

SAMANTHA BEE

A
VICIOUS
GAME
CAN'T
SHATTER ME.

A WORLD OF CHAOS: STEEL ROSES

BEAUTIFUL
CHAOS

BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

STEEL ROSES BOOK FOUR

A WORLD OF CHAOS SERIES

SAMANTHA BEE




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DEDICATION

For my readers

This book is truly for you all who have been so patient and kind as I've struggled with my mental health. There are not enough words in this world to thank you all for your love, support, and kind words. I hope this book is everything you've been hoping for and will have been worth the long wait.

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FOREWORD

Beautiful Chaos is the fourth and final book in the dark contemporary series, Steel Roses. If you have not read the first three books, I strongly advise you to close this book and start with Shattered Chaos.

*In addition to the first three books in this series, a connected standalone, Damaged & Deadly, has also been released. This book follows a subplot introduced in the first two books and tells Jade's story. While it is not strictly necessary to read in publishing order, I do **highly** encourage you to do so as there are overlapping timelines. Damaged & Deadly takes place between books two and three of Steel Roses.*

Beautiful Chaos is a why choose romance, meaning the female protagonist has three or more love interests and will not be choosing.

We are continuing our high steam, high gore journey our girl is taking us on. So triggers beware, though if you made it through the first three books, I think you should be all good. There is a deeper dive into heavy topics that can be triggering for some readers. Scar is on a journey of healing, and sometimes the path to recovery can be just as, if not more brutal, than the initial tragedy.

As always, your friendly reminder that Steel Roses is only the beginning of the saga, A World of Chaos. This is the final book in Steel Roses and wraps up Scar's and her men's main plot line, but there is always more story to tell. I hope you fall

in love with all these characters as much as I have and the end of this series is as fulfilling for you all as it's been for me.

TW: This book contains content that may be triggering, including violence, assault, sexual abuse, mentions of the abuse of children and/or minors, mentions of suicide. Scenes are highly graphic in both blood and sex. Mental health is an ongoing theme in this book and how it relates to past trauma. Please take this into consideration before reading. If you have any concerns, always feel free to read out to me or one of my team members through social media.

This book has been edited, but all humans make mistakes. If you find any typos or concerns in this book, please feel free to fill out this [google form](#) to report them to the author's team. Thank you in advance for your help and understanding!

PLAYLIST

Beautiful Chaos Playlist

Back From the Dead- Besomorph, AViVA, Neoni

Control- Halsey

Blood // Water- grandson

Man or a Monster - Sam Tinnesz, Zayde

SANCTUARY- Neoni

Live Like Legends- Ruelle

Under Your Scars- Godsmack

Never Tear Us Apart- Bishop Briggs

Little Girl Gone- CHINCHILLA

Army- Besomorph, Arcando, Neoni

Wrong Side of Heaven- Five Finger Death Punch

Never Grow Up (Taylor's Version)- Taylor Swift

Wrapped up in Roses- Liddy Clark

Ready To Die- TheUnder

Goodbye- Ramsey

REVIVED- Derivakat

Burn- 2WEI, Edda Hayes

Champions- Kurt Hugo Schneider

GOOD GIRL ERA- UPSAHL

RECAP

It's been awhile since *Vicious Chaos* has released, so here is a summary of where we are in the story as well as a character guide. Feel free to skip over or skim if you don't need the refresher.

In the first three books of our series, our merry band of psychos have been pursuing leads to find the men responsible for the trauma Scar experienced in her father's office at the age of seventeen. We left off with Romano fleeing from them and going into hiding after they blew up his auction. The crew is now searching for leads of where Romano is and tying them back to the night that started Scar down this path of revenge. In search of answers, Scar and Declan attend a charity gala using Declan's family name. At the gala, someone recognizes Scar from her past and calls out her former name.

Main Characters

Scarlett "Scar" Everhart

Luca Cole: face of criminal empire, mainly trade in information

Kade Meyers: reconnected with Scar after years apart and is most well known for his wins in their cage fights.

Noah Frazier: joined the group after being enamored with Scar and has shown to have even better computer and hacking skills than her

Ryder Keating: victim of human trafficking after attempting to save his sister after their father sold her

Declan James: met Scar when she was at a low, surgeon, comes from a wealthy family similar to Scar's

Inner Circle Members

Ian Mallory: dating Jade, runs the fights, training, and helps with special missions

Holden Ingram: history with Jade and Ian, runs the fights, training, and helps with special missions

Tyler Anderson: has been on special missions out of the city for the team, namely Black Hallows, runs the fights, training, and helps with special missions

Joe Lambert: married to Charlene, acts as guardian to the kids, father figure to the entire team, runs the fights, responsible for cards at the fights, security at Steel Roses, backup on special missions

Charlene Lambert: married to Joe, mother figure of team, primary caretaker of the children

Jade Smith: victim of human trafficking saved by team, training to go on rescue missions, dating Ian

Brittany "Britt" Moore: friend of Scar's, coffee barista, managing businesses of Scar's, dating Ronan and Mikey

Ronan Harper: tattoo artist, body clean up, and other misc clean up duties for the team, dating Britt

Mikey Rhodes: tattoo artist, body clean up, and other misc clean up duties for the team, dating Britt

Business Partners

Rachel Caruso: drug empire, took business over after father's death, friend to Kade, Luca, and Scar, Jade's older, long lost sister

Josie Turner: Scar's childhood friend, runs her foundation, Mending Hearts, in her place

Kids

Rowan "Roe" Everhart: 5, Scar's daughter

Trevor Ingram: 6, Holden's son

Kairen “Kai” Mallory: 5, Ian’s son

Callum “Cal” Mallory: 5, Ian’s son

Notable Side Characters

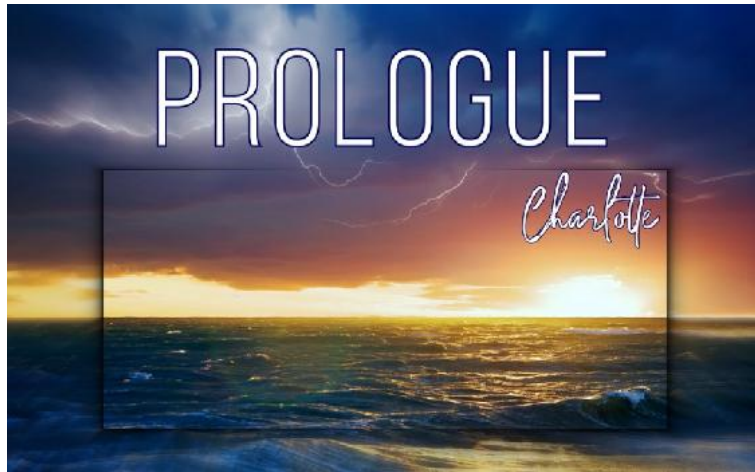
Alec Ruiz: Rachel’s partner, second in command, deceased in VC

Nicholis Ruiz: Alec’s twin brother nicknamed Dark & Douche

The Alvarados: crime family, power based on East Coast, showed up to Alec’s funeral unexpectedly

Dare: dancer at Steel Roses, helps with odd jobs, history with Jade and Ian

Romano: head of the largest human trafficking ring in the US, biggest lead the team has in finding the men behind the brutal attack of Scar’s past



Prologue Charlotte

8 years ago

Burning. Everything burns.

I try to open my mouth, to scream, to cry, to breathe. Anything. But I can't.

Each failed attempt fills my already exhausted lungs with more smoke, making me slowly suffocate on ash and my own tears. It burns so much. Heat washes over me in a never ending wave of pain as even my insides feel torn apart by hot coals with every whisper of a breath as I continue to fight.

My head lulls uselessly forward as I finally accept my defeat. Maybe there's less regret to be found in the rising smoke that fills this room.

What reason do I even have to live anymore?

Everything hurts. Everyone's gone. It's all been taken from me. It would be better to just lay here, let the flames and smoke take me. Rise to the sky on the gray plumes that are slowly killing me. Become one with the very hell that is consuming me. That already consumed my family, my home.

What's even left? Pieces of me better left forgotten.

"Charlotte! Charlotte! Where are you?"

Is someone calling my name? No. Just let me die. I'm not worth saving. Not anymore. Even my mother said so. That's why she set the fire after all. Why she killed my sisters. I wish

she stopped after putting a bullet in my chest, made sure I was dead, and then just covered it up. Wish the twins could have lived a full life. They deserved more than I ever could.

“Charlotte!”

Dammit. My head hurts. I can't think past the pain consuming me. I try to force my eyes open but all I can see is black. It isn't worth the roiling of my stomach to even try. I just wish they would go away.

“Charlotte! Please!” The voice sounds closer but oddly distorted. Like I can't really make out the words.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

A whimper breaks through my lips as pain ratchets through my body. My stomach finally gives into the growing nausea and vomit works its way up my throat. I don't have the strength to turn my head and start coughing as it chokes me. Burning from inside and out. Any second now. Any second now I'll fade into nothing and finally be free.

Just let me die.

My head is tilted to the side and vomit expels from my mouth. It's too much. The movement makes my head swim and I lose myself to the agony. Hoping for the black to take over once more and this time, never lift.

“I got you now, Tootsie Roll. You're going to be okay.”

No. No you don't. No one's got me and I really don't want to be okay anyway.

I just want the storm to take me.



Chapter One Declan

“CHARLOTTE?”

The blood in my veins runs cold as Scarlett freezes at my side. Without looking, I can feel the change emanating from her body. She’s no longer the strong, fierce, slightly crazed woman that I’ve fallen for. She’s a scared and lost little girl, shaking at my side as she stares at the blonde stranger. Her eyes are glazed and doe-eyed, not really seeing what is in front of her but replaying some horrors from her past.

The guys are all cursing down the line, but I can’t stop to focus on them for even a second. Too worried about the state of shock Scarlett is going into.

I lightly squeeze her hip and stare down the stranger. Who is he to have such an effect on her? He must sense my deadly intentions as he releases her arm and turns his attention to me. Confusion, pain, and guilt warring in his eyes. He’s far too young to be one of the perpetrators of her destruction. He can’t be much older than her.

I stroke my thumb over her hip, trying to draw her back into reality without causing a scene. So far, no one has noticed our interaction and no one has overheard what he called her. We can’t risk that changing now. Not when we are so close to answers. Not when someone in this room could be capable of disintegrating the entire life she has fought so hard to build for herself. Away from being Charlotte.

A shiver runs down her spine and I tuck her closer into my side. The haze over her eyes starts to clear, but she still isn't the same ferocious predator I know. She's shaken. Something about this fucker in front of her has been enough to shake her. To rock her in a way I've never seen before, not even the night I first met her. That was loss and regret, this is a different beast entirely. Fear and hopelessness.

He deserves to die for that alone.

"Not here," she whispers. For me or for him, I couldn't gauge. Either way, we can't risk causing a scene. I smile, a baring of my teeth at this stranger. He swallows thickly. Good, he got my message. It's an invitation to follow us and a threat for what will happen if he chooses not to.

I gently guide Scarlett out of the room, leading the way to give her time to reinforce those steel walls I know she's capable of.

"Shut the fuck up," I whisper harshly. My ear is being filled with a cacophony so loud I can barely sort out my own thoughts from everyone else's yells. We're all losing our fucking minds, but it does nothing to help when my attention is already being torn in multiple directions. Thankfully, immediate silence fills the line save a few last grumbles. Not even those get a hint of a smirk from my girl, worrying me more than ever.

The stranger gives me an odd look that I catch out of the corner of my eye. There is no way I am going to give this man my back. Even if Scarlett were her normal self, he is an unknown factor that has already gotten too close. My eyes flicker to her as I analyze her mental state. She's slowly coming back into herself as we move away from the crowd and out of the ballroom. Her spine snaps straight and she stops leaning on me as her strides become more confident with every step. Her vibrant green eyes harden and lose the soft, confused look they had only a moment ago. Even her lips have lost their pout and are now pressed into a hard line as her power radiates off of her. She's as stunning and cold as ever.

There's my pretty girl.

As we pass an open doorway, she spins on her heel and enters the empty room. I let go of her hip and pause, letting the stranger walk in front of me. He looks more unsure of himself now than he did in the ballroom.

I let my eyes rove over him as I try to determine where exactly this situation is going to lead.

Whoever he is, he's a mystery. His wealth and status are clear, but he lacks a certain edge that keeps him from being intimidating. He's tall, almost the same height as I am, but leaner. I study him carefully, trying to pinpoint what it is about him that shook Scarlett. But I can't. He looks...soft. His wide eyes and downturned lips don't strike me as formidable, but rather stoke a growing sense of pity in my gut.

He doesn't hold the air of danger that so many people in this world hold, he's on the other end. A victim of circumstance, of his own last name. He must have an impressive one to keep him afloat in this cutthroat world because I don't think he would be capable of half the shit I've had to do to survive. If he wasn't causing my girl pain, I might even feel for him. Forced into a mold that doesn't suit him. It's something you see all the time when you grow up the way Scarlett and I did.

I flick my gaze away from him and take in the room we've found ourselves in. It's small, intimate, probably for meetings with the long conference table down the center. It's empty except for the three of us, making it the perfect place for us to make some decisions about what happens next.

I close the door behind me and lean up against it, pulling the gun from my waistband and holding it loosely at my side. I may recognize his type, but in no way does that dismiss him from being a threat. A cornered animal is always the most dangerous. He hasn't even noticed, his eyes glued to Scarlett with a mix of horror and wonder right alongside his fear and confusion.

"Charles," she greets coolly. Her panic from early dissipated as if it had never happened. She's fully back in control, even if she was unprepared and caught off guard.

“It’s really you,” he breathes softly in amazement, reaching out for her.

I click the safety off on my gun and rise to aim directly between his eyes. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

“Just fucking kill the bastard,” Kade curses.

“I said shut up,” I hiss. I’ve never been more annoyed about having the loudmouth in my head.

“He isn’t speaking to you,” Scarlett clarifies, her voice pure ice. Colder than I’ve ever heard her before. I almost worry that she’s slipping away from me once more. I pin him with my eyes, nodding to the gun to ensure he’s damn well aware of his position in this room. Maybe Kade has the right idea after all.

“How did you recognize me?” she asks.

Charles, stupid name, shakes his head as he continues to stare at her with a look in his eyes that makes me want to pluck the eyeballs right out of his arrogant face. There’s too much familiarity in the way he looks at my girl. A feeling I know isn’t reciprocated by the fear that shook her and the cold treatment she gives him now.

I tear my eyes away from him to watch her. She’s putting up a good front, no one but one of us would be able to notice the slight tremor of her fingers as she casually taps them against her arm. Or the way her chest doesn’t rise and fall with each breath as she’s wound too tight for the movement.

“How?” he whispers, clearly still in shock. “It can’t be.” Real fear threads his voice as his eyes go wide and he stares at her. “You can’t be here.” It sounds like a warning and a plea all in one.

Friend or foe? With every moment of this conversation, it becomes more and more muddled.

Maybe we should kill him and be done with it. It wouldn’t be the easiest cleanup in the world, but hell. It can’t be harder than a senator, mayor, or a famous movie producer, right?

The silence in my ears is deafening. Almost worse than the cacophony of panic and anger that was blasting through the earpiece only moments ago. At least then I knew what they were doing, even if it was distracting. I wouldn't know if Kade and Ryder were about to tear down the door any second now.

Scarlett takes a deep breath, narrowing her eyes like a wolf ready to sink its teeth into its prey. "Tell me how," she demands.

He laughs, a nervous, shocked sort of sound that spills from his lips as he shakes his head. He hasn't even reacted to the gun being trained on him this entire time. Who the fuck are we dealing with here? He seems like the furthest thing from a threat, yet I can't bring myself to completely dismiss him either. He's not innocent. Who doesn't at least flinch when a gun is aimed at their head? But he's ignored me this entire time, not saving even an ounce of his attention for me. Too locked on Scarlett.

"Your laugh," he finally answers. "I thought I was going crazy when I first heard it as you two went on the balcony. Thought there was no way it could be you." He gets a faraway look in his eyes as if he's remembering something from long ago. I will kill him if he's thinking about a past he had with my girl. "I couldn't help but keep looking for you, hoping you'd laugh again and I'd realize I had been hearing things. But you turned," he pauses, looking up at her with such sorrowful eyes a new burning emotion starts in the pit of my gut. "You put the empty flute on the tray, turned and lifted your eyes. I'd know those green eyes anywhere." He ends in a soft smile, one still full of so much pain. His answer staggers Scarlett too. She wasn't expecting that.

"Okay," I agree. "Let's kill him."

They must turn the mics back on because a burst of agreements erupts in my ear all at once. Based on Scarlett's flinch, it's the same for her.

"I fucking told you," Kade yells.

Noah argues with him in the background but he holds his own. "If D knew who that fucker was, he'd already be dead,"

he yells. The sound of more yelling and banging fills the line and Scarlett tenses with every passing second.

“Oh shit,” I whisper.

“Turn off your fucking mics, you fucking idiots,” she curses, a flare of her temper we hardly ever see. The sound cuts off immediately. The following silence speaks louder than anything they could have said. Her control is one of the coping mechanisms she uses to keep herself grounded. To avoid getting lost in the chaos her mind creates. She craves control, needs it, and she hates to lose it. Especially in front of someone outside our family.

She shakes her hands, trying to force herself back into a semi-reasonable state of mind. I just don’t know if it’s possible. I hardly recognize the fragile yet explosive woman in front of me and I’m not sure I’m enough to keep her from going off. She is a short fuse, already sparking, begging to catch fire and blow the whole building down.

“Charlotte,” Charles whispers. “I don’t know why you’re back, but you can’t be. You need to leave. Now. And never come back.”

“It’s Scarlett,” I snap.

She smirks. “It’s actually Scar. He’s the only one who really calls me Scarlett.”

“Scarlett,” he repeats slowly, as if he’s having trouble forming the name. “Please leave and don’t come back,” he pleads again.

If anything, his words at least tell me we are on exactly the right track by coming here tonight. If I wasn’t sure, her sudden change in attitude would be enough to tell me she agrees.

“Why?” she cocks her head at him as she asks the question. She pushes off from the table where she was leaning on it and slowly moves towards him. Circling around him. A predator that has found her prey. A version of her that I recognize. My heartbeat slows, though my body doesn’t relax. The tension lining my shoulders won’t dissipate until I know

my girl is free from harm. Safe back in my arms. Whole once again.

“Because your father was one of the men who raped and tortured me?”

Ice pushes through my veins and my finger is brushing the trigger before I can even react. Only the quick flash of her hand toward me stops me from pulling it. I lower it, only slightly.

“Because Daddy is here now? Been hunting me down all these years?”

The air in my lungs constricts and nearly chokes me as I force myself to hold still, to not react. To not murder this man in front of me only to massacre the entire ballroom we left behind.

“You knew?” he gasps.

She lifts her shoulder in a shrug. “Figured it out when you grabbed me. Those ice-blue eyes you share with Daddy Dearest have haunted me for years,” she whispers as she leans in close, making me tense. I lift the gun once more, exercising every ounce of control I can to not just blow his head off. Fucking Scarlett. She always has to push it.

My mind is still reeling from the bomb she just dropped. There’s no way she’s nearly as calm as she’s pretending to be. We just got the confirmation that one of the men who attacked her is only a few hundred feet away. In the same building as my pretty girl, drinking champagne and laughing with the crowd. Are they all here? My own anxiety threatens to overwhelm me. I want to shoot this fucker all the more now and pull her into my arms and get out of here. Maybe blow the whole building up on our way out.

His head dips forward and his body slouches, falling into her. I dart across the room, ready to rip him away from her before I see her smug grin. She slips the cap back on the needle and puts the now-emptied syringe back into its holder on her wrist.

A hoarse chuckle is drawn from my lips. “You drugged him?”

She scrunches her nose at me. “Did you think we were just going to leave him? We can use him.”

The mics are turned back on, I’m shocked that it took them this long. “You’re not staying in the hotel for a second longer, Letty,” Luca growls. “Don’t worry about your room, just get that fucker out the service exit.”

Scarlett rolls her eyes as she looks up at me, pointedly keeping her gaze off the slumping body in front of her. Charles mumbles sleepily, not fully unconscious, but not present either. I sling his arm over my shoulder and carry most of his weight while keeping him on his feet. I keep a cautious eye on her as she leads the way out of the conference room, taking small, hurried steps, feigning an air of concern and embarrassment as we move. She may seem back to normal, but the mask she’s wearing isn’t enough to fool me and it won’t be enough for the guys either.

There’s something else ticking in that beautiful head of hers. Something that I can’t help but think is going to bring up all of the old trauma she has worked so hard to bury. That we’ve worked so hard to help her overcome. I hate to admit it, but maybe it’s the push she needed to confront the horrors of her past and truly heal. Getting her revenge won’t fill the holes in her life, rather a new gaping one will be left for us to fill if she doesn’t also work through the feelings she has buried for so long.

As soon as we pass a waiter, she grabs his elbow and bats her long lashes. “I’m so sorry, but our friend had too much to drink.” She looks around nervously, dropping her voice to a whisper. “We can’t have anyone see him like this.” She grimaces. A nice touch. A look of understanding dawns on him as he nods his head at her.

“Of course, Miss. I understand,” he assures her with a look that says it happens all the time. He must be used to the wealthy over indulging and having to get them out of sticky

situations. “Right this way,” he says as he leads us off the main hallway and out to the side of the building.

It’s not much longer until we reach the service exit to find the van ready and waiting.

I stop and shake hands with the waiter, thanking him once more as I slip a hundred dollar bill into his hand. He’ll know to keep this entire incident quiet. He’s quick to turn and hurry away, not sparing another glance for us as I move back to assist Scarlett in getting Charles down the ramp used for deliveries.

As soon as the waiter is out of sight, the back doors to the van are thrown open and Kade jumps out, ripping Charles out of mine and Scarlett’s arms.

She huffs but I can see her visibly shaking. “Keep him in one piece dammit,” she curses. I move to rest my hand on her hip, attempting to draw her in closer to me, only for her to flinch at the contact. I pull away sharply. Kade doesn’t miss a beat and I can see the beast that rides him on the verge of breaking loose as he tosses Charles’ almost lifeless body into the van.

“Fucking hell,” Scarlett murmurs to herself as she wraps her arms around her midsection. I want to pull her against my chest, envelop her in my warmth, but everything about her body language and her earlier reaction is telling me not to.

I trade looks with Kade and subtly shake my head without her noticing. He tightens his fists at his side, but shows more restraint than I thought he was capable of as he stomps around the side of the car and climbs into the passenger seat. I’m impressed even if he does slam the door behind him.

I meet Luca’s eyes in the rearview mirror to see them blazing with the same barely constrained need to destroy the man slumped on the ground at my feet. He hasn’t said a word since he demanded for us to get our asses out of that hotel. I can only imagine it isn’t because he doesn’t have a whole lot to say on the events of tonight, but rather a fear of his last thread of control snapping once he opens his mouth.

Ryder sits tensely at Scarlett's side, obviously feeling the same need to comfort her all while knowing it isn't what she needs right now. The problem is I don't think any of us can pinpoint what it is she does need. There's not a single rational person in this van currently, I'm not even sure how we figure out our next step, let alone how to help Scarlett.

I've never felt so useless and lost. Especially not since finding her. I've never floundered so badly with how to anchor her back to the here and now, but I can see in her eyes that she's being ripped into the darkest parts of her past. Drowned in the painful memories that have haunted her nightmares.

She was finally free from the restless nights, but it's easy to see that was only a short break before they would come rearing back with a new purpose. To destroy her all over again.

Maybe I really should have just killed this man who brought her worst fears to life the moment her name passed his lips. But even with her fragile state of mind, Scarlett was right. She made the right call. We showed up here in search of leads and this man is so much more than just that. He has answers.

Luca pulls to the front of the hotel at the same time Noah, Ian, and Joe walk out the front doors with our luggage. They barely slow in stride as they spot us and head straight towards the van, waving off the valets.

As soon as the door closes behind them Scarlett speaks for the first time since we left the waiter behind. "The house on Coleman."

Luca's fists tighten around the steering wheel as the rest of us trade looks. It's one of our safehouses just outside of town. We don't have many options this far North, but none of us were exactly surprised to realize Scarlett has safehouses in every big city that often caters to these types of grand events. Bringing him there, however, is a huge surprise. One that feels like a miscalculation on her part. I know it isn't because she trusts him. Even if I can see her grappling to understand her own feelings as she sits there silently.

"That address and every other one associated with it will be burned," Noah says gently. His eyes locked on her warily as

her whole body tightens at his words.

“I don’t see another choice.” Noah’s frown deepens at her succinct response. She doesn’t snap at him but she used her last thread of control not to do so. Kade starts to open his mouth and I already know that whatever comes out of it next will break her thinly tethered control.

I clear my throat, drawing the attention of everyone to myself before giving the address to a family estate in the area. It’s not a safe house that will be burned as soon as Charles wakes up if we choose not to kill him. It’s a property owned in the James name as my father had business here quite frequently.

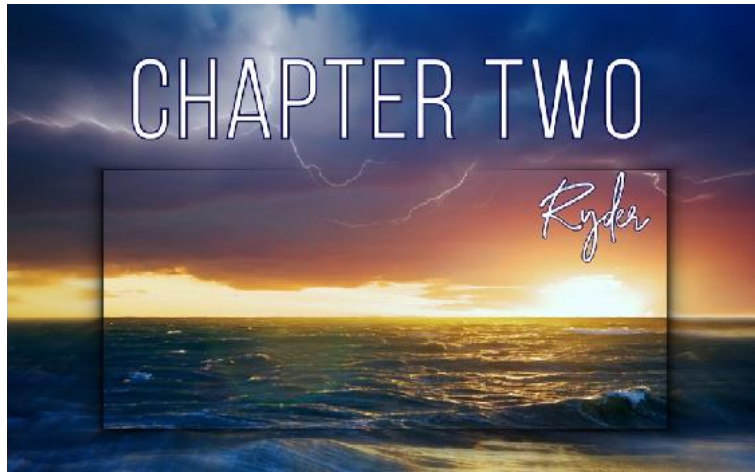
Noah gives me a questioning look but I respond before he can even ask. “Charles would find out who I am as soon as he wakes up if he doesn’t already know. We aren’t losing anything by taking him there even if we do choose to let him live.”

Scarlett flinches at my words and I can’t begin to understand why. She has no remorse when eliminating threats.

Kade puts in the address and not another word is spoken as Luca heads to our new destination. Every single one of us stays on the edge of our seats as we wait for Scarlett to break. To rage. To cry. To murder him. To do anything but sit there with that distant look in her eyes.

For the first time, I’m scared to push her. Scared to make her face her feelings on this. For the first time, I feel as lost as she is.

I don’t know where we go from here.



Chapter Two Ryder

SHIT HASN'T BEEN RIGHT since the moment we heard someone call "Charlotte."

It's not a name I can even begin to associate with Scar. It's not who she is. Charlotte was a soft, little girl, blind to the evil in her own house. She was light and joy, content to never know the secrets the shadows hide. Scar was born from the poisoned touch from those very same shadows Charlotte was oblivious too. She isn't the same person. Not anymore. Not when she wants to leave Charlotte buried in the past. It's not something everyone can understand. Even when we've all been through different shades of horror, it can be hard to understand. But I do. The part of me that had accepted my fate as a piece of property and was ready to die after losing Jen, resonates with why she would want to leave her past self behind her.

Almost as if by saying Charlotte also died in the fire and a monster rose from the ashes, the innocent parts of herself were laid to rest with her sisters. Like they will always have a piece of her with them and she can move forward, knowing she isn't abandoning or forgetting them.

I don't like someone taking that away from her. Dragging her past back up to the surface, even if there was no way they could have known what they were doing.

Kade immediately recognized who it was that called her name. He was out of his seat before the name had even fully left his lips. Before we ever heard any response from Scar or Declan. I'm surprised we have any functioning equipment left in the van because he was ready to flip tables the moment he heard his voice.

Luca immediately went into boss mode and got everyone moving so we could make a fast getaway, regardless of how the events turned out. His hands stayed fisted at his sides, even as he sent Noah, Joe and Ian to clear out any trace of our presence from the hotel room. But even as we did our best to keep it together, trying to pull up different angles of the ballroom, none of us truly knew what our next step would be.

We didn't know how Scar would respond, what she would want us to do. Were we cleaning up a body? Blowing up a ballroom? All of the above, perhaps. I've gotten pretty good at being able to anticipate and meet her needs without her having to tell me. Thought we all had gotten to the point we could work flawlessly together with little communication. I don't think I was wrong, but this situation has proven I wasn't entirely right either. There will always be situations we aren't prepared for, ones we couldn't have expected or planned for.

Ones like Scar, Declan, and an unconscious body in the back of the van with us.

As always, my eyes are drawn to Scar. I knew she would be able to make it back to us in one piece. But I still as I take her in. Relief and worry simultaneously flooding through me. Not a hair is out of place. She's as perfect as when she left the hotel room, her dress fitting her toned figure, her hair framing her angled face in a way that accentuates each of her features.

You would never know we were in survival mode based on the picture she presents. That behind the gorgeous, put-together woman, were five men absolutely losing their minds over her. But she can no longer completely hide from us. Can't quite mask the lost and confused look in her eyes. The way she won't quite meet any of our eyes as Kade throws the body on the floor of the van.

She nods in our direction as she climbs into the back to take her seat, but keeps her gaze centered on the floor. My gut twists in reaction to her distress.

We may have come here for answers, but none of us expected to get them like this. We may need them, but at what cost? How much will be too much for her to handle?

I nudge his unconscious body with my foot and stare at him with disdain. He isn't worthy of being what breaks my girl. Not even worthy of a crack in her armor.

I still don't know who he is to her. How he could possibly recognize her from her laugh alone. The familiarity in which he addressed her rubs my skin raw. I shake off the murderous urges as my curious gaze turns into more than a little bloodthirsty.

I turn my focus to her, watching the way she gnaws on her bottom lip, lost in her own thoughts. I wait for her to feel my attention on her and turn to me the way she always does. With each passing minute that she doesn't, my own anxiety ratchets up higher.

Scar isn't herself.

None of us are.

The rest of the guys are also subdued. She hasn't had any type of reaction, making it impossible to understand where her head is at. I feel almost as helpless as the day I lost Jen. Like I'm just waiting to lose the most important person in my life all over again.

The pain in her eyes, the lost and faraway look, it all reminds me of the time I first met her when hearing her scream from her nightmares were as common as hearing her and Kade have sex.

My thoughts wander back to that time and I realize just how far Scar has come in the past year. She's no longer keeping us all at arm's length, which means her lack of reaction can only be one thing. She doesn't know how to react. She doesn't know what our next step should be either. Maybe she doesn't even know what to do with this man. I've never

seen her hesitate to kill anyone before, but somehow I get the feeling that's exactly the case here. Whether she realizes it or not.

The drive to Declan's place seems to drag on as the silence transcends any level of comfort we normally have as a group. Nothing about this trip has been typical for us. It unsettles me that one unexpected twist of events has rocked us so off balance.

I stare out the window as Luca pulls off the freeway. We drive through lights, becoming further and further away until we reach an isolated residential area. Luca still doesn't slow the car. Passing through stop signs as we begin to drive up a hill. It seems as if the road just keeps going, all the way until houses no longer line the streets.

We pull up to a wrought iron gate that closes off the street. Luca rolls to a stop and Declan clears his throat before telling him the code that opens the gate. The rest of us exchange looks as the intricate gate slowly opens.

There are no signs or any evidence that this is a gated community. Rather all indications lead to the conclusion that Declan's family has more wealth than I had anticipated. It's one thing to have a gate off of a residential street the way Luca does. It's quite another for the main street to turn into your private drive at the top of a mountain.

I study Declan, but he's actively avoiding our stares as much as Scar is now. His body is much tenser than when he first climbed into the car. I guess I was so focused on Scar, I didn't stop to think how he would feel about coming back to one of his family's homes. He's never opened up to me, but from what he revealed when he discovered Scar's true identity, I know being a James has been, at best, a burden but more likely a horror show.

Kade watches him with the same apprehension he had been using to watch Scar. I guess they also have come a long way from the time they couldn't be in the same room together. Declan meets his eyes only to subtly shake his head.

He calls out another code just as Luca begins to slow to another stop.

Kade arches a brow, breaking the tense mood of the car. “Two gates. Really?”

Declan scoffs, a huff of amusement that draws even Scar’s attention. “How else would you know I was rich rich?”

I snort as Luca pulls through the gate and turns the corner of the road and the house appears before us. “I don’t think any of us would doubt that.”

I can’t take my eyes off of her as she takes in the huge mansion in front of us. Any other time Kade would join me in heckling Declan as Scar watched on in amusement. But I can’t dredge up the energy and I don’t think the rest of us can either. It was a brief moment of small smiles that couldn’t overcome the stress that has accumulated from this night.

“You can just park at the front,” Declan directs. “All staff will be gone at this time.”

Luca and Kade nod, but no one else says anything as Luca parks and we all pile out of the van. Scar looks at the colonial mansion with wide eyes, full of emotion. Of recognition, longing, and even a thread of disgust. None of us can blame her for her disdain for this type of show of wealth. It must be reminiscent of her own childhood.

Declan leads us through the front door, hardly stopping to show us around before leading us all to a hallway full of bedrooms.

Scar speaks up for the first time when she directs Ian and Joe to take Charles into an empty room and to rotate standing guard.

“We can all take turns,” Kade volunteers.

She scoffs, some of her normal fire bleeding through her stone cold exterior. “I can’t trust the rest of you Neanderthals with him.”

“Hey, I don’t even know who the dick is,” I argue back, taking issue with her saying she can’t trust us.

“Her ex,” Luca says derisively.

I nod, crossing my arms over my chest. Understanding dawns on me as to the reason why Luca and Kade seemed even more tightly wound than the rest of us. She arches a brow, challenging me. “Yeah, can’t trust me,” I agree, changing my tune now that I know their past. What a sick, twisted history it is. We all heard what she said, what she realized. His father is one of the men who ruined our girl. For it to have been someone who was so close to her. It somehow makes the whole thing that much worse.

Maybe I can understand why she is so lost in her own mind right now. That’s a hell of a lot to process. She’s handling it better than I did. I eye his body slung over Joe’s shoulder. Maybe we should just kill him.

“We have it under control,” Joe intervenes before things can get out of hand. He looks over Scar appraisingly. “How do you want us to handle him?”

She hesitates. Right. No killing. Not until she is certain of her own mind. “Just come get me when he wakes up,” she answers instead.

Ian and Joe trade looks, stopping to look at the unmoving body in Joe’s arms. “And before then?” Ian asks hesitantly.

Scar rolls her eyes. With each little bit of attitude seeping out of her, she seems more like herself. “Just throw him on the bed and keep an eye on him. He’ll be out for at least a couple more hours.”

“That’s it?” Ian isn’t the only one who is surprised. When we captured William, she immediately had us bound and string him up like some type of fucked up pinata. She just wants to leave this guy to take a nap in the guest room?

She takes a deep breath, clearly trying not to snap at any of us again. Even that is out of character for her. “For now, yeah. I haven’t decided how we are dealing with this yet.”

“You got it, Boss,” Ian murmurs before he and Joe disappear into the room Declan pointed out to them.

D grabs Scar by the hand tentatively, waiting to see if she flinches again. When she doesn't we all collectively release the breath we had been holding. He uses his grip to pull her along with him until we walk into a spacious living room. I'm quick to nab the spot on her other side as soon as she sits down on the couch. Kade flips me off, dropping into a loveseat to the left of the couch. Noah smiles but is quick to smother it and peek at Scar to see her reaction before sitting in another open seat.

Luca refuses to sit and begins pacing around the room. I watch Scar's profile but she doesn't react to any of us. She's looking over Noah's head at a blank space on the wall, lost in her own thoughts. I look past her to Declan, waiting for him to direct us on what to do. I've never seen Scar go so silent. With each passing second I feel more anxious than the last. Maybe we should get her whiskey. It made the voices in my head go quiet. At least for a little while.

If I was hoping for D to have a better idea I would be severely disappointed because he looks as lost as I feel.

For my own sanity, I snake my hand out and rest it on her thigh. When she doesn't react, I slip it under the slit in her dress and start to draw circles over the soft skin on her inner thigh. After a few minutes it seems to draw her attention to me.

Her small smile throws me off, worrying me even more. She's been practically silent since we walked into the house and when she did talk, she was closer to snapping than anything else.

"How about a shower?" I take a chance and ask, pulling on her dress. It has to be uncomfortable, she hasn't even slipped out of the death traps she calls heels. I think more than anything, she needs a restart. A chance to clear some of the thoughts that are consuming her. A hot shower always seems to be the answer.

She sighs in relief and I know she's glad for the break. For that much longer to sort out her own thoughts. On second thought, maybe it's better she isn't going straight for a bottle

of whiskey like I did when I realized it was someone close to me that tipped my life into chaos. I was useless for weeks, okay months, being too drunk to string two words together let alone an entire plan.

I slip my arm under the crook of her knees and my other arm around her back to haul her into my arms in a bridal hold. She doesn't fight me like I half expected her to, but melts into my arms, resting her head against my shoulder.

Noah pops out of his seat. "I'll go grab our bags."

"I'll help," Kade agrees.

I'm not sure what Declan and Luca decide to do as I carry her out of the room as they begin their own conversation, but it doesn't really matter. I know we are all going to be doing our part to help our girl out in any way we can.

I push into one of the rooms D had pointed out earlier. It's as far from the room Joe is in as we can get, but I remember that D said it has an ensuite.

I walk her straight into the bathroom and set her ass on the counter. She watches me as I turn to the shower and study it for a moment before turning it to as hot as I'll be able to stand. Scar likes her showers on this side of scalding for some ghastly reason.

I move back to her and grab ahold of her hips, giving her a small smile as she steals all of my attention without even trying. She's never far from my mind and the smirk she gives me tells me she knows it too. Even when we are like this, unsure and just trying to survive, when I look into her eyes I find home. I find peace. I find the courage to believe that no matter what, we will be able to figure it out.

Her zipper is easy to find at the back of her dress and I don't hesitate to slide it down her spine, letting my fingers brush against her bare skin as I go. She trembles under the touch and goosebumps rise along her skin. She looks almost serene as I dip my fingers under the fabric at her shoulders and slowly start pushing it down to reveal her chest to me.

She arches her back and I let her dress pool around her waist. I move my hands to her hair and carefully find and remove the pins holding it in place, letting it fall in long waves down her back.

She smiles as I trace my fingers against the weapons and syringes strapped to her body, now exposed. One by one, I remove each as the bathroom begins to fill with steam until I can only barely make out our shapes in the mirror. She stays silent as she observes me, just relishing in the simple touches as I let my fingers linger on her skin with each removal.

Her nipples peak despite the now warm air. I grin as I brush my knuckles against them, making her chuckle. A rough and husky sound. Not quite the same cadence I can usually pull from her. It lacks the full throatiness of her usual laugh, but it makes me smile nonetheless.

“I shouldn’t even be surprised,” I whisper. “My girl is always so needy.”

I hadn’t brought her in here with the intent to distract her. I really thought a shower would be just the way to reset and come back to our problems with a clear mind. I won’t complain about this turn of events. If she needs more than just a mental break, needs an orgasm or two to really clear her head, I can give that to her. I can always give that to her.

I pick her up and pull her from the counter until she’s standing, those damn heels still on. Her dress falls to a puddle at her feet, and I leave it abandoned there. As beautiful as she looked, it’s now marred with these memories. I pull free the knives and harnesses from her thighs, grabbing the diamond chain as well. I lay all of them out on the counter at her side before picking her back up and placing her in the same spot as before.

She flinches at the cold tile against her bare ass and cocks her head to the side in confusion as she watches me, but I have a plan. If my girl needs to relax, she’s going to *relax*. I drop to my knees and wrap my hand around one of her heels, slowly removing it from her foot.

She laughs, a small breathy sound. “I think the prince is supposed to put the glass slipper on my foot.”

I shake my head at her as I remove the other shoe and begin to massage her feet. Slow, deep caresses to work out the pain I know she must be feeling in them. Jen always hated wearing heels.

“We both know I’m no prince,” I tease her back. A small moan slips through her lips as I continue to rub her feet. “But I’ll still slay the monsters with you.”

“Not for me?”

I laugh, as if she would ever want that. “And have all the fun by myself? Never.”

“I knew there was a reason I kept you around.”

I move my hands away from her feet until I’m caressing her calf, slowly kneading my way up her legs. She spreads her legs wider to accommodate my shoulder width as I make my way up to her thighs. I love the way I can see her already starting to glisten for me with barely any prep at all.

I pepper kisses over her inner thighs. “There are a lot of reasons you keep me around,” I tell her, letting my breath fan over her exposed pussy.

Her fingers sink into my hair and tighten around it, urging me closer to her. I guess I won’t make her beg for it. Today anyways.

I brush my nose over her lips, just barely hitting that sensitive bundle of nerves. I breathe in deeply, loving the way her scent drowns out all of my worries. I push her knees wider, opening her up to me even more. Loving every little sound that spills from her full lips.

I run my tongue up her center, stopping at her clit to lather it with attention. I lap at her as she writhes against my face, begging for more. I don’t make her wait for long before I’m slipping two fingers into her warmth and begin to thrust in and out of her. Her moans get louder, and I move my tongue faster as I roll it against her. I crook my fingers inside of her to hit her g-spot and don’t stop until she’s coming on my tongue.

The way she cries out my name is one of the sweetest things, second only to the taste of her. I slow my movements as she rides through her orgasm and comes back down. I don't give her a chance to say anything though as I scoop her up in my arms and carry her to the shower, letting her get in first while I undress myself.

I climb into the shower behind her and let the water sear into my skin. I can't help but flinch at the burn the moment it hits. Scar smirks and turns the dial of the shower down. I roll my eyes and lean over her to turn it back up. I'll get used to it.

She leans into me and I grab a clean washcloth and pour a generous amount of body wash into it. It smells nice, but different than what Scar normally uses. I dismiss the thought and focus on scrubbing her body down, giving her a light massage as I go.

We don't speak, nothing more than little sighs of contentment from her and murmured directions from me. I don't rush through it, giving each of her limbs special attention until she's fully relaxed under the water spray.

As I turn her around to start washing her hair, I almost wish we were in a bath for this part so she could continue to lean against me completely. I scrub her scalp, brushing just behind her ears where I know she's especially sensitive. Her small moan makes me smile as I grab the shower head and pull it back to us to carefully rinse the suds from her hair.

I half expect her to make a comment about putting it to better use. We've all heard about her little shower adventure with Luca and Noah more than one time, but she keeps any dirty thoughts to herself. That more than anything shows me how in her head she still is.

I replace the shower head on the wall and repeat the process with the conditioner. The new and unfamiliar fragrance shouldn't aggravate me as much as it does, but I can't seem to help the rising bitterness that even this simple thing isn't the same. I've come to accept just how much I rely on things not changing. I wonder if it's the same for Scar? If she too is wishing she had her own products from home right

now. Knowing her, there are probably travel sizes of everything she uses in her bag, but I guess I let my impatience get the best of me.

After rinsing the conditioner from her hair, I turn off the water and lift her out of the shower. I deftly wrap a towel around my waist before grabbing another one and begin to pat her dry. With every movement she leans more into the motion, swaying slightly on her feet.

I bundle her up in a fluffy robe and grab a new, dry towel and a hairbrush before carrying her to the bed. It's when I'm drying her hair, she finally starts to share some of the thoughts running rampant through her mind.

"I don't know my own mind anymore," she admits in a whisper.

"So what?"

She tilts her head back to look at me, confusion marring her features.

I give her a small smile. "So what if you don't know your mind? We can hold on to him until you know what you want to do with him. If you want him dead, he's dead. If you can't do it yourself, I'll do it for you. If you want him to live, we will figure that out too. You don't have to have the answers right now."

She's silent for a few moments as she mulls over what I said. I finish pulling the brush through her damp hair and braid it back away from her face. If I know one thing about this girl, it's that she moves a hell of a lot in her sleep and will wake up with crazy hair if she doesn't pull it up.

"Who would have thought that we would be switching roles?"

I chuckle as I finish her hair and pull her into my arms and fall back onto the bed, situating her so we are laying face to face. "Why do you think you always have to be the strong one?"

She doesn't answer. I know once upon a time she wouldn't have hesitated to answer that it was because she always had

been before. But we all know that isn't the truth. We've seen Scar break. We've seen her come back from her absolute lowest. Where she had to lean on us to find her strength and purpose again. To actually heal from the wounds that had festered that she pretended didn't exist. No one ever said there is an end to healing though. The thing about trauma is it sneaks back up on you in unexpected ways. Just when you think you're finally okay, it all comes rushing back and it feels like every step forward was all for nothing. She was never going to heal in just a day, or a week, or even a year.

"You once told me that you would be my strength when I needed to be weak. We will all be that for you, Scar."

"I know," she whispers, closing her eyes.

"So be weak," I tell her. "Admit that you don't know what to do with Charles. That maybe seeing him brought up emotions you don't understand. That finding out who one of your rapists was, finding out how close that person was to you, feels like a gut punch and you're just trying to catch your breath before figuring out what it all means. That just because you've been feeling better doesn't miraculously mean you are *better*. That what happened all those years ago doesn't still tear you apart."

Her big green eyes search mine, filling with so much emotion I know she can't possibly reconcile everything she's feeling. "I always thought my path to revenge was a clear one. Kill anyone who gets in my way, no hesitation."

I trace my fingers down her cheek, cupping her face in mine. "Not all wounds are created equal. Not all cuts bleed the same. Not all scars still ache. Some lies, some betrayals, some mistakes are worth forgiving. You told me you would rather be destroyed by your anger than absolve your rapists of their sins. You were entirely sure in that conviction. They didn't deserve to be written off as a lesson learned, didn't deserve to be forgiven. Maybe Charles does. Maybe the scars he left don't ache anymore. Maybe the marks he left are the ones you took to build everything you have since you left Charlotte behind. Maybe the blood spilt due to his broken edges is what fueled you into becoming Scar. A fierce badass with a huge heart she

had to protect until she was strong enough to let people in again.”

“You don’t think I should kill him?”

I grimace. “Well, I didn’t say that,” I hedge. “I vote death for anyone who ever hurts even a single hair on your head. But it isn’t my opinion that matters here and I’ve never known you to struggle with dealing a killing blow. If you’re hesitating, it’s not about death, it’s about him. He must be worth at least the consideration.”

She buries her face in my chest and wraps her arms around my waist, but not before I see the smile spreading across her features.



Chapter Three Scar

THE STARES HAVEN'T GOTTEN any easier. I wind my arms around my waist as I make my way to class. My wounds, now scars, still ache with the phantom pain of my memories, as if they haven't healed in the slightest. Each stare and whisper feels like another cut against my delicate skin as they intensify with each step I take down the hall.

A feeling burns the side of my face. I tense as I turn to catch an ice-blue gaze locked on me. Fear flashes through me before a heavy sense of dejection. The moment of fear forgotten as I take in Charles' tall and slender form as he turns away from me the second our eyes meet. Turning his back on me.

Again.

I've never felt so utterly lost and alone.

Those blue eyes have haunted me for years in my dreams. I've woken up screaming as they chase me even into my waking moments. The first one to draw blood from me that night. The first one to violate me and take satisfaction in every ounce of my pain. The very one who admitted just how long he had been craving my flesh under his. His control asserted over me.

Maybe somewhere in the back of my mind I always knew who it was. Knew I had lost Charles even before I had actually

lost him. How could I not? How have I never put the pieces together to realize it was Charles' father? The man that I was never comfortable around despite growing up around him.

The only thing left to do is decide how to proceed. Is Ryder right? How can I be sure? How much has Charles changed in the last eight years? Once upon a time he was my best friend, my closest ally. His betrayal is partially what made it so easy to keep everyone at a distance when I left. He never laid a finger on me, but he didn't stop his friends from trying.

The first time, Kade saved me as Charles watched.

The second time, I just barely saved myself, Charles was nowhere to be seen. I barely made it to Luca's after getting away from them. Barely survived. Yet again. It was the moment I knew I had to leave everything behind.

The shattered pieces I left behind are finally coming together. Giving me a clear picture of my past, but muddling the waters of what I thought I knew. Of what I thought came next.

I could kill Charles for recognizing me. Cut off one more tie to the girl who I used to be. Who remembers me as Charlotte. From a past version of myself that I no longer know. No longer have any desire to know. Not the way he sees me.

But why kill him when I can use him?

He may very well be the key to my revenge plans. Give me access to everything I need. His father. All the knowledge I need to carry out my plans may reside behind his closed eyes, clueless to the real reason why I attended that gala tonight.

He can't possibly imagine the hell I plan on bringing to his doorstep. How badly I crave his father's blood on my hands, his life at my mercy. He had the power to help me all those years ago and chose not to, the difference is now I can make him. If I choose to.

Ryder presses his lips to the top of my head. "Get some sleep. You might have a clearer answer after talking to him."

I nod, rubbing my nose against him. He's right. How can I know what the right call is when I really have no idea who I'm

dealing with? Charles may have grown up to be as twisted and corrupt as his father. I won't deny the piece of me hoping that isn't true, but I won't verbalize it either.

“You're just hoping I'll wake up bloodthirsty and decide to kill him.”

His body rumbles with his laughter, shaking me and making me smile wider.

“Absofuckinglylutely. And I'm hoping you let me do it too.”

Oh how the tables have turned. It wasn't even that long ago that I was comforting Ryder through forgiveness and offering to kill his dad for him. I'd be lying if I said I ever thought we would really get to this point.

“Sleep, Scar. I got you. It's going to be okay.”

I know he does. They all do. And I know it will be.

Despite the odds, I drift off to sleep.



MY EYES FEEL HEAVIER with every flutter of my lashes. I can barely keep them open as pain ratchets through my body. I squeeze them shut in response to one of them yanking my head off the floor by fisting my dirty blonde hair and pulling me towards him.

Fear like nothing I've ever known courses through my body. Something wet and hot slides up the side of my cheek, tracing a pathway to my ear. He's licking up my blood and tears, drinking in my pain, relishing in my demise. My fear is a wild animal locked inside my body, thrashing and fighting to get out to run away. But we're trapped. Unable to move.

I fight to open my eyes. To look into the eyes of the perpetrator of my destruction. My lashes flutter, but fuck. They're so heavy. Everything hurts so much. I'm drowning in a sea of agony and despair. I don't think I'll be able to escape it.

“I've been waiting a long time for this,” he whispers in my ear and I gasp.

I know that voice.

My eyes fly open as searing, blinding pain rips through my core. He groans above me and I get one startling moment of clarity as I stare deep into ice blue eyes before darkness starts to overtake me.

I know those eyes.

My heart pounds in my chest as the pain starts to fade away. The black around my vision starts to clear, leaving only the fear behind. My eyes open easily to find Charles laughing at my side, pulling my hand in his as we run across the grass field that leads to the creek behind his house.

It's our favorite place to play, even if our parents hate when we do.

The fear is forgotten as giggles burst freely from my lips as Charles continues to drag me after him. When did he get so much taller than me? My little legs can't keep up with the larger steps he's able to take and I stumble. Charles stops immediately, trying to catch me, but my knees hit the ground and tears spring to my eyes.

"Charlotte!" he cries. "Are you okay?" He falls to my side and peers at my scraped knees. He swallows thickly. "I'm sorry, Tootsie Roll. I didn't mean to."

I grab his hand and squeeze, gaining a small smile from him. "Here, hop on. I'll give you a piggyback ride to find Ms. Nancy. She always makes ouchies better."

My tears dry, almost forgotten as Charles carries me on his back towards the house. Except, it isn't Ms. Nancy we find first. Charles' father watches us with a weird look in his eye that I don't understand. I pat Charles' shoulder to get his attention but his father is already walking towards us.

"What happened here?" His voice doesn't sound angry, but Charles still tenses.

"Charlotte fell and hurt her knees. Ms. Nancy was going to put bandaids on her." His answer confuses me because we haven't seen his nanny yet, but I don't say anything.

His father turns behind him to a man I didn't notice before. "Find Nancy and have her meet the children in the kitchen." The man nods and retreats as Mr. Donahue continues to watch us. He clicks his tongue as his eyes land on my bloody knees. I flinch at the sound, it's the same one my dad makes when he's unhappy with something I've done. He doesn't say anything more before walking away. Charles holds still for a moment before he squeezes my legs. "Come on, Tootsie."

A few minutes later, we're both sitting in the kitchen as Ms. Nancy fusses over my knees. She's so nice. They barely even hurt anymore. Plus she gave us both cookies.

Mr. Donahue comes in and again Charles stiffens at my side. I also get nervous, maybe I'm getting in trouble after all. He ignores both his son and the nanny and walks right up to me.

"You okay now, Charlotte?" I nod gingerly, not saying anything back. Charles' father has always scared me just a little bit, even though he's always nice to me. I think Charles is a little bit scared of him too. Ms. Nancy moves away from us to get out of his way and starts cleaning up. His hands land on my legs and lift them so he can examine the butterfly bandaids on my knees. "You have to be more careful," he chastises, his voice gentle. Much softer than how my father talks to me. His fingers stroke the skin next to my cuts. "We don't want this pretty skin to be marred, do we?"

I don't know what that means, but I shake my head anyway. I don't want him to be mad at me. He leans away from me and turns around. That same man from earlier comes up from behind him. Mr. Donahue takes whatever he hands him, but I can't see what it is. Though, I already have a feeling I know.

He turns around and hands me a small bouquet of daisies. Just like every other time I see him.

"Thank you, Mr. Donahue," I whisper. I'll get in trouble if I don't mind my manners. Even if I don't understand why he always gives me the same flowers.

He laughs, cupping my chin, forcing me to meet his blue eyes. So similar to Charles' but so different too. "You don't

have to be so formal with me. We're family, my little daisy."

I dip my head to agree and his thumb rubs against my cheek. "Good girl. Now, Gregory is going to take you home. Charles and I need to have a talk."

I blink and their kitchen fades around me as smoke fills the air. Heat rushes through me and I open my mouth to scream but no sounds come out. He's still there, still watching me with those icy blue eyes, a growing grin spreading across his face. I look down to find the bouquet still in my hands but somehow, it's caught fire.

I jump back and try to drop it but the flames chase me.

"I've been waiting for you, my little daisy."

HUSHED VOICES BREAK through my dreams of smoke and pain.

"Just let her sleep," someone whisper-shouts from behind me. Probably not the best way to ensure I stay asleep. The thought makes me smile, even as I struggle to shake off the hands of the demons from my dreams. Determined to drag me back down into the abyss of my mind where only pain and agony await me.

"What do you guys think we should do with him?" someone else whispers from the foot of the bed. If I could just force my eyes open, I could figure out what they're talking about. I despise this slow-to-waking feeling. This groggy, hard-to-think space in time.

"Feels wrong to just leave him," someone else argues.

I groan as I roll over. Arms immediately tighten around my waist. "You assholes woke her up." I open my eyes to find Ryder glaring at the other guys. Fingers trace down my spine and I turn to find Noah snuggled up against my back, with the rest of the guys at the foot of my bed.

I yawn and stretch my arms above my head. I chuckle as I look up to find Kade's eyes glued to my chest where my robe has slipped open. I roll my eyes and start to climb over Ryder to get out of bed. "I take it Charles woke up?" I don't bother

asking about the new bruises and cuts on both Luca's and Kade's faces. It doesn't take a genius to guess what they were up to while I slept. Hopefully it helped ease some of their stress and tension.

They both start grumbling and I scoff, guess it didn't. "Oh, calm down. I'm going to get dressed first." They act like I would really waltz in there half-naked like this. There's a lot of places I would do exactly that, but not in a situation like this. Not when it has to do with me finally getting my revenge.

I dress quickly, thankful one of the guys had the foresight to set out a comfortable outfit for me. My bet would be on Noah. The guys stand there watching me pull the tank top over my head and step into the loose athletic shorts. I shake my head, patting Luca and Kade on their cheeks as I walk by them.

"That outfit isn't much better," Kade mumbles as I pass him and I can feel his gaze glued to my ass. I understand this is harder on them than the other guys. They have their own history with Charles. Their own painful pasts his presence dredges up.

It doesn't change that he's probably our best bet to get what we need.

I keep Ryder's words in my mind and know any single one of my men would be more than happy to end Charles in a second if he tries anything. I push away the nagging feeling of hope he doesn't. Either way, we will deal with the fallout and I'll walk out of that room with my head held high.

I lead the guys out of my room and down the hall to where I had directed Joe and Ian last night. Was it really only last night? I take a deep breath but don't allow myself to hesitate as I push through the door. I keep my surprise hidden as my eyes wander over the scene in front of me.

Both Ian and Joe stand between the door and the bed, their arms crossed over their chests and looking down where Charles casually sits at the foot of the bed. He looks altogether far too calm for the position he's in. Both of his feet lay flat

against the floor, his eyes focused on his hands folded neatly in his lap.

If I hadn't been the one to drug him myself, I would never believe he hadn't chosen to be here. His head lifts as the guys crowd in behind me. I sigh to myself. This room is large, but not enough to not feel small with how many people are in it.

I meet Joe's eyes and he gives me a small shrug as he and Ian move farther into the room to stand by the window. I take their place, standing closer to the foot of the bed as I peruse Charles. I was too shocked last night to really observe him. To figure out just how much he's changed.

His eyes run over me in the same way, lingering on the tattoos that now cover both my arms and span across most of my body. Much more visible in my outfit today than the dress I had been wearing last night.

There's a curiosity in his gaze. Guilt and sadness too. I don't sense any judgement, any anger, not even any resentment. Ryder was right, I do feel like I have a clearer head after I slept. I was so consumed by the feelings rushing through me last night, I didn't stop long enough to realize it was concern that had Charles trying to push me out of that ballroom. Concern for his father? Or concern for me?

The soft look in his features right now makes me think it was for me after all. But how does that make sense? Or am I just seeing what it is I secretly desire to see?

He had his chance to protect me and he didn't. He watched with clenched fists and a shaky body as his friends tried to hurt and humiliate me all over again. Kade saved me. Charles watched. *With clenched fists and a shaky body.* Maybe there's more to the story than I know. Or maybe I'm seeing hope and light where only shadows exist.

I turn to find my big guy glaring at Charles, running his thumb down the light scar on his cheek.

Charles clears his throat. I cock my head and arch a brow, waiting him out. Something is off, I just can't put my finger on what.

He squeezes his hands together in his lap and closes his eyes tightly. “Why did you come back, Charlotte?”

I catch Kade and Luca both flinch in my peripheral at the use of my old name.

I don’t respond, just continue to stare at Charles, trying to unravel the mystery he is presenting me with. It feels like I’m missing something vital. Can I trust my own intuition? My own hesitation? Or am I destined to repeat the same mistakes as my past self?

He keeps eye contact with me. He doesn’t waver as he waits me out, a spark of fear in his eyes. Fear of me or fear for me? I can’t decide. His eyes travel over the guys in the room. I hold my hand up at my side for all of them. I don’t want them to respond to him.

I force back a smile at watching Kade having to swallow his words. I know he wants to berate Charles, has probably been waiting years for this exact opportunity. A part of me is surprised he and Luca had never gone searching for him.

Charles starts to falter, a new look of confusion in his features as he focuses back on me. “There was a reason, wasn’t there?”

Still, I say nothing. I want to see where this thought takes him. Just what is going on in his head. He’s been sitting here so calmly, as if this is a normal experience for him. Granted, with his father I’m sure he has been in a ton of fucked up situations. Nevertheless, he’s close to giving something away. He hasn’t been sitting here, blindly accepting whatever fate he thinks I’ve decided for him. There’s too much calculation in those blue eyes of his for that to be true.

He has some thoughts on why I was there. Why I took him. Why I am the way that I am now.

I want to hear those thoughts. See just how far he’s come on his own while he sat here waiting for me.

“Were you looking for answers, Charlotte?” he questions. It’s lacking the confidence he had with his previous questions. Declan starts to open his mouth but I wave him off. I know he

was about to correct the use of my name. He's already told Charles not to call me that. I know the guys are doing their best to stay quiet, but I can also see the way it is eating at them.

Declan huffs, "That's not your fucking name."

I throw a glare his way and arch a brow. He is hardly ever the one to push back against me. To go against an order. I'm surprised by how touchy he's being over this subject. To me, it's just a name. A version of myself I no longer like, but one that isn't going to kill me to hear. At least not while we are secured here anyway.

On the other hand, it is not at all surprising when Kade backs Declan up. "He's right. You're Scar. That fucker calls you Charlotte again and I will stab him."

I press my fingertips to my temple as Luca chimes in, "Shooting him would be faster." A chorus of agreements sound throughout the room. I shake my head as I survey all of them. Oh my fucking god.

I rub my hand over my face. "Guns, really guys?" I hadn't realized all seven of them had their weapons already drawn and at their sides. Probably for this entire time since we first entered the room. I guess I should have been more direct in what I wanted from them.

"Shut up," I call, cutting off their mumblings and complaints about Charles and the directions I had left them. Who knew being told to do nothing was such a hardship for this crew?

A new look of understanding dawns on Charles. If he had suspicions about who was in charge here before, they've all been confirmed now. "You were there looking for something," he hesitates, glancing at the guys. "Someone?"

I check my nails, waiting to see just how close he will get. Will he guess that I'm out for revenge? Has he put together the pieces to get the full picture? Realized last night had been eight years in the making?

"Maybe I can help," he pushes. "If I knew, I could help."

I drop my hand, ready to finally comment when Kade beats me to it. “Or, hear me out. We could just kill him.”

I take a deep breath and slowly turn to my big guy, a threatening smile on my face. “I said, shut it.”

Ryder chuckles at his side. “You’re going to pay for that one later.”

I click my tongue and narrow my eyes at him. “And keep it shut.” They really can be so annoying, but it’s hard not to smirk at their antics. At least they aren’t all still looking at me like I’m one wrong word away from breaking. Their usual banter brings a relief to the chasm of confusion in my chest, but it’s still not something I can focus on. The larger part of me just needs them to listen.

It’s time to find out just how much Charles is willing to back up that statement before I kill everyone in this room.

“I can help you get your answers,” Charles swears.

“You don’t know what I’m looking for.” I point out.

“Doesn’t matter,” he’s quick to rebuttal. “Even if I don’t have them, I’ll know where to find them. Being my father’s son doesn’t grant me much, but it does grant me access to just about anything you can imagine.” He says the last part with a shudder. So he isn’t clueless about his father’s operations. I wonder just how much he is privy to.

“What is it you want in exchange?” I ask. I know there’s something. He’s too calm to be bargaining for his own life. I’m not sure if he’s underestimating me, relying on our history for his safety, or has just reasoned that the information he has is worth more than just his life. But I do know there is something he wants in exchange for helping me now. How very brave, and utterly stupid.

I ignore the guys’ outbursts. There’s no point in telling them to shut up again. They’re outraged at the thought of Charles demanding anything from me but I’m curious about what it is he could possibly want from me.

His eyes linger on the weapons in everyone’s hands but my own. He meets my eyes again, a clear determination shining

there.

“Kill my father.”



Chapter Four Scar

LAUGHTER TUMBLES FROM MY LIPS.

Of all the things I expected him to ask, that was not one of them. For the first time, maybe ever, I break. My mask slips off my face as I throw my head back and laugh at his request. It's not even an intimidation tactic, or calculated in any way. My true reaction just broke through with how fucking surprised I am.

I shake my head, trying to ground myself in order to continue this conversation.

“You want your father dead?” I ask to clarify.

He nods slowly, thrown back by my reaction. Once more, his eyes trail over all the weapons in the room. “I get the feeling you're more than capable of it now.”

I lift a shoulder casually. “You're not wrong,” I concede. “What if I told you that's why I came back?”

“To kill my father?” he stammers with wide eyes.

“He did rape me after all.”

He nods along with my words, horror written in his expression. It's nothing he didn't know, but apparently he doesn't like hearing it. “Revenge,” he whispers. “You came back for revenge.”

“I think I deserve it after what happened in my father’s office,” I drawl slowly. “And everything afterwards.”

His body slumps forward, guilt overwhelming him now.

“Charlotte,” he whispers, almost pleadingly.

“Everyone out,” I cut him off. The guys start to protest, but I throw them a look that promises retribution if they continue to push me. They walk out silently, throwing menacing glares at Charles the whole way.

Joe stops just inside the door and closes it after the others. I open my mouth to question him, but he shuts me down in a way only he can. “I understand why you don’t want them in here, but Scarlett, if you think I’m leaving you alone with a man we do not know or trust, you’re stupider than you look.”

I hold my tongue. Not wanting to argue with him in front of Charles. “Fine,” I agree, if a bit petulantly. A slight tremor runs through my fingers and I know I’m not as strong as I’m pretending to be. I didn’t want the guys to see my weakness. Not here. I don’t want to break in front of Charles, and having them here makes it all the much harder to stay strong. When all I really want to do is collapse in their arms and cry for the girl that used to love the boy in front of me.

I won’t admit it aloud, but I’m thankful for Joe’s silent presence behind me.

“It’s Scar now,” I remind Charles. “Any single one of those guys will kill you if you use that name again.”

“I understand,” he murmurs. “Scar,” he says slowly, like tasting my name to get the feel of it. I watch as he tries to reconcile who I am now with the girl he remembers.

“What do you know about that night?” I ask, changing the subject. I aim to maintain my perfect calm. Not give anything away. But fuck, it’s a lot harder than it ever has been before. I keep my trembling hand out of Charles’ sight.

“I know it wasn’t as the news made it out to be,” he starts. “My father was there.” He closes his eyes, lost in his own memories. “He wasn’t the only one there.” There’s anguish

lining every word. It makes me mad. Pisses me off that he feels pain over my trauma when he didn't help me.

But it also makes me sad. For some inexplicable reason, sadness weighs me down at the thought of the kids we were who were dealt a hand we had no hope of being capable of handling. We were always helpless against the wishes of our parents. I wonder what his father pulled behind the scenes to turn even Charles against me back then.

“Do you know who the others were?” I ask, trying to shake off the grips of melancholy holding me down. I don't want to feel sympathy for him. Not when he hurt me too. I'm not ready to analyze those emotions yet. For now, I just want to use him.

He shakes his head and a bitterness fills me. “My father never told me what happened. He doesn't even know I know.” He opens his eyes, searching me out. “I put some of the pieces together myself, but I only knew those couple things for certain,” he whispers. “Scar,” he starts again, but I shake my head.

“I don't want to hear your excuses or your reasons.”

He looks shattered, but for some reason I feel the same way. Tears rise in my eyes, blurring my vision and I hate him for it. “I'm not ready to forgive you,” I admit, swallowing my emotions. I hate that I get the feeling I will be forgiving him, but not today. Not right now.

“Then use me,” he replies. “Use me to get your revenge. Use me however you need to.” He hangs his head. “I failed you once, Tootsie Roll. I won't fail you again.”

The nickname is a brand of regret over my already sensitive heart. I open my mouth to respond, but snap it shut almost as quickly. No. Charles will be nothing but another tool to get my revenge. Nothing more.



I PULL the cover over my head as I hear the door open and close. I can take a guess on who just walked into the room, but I'm not ready to talk about it yet. So I hide. I burrow myself under the blankets and sheets. Just like I left Charles and hid in here.

I only waited long enough to give Joe instructions on getting him settled. I know I'll need to pull myself from this hole and go out there to make plans. I still have so many questions for Charles. Have to figure out exactly how I can use him.

A moment was needed before I could do all that though. A moment to wallow in my own despair and confusion before putting on the brave face to push forward.

The bed dips on both sides of me. I don't move, waiting for them to pull me to one of them. The covers are removed from over my head and I find Noah giving me a soft smile as he pulls me on top of his chest.

I rest my cheek against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat. Declan lays on his side, resting his hand on my back. I figured it would be one of them that came in to check on me, I didn't expect it to be both of them. I give Declan a small smile that he returns, rubbing circles into my back.

“Want to talk about it?”

My smile falls off my face and I turn my head away from D and bury it in Noah's chest. It rumbles under me with his laughter. It might bring a small little smirk back to my face, but I'll deny it.

“I'll take that as a no then,” D teases, lightly tickling my sides. I humph in response, not lifting my head at all.

“How about telling us what you want us to do?” Noah encourages, squeezing my hips.

I sigh, if I had an answer for any of them, I wouldn't be hiding in here. I don't want to admit that though. “I just needed a moment,” I deflect, lifting my head to meet his eyes. I catch them trading looks and know I'm not getting off that easily.

“And what do you plan on doing after your moment?” Noah prods.

I roll my lips back as I think about it. Plans have been my happy place for a long time. Meticulously figuring out the next steps to take to maximize our outcomes and minimize the risks. Maybe focusing on a list of what I need to do will help my head stop spinning.

Who said I have to figure out the convoluted feelings Charles dredged up right now?

“Charles is going to help us,” I start. Noah tenses under me, but I push forward. I know none of the guys are going to love his presence, especially Kade, but there’s no denying this is the best move forward. He has access to everything we need to get my revenge. He said to use him, and regardless of what my feelings are, I plan to use him for everything I can. “I need to figure out just how helpful he’s going to be.”

Noah opens his mouth but Declan speaks first. “What do you need to know to figure that out?” I release the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. I knew these two would be the two most likely to see my side of things.

Sticking to only the facts and keeping all emotions out of it is the only way to come up with the best plans.

“How involved he is with his father’s business. How close they are. What he knows about his associates. If he has any thoughts or leads about who else was there.” I pause, reflecting on our own conversation. “Just what pieces he has from that night.” I shake my head, clearing it. “But more importantly, what he knows now. What connections we can use. If Romano did run to his father. If he knows who Romano is.”

“Do you think he will tell you the truth?” Noah asks.

I nod my head, climbing off him. “He has no reason to lie.” If nothing else, I believe that. Charles hates his father, maybe almost as much as I do.

“Then let’s go get your answers, baby girl. Anything he gives us will give me more to work with. I’ll be able to fill in

any gaps and catch him if he does try to deceive us.” He looks to Declan, before turning back to me hesitantly.

I tense, knowing he wants to move away from the practical part of our conversation. I’m still not ready to admit just how I’m feeling about it all right now. There’s a mess of writhing demons in my chest, clamoring for different things. Too many things to even attempt to put into words. How can wanting to forgive someone make you hate them even more?

“Can we ask about him being your ex?”

I force myself to take deep breaths. They have reason to want to know more about that, especially since I plan on keeping him around. I give a short nod. “He’s my ex-fiance.”

Noah rises up on his knees and catches hold of my hands, pulling me back to the bed. “We won’t make you talk about it if you’re not ready,” he assures me. Guilt prickles at my conscience. They’re always so willing to roll with all the punches I throw their way.

I let myself lean into his arms, resting against the bed. “We were engaged before I was even born,” I explain. “Our fathers were as close as monsters can be. We grew up together. Grew up knowing we would always be together. One day we would merge businesses. Charles would lead our families into new and greater wealth. The engagement ended the same day my family did. I lost all status, all power, even my beauty was marred. That’s all I was worth to them. There was no reason to continue the engagement.”

Declan nods along even as Noah looks appalled. He didn’t grow up in our world, doesn’t understand how these things work. People from our circles didn’t marry for love. Only for money and power. I scoff. “I guess I should be thankful his father didn’t think to use Charles to steal my wealth from me too. It was the last thing I had.”

“He probably didn’t want to risk drawing any eyes his way. Better to cut all ties,” Declan muses, an angry glint in his eyes, making his cool blue eyes burn hotter than I’ve ever seen them.

“Do you want to share why Kade seemed like he was struggling not to kill him?”

I shake my head. I’d rather not get into all that.

Noah huffs an exasperated laugh. “And why is that?”

“His anger is justified,” I explain. “I don’t really want both of you reacting the same way to him.”

Declan pulls me further onto the bed and cages me under him. “Are you going to forgive him for whatever it is he did to you?”

I should have known that D would never be able to leave a thread unraveled. Not when it has to do with my emotions. He will push as far as he thinks I can stand. Somehow, he always knows exactly when to back off though. Understands me better than I know myself sometimes.

“I don’t know yet,” I admit in a whisper. “But maybe I want to.”

He searches me out, as if he can read my every inner thought just by focusing on my face. After several heavy moments of silence a pained expression takes over his face. “You think he’s like us,” he says.

I can still see Noah in my peripheral trying to follow along with the conversation, but I can’t tear my eyes away from D to see if he’s confused. “I think he might be,” I whisper.

With that small admission I know I have Declan’s full support and understanding. No matter how deep my wounds run from Charles’ betrayal, can I still hate him if he was just as helpless as I was in the whole situation?

The power our parents wield over us is unlike any normal familial relationship. It surpasses that of a typical parent-child dynamic. We never had the ability to say no. If we tried we faced abuse and even the possibility of death. Like I came all too close to myself.

Declan presses a sweet kiss against my forehead. “We will figure it all out, pretty girl.”

He moves away from me, letting me climb off the bed for a second time. “Let’s do this,” I say, fortifying my walls.

I can’t let anyone see just how weak I feel on the inside. How unsure I still am about this path. I believe Charles won’t betray me. I just don’t know what I’ll be putting myself through the more I talk to him. He was one ghost I had intended on leaving in the past. I never thought I would be picking at those old wounds, but here we are. Now it’s too late to turn back. The scab has fallen off and the blood is already flowing. I won’t be able to stop until I know everything. Until I forgive him or forget him permanently.

I lead the two of them out into the hallway just as the door at the other end of the hall opens. Joe leads a freshly showered and changed Charles out of the room. I meet his eyes and nod. “Follow me,” I direct, my voice already stronger. Sounding more like myself.

I don’t look back again as I head back to the living room where I can hear the others arguing. They must hear us coming because the commotion quiets before we even reach the large room. I didn’t overhear enough to even try and guess what they were arguing about, but it’s clear the matter wasn’t settled.

All four of them stand at different points of the room, their bodies tense, arms crossed over their chests as they glare daggers at each other. The living room looks different than when I briefly saw it before. The guys must have moved the furniture around to create a circle around the coffee table that almost mimics the setup we have in our office. Not that any of them are using the setup while they argue back and forth. Probably shouldn’t have left all of the hotheads unattended for so long.

The only one I’m really surprised about is Ian. He normally takes direction well even if he’s an ass. The only time he’s ever popped off to one of us in a way that could get him in trouble has been directly related to Jade. So what is it now?

We should have brought Holden too. I didn't think we would need another cool head to help keep the others in check.

"Am I interrupting?" I taunt as I walk further into the room.

Kade relaxes for a moment before he spots Charles behind me and is immediately back on guard. Practically vibrating with his anger. I sigh to myself. I knew this was coming. I study Luca to find him only marginally more composed.

All of a sudden, I'm thankful Declan and Noah both came into the room to check on me. I'm going to need all the backup I can get on this.

"Scar," Ryder calls my name with relief. A smile gracing his face. I know they are all worried about me and tensions are running high but we need to continue forward. We can't afford to get entangled in our pasts. Our mission hasn't changed.

Romano first.

Then the four men who broke me.

All five of them will be erased from this planet and the world will be a better place for it.

As everyone spreads out around the room, Charles stays just behind me, almost not even in the room. Joe leaves his side to move across from me, while Declan and Noah flank my sides.

No one bothers taking a seat. Too revved up to even consider it.

Might as well jump into the thick of it.

"From this day forward, we will be working with Charles."

As expected Kade opens his mouth to yell his opposition. "Scar!"

I hold my hand up. "No." My stance is firm. There will be no changing my mind on this. We have a golden opportunity and while I may not fully trust Charles, I trust myself enough to know this has more pros than cons. Any trouble he may try

to start wouldn't come close to being enough to bring us down.

"Letty." Luca tries next, his voice no more than a threatening growl.

"I said no," I repeat, my voice harder. Rolling off my tongue with the grit of my agitation.

I turn to where Charles stands in the shadows. "Time to give me all of the information you can. But I'll have you know, I'm not the girl you once knew."

"I know," he says almost silently.

"No, you really don't," I laugh. "You think you do. But I've spent the last eight years dealing with monsters just like your father. Turning into a monster of my own brand. I have my own claws, my own fangs now. Dripping with poison and ready to kill at a moment's notice. You have no idea what I'm capable of. The blood I've spilt. The blood I crave. Just how creative I can get when someone even thinks about betraying me. Don't make me provide a demonstration. Okay?"

Charles moves forward from the shadows, yet still the man shows no fear. It's something I just can't understand. He's had guns trained on him, been kidnapped, threatened, and none of it has made him even blink.

Though, he isn't wholly unaffected by my little speech. No, his demeanor shifted with each word out of my mouth. Just not the reaction I anticipated. He seems weighed down in his grief. It sparks tears in my eyes and anger in my veins all at the same time.

I don't want him to be sad about who I became.

And yet... I can't stop being sad for the kids we used to be either.

No matter how happy I am in my life now, with the family I built for myself, it will never change the fact that my current happiness was born from the tragedies that destroyed me. I'll never stop being sad about everything I lost in that fire eight years ago.

“You should believe her,” Ryder adds cheerfully, breaking up the emotional atmosphere. “She threatened to cut off my dick and make me choke on it when she thought I might be lying to her.”

A surprised laugh eddies up out of me. I’m not the only one either. I look at Ry and know he did it on purpose. It makes my smile all that much more genuine.

He looks around the room and shrugs. “What? Felt like he needed a nice and clear picture.”

I shake my head as I wave to everyone to sit down so we can get to planning. I can’t help but notice that Charles does look just a bit paler than before. I should have known. Even a man who isn’t afraid of death is afraid of losing his dick.

Just about everyone follows my direction, except for Kade and Luca of course. Charles hesitates, but only for a moment before taking a chair directly on the other side of the coffee table from where I sit on the couch. Joe takes a seat at his side and after a quick look in my direction, Ian takes the one at his other side.

Noah falls onto the cushion on my right side while Ry steals the one on the left. Declan places his hand on my shoulder and stays standing at my back. His eyes roving over the others, a silent threat to all of them not to push me. The silent warning wafts off him in palpable waves.

Charles is the first to break the silence. “What do you need from me?”

Straight to the point. I like it. Makes it easier to know where to start.

“Where is your father staying currently and where has he been recently?” Start with something easy. Just because he was there that night, doesn’t mean he was the one Romano turned to.

“We’re staying at the Fairmore house for the next month or so. We came a week before the gala but Father had business he wanted to stay in the area for.”

“Do you know what?” I interject but he’s already shaking his head.

“I’m running most of the meetings on our legitimate business while we are in town.” He doesn’t have to verbalize what he means. Whatever his father is here for, it isn’t legal. Sure, they have their businesses here that do need their attention and in-person meetings, but Charles is taking care of it on his own.

“I wasn’t supposed to stay longer than a week here though,” he continues. “I met him in Cherry Hill and we flew out here together. That was when he asked for me to take over his meetings that he had set up because he had other important matters to attend to. He did say he wouldn’t be traveling far from Fairmore so I know he will be around.”

I hesitate to ask my next question. It’s important but even saying the name of my hometown after so long feels wrong.

Charles doesn’t miss a beat even as I struggle to ask. “Our base is still Eastvale,” he answers without making me ask. I can’t suppress the shudder at hearing that name. I don’t think I ever will. “He spends most of the year there, with only brief trips here and there. A trip of this length is unusual.”

I look at Declan to get his thoughts on the matter before turning to Luca. I think the two of them would have the same line of thought that I’m thinking. If his father changed his plans after being in Cherry Hill, there’s a good chance it’s because of Romano.

“Do you know Arthur Romano?”

“The name Romano,” he stops. “I’ve heard it over the years, but I couldn’t even begin to point you in the right direction. He’s connected to my father, but I don’t know how.”

I continue to ask him questions, trying to find out if he’s heard the name recently but we don’t get far. It seems his father really does keep him out of the shady dwellings he likes to reside in. I have to wonder why. He must believe he has Charles firmly under his thumb, yet never has tried to bring

him into the seedier aspects of where their money and power really comes from.

“Have you ever met him?” I ask, more on a whim than anything. Maybe he’s seen him recently and didn’t even realize it.

“I can’t put a face to the name, no,” he answers readily.

Noah is already handing a tablet over to me, a picture of Romano already enlarged on the screen. I hand it to Charles who takes his time studying it.

“I’ve seen this man before.” He says the words slowly, like he isn’t entirely sure of them even as they come out of his mouth. “I can’t place him though.” His frustration starts to burn through. “I feel like I should know.”

“Recently?” Noah asks as he takes the tablet back. Charles hands it back with one last begrudging look towards the photo.

“No. Definitely not recent.”

I sigh, we could have been so close. I guess it doesn’t matter anyways. I still believe we are on the right track. I lean back against the couch and close my eyes as I think over the implications of the information I have now.

Noah takes over interrogating Charles for any bit of seemingly useless information that can point us in the right direction. I continue to listen as they compile a list of properties, aliases, bank accounts, associates, businesses, and every other possible thread that Noah and I will be able to pick at until we unravel his entire life.

Charles is as forthcoming with the information as he can be. Even giving details Noah hadn’t gotten around to asking yet.

I need to decide just how much to tell him before sending him back. If we can find where Romano is staying, wiping him off the board will be as easy as breathing. I just need to be careful to not give anything else away when I give Charles his instructions.



Chapter Five Noah

WHILE IT MAY SEEM like Scar is being too trusting of this man that's virtually a stranger to her now, I can still see the shrewd calculation in her eyes. She takes everything with a grain of salt and I know we can trust her to make the right decisions. Even the ones as emotionally charged as this one.

Luca and Kade know it too, even if they don't agree with her.

I finish gathering the intel that will help me get into all the right places and know where to look. Charles gave me more to work with than I thought he would. I'm wary of how much he knows even though he isn't involved. It's clear he's been watching his father for a long time, or he's close to the man.

Leaning back into the couch, I squeeze Scar's knee and her eyes pop open, shining a vibrant green as her mind races with thoughts and plans.

"How suspicious will your father be about you not coming home last night?" she asks.

He shrugs like it isn't a big deal. "He most likely didn't even notice. If he did, he would assume I was out with a partner. He won't ask."

Makes sense. He is a grown man after all. Why would his father be keeping track of his every move?

“That makes this easier,” Scar says. “You can go home as if nothing happened.”

“And then?” he pushes.

Is she going to ask for more from him? It looks like she might still be undecided. She tilts her head back and forth as if mentally going through the pros and cons.

“Keep your eye out for anything that has to do with Romano. I’m guessing your father is hiding him and he’s first on my list to die.”

There’s not a flicker of disgust or remorse as he nods along to her words and agrees. There’s something off about this man, but I just can’t put my finger on what. He isn’t reacting like any sane person would react in this situation. He was all too eager to join in on her chaos. Does that make him a threat or an ally? I can’t tell.

It seems as if Scar has decided an ally until further notice.

“I’ll find out if any of our properties are being used,” he offers.

“Don’t do anything that will garner suspicion,” she warns.

He heeds her warning and they go back and forth a while longer solidifying plans. I’m relieved when Scar states we will be heading back home. It hasn’t even been two full days since we left, but I’m already craving the comfort I’ve found in St Graves.

There really is no place like home, especially when it’s been carved out for you in blood and destruction. We’ve poured our blood, sweat, and tears into that city to make it ours. Now I just want to go back to it. Bring Roe back home to us.

We won’t be able to until we rid the world of Romano, but that makes me all the more eager to get back to my equipment so we can lockdown his location. Charles may help us refine the search, but I refuse to put any stock in his help. We have no proof of how useful he will actually be further than the information he’s given us.

For now, his job is to keep an eye on his father and report back to Scar. No more, no less.

Speaking of, there is one more thing I need from him.

“By the way,” I interject as they’re finalizing their plan to get him home. “What is your father’s name?” For all the information I gathered, we skipped the simplest and most important fact. Scar knows, but I figure better to get it out of the way now. Put a name to the demon.

“Christopher Donahue.”

Sounds as evil as he is. At least it’s on brand.

I notice Declan jerks a little forward at the name. I’m not the only one who notices either. Scar turns to him and tilts her head in question.

“He and my father were friends,” D confirms. Charles nods along with his words. He must have recognized Declan this whole time. I guess he really is still as relevant in their circles even if he stays out of the limelight.

That must be the connection to why his father had the photos of Scar. By the disgust on everyone’s faces, it’s clear we all had the same thought.

Scar clears her throat and starts talking to Joe about the best way they can get Charles back to Fairmore.

“Take one of the cars from the garage,” Declan offers. “The keys are all hanging in the black cabinet to the left of the door.”

She gives him a grateful smile. “Joe, you can drive him back.”

“My car will still be at the hotel, you can take me there.”

“Just bring the car to our house or yours,” Declan adds. It’s obvious he’s not too worried about it. With Romano and all of his associates gone from St Graves we no longer have to move only by the tunnels. We can afford to relax our defenses a little bit. It only means we don’t have to burn every car we use. Scar may have the money to burn, but damn. That overhead was

starting to weigh on me. The only reason I could excuse it was I knew it was keeping us safe. Keeping Roe and the kids safe.

Joe nods his goodbyes and starts to head out of the room to gather his stuff. Charles hesitates, giving Scar a once-over that makes my blood boil, as if he's contemplating moving towards her. D's hand tightens on her shoulder and I tense, moving forward to intervene if he even thinks about trying to touch our girl.

Before he's even made a decision one way or the other, Kade is in front of him. I don't know when he moved, he appeared so suddenly. He doesn't even pause in his movement before winding back and landing a solid punch right to his midsection.

"Fucking Kade," Scar yells as Charles doubles over, the wind knocked out of him. He can't straighten or even speak as he tries to catch his breath.

Kade turns to Scar, arms folded over his chest in a look that tells all of us he doesn't regret what he just did even for a moment. Even knowing it very well may bring her wrath on him.

"Tell me he didn't deserve that," he argues.

Scar puts her head in her hand just as Joe walks back into the room after hearing the commotion. "Please tell me you have something for me to smoke," she pleads to him without responding to Kade. She already admitted to us that Kade and Luca were justified in their anger. Joe pulls a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of his pocket and deftly tosses it to her. She catches both with an ease and immediately lights up.

Declan doesn't seem bothered by it, so I just roll with it. She doesn't smoke often, especially recently. Usually only when she's really stressed. I do give a pointed look to Kade at pushing her to this point. At least he has the wherewithal to look slightly sheepish.

After several inhaled where she focuses only on the smoke spilling from between her lips, she faces Kade again. "Are we done now? Got it out of our system?"

“If that’s an offer,” Luca pipes up only to shut back down as she glares at him. “It’s not like I got a turn,” he finishes quietly.

“We’re done now, right?” she asks, leaving no room for argument or smart ass comments this time. She pins each one of us with a deadly stare, waiting for our acknowledgement.

“I’ll be good now,” Kade promises, somewhat begrudgingly. I scoff, I don’t think he knows the meaning of the word. He flips me off but Scar rolls her eyes.

“Please leave. Now,” she directs to Joe and Charles. “Before I get an even bigger headache.”

Whatever had him hesitating before, it is no longer. He moves slowly, still clutching his midsection and panting as Joe ushers him out of the room.

“That mean we can go home now?”

Everyone releases some of the tension they’ve been holding when she nods yes. She finishes her cigarette and heads back to her room to pack up her stuff. It’s less than an hour before we are back in the van and heading back to St Graves.



THERE’S the telltale sign of the pitter-patter of feet that just barely prepares me to catch Roe before she flies around the corner and launches herself into my arms.

I drop Scar’s bag and catch her just in the nick of time as she squeals and giggles. I chuckle as I tickle her sides. “Hi there, sweet girl.” Her laughter fills the room and the exhaustion that was seeping into my every fiber evaporates like it was never even there.

Kade laughs behind me and picks up Scar’s bag as I walk further into the room. I don’t make it even two steps before I almost trip over both of the twins hurling themselves at my legs and wrapping themselves around each one.

“Shit,” I curse as I stumble and barely manage to right myself. Kade claps his hand down on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Good luck,” he cheers happily as he pushes past us and makes his way into the house. I laugh as he curses when Blu comes running from the back of the house, hearing the commotion, and does his best to take out Kade as he jumps up on him.

All three of the kids giggle as I take long slow steps, dragging the twins with each one. This is probably their favorite activity in the world. They take every opportunity they have to be dragged around like this.

“I didn’t know I was going to have such a good surprise waiting for me when I got home,” Scar coos from behind me. Sweeping in to steal Roe from my arms. At least now it’s easier to move. I bend down and pick up Cal into my arms so I only have to drag Kai behind me. Just as we are about to reach the living room, Ian must come into his line of sight because all of a sudden he releases my leg and jumps to his feet.

“Daddy!”

Cal immediately starts wiggling in my arms, simultaneously trying to turn to look and get down to his feet. I let him down and he’s off like a rocket, chasing after his brother to jump on their dad.

I’ve missed the chaos that only kids can bring into this house. Even with as loud as we can all be, it’s too quiet without them.

Ian manages to sweep both boys up into his arms and carry them after us into the living room. I don’t know how he does it. Scar snuggles Roe, even as she giggles and tries to break free to say hi to the rest of the guys. Scar teases her and tells her she has to stay with her now. Her squeals of delight ease the anxiety and stress of the last twenty-four hours.

Kade appears from the back hall, probably after putting Blu back outside. He’s still just a pup and often still pees when he gets too excited. Kade sneaks behind Scar to swipe Roe

from her without her noticing. She shrieks in surprise as Kade lifts her to his chest before tossing her in the air and catching her. He catches her and cuddles her into his chest.

“Dang, Roe baby. You’re getting heavy. I almost dropped you,” he teases.

“Daddy’s being silly,” she laughs, shaking her head and refusing to believe he almost dropped her.

“That’s right, baby,” Ryder agrees, stealing her from Kade. “Tell him if he thinks you’re heavy, he needs to spend more time in the gym.”

Ian groans. “Please don’t tell any of these psychos that.” Jade shakes her head as she walks up to him, taking Kai from him. He eagerly climbs into her arms and rests his head on her shoulders, yawning.

The taunts continue as the kids say hi to everyone and we all begin to settle in. Just as we all get comfortable sitting down, Charlene walks into the room with trays of sandwiches.

“I thought everyone might be hungry,” she announces as she sets the trays down on the coffee table. Kai and Roe both pop up from where they were laying down in Jade’s and Scar’s laps. I grab a plate for all three kids and grab the heart-shaped sandwiches obviously meant for them and the three of them settle on the floor to start eating their food.

I have a feeling it will be naps right after they finish, if the big yawns and tired eyes are anything to go by. They’re much quieter as they settle in on the floor and dig into their lunches. Cal takes one bite before stopping and searching for his dad. “When Trev going to be here?”

Ian ruffles his hair and takes his own seat on one of the chairs with a plate in hand. “I don’t know, buddy. Let me call his dad. Okay?”

Cal nods along and starts eating again. I smile as I watch Roe pick back up her own sandwich and focus on her food again too. Apparently all three of them had been wondering when Trevor was going to get here.

Ian pulls out his phone and makes the call only to pull it away from his face moments later with a frown. Just then I can hear a commotion coming from the back hallway.

“Couldn’t wait two more seconds to see my face?” Holden teases as he walks into the room, carrying a very sleepy Trevor in his arms.

Ian scoffs, “It wasn’t you we were missing. Cal needed his partner in crime.”

Holden feigns shock as Trevor rushes to get out of his arms and sit with the other kids. Charlene goes to get up to make another sandwich but Holden waves for her to sit back down, telling her they already ate.

I keep my eyes on Scar, watching how she eases back into herself when she’s surrounded by her people. The absolute mundaneness of today is a direct contrast to everything else we’ve been dealing with. The tension that has been riding her shoulders almost seems gone as she strokes Roe’s hair with her fingers and chats with Jade.

No one brings up the last few days. The things we’ve discovered, the work that needs to be done. No one asks any questions or volunteers any information about everything we’ve learned or what our next steps are. The past year has taught all of us just how important it is to turn that part of our lives off every once in a while. To relish the quiet moments.

It’s become obvious just how much Scar needs these moments to keep it together. To survive this world with her heart and soul still intact.

We finish eating and keep the conversations light. Time passes quickly and I chuckle as Roe starts to sway back into her mom’s touch, barely managing to keep her eyes open.

“Come on, Roe baby,” I call out as I get to my feet and pick her up and cradle her to my chest. “Let’s get you down for a nap.”

“I want Mommy,” she whines, fighting against me. My mouth drops open and I’m not the only one. Roe isn’t one to

throw fits. Ever. Her wanting Scar is nothing new, but the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks certainly are.

Scar is quick to jump to her feet and smooth over the moment. “Come here, sweet girl. You must be tired.” She presses her face into her mom’s chest and cries for a few moments as Scar hushes her. Charlene watches the interaction with a knowing smile as Scar carries her out of the room. I hesitate as I watch them go, not knowing if I should follow, but Charlene waves me to sit back down.

The boys start to act up now that Roe is gone and Ian and Holden are quick to get them moving down to a guest room as well.

“She’s been missing her momma,” Charlene explains as she comes over and pats my knee. I give her a smile to reassure her that I’m not offended. I love that little girl something fierce and I know she loves me right back, but sometimes you just need your mom.

“Has she been having nightmares again?” I ask hesitantly. She’s been sleeping a lot better for months, but the continued separation from Scar and the rest of us can’t be good. We may do our best to shelter the kids, but kids are smarter than we give them credit for. It’s entirely reasonable they know something is going on, even if they don’t understand it.

“No nightmares,” Charlene explains. “Just asking for Scar a lot more frequently.”

“We’re close to eliminating Romano,” Luca tells her. “Once we do, we will be able to find our new normal. One where we aren’t so far from each other and get to spend more time all together.”

Everyone is quiet for a moment as we let his words sink in. Almost at once we all hop up to get back to our own tasks, ready for this break to be over so we can move that much closer to a life without Romano’s shadow looming over us.



I MARK another property off the list.

A sigh escapes my lips as I crack my neck and run my hands over my face. Two weeks of endless digging into mostly empty estates. The monotony of the task is a much larger threat to my sanity than any of the shit I've been exposed to since meeting Scar.

Who knew the Donahues would have so many goddamn properties that could easily hide a madman like Romano? I underestimated just how many threads I would have to pull loose to unravel this mess.

My phone rings jarring me out of my thoughts. I look down as Charles' name flashes across the screen and tilt my head to the side as I answer it. It's only been a day since we last spoke and I'm really hoping he's calling to help me narrow down my search rather than expand on it.

"Hey, I just wanted to let Char," he coughs, cutting himself off, "Scar, know that I had that list she wanted."

I tap my pen against my desk and wrack my brain trying to recall what she asked for this time. "Uh huh," I hum, hoping Charles will fill in the blanks. This would be a lot easier if she would either just talk to him, or run all communication through me. Instead, she has taken to texting him from different burner phones and then throwing them away before he has the chance to even think about responding.

"She wanted to see if I could add anyone to her list of potential abusers," he explains, picking up on my hesitations.

I snap my fingers. "Oh shit, yes. Send that to me. We're looking for any business partners, friends, even associates, anyone that could have had a correlation with either your father, hers, or Romano. Even the James family. Just anyone that would have even the slightest reason to have been in that office that night so we can have a master-list to reference back to."

"This list is a long one." I can hear the warning and hesitation in his voice as he tells me. I try not to curse at the amount of work that I know is coming my way.

“How is that different from any other conversation we’ve had?” I scoff. Each one leads down a whole new road of leads to chase. Hours and hours behind a computer screen tracking down every name, every property, every possibility that could lead us back to the answers we so desperately crave.

I feel Scar’s presence enter the office before I see her. Can feel her eyes burning into my skin like the brand they are. It was odd that she didn’t beat me here this morning. She’s never spent more time locked away with a computer than these last few weeks. The only times she isn’t here is when she’s with Roe or when she’s training. I’m positive she would even be sleeping in here if we didn’t drag her to bed every night.

“Well, I’ve never heard of an underworked hacker,” Charles chuckles, drawing my attention back to the conversation and a surprised laugh eddies up out of me.

I immediately freeze and my laugh tapers off awkwardly. Charles clears his throat on the line as well. “Right, well,” he continues awkwardly. “I have confirmed Romano has not left the country and I’m fairly positive he’s not on the West Coast anymore. My father extended his initial visit here, but his movements have been erratic since he abruptly changed his departure date again. I think he may have taken him back east.”

I sit up straighter in my seat. That eliminates more than half my list and cuts down on the work I need to do. I look down at my own list I was slowly working through to cross properties off and sure enough, all the ones that I have been able to confirm he wasn’t there have been either on the West Coast or out of the country.

“That narrows down our search a lot,” I respond, not able to keep the thread of excitement from my voice.

“It does. My father has been reaching out to contacts back home and I’ve been tracking his movements. I’m fairly sure he’s trying to decide if Romano is worth keeping alive at this point.”

I tap my pen against the desk as I swivel my chair to meet Scar’s eyes. They’re lit up with a hungry hope that can only

speak to her bloodlust. I start to smile at her but it freezes as I notice the hard and possibly hurt expression on Kade's face as he studies her. I hadn't heard him sneak in behind her and I don't think she realizes he's there either.

I sink my teeth into my lower lip as my gaze darts between the two of them. Are they fighting again? Everything has seemed just a little off-kilter since the gala. Like the balance we worked so hard to achieve is no longer as stable as it once was and one wrong move could leave us knocked on our side all over again.

"Do you know who he's been in contact with?" I ask Charles, pushing my worries about Kade and Scar away for the moment. They may fight, but they always find their way back to each other. Scar needs to sort out everything that has been eating away at her and once she gets her head back on straight she will make things right with Kade.

Scar starts making her way towards me and I give one last lingering look to Kade to see how he's going to react. His jaw clenches and his fingers twitch at the sound of Charles' voice but he stays where he is. I turn back to my computer as I listen to Charles.

"They're all highlighted in orange on the list I just sent you."

I open a new tab and pull the document he sent me up and can't help but chuckle at the color-coded list he sent.

"Red is for the associates I have confirmed have participated in illegal activities in the last twenty years. Yellow is for the ones I have found evidence of but only going back the last five years. Green are the ones I have found no evidence of but have worked closely with at least one of our families."

Not only are they all organized by the most likely candidates, each one has detailed notes about the family, who they've interacted with, in what capacity, and any other detail that might pertain to our investigations. Even the least likely candidates have as much care and attention as the most likely ones.

“I’m impressed,” I admit. I can feel Kade’s rage burning into my back even from where he stands at the other side of the room. I clear my throat again. “Thank you, Charles. I’m going to give this list to Declan to see if he can add anything else to it. Call me if you have any more info about your father.”

“Of course,” he answers quickly, but I can sense his hesitation. An awkward pause fills the line, I hold my breath to hear what he has to say, and Scar’s fingers dig into my shoulders. He sighs and I can feel her tense in anticipation but he just says goodbye before hanging up.

I toss my phone down on the desk and pull her into my lap. Her fingers find the soft tendrils at the base of my neck and she winds them up, softly tugging on them. I hum at the familiar feeling and lean into her touch.

“Am I overworking you?” she asks jokingly.

I nod vigorously. “You really are,” I tease her. “I deserve compensation.”

She laughs but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes as they wander away from mine and look over the information I have scattered across the desk and computer screen. “Do you need me to stay and work through these with you?” Her eyes dart over my shoulder to Kade, they were supposed to train together today.

“No, Charles actually just lightened my load for the day. I’ll be fine.” I press my lips against her cheek, but she doesn’t react the way she normally does. I pull away to study her face and find the now familiar faraway look once again glazing over her eyes.

Any mention of him trips her up now. I wonder when she’s going to allow herself to forgive him and move forward. It’s clear to me she is already starting to, but for some reason she finds it hard to accept that it’s what she really wants.

I look over my shoulder and meet Kade’s hard eyes. Maybe it’s not just about her after all.

“Go, baby girl. I’ll hold down the fort while you and Kade work out.” I bring my hand down against her thigh and squeeze her, drawing her out of her thoughts. I push her hair back behind her ear and press my lips to her ear. “It’s all going to work out. Don’t worry so much.”

She leans into me and takes a deep breath, smiling when she gets back to her feet. Her hand runs through my hair as walks towards Kade.

“Come on, Big Guy. It’s been too long since I’ve kicked your ass.”



Chapter Six Kade

SWEAT DRIPS DOWN MY BROW. I shake my head and wipe my hand over my face as I fight the smile that comes naturally at the sight of Scar's maddening smirk.

It might be both my favorite and most hated attribute of hers. That little smirk that spells nothing but trouble. It all but guarantees that someone will be pissed off. Usually Luca. That's when I adore it. Encourage it. Live to help her set fires that the others will have to put out. Again, namely Luca.

Nothing gets under his skin like that smirk does. And she knows it.

My only problem is it has another meaning too. One that doesn't just get under my skin, but burrows right down into my soul and fuels the very worst parts of me. The doubts and insecurities.

It's her mask. Her familiar fall back in order to hide whatever is going on in that little fucked up head of hers. She's hiding. And not just from me, but all of us. Maybe even herself.

Scar bounces on her feet as she pants, the little gasps of breath begging to draw my attention down to her lips. I fight the battle as my lips twitch and I shake my head at her.

Even when she's lost in the chaos of her own mind, she never stops being able to entice me, to draw me into her storm

and make me beg for more. Never stops being aware of what her broken pieces do to mine.

“What you thinking about so hard there, Big Guy?”

Her usual snark doesn't hit quite the same when I can see the remnants of her earlier hesitation and confusion lingering in her eyes even now. Ever since she saw Charles again, some of her shine has been missing.

No matter how well she tries to fake it, she can never quite hide all the turmoil that's brewing in her veins. I can feel the angry, pulsing winds tearing her apart against my skin. Each one its own lash, ripping my skin open and making me bleed as once again she fights against her trauma as it tries to drag her back under the surface. Her storm has always called to me, but now it threatens to take me under with her.

“All the things I'm going to do to you once I get you under me,” I snark back, my own fake grin in place. She doesn't want to hear my worries. Not right now. She isn't ready to confront what's eating away at her. I've never been good at slowly dragging things out of her.

Noah and Declan can coax her into spilling her guts, into realizing her own truths. I always push her just a little too far, a little too fast. Making her run, making her hide.

“Confident today, are we?” A small twinkle enters her eye and my grin relaxes into something slightly more natural. More real. If only I were more confident. Maybe then I wouldn't feel this way. Like I'm losing my grip on my own sanity as I watch Scar choose to suffer alone rather than lean on me.

“I'm always confident in my ability to get you on your back.” Her surprised laugh soothes the wounds her distance causes. We all have things we're good at. This is where I thrive. In my ability to draw her out of herself when she goes dark. To find the joy and happiness in the shadows.

I throw myself across the ring, wrapping my arms around her waist and taking her down to the mat with me. Her laughter grows and I nuzzle my nose against her throat,

relishing in the pounding pulse I can feel under her skin as I drag my tongue up her neck.

“I love your laugh, Ladybug,” I confess like it’s a sin. My words make her pause and she arches her body up into me. “I just wish it was enough,” I finish heavily.

She tenses under me and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying not to regret the words that slipped free. I hadn’t meant to say them. Not here, not now. I just can’t get the sight of her listening to Noah talking to Charles out of my head. The look of contemplation as she listened to his words, the smile when he laughed at Charles’ poor attempt at a joke. The hope that she couldn’t quite hide.

I lean up on my elbows to look down at her face. She’s frowning as she looks up at me, waiting for me to meet her eyes. When I do, I find the storm brewing there, no longer trying to conceal it from me. Satisfaction purrs to life in my chest. A familiar beast raising his head at the sight of her anger.

She arches a brow, daring me to repeat myself. I shouldn’t like that reaction as much as I do. But at least she isn’t hiding from me. Everything she’s feeling is written plainly on her face. Sharing with me. Being open with me. Just me.

“Just what isn’t enough for you?” she demands when I don’t answer her silent question.

“Pieces of you,” I answer without hesitation. A grunt escapes me as fire burns in my belly. I huff out a breath. Little brat knocked the wind out of me. My head rocks back against the mat as she straddles me, leaning down over me.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” No sign of her earlier smile or laugh left on her angry features.

I smirk up at her. That inner beast riding me hard. I may not be able to coax it out of her the way the other guys can. Might not be the one she chooses to open up to and work through her emotions with, but I can’t just have her happiness. I’ll never be happy with only pieces of her while she keeps others hidden away.

“You’re running again,” I challenge her. “Hiding from me.”

She slams her fist into my chest this time and I cough out with the force behind it. “I’m right fucking here,” she pants out.

We all have our talents. Mine include getting this wonderfully annoying woman above me to smile and also to piss her right the fuck off.

“Are you?” I ask and throw my shoulder into hers, knocking her off balance. She’s quick to move back and diminish my opportunity to get her under me again. She rolls backwards and lands on her feet, still crouched with her hands hovering above the mat. Ready and waiting for my next move.

I get my feet under me and stand tall, towering over her. “Cause it feels to me like you’ve been a million miles away. You spend more time lost in your own thoughts than I’ve ever seen you before. Even more than before you left us.”

She comes at me hard, distracting me with an uppercut that I just barely manage to dodge before she gets me in the chest with a roundhouse kick. It knocks me back several steps, but I don’t let her steal the advantage. I crouch low, faking right and waiting for her movement to match mine before turning on a dime and landing a hit on her left side.

She’s quick to respond with her own kick but this time I’m prepared for it. I catch her foot in my hands and yank her towards me, bringing her down onto her ass. I fall on top of her as she bangs her hands against my chest. “How long are you going to hold that against me?” she demands.

I sigh, my own anger at her distance ebbing as I see the emotion pouring off her in tangible waves. I didn’t want to hurt her. “I’m not,” I promise, raining kisses down on her face. “I told you I forgive you and I do. I know that I had my own blame for that.”

If I thought that would appease her, I was wrong. Very very wrong.

“Fuck!” I curse as she once again flips us around. “Will you stop doing that?” I demand as she smirks down at me. I shake my head and take several deep steadying breaths trying to breathe through the pain of her kneeling me in the gut.

“You should have been prepared for that,” she taunts.

I wrap my arms around her waist, but instead of trying to flip us like she’s expecting, I bring her down tighter against me. She huffs in surprise but it’s quick to turn into a near silent moan as she feels my erection pressed up against her.

“I’ll give you something to prepare for,” I growl in her ear.

She wiggles in my arms, but can’t escape my bear hug. “Bastard,” she curses, but her earlier amusement is back in her voice, even if there’s still a thread of annoyance in there too. I guess we can be even on that count.

I keep her trapped against me, wrapping my legs around hers as she tries to use them to gain traction to break my hold. I roll us over so she’s underneath me once more.

“Here we are again,” I taunt her, loosening my grip on her just enough to catch her hands in mine and lift them above her head. Now that she’s no longer fighting me, I straddle her hips and rise on my knees so I’m able to pull her tank top up and over her head. Instead of releasing her hands to free her shirt though, I wrap it tightly around her wrists and secure them to the ropes.

She scoffs, “You and Noah have been hanging out too much.”

I grin down at her. “How else are we supposed to keep you in line?”

She bucks her hips up and I laugh at the feeble attempt to dislodge me off of her. We both know I’m not going anywhere now. I dance my fingers down her arms to her chin, loving the sparkle back in her eyes. At least here, we always understand each other. Always know everything the other is thinking even without words.

Neither one of us has ever been the best at finding the right words at the right moment. This is much more our speed.

Getting lost in each other's bodies. I trace my fingers down her throat to her cleavage. I grin as I dip my fingers down and pull out the dagger she always keeps there.

Scar's brows furrow as she watches me press the tip of the blade into her sternum. Not hard enough to draw blood, not even hard enough for her to really feel it. Her lips part open and a beautiful flush spreads up her neck and across her cheeks.

I grow harder against her as I watch her reaction. One deft flick of my wrist and her perky breasts spill free from her now tattered sports bra.

She gasps. "That was rude!" she complains.

I hum along with her, pressing the flat of the blade against her peaked nipples. "It's rude to suffocate my beautiful babies." She shakes her head in exasperation but her body gives her away. Her back arches as she chases my touch.

I drag the tip of the blade across her chest until I reach her other nipple and tease her with it, careful not to nick her in the process. I do love my girl covered in blood, but not her own. Never her own.

Her breath comes out faster and a dark chuckle escapes my lips. "You like that, Ladybug?"

She nods so earnestly, every moment of her pulling back, every unsure glance in my direction, every single insecurity is erased from my mind. How could I ever doubt this woman and her love for me? Question how perfect we are for each other?

"Fuck, Letty. I could eat you alive when you look like this."

"So do it," she challenges, her voice husky with her arousal. I toss the knife to the mat away from us and let my tongue replace it. I breathe her in deeply, loving the scent that is so uniquely her and somehow never changes.

I caress her tits in my palms, gently squeezing them as I catch one of her nipples between my teeth and bite down sharply, eliciting a shocked cry from her. I soothe the little bud with my tongue and grin at the sound of Scar's heavy

breathing and the way she writhes underneath me. Searching out friction for her core.

It makes me want to torture her all the more.

So I do.

I take my time licking up her bit of sweat from her chest and neck, leaving love bites and marks all over her skin. I never let my hands stop wandering, exploring her body. Gentle brushes over her sensitive skin, sudden pinches against her nipples and breasts. But not once do I let my hands drift south of her waist.

Just enough to drive her out of her mind with need. Enough to make her beg. "Please, Kade."

"What do you need, Letty?" I ask, my own voice thick with desire.

"More," she pants. "More of you. All of you."

A pleased growl reverberates through my chest, a sound I didn't know I was capable of. I should stop being surprised by what this woman pulls out of me.

"I need all of you too, Scar. Every inch of you." I grip her hips in my hands and place kisses down her stomach as I move myself down her body. She mewls as she tries to lift herself up.

"Hmm," I hum against the skin of her lower belly. "I can smell you through your shorts, needy girl."

"Kade," she moans, her impatience makes me smile even as my own dick aches in my shorts. I slide my hands into the waistband of her shorts and pull them and her underwear down her legs in one swipe, leaving her completely bare to me.

She's swollen and dripping, just begging for me to steal a taste. I settle between her legs and lift her knees up high and wide, leaving her pussy completely open and exposed to me.

I curse under my breath. "I'll never get over how absolutely breathtaking you are," I praise her. The words strained as I fight to keep myself in control. Her pussy glistens

under my gaze and I can't hold back from giving her what she's been so desperately begging for.

I start at her inner thighs, using my tongue to clean up every drop of her wetness smeared there and work my way up. She wiggles and writhes, begging for more, but I hold her hips in my hands and anchor her down to the mat. Much to her frustration.

My smile stretches across my cheeks and I use my nose to find her slick and swollen clit. I shake my head slowly back and forth, increasing the pressure only slightly with each motion. Her cries only fuel my desire to continue her torture. To build her up into the slowest and sweetest orgasm. To make her feel the same torturous ecstasy I feel every day while loving her.

Finally, I lave my tongue over her clit. She moans obscenely and I chuckle against her, making her grind up into my face. I hum as I double down, eating her out as if my life depended on it. The more she grinds, the more I hum, attacking her clit with my tongue and tracing little circles over it the way I know she goes crazy for.

I'm determined to make her come without ever entering her. Though I can't wait to do that either. I keep one hand placed firmly on her lower belly, while the other one reaches up to tweak and roll her nipples between my fingers.

Her body tightens under my ministrations and her mouth parts open. I smirk against her as I begin to hum again, knowing she's right at the edge, just begging to spill over. I'm quickly rewarded with a gush of heat that spills down my chin as her back arches and her sweet cries fill my ears as she falls apart underneath me. Her body sags as the last waves of the orgasm recede and my hands find her hair, burying in the long locks and pulling sharply as I rise over her body and meet her satisfied smile.

"I know that isn't the best you've got," she taunts. A surprised laugh rumbles through me and breaks up some of the residual tension left between us.

“On the contrary, you are the very best thing I’ve got.” Her smile softens as I lean down, just above her lips. She darts up to press our lips together. I tilt my head forward and take control of the kiss, pouring everything I’m feeling into it. My love and fear. The old insecurities and friendship that was at the start of our story. My need and desperation for her and grief and anger for her too. She responds immediately, letting me have control while she relaxes into my touch. Showing her own understanding and fears. Her doubts and pain. Her guilt and worries.

Her taste lingers on both of our lips, igniting my desire to obscene levels. Creating cravings I haven’t had since that night I found her in the bar with Declan.

A beast I had no idea existed within myself until then. One that has lain mostly dormant until this moment. When I once again doubt my ability to hold on to Scar.

Rather than punishing her this time, I strive to make her desperate for me. A different type of torture. Fill her mind with me and only me. Leave no room for anything or anyone else.

Her tits fit so perfectly in my hands as I cup them, pushing them together as I pull away from her lips and press kisses to her cleavage. The sight of the purple marks already forming from my earlier nips make my cock twitch between us.

I run my tongue over them, biting again over the mark forming over her heart. This desire to own her, to mark her, to absolutely fill her with me steals what was left of my sanity.

Keeping one hand on her chest, I brush over her pert nipple as my other hand moves down between her legs. I’ll never get enough of how wet she gets for me. Just how messy I can make her.

My fingers swirl through the desire, gently swiping over her swollen clit until she’s moaning under my touch. Her back arches, putting her perfect tits right in my face as I pass over her clit again. I catch one nipple between my teeth, biting down sharply before instantly releasing her. Her cries are music to my ears. Her hips undulating as she rides nothing but

air, the most beautiful choreography I've ever seen. The sweat trickling down her skin as her body bows to the pleasure I create in her the most perfect art.

If I could catch this moment in a photo, I would blow it up and hang it over my bed to look at every day. When Scar is completely consumed by me.

"Kade, please," she pants and I smirk.

"I'll give you my dick, Ladybug," I promise as I put pressure on her clit and run those same tight circles over it. "But not yet." She groans and a satisfied chuckle rumbles out from deep in my chest.

"I love you like this too much to end it already," I admit. "Needy, begging, under me."

Her hips chase my hand as I pull away from her. "You're such a dick," she curses.

"Mhm," I hum. "But you love me anyways." I lick my lips as she spreads her legs open, giving me the perfect view of her slick cunt. The anticipation of sinking balls deep into her wet heat rides me hard. There's no better feeling than being fully connected with this wildly irresistible woman. "Are you going to let me have my way with you, Letty?"

Her silence doesn't annoy me. Rather her bratty attitude helps alleviate some of the tightness from my chest. My girl, my stubborn as fuck girl. She's never soft and pliant, always ready for a fight. Even when she's desperate for my touch, she'll never give in too easily. Just another reason why I love her so damn much.

A quick pinch of her nipple makes her yelp and throw me a dirty look, but I didn't miss the way her pussy glistened with new arousal at the move. She likes a bit of pain with her pleasure. Something I don't think we give her enough of.

Finally, she nods. "Take what you want, Stranger," she dares.

My cock twitches in my shorts at the challenge. She knows exactly what she's doing to me.

“I plan to,” I tell her. “It’s been too long since we’ve just played.” We fall into bed together just about every night. Usually with at least Ryder and Noah. Most of those nights end in some type of sex. Even with as out of sorts we’ve all felt, the sex hasn’t changed. She’s just as hungry, if not more so, for us than she ever has been.

I can’t imagine ever not being starving for her.

But this? I collect some of her come between my fingers and bring it up to face level. She shudders under me as I bring my fingers to my mouth and slip them into my mouth. I haven’t played her body like my own personal instrument in too long. Though it could have been only yesterday and it would still feel far too long.

“You’re going to fall apart for me in the most delicious ways before I’m done.” Her eyes dilate, her mouth parting as she focuses on my fingers and my lips. I collect more of her wetness before smearing it over both of her nipples, loving how transfixed she is. Fully here, with me. Only me.

Leaning down, I clean up the mess I made on her chest with my tongue. Slowly lapping up every bit and her breathing grows faster, more erratic. Her body clenches and writhes under me, needing to be filled. Begging for it.

“I’m going to finger fuck you until you soak my face and shirt with your come.” Her eyes widen and she cries out as I roughly shove two fingers into her cunt without warning.

Her walls immediately clamp down on me, sucking me in deeper as her body shudders in sudden climax. Normally, I would ease her through her orgasms, but that’s not what I’m after today. I have a very specific goal in mind.

I thrust in and out of her, scissoring my fingers and rubbing against her clit alternatively. The pace I set is fast, brutal. Demanding. Her ass lifts off the mat as her orgasm passes and her body begins to relax, only to tighten immediately when I keep up the relentless pace.

“Kade,” she warns, but I only grin in response. Orgasm on entry is great, why I teased her so intensely. Showered her

body with love and attention. Nothing pleases me more than being able to make her come at my command.

I twist my fingers in her, truly fucking her as deep as I can reach with just my fingers. I add a third finger at the same time as I lift her leg and brace it with my free arm. Her body twists with the new position, opening her pussy to me even more and allowing me to sink into her even deeper with each aggressive thrust of my fingers. I feel that sweet spot inside of her as her orgasm begins to build again, a frantic and rapid tightening of inner walls as she screams out for me.

Lifting her thigh higher, I rest it against my shoulder bringing her ass and pussy even further off the mat. I take one moment to appreciate the way her pink pussy gushes around my fingers, fat drops of her arousal dripping to the ground between us. Her clit is swollen and just begging for attention.

Never one to deny my girl, I lock her in place against me with my free arm as I dive into my favorite meal, never slowing the pace of my fingers thrusting inside of her. The second my tongue laves over the needy bud, Scar is exploding on my tongue.

Fuck do I love that taste.

Her third orgasm is just as intense as the first two. I slow my fingers, rubbing her inner walls as they spasm. Gently coaxing every ounce of her pleasure that I can. Licking her up, not wasting a single drop of the come I worked so hard to obtain.

As soon as her orgasm ebbs away, her body begins to relax. She pulls against the restraints she's still in and I just know she was going to grab my hair and pull me up to her.

Too bad I still haven't achieved my goal yet.

I don't meet her eyes, keeping my mouth on her cunt as I return to the pace I had previously set.

"Fuck!" she screams. I'd smile if I wasn't too busy wrapping my lips around her clit to suck the little bead into my mouth as my fingers thrust in and out of her.

She attempts to pull her overly sensitive cunt away from me and I chuckle against her. It won't take long to get her to the peak of that pleasure again. Not with the way her body is already screaming for release.

"Oh fuck, fuck, fuck," she pants, the words barely coming out. I find that sweet spot inside her again, roughly stroking it as I release the suction and catch her clit between my teeth. The moment I bite down, Scar sobs as she explodes, her release squirting from her entrance as she soaks my face and chest.

I let go of her clit, laving it with gentle caresses as I once again, gently coax the rest of her orgasm out of her. Carefully, I maneuver her back down to the mat, keeping contact with her pussy. Only now, I'm slowly stroking her entrance with soothing touches. No longer pushing her.

Satisfaction fills me to the brim as I lick my lips and meet her gaze. Tears stream down her face but it's her smile that blinds me. The faint blush across her cheeks making her come on my lips all that much sweeter.

"You did that on purpose," she accuses. Her body shivers between us, completely relaxed now. Even her words sound almost distant in her fatigue.

"Had to prove I could do it without Ryder's dick inside of you." It's too bad I didn't get this time on film, but I'm ecstatic all the same.

Hovering above her, I push my shorts down and release my aching cock, slowly stroking it from root to tip. Squeezing just slightly to try and relieve some of the ache. Her eyes follow the motion and her teeth sink into her lower lip. Despite how exhausted she appeared only a moment ago, a new energy is thrumming her skin.

"Can you take me, Ladybug? Tell me I can sink into that pretty pussy and fill you with my come." Her eyebrows raise but she doesn't interrupt. My obsession with my come in her has never made sense to her when she's on birth control. But I don't care about that. I just want to see her marked as mine in every way. As often as possible.

A drop of pre-come rests at the tip of my dick and I swipe it up with my thumb and smear it over her lips. Her tongue darts out to lap it up immediately. “Or should I feed you my cock? Fuck your face until I’m spilling down your throat and you swallow like the good girl I know you are?”

Her tongue moistens her lips before she answers. “What do you want?”

I groan, squeezing my dick again. “I want it all, Letty. That pretty pussy full of my come, it dripping from that tight ass, while I come down your throat.”

She swallows thickly, a haze entering her eyes as she pictures it. The same way I have been for the last several minutes. It’s a miracle I haven’t come in my hand. “Take,” she whispers before clearing her throat. “Take what you need, Kade.” There’s a lilt in her words, an edge to her gaze that gives away a hidden meaning behind those words, but it’s not one I can focus on. Can barely even recognize.

I grab her hips, anchoring her to me as I slide my dick through her pussy lips. “You going to let me fuck your ass?”

Her apprehension over ass play has diminished almost entirely. She’s learned to enjoy it. To completely let go of the control she holds onto so tightly. She trusts us implicitly. But she never offers it up freely.

She must see my hesitation because she moves her hips with me. “Fuck me, Kade,” she commands. “Every way you want to. Exactly how you want to.”

A growl spills past my lips and I flip her over onto her knees, the shirt restraining her twisting with the movement. Her fingers wrap around the ropes of the ring and I take a moment to make sure her circulation isn’t being impacted by the new position.

Once I’m assured she’s okay, I waste no time burying myself in her to the hilt. She gasps as I bottom out, her cunt already tightening around me. I’m close without even having moved yet. The desperation to feel her finally fulfilled enough to drive me right up to that edge.

I pull all the way out of her, gripping her hips tightly, tighter than I ever have before. I don't want fingermarks left behind, I want my hand prints branded onto her skin where I hold her to me. Driving back into her makes her back arch. Encouraging me with every pant, moan, and the way she leans into my touch.

"You take me so goddamn well, Letty." My dick is coated in her come as I pull back out, all the way to the tip, and the little brat clenches hard around me, sucking me right back in.

Releasing her hip, I bring my hand down on her ass. A loud slap rings through the gym and her pussy spasms around me. A vibrant red handprint begins to appear on her ass cheek and my thrusts become less controlled as the sight drives me mad.

I chase my release, needing to feel the euphoria only she gives me. It's only a few strokes later when I can feel the telltale sign of my balls tightening. I reach around to Scar's front and find her clit to get her there with me.

"Oh fuck, Kade. That's so good."

"Come for me, Letty," I demand, bottoming out in her again. She clenches but she isn't quite there yet. I strain against coming, rubbing my fingers against her clit faster. "Be my good girl," I growl. Dirty talk always helps take her over the edge. "Show me how much you love taking my cock. How good it makes you feel."

"I'm close," she pants, writhing into my hand. "So fucking close."

"Hold on tight." Her hands grip the rope tighter and I release my hold on her. She falls forward but I'm right there with her. Pulling her back to me by her pussy. My free hand splays over her back, pushing her head down to put that perfect ass on display for me.

I spit on her ass and she curses. Fuck. She's so tight, so wet, so fucking good. My eyes almost roll into the back of my head, but not yet. Almost.

I rub my spit into her ass, that tight ring of muscles relaxing enough for me to slip my thumb in. Not willing to hurt her, I move slowly just starting to stretch her out so she can take my cock here next.

It immediately makes her tighter around my cock, her pussy milking me and I can't hold back any longer. "You're fucking perfect," I curse as I tense inside of her, spilling my come into her.

She curses as her orgasm crashes through her, taking mine to new heights. My chest presses against her back as I hold us there, buried deep inside her while the waves of her orgasm recede and the last ropes of my come spill from me.

We stay there for a moment, the only sounds in the room our heavy breathing. Neither of us has enough air to speak or even move. I keep us pressed together, my thumb still in her ass, my cock still in her pussy.

Instead of pulling free, I press kisses down her spine as I begin to straighten and get to work on preparing her ass.

"Kade?" she mumbles questioningly.

"Hmm?" I respond, stretching her tight hole with my thumb. She stays relaxed, just like I need her to in order to replace my thumb with two fingers. When I slip them in she moans.

"You just came," she points out. My dick is still inside her, slowly softening now.

"Don't you worry." I begin to scissor my fingers in her asshole. "Give me a few minutes and I'll be ready to fuck this ass."

She starts to say something else but it gets lost in a moan. "Let me hear you," I encourage her as she writhes on my hand. I debate if I should even pull out of her, but my dick is already oversensitive and the way she's clamping down on me is almost painful. Somehow, it still feels good. Everything with Scar feels good.

Still, I pull out so I am able to have more control over her as I slowly stretch her out. It makes me grin to watch her eyes

cloud over in a haze of pleasure from this when she used to hate even the thought of it. My dick twitches as I watch her expression flutter from bliss, to pain, to concentration, and back to bliss as I slip a third finger inside her tight ass and begin to slowly pump in and out of her.

“You take it so well, Scar. So fucking well.” I’m already getting hard again as I watch the way she sucks my fingers back in. “Look at what you do to me. Even the best sex with you is never enough.” She pants as I begin to thrust faster, twisting my fingers as I go. “I’m already dying to sink my cock into this greedy hole.” She moans and I pull my fingers out, grabbing the lube and begin to slick myself up.

Her whimpers have me fumbling to hurry up and before even a few moments have passed, I’m pressing the hard tip of my cock against her hole. Slowly pushing in, she holds her breath as her ass stretches around my length.

“Shh, ladybug. You’re doing so good. Just like that,” I murmur as I force my way past the tight circle of muscles. “Breathe, Scar,” I remind her as I stroke her hip, brushing her skin as I reach around her front and find her clit to stroke. After what feels like ages, I bottom out in her. Sweat drips from my brow and her legs shake under me. “Fuck me, Scar. You feel so unbelievably good.”

A choked chuckle is ripped from my throat when she takes the words as a challenge and begins to rock her hips. Matching her intensity, I pull out before thrusting all the way back in. In no time at all, it’s just me and her. Scar and Kade. No.

A stranger and his ladybug.

Lost in the magic we make with our bodies. No more words spoken, a connection deep and true built on the passion and fire of the way our bodies move together. She’s as desperate for me as I am for her. As lost in me as I am in her. Nothing between us but the thick scent of sweat and desire.

My mind begins to black out, all the worries leaving me as I feel the telltale signs of her impending orgasm. I pick up the pace as I drive into her, needing to catch up with her and come together one last time.

“Almost there, Ladybug. Almost there,” I murmur in her ear and she pants out a response I can’t make out. I redouble my effort and my balls draw up as ecstasy builds in my veins. There is no high like what I get from this woman in front of me.

Scar tightens around me and it pushes me over the edge just as she starts to spasm around me, I come, thick come shooting inside her tight hole. We’re both panting and I collapse at her side, pulling out of her as I do. She gives me a wry smile and I see the confident woman I know shining in her eyes.

“I love you.” The words are a promise as much as a reminder. To both her and myself. I do love her. Even the parts of her she’s buried, even the parts I’m still learning. The ones she’s still learning and the ones she doesn’t even know exist.

Her eyes shine with understanding and I brush her hair from her face and tuck it behind her ear. Nothing but the naked truth left between us, shining with an intensity neither of us can continue to ignore. We both know the inevitable outcomes of all the things we’ve both been grappling with.

I’m scared. Scared she’s going to lose herself to her past once more. Scared that Charles may still have the power to tear her apart and ruin all the progress she’s made. Scared I’m going to lose her to the very reason I fell in love with her. The storm that brews in her soul.

“What is it that you’re so afraid of?” She looks up at me earnestly, her own insecurity shining in her eyes. Almost like she already knows all the thoughts running rampant in my head and she fears I’m about to confirm them.

She’s going to forgive Charles, and somehow I’ll learn to be okay with it. Somehow. At some point. But not today. Not right now. There’s too much fear writhing in my chest to accept what she’s saying without words.

I rear back as if she struck me, a feat I know is impossible since her arms are still immobile above her head. I push myself to my feet, turning away from her so she can’t read me like she always does. I can’t be here. Can’t even look her in

the eyes. I never thought it would be me, but I finally get the allure of it. I turn my back on her and run out of the gym, leaving her behind.

What else could I do when my biggest fear is that telling her what I'm scared of will make it come true?



BLOOD SPLATTERS from my knuckles as I feel his cheek shatter under the force of my blow. I don't even pause before hitting him in the gut with a left hook, knocking the wind from him.

He pushes back, just barely managing to catch himself before eating mat. He's too unsteady to have any real chance of landing a hit back on me, but it doesn't stop him from trying. I easily dodge his punch, debating if I should use the opportunity to end the fight. It just doesn't feel like enough. A buzz still rushes through my veins demanding to be let out.

He pulls back and tries to kick out at me. Ugh, he's almost making it too easy. I side step his kick and hit him in the chest with two sharp jabs, making him wheeze.

Tyler knew exactly what kind of mood I was in tonight as soon as he saw my face. He already assured me he matched me up with absolute scum. Someone I don't have to feel guilty about killing. I just wish he was making me at least work for it. The beast that lives in my soul is never satisfied by an easy kill. It only makes him that much hungrier.

His next punch is aimed at my face, but he's far too slow. I allow his knuckles to graze my cheek and take the shot at getting on the inside to end this once and for all. I hear his nose crack as more blood is spewed from his face and his head slings back.

I use my leg to knock his feet out from under him and follow him down. Raining blow after blow on his face and head until his body stops writhing beneath mine.

I crack my neck as I rise to my feet. The crowd goes crazy over the bloodshed as Ty announces me the winner of the

fight, continuing my undefeated streak. You'd think people would be more cautious here after the last few months, but if anything it's made people crave more violence. If we were worried the events of the war would diminish our pool of fighters at all, we didn't need to be. We have more eager participants than ever before. Men and women who want to prove themselves in the bloodiest rings in the states. Even with our lower presence here.

Luca and I used to be here weekly, I was almost here daily with Ian, Holden, Ty, and Joe. But with everything going on, it just hasn't been possible. The guys have been keeping everything running smoothly, but I can't say I wasn't shocked on coming in here tonight to find we are busier than ever.

Reading the reports and feeling the energy of this crowd are two very different things.

My blood sings in victory as I look out at the crowd cheering. The beast in me preening at the praise but not ready to climb out of the cage. We're ready for another fight.

Tyler continues speaking into the microphone, assessing me before calling for another fighter to enter the ring. He gives me a nod and with just that I know he has a whole lineup of people that I can kill.

I knew Ty was one of the good ones.

This insatiable bloodlust has nowhere else to go. I can't take it out on the person I really want to. Not when it's Scar herself that is making the darkest parts of me wake up and take notice. I knew that little smirk of hers meant nothing but trouble, even when she's only using it as a mask.

I could see it in her eyes. She finally stopped hiding from me and let me take a peek at what is in her soul and for the first time ever I can honestly say, I wish she hadn't. I wish I hadn't. Because now, there is no going back. There is no unknowing what I know.

Scar wants to forgive Charles. Even if she hasn't found it within herself to do it yet, she wants to. She wants him to prove himself trustworthy. To prove himself worth it. To prove

that even after all these years, he's choosing her. He's on her side.

I barely wait for the bell to ring before I'm throwing myself at my next opponent. The next sorry loser who had more confidence than he should and a string of crimes in his past that made Ty invite him to his death in this ring.

I black out, not even aware of my surroundings any longer. All I know is the second fight didn't last even half as long as the first one. It's still nowhere near enough to satisfy my rage. I don't know if it is even possible for me to find my peace here tonight. No matter how much my blood sings for the savagery of the fight, it's Scar that my body truly craves.

Her wet and willing and begging under me. Just like I had her. Too consumed by what I was doing to her body to worry and stress about Romano, to feel the echoes of her trauma, to even think about that scumbag from her past.

He never deserved her back then and he sure as fuck doesn't deserve her now. No matter what leads he gives us, no matter how much work he does for us. He could never right the wrongs of his past. Never erase how much he hurt my girl.

Another fighter enters the ring. I crack my neck and flex my fingers as I let my eyes rove over my newest opponent. He isn't like the first two. He doesn't enter this ring with an embarrassingly misplaced sense of arrogance. No, he enters this ring without the fear of death. He knows he might die at my hands, that it might even be the most likely outcome. He just doesn't care.

That makes him the most dangerous type of opponent. The type that doesn't have anything left to lose. I laugh sardonically, excited for the first time tonight. Since I saw that expression on her face and the truth dawned on me.

She doesn't want to hate Charles, but I do. I can't stop from wanting his blood on my hands. One punch was never going to be enough to suppress the rage I've felt for years. For all the times I've held myself back from seeking him out and getting my own vengeance on him.

I guess a part of me always knew that Scar's heart, as damaged and torn to pieces as it has been, is still far too big to ever hate the boy who was once her whole world. Her lifeline. The very reason she wants to forgive him is the reason I can never.

I can't hold it against her, and I know the time will come where she won't let me hold it against him any longer either. Unlucky for this guy, he just so happens to have the same annoyingly blonde hair as Charles and I can very much hold it against him.

There's no blacking out in this fight. I'm aware and sharp for every punch, every kick, every grapple. I even let him get me underneath him a few times so he can feel that sense of hope and accomplishment only to realize he had just fallen into another one of my traps.

Some would call it sadistic, I call it therapy.

Better to take it out on the fucker who I know deserves it than the woman I know is just trying to heal. The very thing I have wanted her to do for so long.

My knuckles smash into his rib cage and I can feel the bones bend and break underneath my fist as I make contact. He gasps in pain but doesn't relent as he drives his own fists into my midsection. A laugh bubbles up out of me as I wrap my arm around his neck and force his head into my side, locking him into place. I drive my fist into his face with a savage ferocity that I haven't felt since Scar left us.

He puts up more of a fight than the first two, but in the end, none of it matters. Blood and sweat drip down my face in a familiar sensation of the fights and finally some of the ragged edges of my rage are slightly soothed. Not gone, but less serrated.

Maybe this shouldn't be where I find my comfort, but if everyone has a church, these ropes are my pews and this mat is my altar. Which I guess makes this imbecile my sacrifice.

I loosen my hold without giving up control until I get into a better position. He struggles and writhes, suddenly aware of

what is to come. Maybe he wasn't as fearless as he first thought he was when he strode up into this ring.

My hands lock into position and before he has a chance to do anything, I snap his neck and drop his lifeless body to the mat beneath me.

The bloodthirsty crowd roars their approval and I can't help but chuckle as I make my way back toward Tyler.

"You good, man?" His hand comes down on my shoulder and he gives me a squeeze. I grin up at him, feeling slightly more at ease after my fights. I still have a lot to think about and come to peace with. I know Letty and I are going to have to have a real conversation that is more than just sex about the whole thing. But at least for tonight the screams inside my own head are a little quieter. My demons crying out my insecurities have been put to rest for now.

"That last fight settled me out," I say in thanks.

Ty nods knowingly. "He deserved it. We were going to take him out soon if we didn't get him in the ring."

"You good now?" A new voice asks, and I turn around to find Ryder looking up at me and Tyler with his own smirk on his face.

"When did you get here?" I question, looking around to see who else is here as I hop down off the elevated boxes and allow for Tyler to carry on the fights.

Ry rolls his eyes as we both turn towards the locker rooms reserved for only our team members. The crowd parts for us, giving us a wide berth as he smacks my shoulder. "Did you forget? We need to make rounds for Rach tonight."

I curse as the heavy locker room doors slam behind us.

Ryder cackles. "You totally did forget. Oh, I can't wait to let the girls know."

"Fuck off." I flip him off as I strip down and jump into the closest shower. "We're just going to the home office, right? No meetings?"

I can still hear him fucking around on his phone over the sound of the shower water so I know he's just ignoring me when more than a few seconds go by and he doesn't respond. "Hey, fucker."

"You don't have to wear a suit," he finally calls back, and I can practically hear the eye roll. I wipe my hand over my face. He's getting to be as bad as Scar. Lord help us all.

Since it will mostly just be us and maybe some of Rachel's underlings, I rush through my shower and get dressed in my extra clothes quickly. Any time we've had meetings on her behalf, Ry and I have both been careful to maintain the same type of presence Rachel herself commands. Without that worry tonight, it makes my preparations that much smoother.

Thank fuck because I really did forget and I definitely don't have a suit on hand.

Ryder shoves his phone into his pocket and picks up my bloody clothes off the floor and tosses them into the extra backpack I brought. We leave through the back doors without anyone noticing. The guys will already be aware that we weren't going to stick around tonight. I wouldn't be surprised if they somehow know my schedule better than I do. Especially since it feels like I've been living with my head in the clouds the last few weeks.

Ryder tosses me the keys and I climb into the driver's seat, thankful it isn't an argument. Once I get the truck turned on, I take a few deep breaths and try to get my head screwed back on right. I would be lying to say the adrenaline isn't still rushing through my veins. I never thought I'd want to glamorize death, but there really is nothing like feeling the life draining out of someone because of a split second decision you made.

Being that in control, to literally hold someone else's life in the palm of your hands. It's a heady and addictive feeling. One heightened by knowing that the world is a better place now that those three scumbags aren't in it.

There's a fine tremor in my hands as I grip the steering wheel and try to shake the worst of it off. Focusing on

something new will help the rest of them go away. I just need to push through the initial come-down.

I can feel Ryder's eyes on me, but I don't sense any worry or concern coming from him. Just curiosity. His natural interest now that he's elbows deep into this life with us. He's more attuned to his own needs, but also our own after the time he's spent with us.

Exhaling heavily, I put the car in reverse and head the opposite way from home and deeper into the city toward Thorns. After a few minutes in the car with nothing but the soft music playing on low, my heartbeat no longer feels as erratic as it first had. Taking back control is something I struggled to learn, but now have comfortably mastered. Scar has her needs, Ryder is learning his, and I have mine.

I crack my neck and tension eases out of my shoulders as I continue down the familiar route. Ryder clears his throat, pointedly looking out the window as he does. It's obvious he was waiting for me to be back in full control of my emotions before bringing up whatever it is he's about to.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I turn towards him just enough for him to catch the movement and look to see my arched brow. He rolls his eyes. "Whatever it is that made you storm out of the house today, leave Scar naked and tied up in the gym," I wince at that part, but he continues, "and come to the fights to beat three people to death."

"She liked being tied up," I half-heartedly defend.

Ryder snorts. "Considerably less so when you weren't there to give her any more orgasms." I chuckle in response and shake my head.

"I did know you guys were there and would find her quickly. Not like she couldn't have gotten out of it herself."

It's his turn to arch a brow and make me roll my eyes. Okay, okay. It wasn't the nicest thing I could have done. But it isn't exactly out of the ordinary for me either. "She was being a brat." I shrug a shoulder, but I know I'll explain more.

Ry makes it easy to talk to him. He has his own level of derangement that I think may surpass even my own. None of the guys would judge me, Luca would probably understand me best as he's most likely feeling the same way, but Ry's a little different. He's newly broken, not nearly healed yet. He has a certain fuckall attitude that allows him to cut through all the bullshit and get to the core of the issue. He accepts everything about us all with an ease that is rare to find.

I sigh, knowing I'm going to admit it anyways. "I think she wants to forgive Charles," I explain, tightening my hands around the steering wheel as I grit the words out.

"She does." He says it so simply, so easily, like it doesn't drive a knife through my chest.

"She told you that?" I can barely force the words out through the emotions clogging my throat.

Ryder hums as he thinks about how to answer me. "She didn't have to. I could tell." I wait for him to continue his explanation. It takes him only a few moments but he does. "From the second I saw how she was reacting to him. She was different. Not the Scar I know." I nod along in agreement with his words.

"It reminded me of the conversation we had right after she killed my dad. We talked about forgiveness and what it meant to her. How some wounds just can't be forgiven."

I continue nodding along to his words as I pull off the freeway. "I agree. Charles doesn't deserve to be forgiven."

Ryder laughs and shakes his head, but I'm being serious. I don't think I can ever forget the lost and lonely look on her face when she realized she had no one left at her side. When he stood back and watched her being tormented day after day until she finally ran away. I had to watch what it did to her, as it broke her down more and more each day when she didn't have anything left to give.

"It's not your decision to make, Kade. You can hate him all you want, but Scar has experienced enough pain in her life to know what is and isn't worth forgiving."

I scoff. “If you had to watch what I did, you wouldn’t be saying that. You’d want him dead too.”

I can see Thorns coming up and I know we won’t continue this conversation out of this car. There are too many people that could overhear. These pieces of ourselves are meant for our family only.

“I already want him dead,” Ryder laughs, surprising me. I turn to him sharply, and give him a questioning look, but he just shrugs. “I know he hurt our girl. That is always punishable by death in my opinion.” Yes, that’s exactly it. Now Scar just needs to remember that. “But it doesn’t matter what we want or what we think. She was the one who got hurt, and if she feels like she’s healed enough to forgive him then we have to support that.”

A huff of frustration escapes me. “Do you think she has? Healed enough, I mean?”

He shrugs as I pull into the parking lot and head towards the back lot. “I think the fact she’s even considering it shows she has. The Scar I first met would have already killed him, or acted like none of it mattered. She would have laughed it off and been crass and never let any of us see how much she’s struggling.”

I grimace because he has a point, but I still have a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of it. It might not be up to me, but that doesn’t make it any easier for me. I pull into Rachel’s spot and turn off the truck.

“I know it isn’t easy to accept, but I’ll ask you this. Would you ever blame Scar for not being able to save her sisters?”

“Fuck no,” I exclaim. “Are you serious?” My anger rises that he could ever even think to ask that.

“Of course not. Because she never meant to hurt them. She was barely able to survive herself. She was too weak to do anything.” My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I wait for him to get to the point. “Maybe it was the same for him. Maybe he was just trying to survive himself and he was too weak to save her.”

I crack my neck, hating how his words make me feel. Weakness isn't an excuse. Not when it cost Scar everything. Not when she's still tied up in knots every time she looks at him.

He sighs, but doesn't hesitate to pat me on the shoulder. "You can forgive weakness because you can fix it. A person can become stronger. Every time he risks himself to give us intel, he's proving to her that he's not the same scared and helpless kid she once knew. He's showing her every day that he's ready to be someone who can actually help her, and he is. He's helping all of us. He might have hurt her, but if she's ready to let that pain go, we need to encourage it." He pats my shoulder in comfort. "Not all wounds bleed the same, Kade. Not all scars need to hurt forever."

I hate how much his words make sense. Hate that he's saying everything I already knew. Hate that this is the exact reason why I ended up in the rings tonight because I didn't want to admit the truth. Not to her, or anyone, and especially not to myself.

He starts to turn towards the door, but I grab his arm to stop him. He waits and I swallow thickly. He's a jackass. A hothead that puts even me to shame. And yet he cut to the core of the issue so easily. And I can't ask one stupid question. I curse under my breath, but he waits patiently.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes tightly as I finally force the words out. "If it's that simple, why hasn't she just forgiven him yet? You said it yourself, he's proving it every day, so why is she still struggling so hard and looks so damn lost every time I see her?"

He chuckles dryly. "Revenge is easy. Looking at someone who hurt you, accepting their faults and still choosing to forgive them, care about them, let them back in and give them the power to hurt you again. Well, that is a hell of a lot harder. You have to do work yourself. Let go of your own pain and anger. Accept that they weren't perfect and put yourself on the line all over again. Look at how hard it was for you to forgive Scar after she left us."

I drop his arm as his words resonate through my skull. Knocking every notion and feeling I had about this around and reconfiguring it all. It isn't easy for me to just accept, but at least I have something to think about.

Ryder hops out of the truck and I take another moment before following suit. We still have a lot of work to get done before we can make it back home. I wonder if Scar would let me climb into her bed tonight. I smirk at the thought of her reaction.

Ry arches a brow, catching my moment of levity. "What's so funny, Big Guy?"

"Just imagining how Scar would react if I climbed into her bed when we get home."

His responding cackle lightens some of the load off my shoulders. "Girl will definitely be out for revenge. You'd wake up hogtied for sure."

I shrug as I open the back doors to the club. "Worth it." He nods his agreement as we make our way upstairs and into Rachel's office. Even with coming here several times a week, it feels like every day we come, there's more work than the day before. It's all piling up in Rachel's absence. But neither of us can complain about it when we know exactly why she can't bear to be here.

We work side by side, mostly in silence unless there's something we need to discuss. We've gotten into a fairly simple routine when we work here together. It keeps the business running smoothly even if we don't have the same amount of time that Rachel and Alec had been dedicating to it.

It's a few hours later when Ryder gets up from his chair and stretches while yawning. "How is it she doesn't have anyone else to count on within her own business?" he questions as the door once again closes behind a couple of Rachel's underlings after we gave them their orders and resupplied them.

I shrug, not because I don't think the answer matters. It's just not something that I've never fully understood about

Rachel or Alec either. Scar has always been closed off, but Rachel gives a whole new meaning to keeping her cards close to her chest.

“I’m surprised she’s even letting us help her,” I admit. We’ve gained a lot more intricate understanding of how her business operates through this whole ordeal. If there was any doubt about if she trusted us or not, there isn’t anymore. Our empires have crossed past being allies and are close to being merged at this point. Though I know both Scar and Rachel will always keep a clear line drawn. You can’t have two powerful women that get along as well as those two do without clear boundaries.

I look down at Rachel’s desk as Ryder begins organizing the papers to take to her to keep her apprised of the decisions we’ve made.

Ryder clears his throat. “Strange to think how far we’ve all come since we first met.”

I chuckle with him. I never would have expected for us to end up here. When I reconnected with Scar, I saw it as my second chance. A chance to be what she needed this time. A chance to have the life I never thought I deserved. I just never pictured it would lead us here. Running a drug empire while our ally was in mourning. Rachel had always seemed as untouchable as Scar to me. That nothing would ever get to her.

This bloody war just proved how wrong I was about that. Now I can’t imagine how Scar would be if she lost one of us. Would she walk away from this whole world completely? It’s not like she hasn’t done it before. Create a new identity and try a new life and hope for happiness to find her in the third try? I don’t think so.

Rachel is pouring her everything into revenge, that’s exactly what Scar would do too. She wouldn’t stop until she got it. The difference is Rachel doesn’t need this part of her empire to get it, she just needs Scar. So at Scar’s side she will remain until they both get their vengeance on the man behind both of their downfalls. If Romano wasn’t such a piece of shit, I may even feel bad for the guy for what he has coming.



Chapter Seven Scar

“I BROUGHT COFFEE,” I announce loudly before pushing in through Jade’s bedroom door. It’s always a risk, but there’s no way those idiots didn’t hear me coming. I made more noise than should be humanly possible as I let myself in.

If I do catch them unaware, Ian will spend the next forty-eight hours straight in intensive training. I might just move in too. If he’s that inept at keeping her safe, he could use my help.

Ahh, alas. Everyone is clothed and not at all surprised to see me. Though Jade only grumbles when she sees me, hardly even opening her eyes as she makes grabby hands for the coffee. I put mine down on the side table so I don’t drop any of the three drinks before handing hers to her. Another dark head of hair pops up from the covers where she was leaning against Jade’s shoulder.

“Sorry, Ian. I guess no coffee for you,” I say.

He flips me off. “Don’t act like you ordered that for me anyways. We all know it’s an extra hot caramel macchiato with more espresso than should be legally allowed to sell.”

Someone is grumpy in the morning. “Well, you could have had it if Rachel wasn’t here.”

I hand the other cup in my hand to her and she gives me a grateful smile. We all ignore her puffy and swollen eyes and

the fact that she can barely stand to be in the home her and Alec shared for so many years.

I grab my iced coffee and start crawling into bed on Rachel's other side. Jade pushes against Ian to make room for me. He grumbles the whole time about how it's too early for this many women to be in his bed.

Jade scoffs, "You've never complained before."

He pinches her side before rolling over and pulling the covers over his head and ignoring us as he tries to fall back asleep.

Good luck with that.

Rachel scooches up into a semi-sitting position and both Jade and I take it as an invitation to rest our heads on her shoulders. We stay silent as we consume our coffee and I let both of them wake up a little bit before going into more pressing matters.

Rachel breaks the silence as she looks around the room. Ian and Jade, well Jade really, have made this place their home. Every time I come by, there's more and more intimate details shared on their walls. New decorations that just fit them. There's even a small bookcase on Jade's side of the room now to store her slowly growing collection of books.

I'll have to remember to ask Kade for recommendations on some new ones to buy her so she can fill her shelves. We can consider it partial payback for his recent attitude. Dickhead.

"When do you think the twins will move back in?" I ask, pushing away the annoying thoughts of my grumpy dickhead.

Jade beams and I smirk into my coffee. She's been preparing for those boys to come live here since the week she was released from the hospital. We all knew it was only a matter of time before it would be safe enough to bring them back.

"Not until Romano is gone," she answers. "But their rooms are all ready. We even set up a playroom where Trevor and Roe will be able to come over and they can all have sleepovers in there."

“It’s going to be a nightmare separating them after they’ve all been living together,” I comment with a smile. Even though I know it’s going to be a trying process when we get there, I still remember when Roe was too scared to even look at the boys in the face.

“Speaking of,” I say with a cheshire grin.

Rachel perks up so fast she almost spills her coffee. “So you did come with something to tell us?”

“Damn, bitch. Spit it out already. What’s the holdup?” Jade taunts.

I raise a brow in her direction. Sassy little thing she is now. “I was waiting for you pussies to wake up a little bit,” I point out. They both look back into their coffees and take another long sip. Apparently neither one of them has a smart ass comment to that. Though Rachel’s fire has been rare nowadays.

“It’s nothing definitive,” I start, “but we’ve found proof Romano is still trying to keep in contact with associates,” I explain. While his business did have a lot of fall out after we hit the auction, he had auction houses all over the country. There are many that are still operating, especially the ones on the other side of the country. Less and less people are willing to work with Romano now, but even our power can’t be unrivaled throughout the whole country.

There are plenty of people willing to risk it. They believe the distance keeps them safe from us. They’re not wrong. It’s kept us from making a move, for now. It won’t be like that forever and we keep a long list of names that need to be eliminated.

“That’s why he isn’t already dead.” That’s something Charles began speculating to Noah about that got us to start trying to track call logs of those we know are still running his rings. “Christopher Donahue would not have kept him alive unless he thought he could still be of use, or Romano has some type of insurance against him in the event of his death. The second option isn’t likely, as Romano was far too cocky and left in a hurry. Who would he have been able to give his

insurance to? William? Ciar? They're already dead." I shrug, a small smile playing at the corners of my mouth.

We really have isolated him so beautifully.

"We're trying to track their phone calls to locate him. Charles is also trying to glean any information from his father, but we're getting close now. I can feel it."

There's some of the fire I've been missing in Rachel. Her brown eyes burn with her need to make Romano pay, to see him suffer. It's exactly why I came here this morning. She needed this pick me up. Ryder and Kade have all but completely taken over her business as she tries to heal from this loss. It doesn't feel like anything we do for her could ever be enough but this felt like it could maybe be a start.

"What's the plan once we do find him?" Ian asks.

I flop back against the pillows and shrug. It's hard to decide when we don't know what we're going into. I already know everyone is going to want to be a part of it, but I don't really think a team of fourteen will be necessary or practical.

"Don't know," I admit. "We will get a team together and take it from there. I have to guess he's pretty isolated." I can't imagine him having a lot, if any, security around him. Charles seems to be in agreement that his father would only spend the bare necessity until he was sure Romano was no longer of any use to him. That, and killing him wouldn't set anything into motion.

"It should be quite simple once we find him."

Ian scoffs, "I doubt there will be anything simple about it."

A maniacal grin spreads across my face. "You're probably right."

Rachel chuckles at my side. A flicker of her strength lighting her up. "Is there anything we can do in the meantime to help?"

I hesitate, not knowing what type of job to give her. The truth is we have a million things going on and even with how many of us there are, we are working long hours to keep all of

our businesses up and running while we also dig into Romano and the wealthiest people of this country.

“Get dressed and come to the house. We still have a lot of information to sort through.” I jump out of the bed and trade looks with Ian. He nods and I know he’s got both their backs.

A tingle races down my spine, causing me to shiver. I pause in the doorway, leaning against the frame and try to pinpoint the cause for the sudden rush of unease. My eyes volley around the room one last time but find nothing out of place. The feeling doesn’t subside even as I say my goodbyes and make my way back home. Rather, a sharper edge of excitement pulses alongside the unease as I sit in the driveway.

My head falls to the steering wheel as I try to make sense of the chaos in my head. Something is coming. We’ve been sitting on pins and needles for weeks as we’ve tried to make headway into finding where Donahue could have hidden Romano away from prying eyes. Even with the information pouring in, the leads it has garnered have been few and far between.

A sigh spills past my lips. There are too many moving pieces on the board right now as we’re working on too many different fronts without a solid plan to keep us all organized. It’s my own fault. Some days it feels like I’m barely holding on to myself, let alone managing the team the way I should be. The way I normally do.

One little text should solve the majority of my unease. I exhale a deep breath and push the door open to finally make my way inside. I barely make it past the threshold before I hear Ryder.

“Team meeting?”

I arch a brow as he turns the corner and we come face to face. His lips twitch into a satisfied smirk as he answers my silent question. “I was watching you sit in the driveway and contemplate your life choices.”

I roll my eyes and smack his chest as I walk by. It doesn’t faze him, instead he falls into step beside me, his hand resting

on my ass as he steers me toward the kitchen. My eyes narrow as soon as I make my way into the room and find Kade eating cereal at the counter.

He gives me a sheepish look and I flip him off. Fucking asshole. Ryder and Noah both laugh at my ire. He throws both of them a dirty look, but he damn well knows he deserves it. He's lucky I haven't dumped his bowl over his head as it is.

Actually, I hum to myself. That isn't such a bad idea.

"Don't even think about it, Baby Girl," Noah soothes, appearing in front of me suddenly. His hands fall to my hips and he squeezes gently. My attention snaps away from Kade and to my sweet, yet mischievous boyfriend. "Do you really trust him to do a good job of cleaning it up afterwards?"

"Hey," Kade protests. "Scar knows exactly how good I am at cleaning things up."

My pussy involuntarily clenches at the innuendo in his words and my cheeks heat. Noah chuckles as he notices and a new thrill creeps up my spine.

Ryder shakes his head. "Do you even realize what they're talking about?" he asks Kade. "Just a hint, it wasn't about her cunt." I grin as I study Ry. There's a gleam in his eye that tells me he's hoping I ignore Noah and do it anyway. Especially since Kade himself encouraged it.

It's Noah's turn to shake his head. He squeezes my hips again before releasing me and stepping out of my way. "Be my guest. He did ask for it." Kade only looks confused as if he wasn't fully listening to the conversation and is now lost. He probably wasn't, or he would have known better than to speak up the way he did.

A playful smirk grows across my cheeks as I approach him where he's happily eating his cereal. He watches me warily but doesn't reach out to stop me when I lean into his space. He's too focused on examining my face, he misses when I swipe the bowl away from him. The metal spoon clangs to the hard countertop at the same time as the milk and soggy bits of

cereal pour down his face, dripping down and soaking into his shirt before spilling over the counter and floor.

His mouth parts open in shock as Ryder's raucous laughter fills the room. I smirk as I meet his green eyes sparking and some of the weight lifts off my chest. My big guy is still in there. I'm still here. We might be twisted and feeling lost, but we're still us. "Guess you can remind me just how good you are at cleaning," I tease and my smirk transforms into a full grin as he dramatically wipes milk from his face.

"I don't even want to know."

Luca's droll tone makes me snort as I whip around to find him and Declan walking to the kitchen with both of their laptops.

"I'm sure he deserved it," D remarks dryly.

"Oh, you're gonna pay for that, Ladybug," Kade snarls behind me. Faster than I can turn around, his big arms envelop my waist and my feet are lifted off the floor as he picks me up. I squeal as I feel the milk seeping through my thin shirt but can't help the laughter that tumbles from my lips when he spins me around and burrows the top of his head into the crook of my neck.

The whole room blurs as I hear the chuckles of all my men surrounding me, filling my broken soul with an almost forgotten warmth. Worries that were just plaguing my mind and making lightning dance across my skin drift away as cold milk and bits of cereal are smashed into my hair and skin.

It's a stupid and fleeting moment. One day it will just be a silly memory. Something that will get brought up to tease Kade when he's getting a little too cocky. But right now, it's my lifeline. My reminder that I'm alive and no matter what happens I have my men. My family. My home.

It's an inconsequential scene that maybe just saved my sanity.

I throw back my head and laugh, but Kade still doesn't release me. He turns me in his arms and I wrap my legs around his waist. It's been weeks since I felt this close to him. Even in

the gym when our bodies and souls connected, there was a distance between us I didn't know how to bridge. The truth neither one of us is ready to put into words an obstinate obstacle between us. His eyes bore into mine, alight with his feelings and happiness I haven't seen on him in weeks.

"I thought we were having a team meeting, not a food fight." Ian's low timbre finally draws my eyes away from Kade's, but I relax into his arms.

A loud smack follows his words. "We were about to get a show," Jade admonishes.

Kade snorts and I grin as the rest of my men just roll their eyes. "I can give you a show if that's what you want, J," I flirt. Kade's arms tighten around me. I repay him by squeezing my legs around him until he grunts and narrows his eyes at me.

I see Declan and Luca trading looks before Luca finally sighs. Guess it's his turn to attempt and rein us in. "You know this is only going to get worse as more people show up," he scolds, using his hands to gesture for us to go get cleaned up.

The sound of the front door opening makes me raise my brows in his direction. His lips thin as he shakes his head just as we hear Britt calling out her hellos.

"Oh, hell no," Declan curses.

"That's a recipe for an even bigger disaster just waiting to happen," Ryder snickers.

"Go to your room and get cleaned up, Scarlett," D demands.

I lift my hands from Kade's shoulders in D's direction. "Okay, Daddy."

Kade's body shakes with laughter as Declan starts cursing.

"Come on, Ladybug. I have to remind you just how good I am at cleaning you up."

"You will be cleaning up the kitchen," Luca yells after us as we turn down the hallway.

Britt must have heard him. “Is it safe to come in here?” she asks. “I can never trust what kind of mess I’m walking into.” She scoffs, “Oh, joy. White liquid on the counter. Why are we here again?”



Chapter Eight Scar

THE FAMILIAR BUZZ of energy and noise that floods through the room brings me another dose of peace.

Already the power of being back in control floods my system as everyone turns to watch Kade and I walk into the room.

“Look who decided to finally show up,” Britt calls out.

I roll my eyes. “I’ve been here. Someone decided to be an ass.”

“How is that different from every other day?” Jade asks, grinning.

Kade and I both flip her off at the same time, but I don’t respond to her. It’s all been a much needed reprieve, the casual banter that is our normal. I didn’t realize just how much it was needed until I could feel some of the worries easing from my mind. But now that we’re in our command center, I’m ready to get back to business. The worries haven’t disappeared, they won’t abate until we have solid plans for our next moves and I know that everyone is on the same page again.

It’s been too long since we’ve all been together and gotten shit done. Especially with just how much we have going on. All the moving pieces finally need to come together.

The atmosphere of the room instantly shifts as I take my usual spot and open my laptop that's already waiting for me. Everyone falls silent as they watch me. Their expressions reflect the feelings bubbling up inside of me. A fierce determination to finally reap the rewards we have been carefully sowing. Some of us for months, but most of us for years. Almost a decade now.

They do say that revenge is a dish best served cold. Maybe that's why there are times that I feel as if I'm filled with ice. As if my very blood has frozen over, waiting for these very moments I'm living now. I never thought so much unease would come with the last preparations.

The room mirrors the mess in my own soul. My team is overflowing with their drive to take the next steps, a feral excitement in the air coursing between us all. Almost enough to make the hair raise on my arms. But we aren't without our grief and anxiety. A constant companion nowadays. I fear the day where we forget the sharp pain of all we lost will never come.

"We have a lot of pieces on the board," I start as I pull up my notes on my computer. "Too many moving pieces that make it hard to see the bigger picture."

"Hence the meeting, I suppose," Joe says.

I grin. "It isn't just because I missed all your ugly faces."

A few dry chuckles sound throughout the room as everyone relaxes into their seats, but I don't miss the varying signs of nerves throughout the room. The cool look in Joe's eyes as he braces himself for new developments, or the tinge of worry in Britt's. Holden's fingers dance over the edge of the couch in a rapid rhythm as his eyes flash between Jade and me. While Mikey is tense at the door, arms crossed over his chest.

Guilt and shame writhe in my chest. We're in shambles compared to the flawless unit we were before that damned gala. No one else has changed, only me. I swallow thickly, not letting the tears that prickle the back of my eyes to show. I can't continue to falter. Continue to let everyone down.

“We’re normally better at all working together and being aware of all that’s going on. Ever since the gala, we’ve all been moving in different directions without a center point.”

Luca nods along with my words. “There has been a disconnect between all of us recently.” A few more people nod along with his words. Luca is probably the most informed of all of us. He’s stepped up where I have fallen back, where I’ve been falling apart. He’s seamlessly taken on all the additional duties I normally carry out while I have been struggling to maintain my sanity. While I’ve been throwing myself into digging up every piece of intel I can gather on Donahue, Luca has been overlooking everything else. Including the team and what everyone has been doing. No wonder I feel so out of control. I hadn’t realized just how many of the reins I had passed to him unintentionally. He looks to me and waits for my nod before he continues, “We do have a lot going on, so I think it’s best if each team gives an update.” He gives everyone a moment to interject, but no one has anything to say.

“Let’s start with the fights,” I suggest. “Not including recent misadventures.” I throw a dirty look at Kade who shrugs me off.

“Joe, Ian, Holden, and Ty,” Luca calls. All four men trade looks before Joe takes the lead.

“If we were worried about the recent happenings negatively impacting the fights, the concern was unfounded. We’ve never been busier,” he explains. The fights have always been a huge source of not only intel for us, but also a key piece in the way we network. Most of our jobs come from the fights. It’s the place to go to get in contact with us. As if he’s reading my mind, Joe continues. “There has been some unease over the lack of your presence at the fights. More people are realizing who the right people to talk to are, but since we aren’t taking any jobs right now, it doesn’t do much to help settle the unrest.”

My fingers tap out an uneven beat as I process that. It’s not something I had really considered these last few months. We’ve tightened ship and pretty much stopped interacting with

anyone outside of our circles. The only exception has been Rachel, but word has surely gotten around about her status as a Rose by now.

I shrug. It can't be helped. We don't have any room to add something else to our plates. People are just gonna have to survive without us. "Put out word that the only form of payment we are currently taking is information on Romano."

Joe snickers but nods his head. Should have done that ages ago. It may not bear any results, but it should paint a target on Romano's back. An even bigger one than what I've already put there. Anyone who is desperate for our help will now be looking into him too. It won't hurt us.

Holden clears his throat. "There's been talk that St Graves won't ever be the same after this."

"It won't be," Declan says simply. The silence echoes around us as we all absorb the truth in his statement. We've come out from the shadows and blood has run down these streets. We've gone too far to go back now. "It may have been our home before, but St Graves is ours now. Nothing will happen in this city without our okay."

Holden nods. "That's exactly what people are saying. The Bleeding Roses own these streets and the city will be a death sentence to anyone that dares rise against us. Because of that, we have more people than ever at the fights. More and more fighters are aiming for a card to train with us."

"Have you given out any new ones?" Kade asks.

All four of the guys shake their heads but it's Ian that answers, "We have our eyes on a few fighters but we haven't added anyone since the night we declared war. We didn't want to risk bringing in the wrong person and we haven't had as much time to train either. We'd already had a handful of new fighters this year."

"The young guys?" Kade asks. Something tickles the back of my brain at his question. I can almost remember who he's talking about but I can't quite grasp the memory. I know there's something about them though.

“You’re thinking of Wren and Dean. They’re both high schoolers,” Tyler answers.

Ian continues, “They were the last two fighters we gave cards to. Dean got a card the night Scar went all trigger happy at the fights.”

“And he still showed up to the training?” Ronan asks incredulously.

Ty just shrugs. “Him and Wren are best friends and Wren had already been training with us for over a month.”

Ronan scoffs. “Still, they’re kids. They must have balls of steel to show up after that night.”

Ah, it finally dawns on me. I remember seeing them there that night. They looked to me for a command. They were ready to do whatever I asked of them, even if I could see the fear written plainly on their faces.

“Maybe,” Ty concedes. “Or they just have something worth fighting for.” He trades looks with Ian and Holden and I instantly know they have their suspicions.

“Have they said anything to you about it?” I can’t help but question. We don’t really have the time to be taking on any new problems, but if they’re our fighters then they’re one of ours. Period. We protect our own.

I can’t forget the steely determination in those kids’ eyes that night. If they’re fighting for something or someone, they are ready to go to the very pits of hell to achieve their goal.

“Nah,” Holden answers. “They’re good kids. Diligent in their training, eager to succeed. But they keep their cards close to their chests. I don’t know that they will ever open up to any of us. But we get the feeling there is a very specific reason they are so close mouthed.”

“We can’t know everything that happens. If they need help, we can keep an eye on them but we can’t do much more than that,” Ty comments.

“About that,” Ian interjects, throwing a glance at Jade before he clears his throat. “We had this idea.”

“Go on,” I encourage, curious what it could be. Tyler wasn’t wrong. There’s no way for us to know what’s going on all over St Graves at all times. We have our information network, the fights play an integral part in it, but we also use all of our various businesses to keep our thumb on the pulse of this city. Doesn’t mean we have someone everywhere though. We can’t know every secret. Especially those of high schoolers. That is one area our intel is severely lacking.

“Well,” he hesitates, making me all the more curious. It isn’t like him to hold back when he has an opinion. “We already use the fights for intel, but what if we started using our fighters as well?”

I cock my head to the side as I study him. “In what way?”

“Have them keep their ears to the ground in their day to day lives. Report back to us. We are up to almost forty fighters now, all from different walks of life, all over the city.”

All the guys start smirking as they look to me. I respond with a chuckle. “It is a treasure trove.” One unintended side effect of all this has been the colliding of all our different avenues of business. Where we used to try and keep each one in its own lane, there are a lot more benefits to having those lines start to blur. Giving us more options and things to work with.

“The idea is that once we get it going, people will start to actually use them as points of contact to inform us who needs to be marked for death.”

Risky. But I like it. “I’m intrigued. We’d have to work out a system so those marked don’t realize they have been.” I tap my nails against my laptop without typing anything. “Step one, get the fighters on board to listen and report. In the meantime come up with any further ideas on how to implement the rest.”

He nudges Jade as he answers, “We’ll get on it.” A blush rises on her cheeks and she refuses to meet my eyes. At my arched brow, Ian chuckles. “It was her idea.”

I grin before turning my attention back to Joe. “Anything else we need to be aware of?”

He shakes his head in answer. “I think that’s everything.”

It’s not surprising it took us that long to get through talking about the fights, but I’m more relieved than ever that we decided to do this today. I already feel more settled and in control than I did this morning.

Before I even have to ask, Mikey continues the discussion. “We’re hearing all the same things from our spot.”

Ronan grunts in agreement. “Even our new artists are fully booked with people trying to get in good with The Bleeding Roses.”

“The new sign looks good though,” Britt says.

My mouth drops open briefly before I throw my head back and cackle. “You didn’t?”

“Oh, they did.” She grins emphatically, pulling out her phone as she does. “Sending photos now.”

“I fucking love it.” Everyone laughs as they look at the new sign hanging over the tattoo shop that now reads Bleeding Ink with roses that look eerily similar to the ink that now marks the bodies of everyone in this room.

Mikey rubs the back of his neck. “We thought it was funny, but we didn’t think it would act as such a beacon for business.”

“No kidding,” Ronan snorts.

I grimace. Even through the jokes, I can see the exhaustion lining their faces. Not that any of us are free from that. “How’s the other side of things?”

“It’s slowed down since the auction,” Mikey answers and I breathe a sigh of relief. “We’ve had a few rats we’ve had to clean up, but not as much as before.”

Noah nods. “Since the shutdown of Steel Roses, we haven’t had any new plants in our legitimate businesses.”

I can't say I'm surprised. That was part of the whole reason we decided to shut down Steel Roses for now.

“Mainly people trying to infiltrate the fights and we're seeing a few crop up around Thorns, but not on the staff.”

Rachel sits up a little straighter at the mention of her headquarters. She hasn't been back since we lost Alec. A sharp pain spears through my chest at the thought of him. Against my will, my eyes flick to the board that still has all of our points from the game we've now abandoned.

I can almost hear his laughter in the echoes of the defining silence. The space where he's missing is the loudest thing in the room. The rush of guilt is almost enough to make me gasp for air as I meet Rachel's eyes and see another piece of her crumble away.

The room collectively holds their breath as she sags into Jade's side. J is quick to wrap her arms around her, holding her together with pure force if nothing else will work. She catches Kade's eye over Rachel's head and nods for him to continue.

He clears his throat. “He's right. Things are going almost too well at Thorns on the business side of things. No one has questioned our role there or our authority. It's been running smoothly, all things considered.” He finishes with a cough as he catches the way it sounds.

Jade throws him a dirty look and he gives her a sheepish one back. I bite my lip as I consider his words. I hadn't really thought to stop and think about it, but it is odd how easy the transition has been.

Rachel doesn't run her operations the same way we do. We've vetted some of the people who work under her so we know what she values. She's meticulous in her background checks when bringing someone on board, but her circle of trust went no further than Alec. They're a business, not a family.

There's no reason for anyone to be understanding about what her loss would mean to her. To be understanding about outsiders coming in and taking over the day to day operations. Even making calls without her approval. Ryder and Kade have

had full authority without her around. To have met no resistance raises some red flags.

“Nothing out of sorts has cropped up in the numbers,” Rachel says softly. “I have been reading your reports and tracking the projected numbers. Everything is exactly where it should be.”

The words sound like they should be a good thing, but I can hear the skepticism in them. She expected for there to be some pushback, she even went as far as to warn the guys when it was decided they would step up for her.

“We’ll keep looking into things, but anything specific you want us to watch out for?”

Rachel hums under her breath as Jade rubs her hand up and down her back. There’s a lot Rachel hasn’t opened up to us about, but I get the feeling Jade has gotten at least some of it out of her.

“My father’s men,” she finally answers. “I had expected them to start acting out with Alec gone.” Her voice barely rises above a whisper as she admits to this. “It was never me my father planned to have succeed him.”

We’d had the feeling that was the case based on the information we had gotten out of her when she was first interested in Jade.

“Was it Alec?” Tyler asks, earning a hard smack in the chest from Holden. At least someone in that trio has some sense of decency.

“Ouch! It was just a question!”

“An insensitive one, you prick,” Holden scolds.

Rachel chuckles, pain and humor evident in equal measures as she does. “It’s okay,” she soothes, placing her hand on Jade’s arm. Probably stopping her from throwing something at Ty. “It’s nice to hear his name,” she admits before clearing her throat. “But no, it was Nic.”

The whole room grows tense and I practically snarl at hearing that fucker’s name. Rachel places her hands in the air

to placate us. “He never tried to steal it out from under me. He never even wanted it.”

I roll my eyes and give Noah a meaningful look. He winks in acknowledgment before turning his attention to the computer in front of him. Apparently we need to keep a closer eye on dark and douchey than I thought.

“They settled for Alec and I because they had no choice, but they never liked the way he deferred to me.”

Ian scoffs, “And they liked dark and douchey because he refused to?”

Rachel snorts, sounding more herself than she has in ages. “Nic wouldn’t know how to defer to a bus even as it ran him over.” She sighs and shakes her hair from her bun as she sits up a little straighter. “I expected them to start trying shit with him gone and my not being around. I was even hoping for it. We’d been trying to weed them out for years.”

It’s the closest she’s ever gotten to admitting why she runs the business the way she does.

“Instead they’ve been on their best behavior,” Luca summarizes. “Keep a closer eye on Nic’s movements.”

“Already on it, boss,” Noah answers, ignoring Rachel’s protests. She sputters out her disbelief and rolls her eyes.

“He has been a dick,” Jade attempts to console her.

She ignores her, turning her attention back to me. “What about our biggest problem? Do we have more on Romano? How are we tracking him? What can we do to help?”

“Slow down there, Rach,” Declan teases her. “There hasn’t been much activity in the elite social circles. It seems as though the West Coast circles are tightening and hunkering down. Waiting for the storm to pass. At least as far as their criminal behavior goes.”

“Romano’s presence was stronger on the East Coast,” Luca explains. “He’s taken a hit to his reputation and business overall, but he hasn’t been wiped from the map yet.”

“We’re using that to our advantage though,” I start in order to answer her other questions. “It means we still have a list of known associates that we can monitor and track.”

Noah stands up and my eyes are immediately drawn to him as he takes over. “We know Donahue is helping hide him, but we also know from Charles he wouldn’t do that out of any sense of loyalty. There has to be something in it for him.”

“If he’s still bringing in money, he still has value rather than just being a liability,” Declan summarizes.

“Exactly,” Noah agrees. “And we all know money is traceable. We just have to sort through the records and find the right lead.”

Rachel and Jade both sit up a little straighter and I give them a nod of acknowledgment. “That’s where we could use your help. We need you two to start going through the records that we’ve been able to collect from Romano and his associates and see if we can find any hint on where he could be.”

The room fills with a thoughtful silence as we all get lost in our own thoughts. Trying to find someone who doesn’t want to be found isn’t really an exact science. It’s following a lot of leads that mostly lead to dead ends. It’s noticing patterns and being able to read between the lines of information.

“Is it possible he’s in your hometown, Scar?”

Noah’s spine snaps straight as his body fills with tension at Tyler’s question. I take a deep breath and look around the room to realize he wasn’t the only one to react that way.

“It isn’t likely,” I answer. “We’ve narrowed down where he could be and while Eastvale is on the list, Donahue isn’t one to keep a ticking bomb in his backyard. He’ll be where they control the authorities, and their power is well known, without being too close.”

“Charles thinks the same thing,” Noah adds. “His father isn’t willing to invite trouble. He’s far more meticulous than even Romano was at the height of his power.”

I hum my agreement and quickly change the topic and my fingers begin to twitch at my sides. “What about the business side of things?” I address the question to Luca.

He tilts his head to the side and studies me for a moment before finally answering. “Everything is moving faster than anticipated. We had accounted for more trouble than we’ve been running into. It seems just about everyone supporting Romano really has cleared out of these parts. For now at least.”

I take a moment to study him. There’s no lie in his words, not that I can sense, but there’s something I’m missing. My eyes flash around the room and all five of my guys are looking anywhere but at me. All holding entirely too still.

“That’s good news,” I say, my voice lilting at the end in my hesitation. Luca’s easy grin does the opposite of calming my suspicions. Since when does he grin so freely? I start to question him more on what progress has actually happened in the clubs but stop when I feel my phone vibrate. A quick glance down at it drives out any curiosity about what the guys are up to.

My neck cracks as I jerk it to the side in my irritation. “What the fuck does he think he’s doing here?” I demand of no one in particular. My eyes are drawn to Rachel at Jade’s side.

“Speak of the douche and he shall arrive?” Kade jokes, but it doesn’t mask the raw fury burning behind his green eyes.

Rachel groans and Jade pulls her tighter into her side. “Don’t tell me,” she whispers.

“Okay, we won’t,” I agree chirpily. My eyes cut to Kade. “Cut him off at the driveway and then at the knees.”

His knife is already in his hands before I even finish the sentence. “Your wish is my command,” he sings as he heads to the door.

Declan and Luca trade looks but neither seem all that inclined to interfere as they normally would. Ryder is just a step behind Kade, a matching pair of blades in his hands. My

smile grows wider even as Rachel curses behind me and Jade's giggles fill the air.

"You guys can't actually kill him," Rachel chastises.

"I don't see why not," I argue. "He doesn't do anything for us. We have more friends than him too." I weigh that sentence in my head. "Probably," I amend. I don't actually know what he's all involved in. We hadn't had the need to really delve into his past, that changes now. "It'll still be worth it," I decide. What's a few more enemies to add to the table? "With his personality, I'm sure he has more enemies than friends. You know what they say about the enemy of my enemy and all that."

Rachel is the only one to roll her eyes at me. That, more than anything, shows how much he's pissed off everyone in this room. She shakes her head at me, before dropping her gaze to the floor. "He's still Alec's brother."

Fuck. She knows none of us can say shit to that. The entire room holds their breath as I sigh. "He's still a prick."

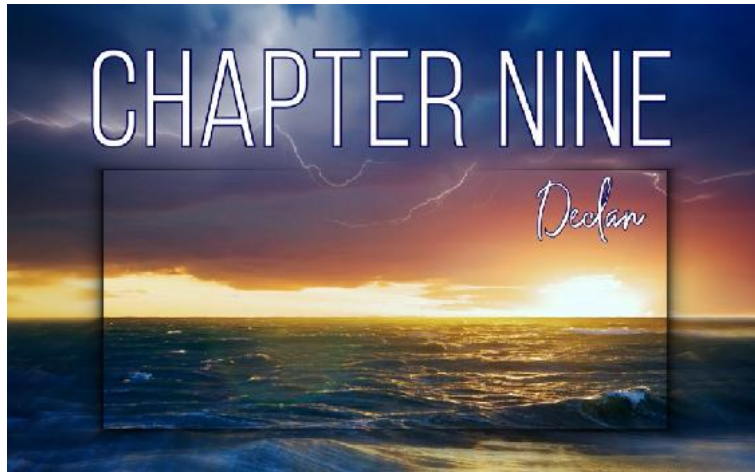
"He's still a prick," she agrees, her hurt and confusion marring the sentiment.

"Let him in, I guess," I concede. As much as I would love to burn him at the stake, it would only hurt Rachel more. I really had thought their shared grief would help mend the damage from their pasts. I thought he was stepping up to be by her side after the funeral. I never thought he would abandon her. Blame her. Fucking destroy the little bit of hope she had left.

Kade and Ryder fall back into their seats as Noah takes over getting the door. I watch as Rachel shrinks into herself with every step he takes out of the room.

Is it too late to change my mind?

He would make such a pretty corpse.



Chapter Nine Declan

“DIDN’T EVER REALLY EXPECT for you to be back here,” Scarlett sneers as Nic follows Noah into the room. I suppress my smile and maintain a cool indifference as I track his movements into the room. His eyes are immediately drawn to where Rachel sits at Jade’s side.

Scarlett is quick to jump to her feet and move in front of the pair. They may have demons from their past made worse by the rawness of their pain, but there is no justification for the way he’s turned his back on her. Learning he was the intended heir only makes his behavior that much more suspicious.

“Never thought I’d have any reason to be back here,” he says dismissively and Scarlett bristles even as she rolls her eyes. Her foot taps in her anger as she doesn’t bother to try and mask her reactions for him. She had been softening towards Alec’s less than likable twin despite his first impression. She even pushed for him to comfort Rachel during the funeral, thinking she could have a piece of her family back even if she lost her other half.

Rather than bring comfort, all he’s done is hurt her. Even as I think it, Rachel flinches behind Scarlett, her small frame cowering away from his obvious disdain. My fists clench at my sides at being reminded just how broken Rachel is.

“Spit out your reason for showing back up or leave,” Scarlett demands, her patience obviously waning. A glint of

silver makes me smirk as I catch sight of Ryder's less than obvious threat as he fingers one of his favored blades. His only saving grace is the shared belief between us all that he still has some common sense and wouldn't show up on our doorstep without a damn good reason.

I cock my head to the side as I analyze him, waiting for his response. There's a flicker of regret in his eyes as they drift to where Rachel has curled in on herself on the couch. I wonder if he even recognizes her. If he feels any remorse that he continues to push her further into her grief, or if he's relishing in his ability to stroke the flames of her guilt that Alec's death is somehow her fault. It's not.

It's no one's. Not hers, not Scarlett's. Though they both seem determined to carry the burden of blame on their delicate shoulders. There is no logic or reasoning in grief or guilt. The only way for them to see the truth is to hand over the man truly behind Alec's death. Everything points to Romano, yet none of the pieces we have fit together to paint a clear picture. I can't help but feel we are missing key elements that led to Unbidden Desires blowing up that day.

As quickly as I saw it, that flicker disappears from Nicholis' eyes. Any sign of his humanity vanishes once more as his cold demeanor returns with a sense of business. "Thought you would benefit from knowing the Alvarados have declared they will no longer do any business with Romano."

Hmm, that does have my attention. I mirror his indifferent expression while my pretty girl cocks her head to the side and hums, "Interesting." There's a lot left unsaid with that single word. A lot of blanks that still need to be filled in.

The Alvarados hold a lot of power, not only in this world but in mine and Scarlett's former one as well. A family known for openly riding the line between the depraved underworld that lives in the elite's shadows. They might have their own moral code, but it isn't one that wholly aligns with ours. There's enough overlap that they've earned our respect, though not our friendship.

They've never had a problem working with Romano all these years even when they themselves never participated in human trafficking. What caused their sudden shift in allegiance?

"They're claiming he's unreliable and causing too much havoc."

Kade snorts, "And we aren't?" I tilt my head in agreement. We were the ones to openly declare war, the ones who've left a rather large, and attention-grabbing, trail of bodies behind us.

Nic smirks, a bit of the guy we had all started to get to know and like shining through. "Guess you are the type of chaos they endorse."

"Hmm," Scarlett hums to herself. She's clearly weighing the news without giving away her thoughts to the outsider. Making such a public statement is the equivalent of the Alvarados announcing their support of us. No one who matters will miss their intentions. Uncovering their motivations is an entirely different story however.

My phone beeps, alerting me to the security going off again. I meet Luca's eyes only to find the same questions reflected back at me. Everyone else is already here, most of them unaware of yet another unexpected guest. Scarlett's body tightens as her unease wafts off her in palpable waves.

"Another surprise guest?" I ask, cracking my neck and moving closer to Scarlett. "I don't think I like that," she murmurs softly, just loud enough for me to catch as I reach her side. My hand wraps around her smaller one as I pull her closer into me. Everyone else slowly catches on that something is wrong as they stop having their side conversations to focus on us.

Noah already has his computer open and is looking to see who it is. A grimace settles across his face as he gives Scarlett a helpless look, all but confirming her sentiment. "I don't think you're going to like this." My grip tightens on her hand as I pull her against my chest and into my arms.

Luca rips the laptop out of his hands before Noah can stop him and immediately starts cursing. If the two of their reactions weren't enough to give it away, the way Luca doesn't turn to Scarlett, but rather Kade would be.

Scarlett's entire body goes rigid and I swear she even stops breathing. I glare at Noah, knowing he's the cause behind this latest development. The reason for the imminent meltdown of our girl.

Noah's already watching her, a guilty and fearful look in his eyes. Her body shudders as she forces herself to take several deep breaths. Obviously, trying to regain the control she seems to always lose in the presence of her past.

"He wouldn't be here unless it's something big," he attempts to console her.

"That does not make me feel better," she mutters to herself. I squeeze her hip in comfort. I can't be confident that she was ready for this confrontation, but it needed to happen. She leans back into me and true worry sparks in my chest as I soak in the riotous emotions coming off of her. My pretty girl has come so far from the desolate woman I met in the bar. She's stronger, more whole. Charles and the demons he brings with him threatens to topple that back down.

"What just happened?" Nic asks as he studies the sudden shift in the atmosphere of the room.

Before any of us have a chance to form a response, Rachel snaps, "None of your goddamn business."

Scarlett snorts and pulls out of my arms to stand straight, smoothing her expression back into the indifference I'm accustomed to seeing on her face. Her mask, her armor. She raises a brow at him and nods. "What she said."

"What is he doing here, Noah?" Luca snarls, drawing us all back to the issue at hand.

He raises his hands in defense. "I don't know why he's here now, but it has to be because he has big news," he hesitates. "News that he didn't feel he could share over the phone or through email." The insinuation is heavy, but it does

nothing to ease the rapidly growing tension in the room. It isn't just the six of us reacting. Every single person in this room is reacting to the volatility leaking from Scarlett, no matter how she may appear on the surface. All of us are too in tune with her to not be affected by his sudden arrival.

"Everyone, stand down," I order. We're too close to completely losing control. It's the last thing she needs when she's in a state of vulnerability. "Lashing out won't solve anything," I remind everyone. A modicum of calm ripples through the group as everyone stands down. Well, almost everyone. My eyes land on my pretty girl and take a deep breath. She may not be ready, but she can't continue to ignore the closure she so obviously needs. "Maybe it's time to get some answers and put some of our worries behind us." She instantly drops her gaze to her feet. This isn't something she can keep hiding from. If I have to be the bad guy, I will be.

Speaking of, I turn my glare to Luca and Kade. They're already silently communicating with just a quirk of their brows and a roll of their lips. The eerily silent communication that takes place between the two of them no longer freaks me out. After almost an entire lifetime together, it only makes sense that they're able to understand each other so thoroughly.

I wait for them to feel the weight of my gaze on them both. They slowly turn almost in perfect unison to meet my stare, already defiant expressions in place. I don't need words to tell them to get their shit together. After a silent stare off, Luca finally drops his gaze first. He catches Kade's arm and gives him a subtle nod.

Pain flashes across Kade's face and regret lashes through me. It's not like I want them to be going through this either. Scarlett refuses to tell any of us more about her past with Charles, but it's clear to all of us it affects the guys as much as her. But none of that changes the fact they are one of the reasons holding her back from getting her closure. As much as I love and respect them, I refuse to allow anyone to hurt our girl. Even if it's one of us.

Resignation weighs heavily between the two of them. It won't be that easy, but at least this is the first step for all three

of them being able to move forward.

“Guess I’ll get the door?” Noah asks as he tentatively moves toward the door.

I nod in assurance, encouraging him to just get on with it so we can get it over with. Scarlett cracks her neck at my side, her fingers dancing against her thigh in agitation.

Joe clears his throat, moving closer to the center of the room. “Everyone is going to behave, yes?”

Reluctant agreements sound throughout the room. He waits, staring down the brooding pair in the corner before they also acquiesce. His gaze turns to Scarlett, concern radiating from him as he studies her.

“Scarlett,” he starts in a soothing voice. “If you want us to handle this, we can do that without you having to face him.”

She swallows thickly and for a moment I think she may actually tuck tail and run. So unlike the girl we all know. Worry spears through me once more, the atmosphere of the room tilting back into chaos as we all await her response. My pretty girl is the center of more than just my whole world. She’s the glue that brought our entire family together, the backbone that keeps us strong, the leader we all need. Witnessing her fragility is something no one in this room is accustomed to. It’s a part of her she rarely allows to exist and share with us, let alone everyone that is here now. Her unease ripples through all of us. Putting every single one of us on guard before Charles even steps foot in the room.

Jade and Rachel both move to flank Scarlett’s side, while everyone else moves to take defensive positions around her. I side-eye Jade as she plants herself between me and Scarlett, but she just smirks and shrugs, staying firm in her position. I guess sometimes you just need your friends. Even Brittney moves closer to the center of action, having Scarlett’s back.

Nic tenses further, his eyes stuck on Rachel as she grows right in front of his eyes. No longer the cowering girl she was only moments ago. Her normal demeanor and strength evident

as she puts aside her own turmoil in order to be there for my girl.

“Do I need to be preparing for something?” he asks, briefly glancing at Scarlett.

“Why are you still here?” Ryder questions with disdain.

He gives him a droll look in response. “When exactly would I have left?”

“Feel free to leave at any time,” Rachel interjects scathingly. His eyes harden as he stares at her but she doesn’t even bother to look in his direction again. I smirk, relieved to see the Rachel from before making an appearance. They are too few and far between. Even Scarlett manages a delighted smile at the interaction.

Nicholis doesn’t bother to respond, instead crossing his arms over his chest as he settles in against the wall. Obviously not willing to leave and miss whatever is about to go down. I hesitate, ready to remove the threat if need be. He already knows too much about all of us, especially Scarlett and Rachel. He knows her true identity and whatever information Charles is about to bring will only put her more at risk.

I catch Scarlett staring at me, her green eyes flooded with more emotions than I could ever put words to. Somehow she’s still able to read me like a book. She cuts a glance at Rachel meaningfully before giving me a slight shake of her head.

Before anyone else can say anything else, Noah escorts Charles into the room. He looks disheveled, his blonde hair longer than when we last saw him is mussed and sticking up in different directions. His skin has a light sheen to it and his eyes have a wild, almost desperate look as his eyes land on Scarlett. My attention shifts to the papers clutched in his hand.

“I found something,” he stammers. “I’m sorry for showing up uninvited, but Scar,” he pauses. “You need to see this. I needed you to see it. Immediately.”

“Did you find him?” Luca demands before any of us have a chance to respond to his declaration.

Charles shakes his head, his eyes never leaving my pretty girl. My hackles rise. “This will help. With finding him and finding who was with my father that night,” he answers, raising the papers in his hands. Still not letting his eyes waver from Scarlett.

All the air is sucked out of the room with those words. The answers to everything might be found in those papers. Right at our fingertips.

Scarlett’s body trembles in response to his declaration. No one dares to speak as we all collectively try and process this news.

“Who the fuck is this guy and who is he looking for?” Nicholis questions.

Scarlett finally snaps, pulling her ever present blade from her hip and deftly throws it in his direction. I snort as it lands in the wall an inch from his head. “None of your fucking business. Get that through your thick skull.”

He arches a brow at her, unfazed by the threat. “I want to know what has the infallible Scar shaken.”

My lips twitch as Scarlett straightens, turning away from Charles to meet Nic’s eyes. His dickish behavior is drawing her out of her own mind. The endless storm that rages inside of her threatening to turn her inside out every time she’s forced to face her past.

“Does this have to do with Romano?” he continues pushing. He comes off the wall and starts to make a move toward her. “Is that who he is looking for?” His eyes dart down to the papers in Charles’ hand. “Are those answers to how and why you lot got my brother killed?” He cocks his head to the side as he gets closer to where the three women stand at the center of the room. Scarlett’s manic grin keeps any of us from making a move to stop him. She needs this distraction to regain control before facing whatever news Charles has.

“Or does it have to do with your sordid past?” His arrogance is on another level. An astounding lack of self

preservation. “Something to do with a certain fallen prom queen? Is this guy someone from your hay day?”

In the blink of an eye, he’s laid out on the ground, Scarlett hovering over his body, blade to his throat. Rage lights in his eyes, battling the surprise already there. He didn’t expect her to lash out, forgotten how quick she can move, how lethal she really is. “Keep digging, but it’ll only be your grave you end up in,” she promises.

Nic doesn’t back down. “If he has answers about Alec then I deserve to hear them too.”

“You deserve nothing from us except this blade embedded in your sternum,” she spits.

“He was my brother,” he argues.

Scarlett laughs, a slow, deep, menacing sound. “Then you should know better than anyone Alec would agree with me. Better my blade in your chest than the one you planted in Rachel’s back.”

His large body shakes under her, but he makes no move to get out from under her. “I never betrayed her.”

Her hollow laughter rings out through the room, making Rachel shiver, though she doesn’t cower again. “That’ll be for us to decide,” Scarlett tells him. “So will be finding answers to Alec’s death. He’s our family.”

“He’s my blood,” he curses her.

“Then find your own answers.” She climbs off of him. “Now, get the fuck out of my house so the adults can talk.” There’s no sign of the broken girl Charles always seems to draw out in her. Never thought I would be grateful to dark and douche-y but here we are. His antics pissed her right off into her normal badass self.

He doesn’t move, studying her as if he’s weighing how serious she is. She doesn’t give him long to contemplate. “Now,” she snaps. “Before I drag your body out of here. Being Alec’s brother only gets you so many allowances and you’re quickly running out.”

Nic slowly climbs to his feet, refusing to back down even as he relents to her demands. “I didn’t have to bring you the news about the Alvarados,” he comments.

She scoffs. “You got us the information a few measly minutes sooner than we would have otherwise received it. Don’t pat yourself on the back too hard.”

He arches a brow as if he doesn’t believe her. After several seconds of silence, the moment is broken by her phone ringing. She huffs in amusement, showing him the name Max Foster on her screen. “Look at that, almost on cue.”

“Hey, Max. You’re on speaker.”

He doesn’t waste any time. “When did you get in bed with the Alvarados?”

She gives Nic a look that says it all. We don’t need him and she’d be more than happy to disabuse him of that notion. “Don’t know,” she answers Max. “Keep your ear to the ground about any motivations for backing us.”

“You got it,” he says before she ends the call.

“Leave.” She turns her back on him, not giving him an ounce more of her attention.

Nic hesitates, his eyes landing back on Rachel as he slowly exits the room. He holds his head high, every step measured belying the fact this is his retreat. He’s steady all the way out, never shaken over the fact he’s not only been dismissed, but even Rachel refused to watch him go.

At least that’s one battle down.

On to the next.

“Show me what you have,” Scarlett commands, walking up to a still shaken Charles. He watches her with something close to appreciation as she moves. I crack my knuckles in irritation.

He’s quick to hand over the papers to her and launch into his explanation over how he’s been pouring over his father’s various business finances. We already knew this, but there has to be a point to this drivel.

“There were the expected shell companies he uses to cover the discrepancies of his embezzling and illegal funds. I was able to track all of those to known criminal activity he’s been involved in,” he continues. It sounds like a win, it would be enough to have him arrested, however, that’s never been our end goal. We want answers and I can’t see how this gives us those.

“Except for one,” he says, pointing to the top of the page. “This business, CGK Corp, has no ties to anything even though there’s been hundreds of thousands of dollars moving through it just in the last couple years.”

Where is he going with this? Surely his father has many secrets he’s unaware of.

“At first, I didn’t think much of it. But it kept popping up, over and over again. He’s hidden his tracks well. It’s a legitimate corporation. A healthy paper trail, even a good reputation. But no one knows the silent owners behind the company. The more I looked, the more I found. Business trips, conferences, expense after expense, and high enough revenues to demand a significant amount of attention and care from my father. I couldn’t believe I had never seen or heard of it before. But I couldn’t find anything at first, second, or even third glance to see how it could relate to you.”

He hesitates, flipping the pages in Scarlett’s hands. “Until I saw this. The company logo.”

The color drains from Scarlett’s face as she stares down at whatever he’s pointing at on the paper. I move Jade out of my way and she goes easily as I rush to Scarlett’s side to see what it is that’s haunting her.

“Daisies,” she whispers.

“Twined around a C,” Charles finishes for her. I trade looks with Luca and Kade but they don’t understand the significance either.

“He,” she starts, looking sick. She shakes her head. “I need a moment.”

She turns on her heel and marches out of the room, tossing the pile of papers at Noah before she leaves the room. “Start looking for the connection to us.”

As one, all five of us move to follow her. A small hand wrapped around my arm stops me. “Don’t,” Jade implores, looking at each of us in turn. “She just told you what she needs.”

“She doesn’t have to do it alone,” Kade argues.

“You’re right,” Jade concedes. “But take it from someone who knows. There are some demons you need to face on your own before you can let anyone else in to ease the burden.” She allows that to sink in. “She knows she isn’t alone anymore. She knows she has all of us to lean on. She isn’t pushing people away anymore. Don’t let your fears and your wants interfere with what she just told you she needs.”

Well shit. Little J is all grown up and putting all of us in our places.

She eyes Noah. “Are you gonna start looking into that or should I learn how to do your job too?”

Holden and Ian snicker.

She ignores them and snaps her fingers at Noah, hurrying him along.

Ouch.

He shakes his head at her, but grabs his laptop and opens it to get to work. Charles calls his name and tosses him a USB. “That’s everything I could find on it in my father’s records.”

Noah catches it easily, huffing under his breath a little. “Maybe I should teach you how to do my job.” He meets Luca’s eyes. “Can you get the girls started on going through the other financials we’ve got?”



Chapter Ten Luca

MY FINGERS TAP out a staccato beat against my thigh as I attempt to rein in my temper. Nothing about this meeting has gone the way that I had anticipated. What was meant as a chance to get all of us on the same page and plan our next steps, has left us with more questions. All thanks to our unexpected guests.

Guests.

Plural.

When the fuck did our home become a pit stop for every unwelcome motherfucker we've ever met? Maybe we've gone too soft recently. I crack my knuckles and move my attention to a prime target to reinstate our fearsome reputation.

Declan clears his throat and I have to force air into my lungs in a deep inhale before slowly exhaling. Right. Charles is off limits. As much as it pains me to admit, it is what is best for Letty.

I give a curt nod to Noah to acknowledge his request. It's not ideal to start the work and expose our systems with an outsider here, but maybe it will give me an excuse to kill the sorry excuse of a man once and for all.

My lips twitch at the macabre thought. One Kade picks up on rather quickly based on the manic gleam in his eye.

“Are we all getting started then?” Rachel asks, a tentative hope in her voice. It immediately deflates my burgeoning bloodthirst as thoughts of Alec fill my head. She wants to find Romano as badly as we do so she can get her pound of flesh. It’ll never make up for the loss she’s had to endure, but at least it’s the first step to healing.

Many would judge her, judge us, for this need. The drive for revenge that is the anchor of our grieving process. Most people haven’t been poisoned the way we all have been though. The sick filth that was pushed on us, that flows in our very blood now makes us this way. How else can we heal than to remove the source of our downfall? The toxins that entered our bloodstream.

“Might as well,” I answer her.

There’s some awkward shuffling as we move our seats into the places where we normally work and Noah starts firing up the computers. I keep my eyes locked on Charles for any sign of ulterior motives, though even I can admit at this point it’s hard to pinpoint what to look for. All I notice is the widening of his eyes as he watches Noah work. There’s no calculating or speculative gleam I can catch. I hate how sincere he seems as he whistles low and near silently.

“More than just Scar has changed,” he notes.

His words put me on edge, but they enrage Kade. “We’re not the same gutter kids from back then,” he sneers.

Charles drops back in surprise. “I,” he stammers, “I never judged you for where you came from. I was always grateful you were able to protect her when I no longer could.” Each word comes out quieter, with less confidence, as if he knows he shouldn’t be saying them to us.

Kade is quick to react, launching himself across the room toward Charles’ still form, already braced for the hit that never lands. Declan and Ryder step in front of him, stopping him in his tracks. No matter how angry Kade is, he won’t hurt one of our own.

Probably.

This fit is one that has been building for a long time. Kade needs to release it as much as Scar needed a moment.

“You have no right,” Kade yells over Ryder’s shoulder. “You did nothing to protect her. Nothing at all. When she needed you most you abandoned her!” The vitriol spewing from him would concern me, should concern me, except I happen to be in full agreement with him. Charles was in a much better position to save her than Kade or I ever could have been back then, and yet he did nothing but watch her suffer. Made her pain worse.

Instead of cowering like I expected him to, Charles’ spine snaps straight. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. What I risked to do what I could for her!”

Ian pulls Jade behind him, while Holden grabs Rachel, ensuring both of them are out of the fray. Mikey already has Britt stashed in the corner with Ronan at his side as if he knew this was going to get ugly. Noah steps up to Charles, not allowing him to get any closer to Kade. With a quick glance in my direction, I know he’s also clocked where I am and is keeping himself in between the two of us as well.

The whole room is on edge once more. A growing rage makes my blood pound at the entire situation. At the fact he’s here. That he has the audacity to face off against Kade. That he even thinks for a moment that anything he says can change the past. Change what he did. What he allowed to happen.

“We know what you did for her,” I spit. “A whole lot of throwing her to the sharks. You were the one with her in that bullshit elitist school of yours. You were the one in the hallways, ignoring her tears. Acting oblivious to the continued harassment. It was your friends that attempted to rape her all over again.” My voice rises to levels I haven’t reached in years. Anger and disgust flowing out of me with every reminder of how helpless we were against the world Letty was born to. The world that destroyed her. “What did you do? What did you risk to stop that? Nothing! You sat back in your ivory tower and watched it happen. You don’t deserve to be here. You don’t deserve to be fucking alive. You may not have touched her, but you betrayed her. I promise you, what you

allowed to happen to her cut deeper than anything those fuckers did to her. You broke the last piece of her, stole the last bit of her light. The detached shell of herself she became? You fucking did that. You.”

I’m shaking by the time I’m done. The entire room holds their breath and immediately I recognize that I’ve said too much. Put too much on display for everyone here. Too fucking many people. Pieces of Letty that she wasn’t willing to share. She didn’t want them to know her history with Charles and I just blew that to hell.

Ryder and Delcan are both tense as they continue to hold back Kade, though he isn’t fighting against their hold either. I meet their eyes to see rage burning in their expressions, mirroring the battle we’ve been waging since that miserable fucking gala. I’m not sure how much effort Kade would even have to make to get at Charles now that they know more.

If I had thought my words were going to be enough to get him to back down, I was sorely mistaken. He shakes his head looking back and forth between both Kade and I. His own hands are trembling with his rampant emotions.

“You’re both so clueless,” he huffs.

Kade cuts him off from saying anymore. “What more do we need to know?” he demands. “You broke her and we kept her safe until she could fit the pieces back together.”

Charles rushes toward him, but Noah is able to hold him back. “You think you’re the only ones who loved her?” he demands, ratcheting up the tension in the room tenfold. “That I didn’t recognize you both? The way you watched her from afar every chance you got? Our paths crossed plenty of times even if we were from different sides of the track. I didn’t know why you cared about my fiancée.” The jab to remind us both who she was to him lands as he intended. A stinging slap of what our reality used to be. “But I knew you did.” He laughs bitterly. “Did you think it was a coincidence she landed in your group home? Don’t tell me you really thought no one was willing to take in a young, famous, helpless heiress. She was a

perfect target for selfish and greedy bastards eager to have her under their control. Even if it was just for a few months.”

He stops fighting against Noah as his words sink in. No. It’s impossible. The meaning behind them slowly dawning on me. I can’t believe it. He was only seventeen, same as Letty. Too young to be able to pull strings the way he is insinuating.

He nods as he watches my disbelief. “There are no coincidences in money. Right, James?” Declan flinches at being dragged into the conversation. “You must realize how odd it was for her to end up where she did.”

I wait for Declan to acknowledge the words. He slowly nods. “It never quite made sense,” he admits reluctantly.

“I put her there,” Charles declares, his voice husky with raw emotion. “I got her out of my world as much as I could and delivered her to you. For you to take care of her. For you to protect her in the ways I couldn’t. I fucking pushed her away and let her go for *her*. No matter what I was losing in doing so. It might have hurt her but it saved her too, whether you want to see that or not. I saved her just as much you assholes did.”

Silence echoes through the room. No one knows quite how to respond to that. Can we even believe it? Trust him?

Kade swallows thickly, clearing his throat, a jarring sound in the silence. “That doesn’t change everything else.”

Charles laughs, almost hysterically. “Of course it doesn’t. You only saw what I wanted the world to see. That I cut ties with her like everyone else.”

“You did,” I grind out between my teeth. “Whatever you may or may not have done to get her placed with us, you still washed your hands of her after that. It doesn’t make you a hero. Not when you stood by and watched her being attacked.”

His hands run through his already messy hair. “And who saved her then? Who got to be her hero?”

Kade narrows his eyes on him, running his thumb over the scar on his cheek. “You know who.”

He nods in acknowledgment. “How’d you find out again?” The way he asks makes my hackles rise, like I’m about to hear something else I not only never expected, but something I don’t think I’m ready to hear either.

“Oh, that’s right,” he drawls sarcastically. “She was taking too long to meet you at your normal spot. Yet, even though she was delayed enough for you to realize something was wrong, they weren’t able to take it very far before you showed up.”

Chills run down my spine.

“Almost as if it was planned for you to be able to intervene.”

“They had no intention of stopping,” Kade curses.

“Of course they didn’t,” Charles screams back. “They were all too eager to get their hands on her. She had been unattainable for years, and now they had the very thing they all craved being served to them on a fucking platter. They were encouraged to devour her, to leave nothing behind. Who do you think put that into motion?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “The men who attacked her. None other than my very own father. You were fighting shadows, but I was fighting from the enemy’s camp. I couldn’t stop it from happening, but I did set it up so you had a chance to get to her. Delayed her at school so you would realize quicker that something was wrong. Then told those bastards where they could cut her off. Close to where you’d be waiting for her.”

“Why set her up at all?” Noah asks calmly, his head tilted to the side as he studies Charles. He’s much calmer than the rest of us. Not that it surprises me. Him and Declan both are much better at putting their emotions to the side in order to analyze a situation logically.

Declan looks strained as Charles drags his gaze from Kade to Noah.

“And have them take her straight from school? Move her somewhere they would have had no chance of ever finding her?”

D cringes as if he's figuring out more behind his words. "You took control of her downfall to mitigate how low she fell."

Charles nods slowly. "Broken is better than dead. They wanted her dead."

I fall back into a chair. It's almost too much to process all at once. Everything I thought I knew about what happened back then is slowly crumbling to pieces. If I'm this staggered by the revelation, what is it going to do to Scar?

Fuck.

Does she already have her suspicions? Is that why she's been struggling with how to deal with Charles? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Declan's voice draws my attention back up. "When did you find out about your father? That he was behind the attack?"

Charles' face shuts down. He steps away from Noah, dropping into the seat closest to him. He sighs, the anger diffusing from his body. "Guess I might as well lay all my cards out on the table since we've come this far."

"Fuck you," Kade snarls. "You can't possibly be behind this shit. I refuse to believe it."

I can't fault Kade for his reaction. Shit, I'm right there with him.

"Oh, fuck off," Charles fires back, once again showing a backbone I didn't know he possessed. The anger real quick to make another reappearance. I guess I'm not the only one on edge. A snort almost escapes at the thought. I think I'm losing it.

"You're mad I broke her, you made your damn point," he argues. "But there would have been no pieces for you to pick up if I hadn't saved her first."

"Don't you dare fucking say that," Kade bellows. "You didn't save her. No matter what you fucking tell yourself, you were too weak, too powerless, too fucking useless to save her."

Charles jumps to his feet, moving too fast for any of the guys to stop him after letting their guards down. He's in Kade's face as he yells right back. "You think I don't know that? That I didn't hate myself for failing her? That I haven't gone over that night a million times, analyzed what I could have done differently? When I said you didn't know shit, I meant it. You have no idea what it's like to live in our world. To live with the monster who took the very best thing in your life and destroyed it. Then relished in your pain as he watched it slip out of your fingers."

Defying my expectations, Kade doesn't lay him out right then and there. He waits with bated breath to hear what else Charles has to say.

Charles cocks his head to the side to look at D. "When did I find out what my father did to my fiancée? The night he raped her. I've always known. Knew I had to get her as far away from him as I could, even if it meant losing her myself."

"He told you?" Declan asks disbelievingly.

He once again shakes his head, easing off Kade as he does. Declan grabs Kade to pull him back and put more distance between the two of them.

"Remind me who saved her from the fire?" His use of sarcasm is really getting old.

"A firefighter," Kade spits.

He arches his brow in response. "She would have been dead before they ever arrived on scene, let alone inside the house."

"It wasn't them," I answer, still remembering the story with perfect clarity. "It was a neighbor. He saw the smoke and came to investigate. Found her first, and didn't realize more people were in the house."

Declan snaps his head in my direction, causing Charles to chuckle. A dark, almost familiar sound. "How many rich people do you know that would involve themselves in someone else's business and then risk themselves by running into a fire?" He directs the question right to D.

“None,” he answers simply. Honestly.

“She wasn’t answering her phone,” he starts and a cold sweat breaks out along my neck. “I worried she had gotten in trouble. Her father had never hit her, but he wasn’t a kind man. I knew more about our father’s proclivities than she did. Had just begun to learn how depraved they were just the week before, actually. I was nervous. On edge. Couldn’t relax until I heard from her. Even though it wasn’t all that unusual for her to be put on lockdown without warning. That night was different.

“When my father got home, I knew. He was in too good of a mood. Too eager to see the worry in my face and ask about her.” He scoffs, his disgust radiating from every pore. “My father never cared about me. I had been angsty for over a week without him noting it, but that night? That night he cared. He was gloating. Not by telling me what happened, but by asking where she was. Prodding my anxiety by mentioning her father had been in a foul mood when he left him in his office earlier. That night he took an interest in me and I immediately knew something was wrong.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tyler curses.

Fuck. I forgot just how many ears were in this room, too caught up with my own destructive emotions. I look around the room to find tears staining all three of the girls’ faces as they listen to Charles talk. Listen to a new version of the worst night of Scar’s life. Grief and anger balloon in the room, suffocating me.

“I pretended to laugh it off. Told him I was going to the party without her. Asked him to let me know if he heard anything about her from her father. He grinned,” he whispers. “It was the sickest, most twisted smile I had ever seen on anyone’s face. All while he patted my back and assured me he would. It was too kind. Too unlike my father. If I had doubts, they were gone in that moment. I kept my calm demeanor as I left the house, and then gunned it to her house.”

I can almost picture the setting he creates with his words. Feel his anxiety and sense of hurry to get to her. So

reminiscent of all the times I've been desperate to see her with my own eyes after a mission to make sure she really is well and truly okay.

"I was too late," he whispers. "I knew I was going to be, but still," he trails off. "When I pulled up to her house and smoke was spilling out of every window and I could see the flames rapidly devouring the house that felt almost like my own, something shattered inside of me. I knew where she would be because of the subtle taunts my father couldn't resist, but nothing could prepare me for what I found. I didn't think there was any way she would survive. There was so much blood, fire already licking up her body. She felt so much smaller in my arms than she had just the day before, like whole pieces of her were being left behind in the flames I pulled her out of."

The love he has for her shines more with every devastated word out of his mouth. It makes me hate him even more.

He looks up from where his eyes were locked on the floor, straight to Kade. "I was too weak, too powerless, too useless to protect her from my father. From hers. From the men who were with them. I vowed that night I would change. I would become stronger, learn my father's games. Learn how to scheme and connive and stab people in the back. I was going to grow my own power and influence and take him down. Protect the next person that came into my life. I just never thought it would be the girl I failed all those years ago."

Kade seems as clueless as I am on what to do with this new information. He tilts his head in question, but I just shrug in response. I don't know if we should believe him or not. Don't know what it means if we do. I don't even know what it means if we decide we don't.

Declan clears his throat and I flinch at the weight of his gaze on me. I'm beginning to understand why Scar often pouts or curses when he turns that look on her.

"I think you're all forgetting that none of this is up to you." His words are a bucket of ice water crashing over me. I click the metal of my piercing against my teeth in frustration. This

is the very crux of why we've always hated Charles so damn much. We could never protect her from him. Never able to stop her from being hurt by him. A blade pierces the skin, but it's easy to step in front of. Betrayal is a poison that seeps into your body, doing damage before you ever realize it's there. There's no way to take this pain for her.

It's a battle within herself, one she has to win, or lose, on her own.

I've never hated anything quite as much as feeling helpless.

"This dick measuring is unnecessary. Scarlett is the only one who decides if you're worthy of forgiveness." Declan aims his words directly at Charles, but it was a reprimand for Kade and I as well. Kade bristles across the room, but makes no move to act out or disagree.

Ryder moves to his side, whispering something in his ear and some of the tension bleeds from his body. He catches my eye and gives me a slight nod. We follow Scar on this. Whatever path she chooses to take, we will be right at her side.

Even if it fucking sucks.

Where the fuck do we go from here?



I COULDN'T STAY in the office for a second longer.

Not with so many people's emotions clogging the air, or all the questions left unasked. Declan was right. It's not up to me, nor Kade. Not even Charles.

Letty is the one he needs to hash the past out with. She's the only one who has the right to decide if his reasons for doing what he did are enough. I have a feeling on which side she will fall on, but I can't help but be worried about what will happen before that.

His side of the story we thought we knew, it's... it's overwhelming. Disorienting. If I'm having this hard of a time

sorting out the feelings Charles evoked, how the hell is Letty going to react? It's not like she's been handling it well so far.

I wander through the halls, stopping at her bedroom but she isn't there like I expected. I pause in the doorway, taking in the familiar and soothing space. My eyes linger on the mural I painted on her wall what feels like a lifetime ago. It's been too long since I had a brush in my hand. Life hasn't allowed time to slow down, detach, and put it all on paper. The only time I truly let go of the control I'm constantly seeking is when I'm in front of a canvas.

Roe baby likes her arts. She was so curious when I first bought the easel and paints for her, but we never had the time to truly explore it. She came to us just as everything got insanely out of hand. I'll have to change that. Carve time out to teach her. To let her explore a different side of the well of creativity I know is rapidly growing inside of her.

I turn away, closing her door behind me. I want to find Scar, but I'm not ready to go back into the shared areas of the house. Too many people are still lingering as Noah works his magic to see what leads we can get from what Charles brought. I'm not even sure exactly what it was. We never quite got around to that portion of the conversation. Seems to be the theme of the night.

With no other choice, I head towards my room to regroup before seeking her out once more. The thought doesn't stay with me long as I open my door to find her. She has her back to me, facing the window that overlooks the backyard. Lost in thought the way I've grown accustomed to finding her recently. It reminds me of the early days. The spacing out. The distancing herself from not only people, but reality. My biggest fear every day is we may lose her to that abyss. I'd rather slay a thousand monsters for her than go against the mind numbing haze she often used to retreat to.

I hesitate in the doorway, much as I did in her bedroom only moments ago. It's rare for me to not be aware of my next move, of what I want, of what I need. It took years for me to learn how to temper my emotional responses. I was quick to anger and even quicker to act on it. Until Letty needed me to

keep it together. Until our very lives were contingent on my being able to play my role well. A role I'm unsure how well it fits me anymore.

Not when I feel as lost as Scar looks.

Shaking myself off, trying to rid the morose thoughts, I move into my own room.

"You've been distant," I murmur softly as I approach her slowly. Her gaze doesn't even flick my way as she continues to stare out the window. She must have been expecting me if she was in here waiting. I have no doubts she was aware the second my presence filled the doorway.

"So have you."

I flinch at her response, knowing she isn't wrong. Even before Charles turned my world upside down, there's been this ever-growing cavern of space that continues to push us further from one another. A cavern we both have equally contributed to and neither have done anything to try and bridge the gap that was created the night of the gala and the following morning.

Declan was right. We allowed her desire and needs for closure to come between us. We put our anger and our fear before her healing. He has the power to devastate her all over again, to betray her once more. Regardless of the story he's told, there's no foolproof way to know we can trust him. All we have is our own intuition. It feels woefully underwhelming when it comes to the possibility of losing Letty all over again. After we just started to get her to move forward. It feels like too big of a risk.

She doesn't react as I step behind her and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her flush with my body. After a moment of hesitation, her body relaxes and she sighs out her relief as she melts into me. I can only do so much to protect her, but I can support her.

It isn't my choice to make. I repeat the sentiment to myself over and over again and tighten my arms around her waist, dropping my lips to her exposed shoulder.

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper against her skin, enjoying the way goosebumps rise along her sensitive flesh. Even now, as we struggle to gain balance on uneven ground, I know her as well as I always have. I can still read her, still elicit such a response from her. Still know she’s mine as much as I have always been hers.

She doesn’t respond, but I don’t need her to. Not this time. I know she’s missed me too, missed all of us. It’s been weeks since that night at the gala and none of us have been quite alright. The answers we’ve been searching for—the entire purpose behind building everything that we have—are right there at our fingertips. All of a sudden it seems as if the closer we get to our end goal, the more we have to lose.

We started down this path with the objective of becoming invincible, strong enough to tear down those who stole her power from her when she was too weak to do anything about it.

Forgiveness and healing were never our end goals, only blood and chaos. She never wanted to be anyone’s hero and I only ever wanted to be hers. That doesn’t stand true any longer. Neither one of us expected to build everything else that came with it. This family, this home. This innate desire to want to do and be better. To not only get revenge but maybe even to heal and soothe our old scars as well.

I never thought it was possible. Not for either one of us. I thought we were too broken, too lost, too many fragmented pieces to ever even dream about putting ourselves back together again. But somehow, each new person that has entered our lives and stayed has helped both of us rebuild ourselves. I’m questioning everything, especially after the revelations of the night.

“I don’t think I can ever forgive him,” I whisper into the heavy silence of the room. Her body tenses in my arms, but she doesn’t pull away from me. I force myself to take a deep breath and push through everything else. All of my reservations, all of my insecurities and fears. “From where I stood, on the outside looking in, he was always a part of the problem. Always pushing you into a role that never really

suited you. A box that was far too small for the way you always shined. I hated him before he ever turned his back on you. Before he let his friends hurt you. Before he stood back and did nothing while your life fell apart and disintegrated in your hands.”

My chest aches as I think back on all the years Kade and I watched her from afar, lying to ourselves that she was happy and safe. Too young to recognize the cracks in her facade for what they were until there was nothing but those very same cracks and holes left. I press my nose against her throat and breathe in her scent that is so uniquely her. It never fails to ground me, to remind me of how far we’ve come. To remind me that everything that really matters, I already have.

“Maybe I was wrong about all that, wrong about him. Wrong about who I thought you were and what you needed before I even really knew you. He has a lot to say about what happened back then,” I trail off when she snorts.

“Yeah, I heard.”

My pulse races as the words register and worry replaces my agitation. If I’m still reeling, what’s going through her head?

“You guys weren’t exactly quiet,” she teases, almost too lightly for the subject matter. Instead of easing my nerves, it makes me nauseous. I know her well enough to recognize her deflection skills.

“Letty,” I whisper, her name a desperate plea for her to stay with me, to not shut down, not push me away.

Her head knocks back against my shoulder, revealing more of her face to me. Her eyes are closed, but lines of confusion and apprehension give away the battle raging behind them. She purses her lips, as if she can’t quite decide if she should say anything or not.

“I don’t know, Luca,” she finally admits on a sigh. “Back then, I was too naive, too lost and confused to realize all the little details that didn’t line up. All the things Charles pointed out? They’re true,” she huffs, running her hands over her face.

She lifts her head off my chest and turns in my arms, finally opening her eyes to meet mine.

Fire isn't green, but I swear that's what I see burning in her eyes. Green flames that consume her, lost in memories of the past. Analyzing all the bits that never quite made sense to her and seeing them in a new light.

"I realized it a few years ago," she admits. "The group home, the neighbor, even the way I was able to run away with you. All these little inconsistencies that didn't match up with the world I knew. I thought there were answers lying in those discrepancies. I just never thought they would lead back to him. Lead to a truth I didn't know to brace myself for."

I hold my breath, my lungs burning as I wait for her to continue. To let me in.

"It should be a good thing, this revelation. It should ease the hurt his betrayal caused, dull the sharp pain of abandonment that chased me for so many years. That caused me to push you all away for so long."

"But it doesn't?" I phrase it as a question, but I don't need to. The battle waging in her eyes is enough of an answer. It's the same one I've been grappling with since I left the office. Since I accepted his version of events doesn't sound like a lie, even if I'm not ready to accept it.

Finding out the truth doesn't change the years of rage and hate for me. How could it change the years of her suffering?

"His story is the most plausible explanation. I never found anything that led back to anyone else. Could never formulate any motivations behind putting me in the group home, or for someone to save me. I'd chalked it up to fate or good karma, but we both know I'm not a big believer in either of those things." She huffs a laugh, sounding more tired and worn out than I've heard her be in a long time. "I let it go because I decided it didn't matter. Those answers weren't going to lead me to my revenge, so I moved on."

Her words don't carry any emotion, nothing to enlighten me on how she's actually feeling over the discovery.

Delivering them as if they're just casual observations, inconsequential facts, when really they change everything.

I'm not the "how does that make you feel" type of guy. That's all Declan. Noah and Ryder are better for that. Fuck. Even Kade is more in touch with his emotions and how to communicate them than I am and he regularly beats people to death instead of going to therapy. Yet, I feel like I have to try.

"But they do. They do matter because you still care. You wanted to forgive him even before today."

"Did I? I wasn't sure that was what I really wanted." I'd roll my eyes, but for once, she isn't being snarky. I grab her face with both my hands, gently cupping her cheeks and running my thumbs against her smooth skin. She holds my gaze and there are so many emotions swirling it grabs my heart in a vice. So much uncertainty and insecurity.

"Who are you lying to right now? Me or to yourself?"

She groans and thunks her head against my chest. Giving me and herself the answer.

"That's what I thought," I tease her lightly, wrapping my arms around and pulling her in tightly. "I know you were having a hard time admitting it, even to yourself. Forgiveness was never a part of our plan. I know that better than anyone."

The last few weeks flash through my mind to the soundtrack of Declan chastising us. "I know that Kade and I made this harder for you because of our visceral anger towards him. I won't lie to you and say the idea of you forgiving him still doesn't make my skin crawl. Whether he really did try his best in the past or not. I've hated him for decades, jealous he had the right to you before I ever thought I'd have a chance to and he ruined it. Ruined you. I can't promise to ever like the guy, I know Kade can't either, but we will at least stop trying to kill him."

She looks at me skeptically, weighing my words and debating how real they could possibly be.

Fair enough.

“Probably,” I tease. “But really, Kade and I would do anything for you. We’ve watched you struggle the last few weeks and it’s been one of the hardest things to realize we added to your struggles. We never want to be a part of the problem.”

Her features soften at my words, more emotion bleeding into her expression with every moment that passes. Her hard edges are smoothed over to reveal more of the young and naïve girl she once was. More and more frequently I have seen that girl lurking in the shadows of Scar’s eyes.

I never dared to hope to bring her back. I love the girl in my arms too much to wish things were different. But maybe there’s always been a phoenix in the ashes of her past, just waiting for the right time to rise once more. To finally heal, to become whole.

“Maybe you need to forgive him, for you. Maybe you need a piece of your old life to hang on to, a reminder of Charlotte and everything you lost. Your world was filled with demons, but it had some light too. You were happy, you were loved, and as much evil as you found in the four walls you called home, you also had someone in your corner. Willing to fight for you. Willing to sacrifice for you. Maybe to move on and kill the demons once and for all, you need to hold onto a little bit of that light. If that’s Charles for you, so be it. Forgive him. At the very least, I really don’t think he will betray you again.”

“How much did those words hurt coming out?” Her grin and light words are belied by the tears shining in her eyes I know she hates.

“A lot,” I admit with a chuckle. “I won’t ever be his biggest fan, but I can’t not be thankful for him. He kept you alive long enough for us to escape.”

“You were right,” she whispers, finally acknowledging it aloud. “I did want to forgive him. I wanted to believe in the kids we used to be. The happy moments we had to escape the bleakness of our surroundings together. I’ve spent so long only seeing the shadows from that time of my life I forgot that you needed both light and darkness to create those shadows. I had

a lot of light in my life that made the darkness that much scarier when I discovered it, but now... Now he's all the light I have left from that world. I never wanted him to be tainted by the darkness too."

"Is that what was holding you back? Were you scared to be wrong and realize he never was the light after all?"

"No, I think that would have been easier," she answers, surprising me. "It's easier to throw around words like evil and demons and monsters. It's natural to hate those things. To feel justified in your anger and your hurt. It's infinitely harder to realize and accept that sometimes people hurt you unintentionally. Good people make bad choices. People can love you and still destroy you. Sometimes people have no choice but to hurt you. I wasn't ready to face the fact that some of the worst wounds aren't caused by the villains, but by the boy with the blue eyes who was just as much a victim as I was."

I tense at those words. "I wouldn't go that far." He may not be the villain here, but he sure as hell isn't a victim the same way Letty was. She had her innocence, her family, her entire life ripped away from her in the matter of hours.

"No?" she questions. "His childhood was just as destroyed as mine was. He lost his family, his best friend. He had to wake up every morning and look the monster that caused his pain in the face and act like he knew none of it. At least I got to run away, build a new life. He's been stuck in the same cycle of torture for the last eight years."

I roll my lips, stopping myself from arguing back instinctively as I really think about her words. Think about the emotions Charles put on display for all of us and really see what he meant by having to fight from behind enemy lines. I don't want to understand the guy, to feel for him. I was happy to hate his guts and take the first chance I had to spill them all over the floor. But what she's saying makes too much sense.

An uncomfortable sensation unfurls in my chest. One I don't recognize and don't have a name for. One I don't want. I

attempt to push them aside, to move forward in our conversation and get the focus off of him.

“What about now that you know? Does it change things for you?”

She shrugs, her shoulders lifting against my chest as she presses her cheek against me, taking a moment to think before she answers.

“It hurt when I thought Charles betrayed me, abandoned me. It was devastating when I thought he just didn’t care enough. Thought he never really loved me. But I dealt with that hurt years ago. Now all of a sudden, he didn’t do those things. He tried. He just failed.

“It’s like finding hope where I thought nothing but misery was buried. But hope can still be the scariest thing of all. It means I can’t hate him, I can’t blame him. I can’t just write him off like I have for years. It’s harder to accept someone for their mistakes than it is to just forget about them.” She gets a small grin on her face. “Or you know, just kill them.” I laugh, knowing how easily that night could have gone in a different direction had he made any indication he was a threat. Scar isn’t one quick to act on her emotions, but no one would dare accuse her of hesitating to kill either.

She nuzzles into my chest in a very uncharacteristic way. I can’t help but smile as she continues, “But the same way I decided to stop running from you guys, from my feelings, I need to stop running from the pieces of myself that survived. I’ll never be Charlotte again, but I never stopped being your Letty. I’ll never not be Marnye and Harlee’s big sister. And maybe Charles never stopped being my best friend either.”

It’s everything I ever wanted her to realize about herself while also being my worst nightmare. I force myself to smile, to focus on how far she’s come in the last year. She really has stopped running when that has been her survival mechanism for so many years. I’ll take that even if it comes with the human-shaped baggage that is Charles fucking Donahue. I hum and run my fingers down along her spine, chuckling as

she shivers under my touch. She's still Scar. Snarky, abrasive, and skilled with a blade.

This is still her comfort zone. Getting lost in the pleasures of her body when the emotions all get too big and overwhelming. She finds her safety here. Her home. I'll always be her home.

"I love how responsive you always are for me, Letty," I growl in her ear, grinning as she practically melts into me. She'd had enough, enough being vulnerable and talking in circles. She knows everything she needs to know and now she just needs comfort. A distraction. It'd be a lie to say I don't crave it just as much. The reassurance I only feel when I'm buried deep in her, feeling her tight walls clench all around me.

I push my fingers into the back of her waistband and slide my hands down until I can cup her ass and pull her into me. Let her feel just what she does to me in only a matter of moments. She might be looking to get lost in me, but I've been a casualty of her storm for years and I never want to be saved.

She pushes against me, her breath picking up in speed and I trace the shell of her ear with my tongue before catching the lobe in between my teeth and bite down. Her gasp sends electricity through me. I tear my hands out of her jeans so I'm able to lift her up. She wraps her legs around my waist at the same time her arms settle around my neck. Our lips are stretched out into smiles as they meet and brush over each other.

All thoughts about what to do next are driven away by the need for each other, by the love we know we can depend on.

My tongue snakes out to trace her plump bottom lip and I carry her away from the window. She tries to catch me in a kiss but I grin before tossing her onto the bed. Her surprised chuckle loosens the knot that's been tightening in my chest. The amused sound and the playful light in her eyes a balm to my soul.

I stalk toward her and she straightens from where I threw her, the playfulness in her expression morphing into heat and

desire. She smirks as my knees hit the edge of the bed and I crawl from the foot of it until I have her settled underneath me.

“I think this is the first time you’ve actually gotten me in bed, Bossman,” she teases, unbuttoning my shirt and pushing it off my shoulders.

“Not the first time,” I counter and drop a kiss to her forehead. “And it won’t be the last.” I wink. The blush that rises to her cheeks at the reminder of our first time gives me one of those rare glimpses into the girl she used to be.

Letty’s fingers rove over my chest and down my abs until she manages to get my belt undone and slip her hands beneath my waistband and squeeze my dick in those perfectly long fingers of hers. I groan, pushing into her touch before I snap out of it.

“Not today, Letty.” I pull her away from me and rise to quickly remove my pants. She watches me the whole while, laid back and spread out, a hungry look in her eyes. All the earlier tension that lined her face is nowhere to be seen as she eats me alive with her gaze.

I take my time stripping her, kissing her skin as I expose it. Running my tongue along her curves as they’re revealed to me. Her shuddering sighs the only sound in the room. Throwing her bra to the floor behind me, I twirl my tongue around her nipple, enjoying the way the ball of my piercing circles the rapidly hardening bud.

Her back arches into the touch and my hands wander down her stomach and to the waistband of her jeans. She groans her protest when I abandon her nipple to remove her pants, but I need her fully bare under me to continue my endless exploration of her body.

For once, she’s not fighting me. Giving me total control as she lies back and gives me full range to do with her as I please. Every second that ticks by with my hands on her body eases each and every thought that has been haunting me. Letty is here. Whole and with me. She’ll always bear the wounds of her past, but she isn’t shattered, she’s just scarred. It makes her all that much more perfect for me.

My lips brush over the ink decorating the scar down her sternum as I kiss down her chest and belly to reach the apex of her thighs. My tongue ring flicks over her clit, her scent and taste flooding my senses, washing away everything that isn't her.

Scar moans my name as I lap at her cunt, worshipping her with each flick of my tongue but not giving her enough to come. I want to savor her, need to memorize every inch of her body over again before I can give us what we both need.

Her hips undulate in a silent plea for more as she begins to drip with her arousal. I rub my face over her pussy, wearing her scent like my favorite cologne before moving back up her body to steal her lips in a kiss. I share the taste of herself with her and she moans into my mouth as I spear my tongue into her mouth, fucking her with it like I soon will be doing elsewhere. She grips my shoulders with her hands, her sharp nails dig into my skin, sparking my need higher with the edge of pain.

I cup her breasts in my hands, running my thumbs over her nipples as I deepen our kiss. The clink of metal against her teeth makes me shudder and she grips me tighter. I pull away from her mouth, and stare down at her heavy-lidded eyes and puffy lips, pride and possessiveness blooming in my chest as I do.

A smile pulls at her swollen lips and I can't help but smile back down at her. I tweak her nipples between my fingers and huff a small laugh at her moan as her body arches off the bed.

“Think I could make you come from your nipples alone?”

Her eyes widen as a delicious smirk takes the place of her soft smile from a moment ago. “You won't know until you try,” she challenges.

Challenge accepted.

I readjust my body over hers to give me the best possible access to her perky tits and get to work. My mouth covers one nipple as I use my fingers to pinch and pluck the other one. I alternate back and forth between the two, changing up the

tempo just as she gets used to what I'm doing. Dancing on the line between pain and pleasure, I go back and forth from soft touches, to bites and pinches. Taking her by surprise as I memorize the sound of her heavy breathing and husky moans, adjusting my ministrations based on her sounds. My name has never sounded so sweet.

It takes a lot longer to get her to reach the climax, but fuck is it worth it as her body tenses under me. I sink my teeth into her sensitive flesh as her body shakes and writhes under mine. Small convulsions wrack through her and I watch in awe of the ecstasy flashing across her face. We don't take it this slow often enough. We never have the time to, but I need to change that.

As the last of her orgasm washes over her, I line myself up with her cunt and before it's even over, I push into her in one smooth thrust.

I was wrong.

I thought my name couldn't sound any sweeter than it did earlier, but the way she screams for me as her cunt clenches around me is even better. Warm, wet heat slides down my dick and her nails dig into my back. The thought of wearing her marks makes my dick twitch inside of her. There's almost nothing I want more than to pound into her, to lose myself with reckless abandon and take her in a way that will ensure she will still be feeling me tomorrow.

Almost.

I've enjoyed the lazy sensual pace we've had as we've touched every inch of each other's bodies though. The gentle caresses mixed in with bursts of pain without the rush or sense of urgency. Passion still burns hot between us, but rather than the usual explosion, it flickers brightly like the soothing embers of a forgotten fire.

We could easily stoke it back to life and roaring flames that could threaten to engulf us both, but there's something beautiful about the warm glow shared in these soft moments. Our hardened edges are not so jagged in the dying light.

Hidden in shadows of our own making where we've built our home.

I slowly pull out of her, the piercing at my tip dragging along her walls, sparking heat in both of us, until I'm almost completely separated from her before pushing all the way back in. An easy rock of my hips that heightens the smallest of touches between us. Our eyes stay locked, as her arms stay wound around me.

Emotions dance in her eyes and neither of us needs any words to feel the love and connection wrapping around both our hearts. She lifts her hips in a slow, undulating rhythm to match mine thrust for thrust. My nerve endings flare with every stroke until we both find our release together in a mess of limbs, sweat, and heavy breathing.

Her pussy clenches around me, making my vision white out as my body tenses and I come inside her, her orgasm milking the last bit of mine out of me and I collapse on top of her as I try to catch my breath.

She lays under me, sated as I wrap myself around her, holding her close to my chest. As if I'll be able to protect her from everything by keeping her here. Maybe Scar isn't the only one who needs to learn not to run when shit gets hard. We could have talked this all out weeks ago.

Even before Charles' life-altering confessions.

"Can I tell you something?" I whisper in her ear.

Her hands tighten around my arms where they hold her. "Always, Luca. I'm here for you as much as you all love to remind me that you're here for me."

I chuckle at her never-ending abundance of sass, even when she's being rather sweet.

"That actually has to do with what I want to admit." Her chest stops rising and falling as she holds her breath, but her body remains relaxed. "I think I forget that it isn't just you and me anymore. It always feels like we have a million things to do and have our fingers in a hundred different pots, but we've really built a family to help manage the load."

She hums to herself. “I know what you mean,” she admits. “It’s why I called the meeting today. It felt like everything was out of control, but it was really only me. Everything is running smoothly thanks to everyone else. It’s all being taken care of, efficiently and with the same precision we would do it. It was just me being consumed by the chaos from within.”

“It was me too,” I tell her, squeezing her softly. “I think we’re still getting used to being loved by so many people.”

She laughs, a soft gentle sound. Nothing like her usual husky laugh. Definitely not her maniacal cackle. “Who thought we’d ever make it this far?”

I press a kiss to the top of her head. “We always had it in us, Letty. We just needed time to find where we thrived, space to grow our own roots, and the courage to let in the right amount of light.”

She turns in my arms to press her lips to mine. No hunger or desperation this time, just comfort. Home.

“We built our home and created our own light.”

It could have been minutes, hours, or even days that passed where we stayed silent and just soaked in a rare moment of peace we’ve found with each other. Nothing mattered but the feel of her against me.

“We can’t do anything here,” I decide to point out to her after some time. “Noah is working on the intel Charles brought and it’s going to take him a bit to get it situated.”

“Mhm?” She rolls over to meet my eyes.

“Let’s go to Poison,” I suggest. “We could use the break. They’ve got it handled here. We aren’t alone anymore. Let’s grab Jade and Rachel and show them the club so far.”

A gleam enters her eyes that’s been noticeably absent recently and she grins up at me. “As weird as it is to not be the one combing through records and trying to find connections, that sounds like more fun.”

I chuckle at the slightly bitter edge of her words. My competitive girl. “You know Noah is probably designing some

type of fucking program that'll get it done faster.”

“He already did that,” she grumbles as she climbs out of bed. “He just needs to feed it info now. Fucker.”

“I’m going to tell him you said that,” I threaten.

She whips around, holding her shirt to her chest with wide eyes. “You wouldn’t fucking dare.”



Chapter Eleven Noah

LUCA STORMING out of the office broke up the thick tension in the room as several small and quiet conversations began to take place. Everyone but Kade, Declan, Ryder, Charles, and I begin to talk with one another about what to do next.

Charles is staring out the door where Luca just left, but I can't help but wonder who he's really thinking about. Luca and his intense reaction? Or the woman Luca no doubt went to go find? Our woman.

My fingers twitch at my sides at the thought of him wanting more from Scar. The idea that he could earn more than just her forgiveness but her favor once more. They were engaged at some point after all.

I glance down at the papers I still hold in my hand. There has to be a wealth of information in here if it's truly what he says it is. I itch to get to work, to ignore everything else that unfolded and dive into the nitty gritty of what Scar really needs. Answers. Ones that we could be just days away from getting.

Somehow it feels wrong to be the first one to make a move though. To fully burst the bubble that ballooned in this room with this conversation. With Luca already gone, I direct my questioning look to D. It takes him a moment to turn to me because his attention is solely locked on where Kade is vibrating with his barely restrained rage.

Declan nods as he clears his throat. “Ryder and Kade, go with the guys to the gym and get a feel for the fighters and how we could implement Jade’s idea.” Ian and Ryder both nod in acknowledgement as they both go to steer Kade out of the office. He doesn’t register, but everyone knows them going to the gym has more to do with letting out Kade’s pent-up aggression than anything else. Tyler and Holden follow them out but Joe lingers, waiting for something from D, but when he’s waved off he also leaves the room.

“Britt needs to get to the coffee shop too,” Mikey says, picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder.

“Hey,” she snaps, smacking his ass. “I want to stay and see Scar,” she argues.

Ronan watches with a smirk. “Sorry, my little java chip, the coffee beans are calling.”

She lifts her head up to glare at him. “You’re the worst.”

He leans forward and smacks her ass as Mikey walks them out of the room. “That’s not what you were saying last night.” My lips twitch at the sound of her groan as they move out of hearing distance.

Jade and Rachel trade looks, before turning their attention to D. “We can stay and start to go through the files Noah needs to look through?” Jade suggests and Rachel eagerly nods. He accepts easily and they both move to sit behind computers and wait for my instructions.

I look down at the papers in my hand, something Charles said still bothering me. “Why did the logo give it away?”

He rubs the back of his neck and looks at the floor before sighing. “I didn’t see it when I was younger,” he starts off defensively. But I don’t get the feeling that he’s defending himself to us. More like trying to justify his flaws even all these years later in an attempt to soothe the guilt. Guilt that may very well be misplaced after everything we’ve learned today.

“You wouldn’t hold a child accountable for the actions of adults. So stop blaming your younger self,” Declan interrupts

him.

The look in Charles' eyes makes me feel uncomfortable. Not because it's wrong, but because it hurts to see how badly he needed to hear those words. I never wanted to like the guy, but slowly through our interactions I could see why Scar was having a hard time. I wanted to hate him because Kade and Luca would never do so without a valid reason, but it was clear how much he cared for Scar. Even now. Almost a decade since they were close, he still is fighting to help her. Hard to hate a guy like that.

Jealousy slithers down my spine. That's something I don't think will ever go away with my girl. I don't mind sharing her with the guys. I've seen how much she needs them. How we all complete each other in a completely wild and fucked up way. We're happy in our current dynamic. It feels good. Full.

Declan and Ryder both came in before we had that feeling. Everything felt up in the air. I was hanging on for as long as I could but never thought Scar could love me back. It's different now.

I might come to like Charles, but I don't want to share Scar with him. I don't want to find a new dynamic. I like ours. The pain in his eyes reflects the same demons I've seen in the mirror, seen in Scar's... and Declan's... and Kade's. Fuck. All of us bear similar scars.

Declan gave him exactly what he needed to hear like we all do for each other. He instinctively comforted him the way he would any of us. It's almost a little too easy to see how he could fit amongst us. And I hate it.

Air hisses through my lips as I force myself to release the breath I've been holding as my lungs begin to burn. Fuck me. I'm not usually the emotionally charged one.

"We won't blame a child," I add in reassurance. Regardless of my feelings on the possibility of change, I won't take it out on someone obviously hurting. Not in this way at least. If he crosses lines, I won't hesitate to sic Kade on him. His anger and hate towards Charles will probably never completely disappear.

“My father,” Charles starts again. “He never really cared. Was never really around.” He stares off at a wall in silence, trying to find a way to string the thoughts into words that fully encapsulate the horrors he must have experienced. “Looking back it’s easy to see how when he did show interest, it always had to do with her.”

Declan nods along with his words and the sick feeling in my stomach intensifies. “Not always in obvious ways. Like he cared about my class schedule and my extracurriculars. But the changes always put me on the same schedule as her. We always loved it, thought it had to do with the inevitable merging of our families.”

“It didn’t?” Jade asks, confusion marring her face.

Charles shakes his head, sadness and grief emanating from his body. “It just made it easier for him to keep an eye on her through me. What was she participating in? How were her grades? What did she like? Never asked quite directly but with a ton of other questions that buried his intent and masked his attempts as an interest in his own kid. He drilled into me the importance of taking care of her as she would be my spouse. I was punished if she was hurt on my watch.”

“Creepy,” I agree, “but how does this lead to the logo?”

“He always gave her daisies,” he answers. “Called her his little daisy,” he continues and my stomach turns, the connection now obvious. No wonder she lost it at the sight of the logo. “Not often enough to raise any real flags, but often enough that we had our own little jokes about it. He stopped as we got older, around the time that we would have realized how odd it was.”

He shudders and I reflexively mimic the action at how sick the entire picture he paints. “As soon as I saw the logo, all those memories, all the once seemingly innocent moments came flooding back in a new light. A much darker one and I just knew.”

I look down at the USB still in my hand and get to work.



“It’s a lot worse than we thought,” I whisper to Luca. They just got back from seeing the progress on Poison and I hate to destroy the fragile peace they’ve found. But this can’t wait.

His eyes darken as he studies my face, trying to read my mind to prepare himself for how bad it is. He breathes heavily and I take it as a sign to get on with it.

“Not that anyone is surprised, but it’s a shell corporation. A good one though. He definitely knows how to cover his tracks. There’s a home office, a website, he files taxes, has detailed expense reports. The whole nine yards.”

“Okay,” he says questioningly.

I rub the back of my neck. “Well, it doesn’t seem like the reports are forged at all. Just the intent behind them is a lie.” I put up some of the information I’ve been able to pull from the USB Charles gave me onto the large screen in the center of the room. “Business conferences, meetings, marketing research. These are all trips that have been written off, but if you throw the locations based off of his receipts onto a map.” I open the map and thousands of red dots appear on it showing where Donaue has traveled to.

Scar stays quiet as she leans against the wall with her eyes shut. She almost looks indifferent, but I know better. She’s simply taking everything in, giving herself time to process the new information before letting her feelings in.

“He travels a lot?” Luca asks.

I’m not explaining this right. I cue in the animation I set up so each dot appears in the order of the dates those trips were taken. “This shows the timeline the trips were taken,” I explain. Luca’s eyes widen as he watches the dots disappear and then slowly begin to reappear one by one starting all around the town Scar grew up and rolling out like a terrifying wave across the country.

“He’s been systematically going through the country,” she observes, no trace of emotion in her voice. The light that was in her eyes moments ago already dimmed. I hate myself a little more for not giving her this day off.

I nod in agreement. “I think he’s been searching for you.”

“He has,” Charles declares. I startle for a moment, having forgotten he was even in the room.

Luca turns dark, steely eyes on him and for a moment I worry we are about to have another fight on our hands. But he stops at just the glare. “Explain.”

“My father is nothing if not thorough. But there is nothing, and I mean nothing else to explain that pattern of behavior besides his obsession getting away from him.” He points to the still rolling tide of red dots. “He’s always wanted to find her and he’s using that business as a means to do it.”

The dots stop in Northern California, in Cherry Hills, where we just were. “He’s getting closer to her.”

Luca shakes his head. “I already knew they were closing in,” he admits. “There were whispers about her for the first time in a long time last year but they hadn’t reached these parts yet.”

“Technically, still haven’t,” I add. Is it helpful? Based on the baleful look Luca throws my way, probably not. “There’s more though,” I continue as I tense. This is the worst part. Scar never worries about herself as much as she worries about others. This will both devastate and piss her right the fuck off. I can’t help but study her as I hesitate in delivering the blow I know will diminish the rest of the light in her eyes.

“Get on with it, Noah,” she snaps. I sigh, but don’t take it personally.

“We have eyes on all our people, especially the east coast ones.” She nods in agreement, her body tensing as she knows what’s coming. I don’t beat around the bush. Pulling up another graphic I made and show her what I found. “The blue dots are Josie, the orange ones are employees of CGK corp.”

They overlap far too much for anyone's comfort or to be a mere coincidence.

"They have eyes on Josie," Scar seethes, her entire face transforming into a mask of rage and violence.

"She's been able to make a few trips without being followed from what I can tell. Including both her recent trips out here. We can at least determine it's not someone in her inner circle."

It doesn't make her feel better. She looks about half a step away from flipping a table. I can't even blame her. When I realized it was happening, I almost lost my shit.

Luca pulls her into his chest and wraps her tightly in his arms. "She has guards on her," he reminds her. "We'll send more. I promise Josie will be okay."



SCAR STARTS THRASHING at my side, immediately jarring me awake. "Shh, baby girl," I console, sitting up and pulling her into my arms. She whimpers in her sleep, her eyelashes fluttering as her body tenses. I rub her arms and gently shake her. "Wake up, baby girl. It's just a nightmare. I've got you. Come back to me," I murmur a litany of soft reassurances, knowing better than to try a more direct approach. It only makes her nightmares worse to forcibly try and wake her.

"No, no, no, no. Please," she begs and curls into me. I hold her close to me and continue to murmur sweet nothings even as a tear escapes her tightly closed eyes and slides down her cheek.

My chest aches with a hollow and useless feeling. Nothing makes me feel worse than this. Not being able to help her. Knowing I can't take away her pain and struggles and carry them myself.

An ear-piercing scream breaks free from her lips, the broken sound a knife right to my chest. I hold her tighter as an even more devastated scream tears from her throat. More tears

stream down her face and my own eyes prick with moisture. Rocking her back and forth in my arms, I continue to try and gently pry her out of the hands of her demons from the past. Minutes pass, each one feeling like an eternity as she refuses to wake up. She whimpers again as she begs to be saved and I wish I could. Wish I could do something more than just try and comfort her, even as I begin to shake her harder in an attempt to wake her up. I've never seen one of her nightmares last this long before. She usually isn't this hard to wake up from them. They're becoming more frequent again too. It all worries me. Facing her demons seems to be dredging up all the suffering they caused.

Just as another pain-filled scream fills the air, the door is thrown open and Kade's large frame fills the doorway. He wastes no time in stripping out of his bloodstained clothes and climbing into bed with us. Rather than pulling her out of my arms and into his, he pulls the both of us towards him so she's sandwiched in between us.

Her scream fades and her body gives a little shudder as she melts in between us.

"How long?" he demands, his voice strained and gruff as he runs his hand over her hair.

"At least ten minutes," I admit, tears working their way free to spill down my cheeks as I watch her tense all over again. I know the whimpering and begging is about to start. Lines of tension mar Kade's face as he watches her.

He gently kisses her forehead before carefully wiping her tears from her cheeks. "She's strong as hell for surviving what she did," he says before reaching out and wiping off my tears. "We have to be strong too." I nod, but it sounds like a reminder to not just me but himself as well. I take a deep, shuddering breath and blink away the last of the moisture in my eyes. Our girl needs us.

Kade closes his eyes tightly and kisses her head again and a weight seems to lift off of his shoulders. Somehow, I just know that he's decided to let his past with Charles go in order to be there for her. He starts softly humming a familiar tune to

her. As her whimpers turn into begs once more, his humming shifts into lyrics. I recognize the words and join him as we both softly sing to Scar. He rubs her arms and pets her hair, as I squeeze her hips and trace designs on her thigh. Both of us keeping her tightly pressed between us.

Her pleas die off, but no scream comes this time. More tears spill free and she begins to shake herself free of the nightmare. Her eyes flutter open and she looks up to Kade. I'd sigh in relief except the tendrils of her suffering lines every inch of her face.

"It hurts so bad," she sobs, the onslaught of emotion wracking her whole body and I know she isn't fully with us. Not quite yet. We squeeze her tighter between us, my hand now resting over Kade's back as we practically wrap ourselves around her. Our singing morphing back into murmuring sweet nothings. Anything and everything we can think of to try and soothe her.

I'm not even aware of half the words coming out of my mouth.

"I can still smell it," she whispers, followed by a gag. "The vodka, the blood, the smoke." I've seen Scar in a lot of different ways, after nightmares, enraged, lost, on the verge of breaking, feeling shattered, but I don't think I've ever seen her so fragile. She looks like a little girl. Like she's morphed back into who she was on that night.

"No, no, no, no." She isn't awake yet. Her eyes are wild as they dart around the room, but never landing on Kade or me.

"Shh, baby girl. It's Noah and Kade. We've got you. Can you hear me?"

"The smell, the smell. Make it go away. I don't like vodka."

I stare helplessly at Kade but he looks just as stuck as I am. We don't know how to break her from this in-between wake and sleep place. "Come on, Letty. Come back to us," he pleads, a desperate edge in his voice.

“Kade?” she questions, a haze still in her voice. “Kade?” she asks again.

“I’m right here,” he promises, holding us both tighter, keeping her locked in between us.

“Luca,” she gasps. “Where’s Luca?”

“He’s working, Ladybug. Noah’s here too. We’re here. We’ve got you.”

Silence follows his words and she shakes her head. “Ladybug,” she whispers, a confused lilt in her tone. I trade looks with Kade as the relief bleeds from his face. She’s still not fully awake. Fuck.

“Scar,” I say slowly. “It’s time to wake up.”

She shakes her head, her eyes drifting shut again. “It hurts. It still hurts. Kade, why does it hurt?”

“I know, Letty. I know. But you have to wake up, okay?”

“Make it go away, make the pain go away.” Her desperation claws its way up her throat and into my skin with her words.

Kade curses under his breath. Finally it dawns on me. “I think she took something to help her sleep.” I’m not sure what it was, but she talked about it with Declan before he left to go wrap some things up at the clinic.

“It hurts,” she cries and Kade curses again. Neither of us sure what to do. “Make it stop,” she begs.

“We’ve got you, Letty,” he promises. “We’re gonna make you feel good, okay?”

She doesn’t respond but sinks deeper into our arms, some of the tension bleeding out of her.

He feathers kisses over her face, catching her lips in a soft, chaste kiss. “Kade?” she questions.

“It’s me, baby. I won’t leave you.”

His comforting strokes turn into sensual caresses. “Are you sure?” I ask.

His eyes are strained as he meets my eyes. “Anything to make her pain less.”

I dip my head in acquiescence. “Okay.” I lift her hair off her shoulder and nuzzle into the skin where her neck and shoulder meet.

“Kade?”

“Yes, Letty. It’s me and Noah.” At the sound of his voice she releases a content sigh and I trail kisses down her back. “We’re gonna make the pain go away, okay?”

“Okay.” She nods her head as her body relaxes. We both lean away from her as we try to reposition ourselves and she instantly tenses.

Kade and I spit out curses at the same time. “She needs touch,” he whispers. “Gentle and slow.”

I nod my agreement and run my fingers through her hair, stopping to massage her scalp. She hums and I do it again. “Good girl,” I praise and the corner of Kade’s lips twitch. Not quite a smile, but I’ll take it.

He leans forward to press kisses from one collarbone to the other. She arches up into his touch and hums under her breath. I glide my hands down her back and over her hips, lightly massaging her as I go. Her eyes stay closed as she falls back into some form of rest.

She normally loves to be woken up by one of us between her thighs, but the nightmare and the likelihood she’s on medication makes me hesitate in pushing it too far. Kade must be of the same mind set as he stays above her sleep tank, never dipping lower than the skin already exposed. We both keep it to firm, affectionate touches until she slips back into a relaxed state of sleep. No more humming, no more whimpering, or begging or screaming.

Kade and I both sigh in relief as we change our positions again, keeping her tucked between the two of us. We both turn into her, our eyes meeting over her head. “No more sleeping pills,” he says.

I chuckle, but it lacks any sort of amusement. “Absolutely no more sleeping pills.” I hesitate. “You think she’s going to be okay the rest of the night?”

He doesn’t answer right away, instead he carefully studies her now peaceful sleeping face. “I really hope so.”

The room drifts off into silence as we both slowly relax enough to fall into a light sleep. The peace doesn’t last long.

It feels as if only a few minutes have passed when a jarring scream wakes me up once more. Scar is locked in another nightmare. Her arms and legs flail as she thrashes, trying to escape the sheets.

“Kade, Kade, please help me,” she cries. “It hurts. It hurts so bad.”

“I’m here, Letty. I’m still here. What hurts?” His voice is so strong and soothing, so aware, I have to wonder if he ever managed to fall asleep. The first hints of light give away the hours that must have passed since her last fit.

“Everywhere. Everything hurts.” Her arms wrap around herself and her body trembles with the phantom pain.

Kade hesitates but as her body convulses and tears begin to cascade down her face, sobs only seconds away from breaking free, he steels himself and makes a decision. “It’s me and Noah, okay, Letty? We’re going to replace the pain with pleasure. We’re going to take care of you.”

I arch a brow in question. “She’s physically feeling that pain right now,” he says, his voice breaking. “Anything to make it disappear.”

“Anything,” I agree. “The meds’ effects should be fading as well.”

Not much ever holds me back from making my girl feel good. From doing anything I can to make her pain disappear. Fear is a strong deterrent though. Fear of making it worse. Of hurting her more.

I steel my nerves. Anything is better than this. Better than doing nothing.

Kade begins to slowly kiss down her face and brush away her tears with his lips. I place my hands on her thighs and gently massage my way down and back up again, being careful to avoid her ass entirely. This isn't the time to push her.

He pulls away from her and looks down at her flushed skin. I help hold her up so we can pull the thin tank top over her head, letting her gorgeous tits spill free. Her whimpers turn to sighs as Kade dips his head to her breasts and reverently kisses the soft mounds.

Her head falls back against my shoulder, exposing her neck to me. I trail my tongue up along the side until I reach her ear. "There's my baby girl." Her body relaxes against mine as Kade begins to tease her nipples between his fingers. "Let us take control."

Her mouth parts open and a gasp of pleasure eases the tension in my shoulders. She's slowly coming back to us.



Chapter Twelve Scar

MY HEAD SWIMS. Confusion and darkness fill me as pain and pleasure battle for dominance.

Shadows hover around me. One moment causing indescribable pain, only to be replaced with soothing caresses the next.

Fear wars with a sense of safety. Feeling like I'm home, where I belong, only to have it ripped away and dropped in hell. Sensations and memories keep me locked in place as my mind battles to sort out what's real and what's not.

The smell of vodka fills my nose and I gag, fear winning and washing out the comfort. No, no, no. I know what happens next and I don't want it. The pain. The shame. The blood.

My stomach turns and I'm going to be sick. I squeeze my eyes tighter but it doesn't make the smell go away. Nothing could make that wretched scent disappear. It fills me, suffocates me, drowns out everything else. A warning of what's to come.

Harsh words whispered in my ear but I can't grasp them. I shake my head and it muddles my thoughts even more. Pain ricochets through me, rattling my thoughts and making the dark even darker.

More words.

No, no, no.

I don't want what comes next.

I struggle, fight with everything I have but my body stays locked in place. I only sink deeper into the abyss. My fear skyrockets, tears burning my eyes and my skin itches.

“Let us take control.”

I freeze. That should scare me. Giving up control is my worst nightmare. I need control. Need it like I need to breathe, like I need to fight. I can't give up control, not when the monsters already stole it from me.

So why did those words wash some of the fear away?

More words but I can't hear them. They're so close, like I should be able to reach up and grab them. Hold them in my hands and keep them with me. Why can't I?

They're just out of reach. Floating somewhere above me but unable to reach me.

My scalp burns as my head is jerked to the side. My eyes fly open but all I can see are shadows. They hover over me, evil grins flashing against the dark figures.

“I like you bleeding and whimpering,” he says darkly and I can smell the vodka on his breath. That's when I feel the knife he's holding against my hip bone. The steel digs into my skin as he drags it across my exposed midriff. More blood trickles down my body, soaking into my white cheer skirt.

Another dark and distorted voice echoes in my head. “She's so pretty when she bleeds.”

A third shadow hums his agreement. “Such pretty designs on her smooth, creamy skin.”

My heart races, my body tenses, and my stomach drops. How could this happen?

I beg and plead for the pain to stop. For them to stop. The coppery tang of blood fills the air but none of it deters them. Fingers creep closer and closer. No one has ever touched me there before but somehow I already know how painful it will

be. Echoes of a past hurt I can't comprehend making my fear spike to new levels.

My throat burns as a scream builds. One I know will be torn from my very soul. As if I've already read this scene and know how it will play out. I prepare for the worst.

Only it doesn't come.

The slimy tongue on my ear is replaced with reverent kisses. The soreness between my legs gives way to a new and unfamiliar pleasure. A fluttering of desire.

No. I don't want the monsters to feel good.

I force my eyes open but the shadows have diminished, nothing but empty darkness surrounds me.

Warmth pulses through me and I sink into it. No more whispers of evil desires stoke my fear into a blazing wrath. Instead a comforting hum fills my ear.

Baby girl.

Safety. I move toward the warmth. Seeking out the security I know will come with it.

Letty.

I'd recognize that deep growl anywhere.

"Kade."

My throat aches and my lips sting as I push the words out. My mind slowly clears as the darkness turns to fog around me.

Heat rushes through me and fear turns to desire. Needy, hot, pulsing desire.

"There's my baby girl," a calm, steady voice soothes the chaos and tumultuous emotions. "My strong baby girl."

I moan as my body reacts to the voice before I can even comprehend it. The scene shifts again. No more shadows. No more fog. Home.

"Our needy girl."

My mouth parts as a gasp spills free, my thighs tightening and my hips thrusting, chasing the sweet sensations.

“Noah,” I moan, my head finally clear. My hands fist the sheets at my side and my back arches as my entire body radiates with desire.

“It’s me, baby girl.” He plucks my nipples between his fingers. More sensations burst through my core and I cry out.

Noah chuckles against my chest. “Me and Kade. We’ve got you, baby girl. Open those gorgeous eyes for us and let go.”

As if his words were a magic spell, my body follows his commands. My eyes fly open to find myself in Noah’s arms, leaning against his chest, his legs braced on either side of me, keeping me cocooned in his warmth.

Both of his large hands span across my chest. I can feel his smile against my neck as he teases my tight nipples as I watch. Sleep quickly clears from my mind as my eyes travel lower to find Kade between my thighs, his face buried against me.

“You heard him, Ladybug. Let go.” The relief in his grin is brief enough that I barely catch it and can’t begin to comprehend it before he dives back in, burying his face between my legs and attacking my clit with a vengeance.

My body shakes as the orgasm is torn from me without warning. A scream rips through the air, but unlike the ones from my nightmares, it burns in the best way.

Kade doesn’t stop, even as waves of pleasure crash over me. His tongue continues to stroke me, lapping up my desire as it pools in my center.

“Fuck, you’ve never tasted sweeter.”

My chuckle tapers off as I yawn. I shake my head. “Good morning to you guys too.” My body still buzzes with pent up desire, feeling like a live wire ready to detonate under their command.

Noah hums behind me, pressing kisses down my neck and shoulder. “I think Kade is still hungry, baby girl.”

He lifts his head and gives me his signature dopey grin, full of hunger. “Starved actually.”

Somehow both of them feel lighter than they did just moments before. The relief in Kade's expression tickles my brain but I'm not quite awake enough to make sense of it.

Noah lifts me in his arms and I begin to protest. I don't want to wake up yet. I want to stay in bed with my two troublemakers.

But rather than moving me off of him, he lifts me straight up and spreads my legs in the air.

It doesn't take long to understand once I see Kade take Noah's hard length in his hand. Oh fuck. He holds Noah steady as Noah lowers me back down. Kade uses his length to tease me, pulling it through my slick slit until it bumps against my clit and back again.

My moan mixes with Noah's as I feel him buck his hips, seeking me out. Kade laughs darkly, pulling Noah's erection through my heat again.

"Kade," Noah groans and I shudder at the sound.

"Okay, okay," he relents, guiding Noah to my entrance. Noah lowers me the rest of the way down and I sink onto his length. Kade frees his hand and settles back down, pressing his face to my cunt again.

"Your pussy looks so pretty taking his cock, Letty," he whispers, the sound just barely brushing against me, causing me to clench around Noah.

He groans from behind me. "She liked that."

Kade blows a soft breath over my cunt and I clench again. "I know what she will like even more." He takes my legs out of Noah's arms and settles them over his shoulders. Putting his hands on my ass he keeps me suspended in the air, giving Noah the space to begin thrusting in and out of me in a slow, torturous dance while locking me firmly against his mouth.

Oh fuck. I already know I have no chance of lasting long with the way they're working my body.

All thoughts flee my mind, the nightmares and pain all but forgotten as I get lost in their touch.

Kade's tongue doesn't leave an inch of my cunt untouched, making it impossible to string together a cohesive thought. He laps at my clit before trailing down my slit. A string of incomprehensible words fall from my mouth and he chuckles against me. The vibrations shoot through me and I clench around Noah who moans my name as he thrusts into me faster.

I can feel my body growing tighter as I climb higher and higher, closer to that peak only my men have ever been able to get me to. So much more intense than any orgasm before them.

Like a man on a mission, Kade becomes even more aggressive in pushing me there. His tongue trails down my slit to my entrance. My whole body short circuits as he slides his tongue inside me alongside Noah's dick. I feel his length twitch inside me and Noah moans Kade's name. The husky, broken sound pushing me over the edge as I shatter around both of them.

Noah grips me tighter as his thrusts become erratic, chasing his own release. Kade withdraws from us, drawing up on his knees. I watch in blissed-out awe as he begins to rapidly stroke himself from his position above us.

Just when I thought I wouldn't be able to come again, I feel another orgasm building as Noah adjusts his position and hits me in a whole new way.

I gasp and his arm bands around my chest, holding me tightly to him as he rocks in and out of me.

"Oh fuck, baby girl. You feel so good," he moans, his lips pressed against my skin and a string of curses escapes me as the waves begin to build.

Kade moans above me and I watch in fascination as he strokes himself faster, twisting his hand over the head of his cock. The sound of my name on his lips makes me clench harder and I feel Noah thicken inside me as his dick pulses. Hot ropes of come land on my exposed cunt as Kade strokes himself to release at the same time I feel Noah's release inside me.

I break all over again, an intense orgasm wracking through my body so hard my vision blacks out for a moment.

When I come to, Kade and Noah are both breathing as heavy as they hold me closely between the two of them, their arms thrown over me and resting on each other.

A surprised giggle bursts out of me, shocking me even more because I am not one to giggle. Ever. Yet I definitely just did.

Kade arches a brow at me, his look of surprise matching my own. I lick my lips, trying not to be afraid of the giddiness running through me.

“Every time we do this,” I start explaining what made me giggle in the first place. “You both seem a little less straight each time.”

They both chuckle with me, squeezing me tighter. I’m fairly positive they’ve had conversations about the lines in their relationship that have been crossed, but I’ve never talked about it with them.

“I like controlling your pleasure,” Noah admits as if I wasn’t already aware. I snort in response and he lightly taps my ass. “But I like controlling theirs almost as much.” He shrugs before continuing, “Sexuality is a sliding scale and how much I love sharing you goes beyond just liking to make you happy. It turns me on to have the other guys here. To see them with you. To work with them. I’ll admit, I was curious when it first started, but I’ve realized my interest doesn’t extend past you being involved.”

Kade yawns but I catch his nod. “I was curious for a while too. I’d never been with a guy before but I started thinking about it after I realized how it turned me on to watch you being fucked. Then we had little moments, Ryder’s tongue hitting my dick, Noah using me to get you off.” His hand lands in my hair and he starts to massage my scalp as his eyes drift shut. “I even watched some gay porn and read some romance novels. Some of it was hot but every time I closed my eyes and tried to create a fantasy, you were always there. You’re the only one I can imagine having sex with. The only one I want.”

I hum and stroke my hand over Kade's chest. I'm almost surprised I don't feel any jealousy or apprehension at anything they've said. Not even hearing about Noah's past hookups.

"You know," I murmur softly, "if you guys wanted to explore, I wouldn't be mad." I don't want to hold them back from pieces of themselves. Knowing they love each other, even if not the same way they love me, only makes me feel more secure in our family. The idea of their love growing into something more doesn't evoke insecurity but rather the opposite. "I love you both and want you to be happy."

Kade grins and his eyes flutter open as he leans to press a kiss against my forehead. Noah presses tighter against my back and kisses my shoulder.

"We love you too, baby girl, but we are happy the way things are."

Kade nods. "Any exploring will be done with you in between us. I love Noah but the idea of fucking him doesn't turn me on."

Noah laughs, his whole body shaking, making me smile. "Same," he agrees. His voice drops lower to a husky whisper, "But the idea of fucking you together? Our dicks sliding against each other while you clench around us both?"

I shiver at his words, feeling more affected than I should after the three orgasms I just had.

"Now that, turns me on."

Kade growls his agreement, moving closer to me before yawning again. I laugh as Noah immediately yawns too.

I sink into their warmth and close my eyes letting the sated peace wash through me. I trace designs on Kade's chest with one hand, holding Noah's hand with the other until I hear both of their breathing drop into the deep cadence of sleep. I smile as I let myself follow after them, knowing no nightmares will haunt me this time.



DAYS PASSED at an obnoxiously slow crawl. Each one dragging on into the next as we combed through Donahue's records.

They were creepy, to say the least. The effort he had put into finding me has brought the nightmares back full force. Each night they follow me into my dreams to relive the worst moments of my life.

Small details continue to come back to me in flashes. Nothing concrete enough to give us a new lead. Just enough to make me feel as if I'm living that torment all over again.

The guys have all refused to leave me alone since the night Noah and Kade used sex to pull me out of the arms of my demons. I fall asleep every night with a body on either side of me. They rotate each day depending on what else needs to be done. I'm not even sure what is occupying so much of their time anymore. It seems like each one of them always has something to be doing. Their schedules are far too coordinated to not have been planned together. But I can't bring myself to ask questions.

I can feel how close we are getting to the answers that really matter. But each day that passes, claws of my past dig deeper into my psyche. The level of obsession apparent from the files is enough to turn anyone's stomach. All of the guys have been on edge. Each one handles it in their own way. But somehow we've managed a tentative sort of peace as we wait for the next steps of our plot to formulate.

Waiting is always the hardest part of any plan. I hate feeling useless but after days of seeing firsthand how deep Donahue's obsession ran and realizing just how far back it started, I can't bring myself to go into the office.

My fingers tap out an erratic pattern against the counter and I take another sip of my coffee. Who knew I'd ever become so adept at delegating I would have nothing to do?

Noah could always use my help, but the idea of going into the office sickens me. I can't do it today. Not when the heavy scent of smoke still lines my nose from my latest nightmare.

Everything is too close to the surface to have to face the evidence of that night.

My hands shake and I chug the rest of my coffee before turning to the fridge in search of the gallon of iced espresso one of the guys always keeps stocked for me.

Large hands wrap around my waist and lift me up, pulling me away from the fridge and setting me on the counter.

“Do I need to cut you off, pretty girl?” Declan asks, eyeing my twitching fingers knowingly.

I narrow my eyes. “Why on earth would you resort to such inhumane treatment?”

He scoffs, “Because I’m pretty sure you have more caffeine than blood in your body right now.”

I roll my eyes and mutter, “It was too early for whiskey.”

He gives me an indulgent smile, but I can see the apprehension he’s trying so hard to hide. I sigh, knowing they’re all worried about me. Even I’m starting to worry about me. The nightmares have never been this intense and persistent. Not since that first year after everything happened.

New memories of Charles’ dad have been rising to the surface in my dreams as well. Little forgotten moments that once seemed innocent now jaded with the truth of his twisted desires.

“Do you need me to stay?”

I groan, dropping my head to his shoulder. His hands stroke up and down my back and he kisses the top of my head. “I’m okay,” I promise him. Surprisingly enough, it’s not a complete lie. After Tyler volunteered to take on the role of Josie’s bodyguard, I was able to breathe again.

Knowing Donahue had eyes on her had made it almost impossible to breathe. It was why I needed to take the medication to sleep, though that only made the nightmares much worse. At least we learned that lesson.

Josie has her own bodyguards. Logically, I know she’s probably safe, we’ve always had measures in place to take

care of her. It was impossible to bury her connection to my old self, even if our friendship was often overlooked. Knowing she was at risk and seeing the evidence of how close that danger lies are two very different things. I wasn't going to be satisfied she was safe until one of my guys was at her side. Someone I trained and trusted to be a machine. To be as good as me since I couldn't be there.

Tyler has been with us for a long time and has been training nonstop for the last year. The same way I trusted Ian to have Jade's back, I knew I could count on Ty to have Josie's. I've never felt such sweet relief as I did when he volunteered for the job.

Declan studies me carefully. "I can stay home," he offers again. Though I can tell he's not as worried.

"Won't invite me with you?" I tease, already knowing the answer. They've all been sneaking around, throwing heavy looks at one another when they think I'm not paying attention.

I'll let them have their secrets for now. It's all very reminiscent of when they came home with Blu out of nowhere. If it's another pet, Charlene may just throttle them. It sounds like their mess to figure out.

I start to pour myself another glass of coffee and Declan grabs it out of my hands. "I have to meet Ryder, and I think I'll be taking this with me. Eat some real food."

I scoff as he backs out of the kitchen with a smirk and wink. What a dick. He didn't even attempt to answer me. I move back to the fridge and grab stuff to make lunch for everyone. At least I can feel productive.

The sound of footsteps makes tension creep up my spine. They aren't immediately recognizable to me which leaves only one person in the house that they could possibly belong to. Charles.

"Can I help with anything?"

I turn to find him standing uncertainly in the doorway, his hands in his pockets as if he doesn't know what to do with them. I bite my lip as I consider him. We haven't talked since I

overheard their argument the other day. I'm not even sure if he knows I heard most of it.

Slowly nodding, I gesture to the fridge. "You can make a salad. Don't add carrots or Kade may actually kill you."

He gives me a brief smile, one I find surprisingly easy to return. The years of resentment and hurt didn't wash away with his admissions. Old wounds can't heal that quickly, and they may never fully recover. Whether his guilt was real or not, my pain and suffering was. I still lost my best friend. Still felt utterly alone and helpless. Abandoned.

Even with the tumultuous emotions gnawing at my stomach that have been present since I first laid eyes on him again, new ones of relief and hope are beginning to bloom. To overshadow the darkness that haunted our pasts. Maybe the guys were right, and I was always ready to mend this one bridge. To have a flicker of light that once shined so brightly inside of me return, even if it's only a modicum of what it once was.

Being the light sounds nice until you realize all that it hides in the shadows.

The silence weighs heavily on the room. Nothing but the sounds of his knife chopping vegetables and the low simmer of the sauce on the stove to accompany my rapidly beating heart. Neither one of us sure how to start the conversation that obviously needs to happen.

I can practically hear Declan screaming in my ear about talking about my feelings in order to move on from them. The thing is, I may be able to be vulnerable with my men, but some things will never change.

No part of me wants to have a heart-to-heart with my childhood best friend. Not right now. I'd rather just move on, deal with my emotions on my own. It's not like we can ever go back to the innocent teens that once clung to each other. He's no longer my only light shrouded by darkness. No longer my safety net.

“I feel like I owe you a lot of explanations.” He breaks the silence, never slowing in the task I gave him.

I keep my back to him as I stir the sauce and eye the water, waiting for it to boil. “You don’t.” There’s no need to turn around to see his expression to know he’s confused. “I heard your conversation with the guys.”

His knife slows, the crunch of the lettuce stopping. I flinch and refocus on my own tasks, refusing to turn in his direction. The sounds resume as he starts once again.

“So you know I never wanted to abandon you.” He sounds much older than our 26 years. All the trauma will do that.

“I know.” And I do. I don’t doubt the story he’s telling. Everything I ever had questions about clicked into place with every word out of his mouth. “I know you’re the one who pulled me from the fire too.”

He clears his throat before asking, “You didn’t remember?”

Feeling his eyes on me, I shake my head. “My head was fucked up for a long time. None of my memories are quite right.”

Silence descends again as my water begins to boil. I take my time, pouring the pasta in. It isn’t until I’m done he finally speaks again. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more.” Emotion makes his voice hoarse and my eyes sting with moisture. Not for myself, but for the kids we once were.

I shake the melancholy off. “You did enough.” He kept me alive long enough to get out. To escape so I could one day come back and get my revenge. “You’re doing even more now.” Everything he brought Noah is going to be exactly what we need to finish this.

“You deserve revenge.” The emotion is no longer clogging his throat. Something almost like amusement has replaced it.

“Seems like you do too.” My own voice holds a note of teasing in it. A place I’m far more comfortable in. “Not many people I know ask for their father’s head as a reward for their help.”

He chuckles and the sound pulls a small smile from me. “No? That surprises me.”

A shocked laugh eddies up out of me. “You’re probably right. More than a couple of us here have daddy issues.”

“At least yours is dead.”

I snort in response. “Don’t worry. Yours will be soon.”

He laughs and a more comfortable silence fills the room as we both get lost in our own thoughts.

I take the pasta off the stove and drain it before returning back to the stove to pour the sauce over it.

“You know,” he starts before hesitating, “I really missed you, but I’d never been so relieved as I was when you disappeared. I dreamed up this whole life for you away from Eastvale.”

I finally turn to stare at his face, a soft smile graces his lips as his blue eyes get a faraway look. It’s an expression I remember from our childhood. Charles always was the dreamer between us two.

“Yeah? Did you get close to picturing the truth?”

He throws his head back in laughter. “Not even close.”

My hip bumps against the counter as I rest my elbows on the island. “Really? I can’t imagine why not.”

He grins at me and shakes his head. This type of banter is familiar, soothing an ache I didn’t realize I still felt in my core. “Me either,” he hums. “The whole psycho assassin thing you’ve got going on really fits the vibe you had back in the day.”

He finishes the salad and pushes it to the side, matching my position on the opposite side of the island.

“So tell me all about this life you did see for me.”

His fingers dance against the counter. “Everyone knew you donated money to Josie’s foundation. Well, everyone back home.”

I shrug, we always knew people would put it together. We only needed it to be untraceable. We've accomplished that much.

"I always knew you'd never run to another elite circle. Even back then, before everything happened, you never wanted to become your mother." I nod in agreement. I had my ticket out of shark-infested waters, I wasn't about to waste it by diving into a pool of piranhas. I wanted to become the predator.

"A small but cozy flat in the middle of Paris. That's where I envisioned you. Just enough money to stay comfortable without drawing attention. Luca and Kade disappeared around the same time you did. Though no one else noticed that bit. But I pictured you all together, finding your happiness. I had no idea what they would do but I always knew they'd keep you safe. And you would become a dance teacher. Surrounded by kids and love and laughter. Bringing them the same joy you always managed to create even on the darkest days."

Tears shine in his eyes and one slips down my own cheek and I know we're both thinking of the twins.

"I tried to save them," he whispers, the cracks in both our hearts visible in that moment.

"Me too. I tried to save them too." Another tear escapes, but I can't even be mad. Crying for my sisters is something I'll never stop doing. They deserve my grief, my tears, the piece of my soul they took with them.

He moves around the counter and hesitatingly pulls me into his arms. I don't fight him, resting my head on his shoulder and wrapping my arms around his waist. He feels so different from when we were seventeen. Much taller and even more filled out than I had first realized. Yet as different as we both are, somehow the comfort I find in his arms is still the same. A small piece of home.

We stay locked together for several seconds, both of us mourning the little girls who deserved so much more than what we could give them. A peace settles over me at being

with one of the only people in the world who knew and loved them like I did.

“Well fuck. Now I need a cigarette.” I pull away, wiping at my eyes and clearing my throat.

“You smoke now?” He clears his throat, wiping his own red rimmed eyes.

I arch a brow in his direction. “Is that really the most surprising thing you’ve learned about me?”



Chapter Thirteen Scar

“OKAY, RACHEL,” I sigh. “That’s enough.”

I’ve been more than lenient and patient with her mourning. How could I not be? I still think I’m missing something that led Alec to his death. I won’t stop searching for it until I’m satisfied I know everything there is to know about why he had to die. But Rachel has stopped living her life in her grief. Alec would never forgive any of us if we let her continue down this road.

“What’s enough?” she asks, looking up from the computer screen.

“There’s nothing more for you to do here,” I point out. She gives me a look of confusion and I can’t say I blame her. To her it probably feels like this is coming out of left field. The thing is, it really isn’t.

“You’re wasting your time and talent looking into Romano. Charles and Noah are about to pinpoint his exact location and everyone in this room knows it. All you’re doing right now is busy work.”

“Scar,” Jade scolds. I would be surprised about my once sweet friend talking back to me, but Jade has come more into her own with every passing day. Taking care of Rachel has pushed her into being that much harder, that much more determined, and that much more vocal. Even with me.

“No, Jade,” I continue. I respect her need to defend Rachel, but the woman doesn’t need anymore coddling. It’s time for some tough love and a good kick in the ass. “You know damn well I’m right. Romano has less than a month before he meets his expiration date. That’s going to happen with or without her combing through his financial statements,” I pause to look at her screen and roll my eyes before continuing, “from seventeen years ago.”

Rachel doesn’t even bother arguing back. The truth is she probably wasn’t even looking through the records properly anymore. It was a mindless task that helped her focus on anything but the fact she lost Alec. Something that still made her feel as if she was a part of helping get justice for him. But the hard work is behind us. We’ve put in the legwork and now it’s time to patiently wait for the fruit of our labors to blossom. She just isn’t ready to move on to the next thing.

“What isn’t going to happen is dealing with the Alvarados. They’ve taken an interest in all of us for some godforsaken reason and won’t stop poking around our business now.”

She scoffs, finally meeting my eyes. “You love the attention.”

Okay, well she isn’t wrong. It is quite the compliment that a family as prominent and as elusive as they are have their eyes on us, waiting to see what we do next. I felt their respect when they showed up to Alec’s funeral. Knew we had their support when they publicly denounced Romano. But the continued interest goes further than that. What do they want?

And more importantly, how can we take advantage of it?

We can’t really. Having them as an ally is about the best we can gain from them. The promise of future information that will help us expand our power from coast to coast. It isn’t a bad deal on either side for us to get along; both sides benefit while staying in their lanes. We don’t go further than that. Our lanes aren’t anywhere near theirs. Day to day business together just isn’t an option. For us.

For Rachel though? She has the means to expand past drug trade and into weapons. She has the structure, she has the

connections, and it won't be hard for us to move in and steal Romano's supplier.

"Never said I didn't," I point out to her. "But I'm not the one who could benefit the most from their interest."

She studies me, trying to ascertain just how serious I am. "You want me to get into bed with the Alvarados? Are you insane?"

Ryder snorts and I flip him off. "I'm not saying climb into anyone's bed," I argue. "If I was, they sure as hell wouldn't be the ones I suggest," I murmur, making her flip me off this time. "It's a chance to expand your money and power. The Rachel I know would be leaping all over the opportunity. So why aren't you?"

The others look away, but Jade squeezes her hand as the familiar haunted look enters Rachel's eyes. The look that feels like the twist of a knife in my gut every time. Her pain is palpable as she lets her walls down.

"Because I can't imagine doing it without him." Her eyes fill with tears and a stabbing pain attacks my own heart.

I fall to the floor on my knees in front of her, gently taking her hands in my own.

"I know how bad it hurts. How heavily the guilt weighs on you like you shouldn't be allowed to be happy without him. Like you should have been the one to die. But we both know Alec would be so pissed at you for thinking that way. For abandoning the dream you both had. The empire you both worked so hard to build."

Tears splash against our clasped hands and she shakes her head. "I know he would." Her voice shakes and her hand trembles in mine. "But that's exactly the problem. It was our dream. Our empire. I don't know how to do it without him. Every step of the way, he was there. Having my back, at my side. Talking through decisions with me. Pushing me to go harder when I was hesitating and pulling me back when I took things too far. He was my balance, Scar. I don't know how to do this without him."

Ryder falls into the seat beside her, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. She easily melts into his side and even as my heart hurts for her, a small amount of relief is there too at the friendship between the two. They both need more people in their corner.

“It was the same way for me when I watched my sister die,” he whispers softly, just for her.

Ryder has come a long way from the bruised and broken man we saved from that cage, but he still has a hard time talking about his sister. His grief is still palpable in little moments, but he usually only shows it to me.

He’s cutting himself open and letting himself bleed in order to help heal some of Rachel’s wounds and I couldn’t be more proud of him.

“But you have us,” he reminds her. “Just because you’re ready to reclaim your throne, doesn’t mean we stop being here. That we stop helping. When you need to talk through a decision, call us. Need backup? We’re already there.”

She nods against his shoulder and squeezes my hand. “I know you guys have my back.”

“But it’s not the same?” he cuts her off, already knowing where she was going. She nods again. He huffs in faux amusement. “Of course we’re not. No matter how much I love this family, it doesn’t replace my sister. Doesn’t take away the pain of losing her. Or the guilt that I should have saved her. But just because it feels like we can’t survive without them, doesn’t mean we can’t.” He squeezes her shoulder. “Doesn’t mean we shouldn’t. They deserve more than us giving up the life they wanted for us. You can’t just live for revenge, Rachel. Alec would never forgive us for allowing that to happen.”

“I promise you,” I say, “we will get that revenge. But take it from someone who lived and lost a lot of years by only thinking about revenge, Ryder is right. It’s a disservice to Alec to lose everything with his death.”

She openly sobs in our arms as Jade watches on warily, clearly wanting to jump in but unsure how. I reach and grab

her hand, placing it on Rachel's knee. That's all she needs from us right now. Being here with her, supporting her.

"I miss him. I know I have you guys, but going back hurts. I see him everywhere. Memories of us are engraved in every inch of Thorns and our home."

Ryder presses a soft kiss against her head. "One day, that will be comforting. He will always be with you. Always be a part of us. Don't run away from that."

We're all silent for several long moments. The sound of our deep breathing and Rachel's sniffles the only ones in the room. At some point, everyone else cleared out, giving us our privacy. A chance for Rachel to break and put herself back together again before facing the next step.

"Okay," she says. "I'll get back to work. I'll reach out to the Alvarados. I won't give up the rest of my life, my business. But I need revenge first."

I meet the steely determination in her eyes and give her my signature savage grin. "Deal."

As if summoned by my declaration, Charles and Noah burst into the room.

"We found him."



Chapter Fourteen Declan

MY EYES STAY LOCKED on my dark-haired pretty girl, where she sits in her seat curled around her tablet. It doesn't matter if we have all the information we could get our hands on already, or that we already agreed to finish the plan once we get to the city where Noah and Charles tracked Romano to. While everyone else's rush of excitement has dwindled down over the first couple hours of the flight, Scarlett's tension hasn't eased from her shoulders or the tight knit of her brow. She's as wound up as when we first heard the news.

We finally found him.

Black Hallows, a small town on the east coast known for the stark dichotomy between the North and South sides. One side built on corruption, secrets, and blood, not unlike the towns where Scarlett and I grew up in. But neither of our towns had such a close proximity to the other half, the ones who bled for the elite to thrive. The ones who fought every day just to survive.

It isn't the first time the town has come up on our radar. If they were stained in blood before, they've been soaked in it now. War has a way of doing that.

As if conjured by the thought, I hear the Facetime ringtone coming from Scarlett's tablet, and Tyler's face is quick to fill her screen. I get up from my seat to sit beside her to hear his update.

“Have you heard back from any of your contacts? Max isn’t in town this week.” Scarlett’s brows dip even further in her concentration. She was hoping to have him there, but even as he offered to make the trip she told him not to worry about it. Tyler spent time here on a job Scarlett agreed to for Max. To help and act as backup in the war that could have ripped this town apart but has acted as a cleansing instead.

Not so very different from what we’ve been doing in our own town.

We have enough of our own backup and information without not only having to inconvenience Max, but also wait for him.

“I just got here,” Tyler says in his low, gravelly voice. “But I’ve already secured backup and it turns out, it’s somewhere I’ve been before. Should be an easy in-and-out mission.” Tyler is the most serious out of the crew that runs the fights. He’s not one to mince words or give empty platitudes. If he says it should be simple to get in, I believe him, even if everything that happens afterward will be anything but.

A smirk of amusement lights up Scarlett’s face and I can’t help but to mirror it. There hasn’t been any of her usual savage excitement at the prospect of her next kill. No, it’s been all fierce determination.

“I thought I recognized the name,” she hums.

Tyler responds with his own sly smirk and nod. “Rolland Atkins. One of the many corrupted scumbags that were cleared out while I was visiting Black Hallows.” A new, intrigued light enters Scarlett’s eyes.

“I’m almost excited to meet the crew you worked with.”

He huffs half a chuckle. “One of them will be with me to pick you up from the airport. I’m almost worried about how much you’re going to like them.”

Scarlett promises to see him soon after reminding him to collect any and all useful intel he can over the next couple hours before we land. He readily agrees before hanging up without saying goodbye. I smile in amusement at his gruff

personality when I've seen the other side of him that Ian and Holden are masters at drawing out.

“Pretty girl,” I purr as I wrap my arm around her and pull her into my chest. “Get some rest while you can.” Everyone else has already drifted to sleep around us. “It’ll be morning by the time we get there and we both know you won’t want to stop and take a nap.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to argue. Her fingers clutch even tighter around the tablet and her eyes harden while her smirk drops. But before I can really push her again, she sighs and nods, grabbing my hand. “Only if you stay with me.” The soft-spoken words painfully pull at my heart, not because of the words themselves, but because of the fear and anxiety she lets me see with them.

Of course. How could I have missed it? She’s scared to sleep. Who wouldn’t be when the worst moments of your life play like a neverending reel behind closed eyes? Every time she drifts off into sleep, it’s not dreams that find her. It’s hell.

I stand and scoop her into my arms, carrying her to the back room where there’s a bed that no one bothered to use. Everyone wanted to stay together, stay close. But she needs solid sleep for everything we have planned. “I’ll hold you tight and won’t let go,” I promise and climb into bed before tucking her against me.

Her hands are freezing as she slips them under my shirt and presses them against my skin. I hiss in response and she smirks as she snuggles in closer to me.

“You could have told me you were cold, pretty girl.”

She lifts her shoulders in a shrug and slides her hands down lower into the waistband of my pants. “I can think of a few ways to warm up.” Her playful smirk lights me up and I don’t even care if this is her way of trying to avoid sleep. Maybe exhausting her will help her fall into a deeper sleep where no nightmares will follow her. It seems to have worked before.

My hands slide down her back and cup her ass, pulling her up against my rapidly hardening erection. “Oh, can you?”

She nods, humming under her breath. “Can you be quiet?” I challenge her and her nods become frantic. It’s not just us on this plane, and while I don’t mind sharing her as much anymore, I’m not willing for Holden to hear her cries of pleasure. Don’t even want to imagine the trauma of Joe hearing them.

“We’re not alone, so you have to be a good girl for me.”

Her hands move lower until she brushes past my aching cock and squeezes my balls in her hands. “I’m always a good girl,” she snarks and I snort in response, even as my hips thrust against her hand holding me. “The real question is, can you be a good boy?” I sink my teeth into my lower lip to suppress a moan as she rolls my balls in her hands.

“Two can play that game, pretty girl,” I taunt and move my hand away from her ass to pinch her clit between my fingers. Her mouth drops open but only a muffled sound escapes as she catches herself. I chuckle and slide my fingers down her already slick slit and push two fingers inside her warm cunt. Her lips stay parted but no sound escapes as I thrust two fingers in and out of her. Using my free hand, I grab the waistband of her yoga pants and push them down over her ass and off her legs, exposing her cunt to me.

Scarlett follows suit and releases her hold on me to push my pants down my legs and takes my hard length in her hand. Pure pleasure pulses through me as she wraps her hand tightly around me and begins to stroke me at the same pace as I thrust my fingers into her. Slowing down, I scissor my fingers inside her and curl my fingers to try and hit that special spot inside of her she likes so much.

I smirk as her breath stutters and her grip tightens as her hips begin to move against my hand. “You ready for me to sink inside you?”

“Please,” she begs and it’s more than enough to convince me. I take my fingers out of her cunt and tap her lips, smearing

her desire over them until she opens for me and sucks both fingers into her mouth, cleaning them thoroughly.

“God, you’re so fucking pretty.” I line up my cock to her cunt and thrust forward until my pelvis rests against hers and I can feel heat wrap around me like a glove. Fuck. She feels good.

A small moan escapes her lips when I begin to piston my hips into her at an angle. Catching her lips with mine, I silence her as we both rock together. A quick stolen moment amidst all the other chaos where it’s me and my pretty girl and nothing else matters. Nothing could be more special than sharing these small moments together. Feeling her under me. Tasting her desire shared between us.

Her back arches off the bed and I pick up the pace as I drive into her. Tearing my mouth away from hers, I wrap my hands around her hips and flip her over so she’s on top of me. Scarlett adjusts her legs and straddles me, grinning down as she does. “Knew you could be my good boy,” she teases and my dick twitches inside of her. “You liked that.”

I grin up at her. “I like anything that makes you smile.” But I won’t lie, I did enjoy her praise for me too. “But you can keep praising me if you like.” I punctuate my words by thrusting up inside her. She gasps and braces her hands over my abs and begins to lift herself off my length before lowering back down to take me all the way into her.

“Fuck, you’re so big,” she whispers and I get impossibly harder inside her. She grins and clenches around me and I have to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from groaning. “You feel so good inside me, D. Fuck, I love you.”

“Oh, pretty girl,” I whisper hoarsely. “I fucking love you too. The way you take all of me. How sexy you look riding me like this.” I sit myself up so I can push her shirt over head and expose her perfect tits to me. I pull her down with me as I lay back down, but she stays seated over me, taking me in and out of her like a pro. Wrapping her hair around one of my hands, I pull her head back and kiss down her neck and collarbone.

Soft pants whisper over my skin and I pull her back further by her hair until I can wrap my lips around her nipples. Scarlett moans above me and undulates her hips, grinding down on me and taking me further into her.

She grows even wetter as she rocks her hips back and forth and I can feel her dripping down my length and over my balls. Biting down on her breast keeps me from moaning, but I chuckle instead as she has to stifle a moan of her own. I nuzzle my face against her chest and she sighs. “You look so good under me,” Scarlett murmurs and I can’t help the smile that pulls at my lips.

Bucking my hips up into her, I ask, “And how do I feel?”

“Perfect,” she gasps. I hold on to her hips tightly as I feel her pussy begin to clench around me. “Strong,” she continues and her praise washes over me blissfully. “Safe,” she pants. And fuck if that isn’t the highest compliment I’ve ever been given. I continue to thrust up into her and the way she begins to tighten as she gets closer to her climax is enough to push me close to my own.

“Mine,” she breathes and my pleasure is taken to new heights at the simple possession in her voice. A muffled grunt escapes my lips as I rock all the way up into her and my cock swells as my orgasm crashes through me. Her breathing stutters as I flood her cunt and the telltale signs of her orgasm starts, prolonging mine as she clenches around my sensitive dick. “Mine,” she repeats, before collapsing on top of me.

We both lay there panting for several moments before soft laughter spills from both of us. Whatever we find once this plane lands is probably going to change our lives. Change her. I don’t think I’ll ever be looking at the same Scarlett in this moment after we start the confrontation of her past.

“I love you,” I whisper, brushing a piece of hair sticking to her forehead and putting it behind her ear. “No matter what comes, we face it together.”

She curls up against my chest and I wrap my arms around her and hold her close to me. She stays so quiet and her

breathing deepens until I'm sure she's passed out, but just as I close my eyes to let myself drift off I hear her.

"Together," she promises, so quietly I almost miss it. I kiss the top of her head and hold her closer until we both fall asleep.

It's not a surprise to anyone when we wake as the plane descends to have a much fuller bed than when we fell asleep. I groan as I throw an elbow back. "Get your dick away from my ass, Ryder."

"It's not your ass he wants," he mumbles back sleepily, only cuddling further into my back. "And it's not his fault it smells like sex in here."

Scarlett smiles as she tries not to laugh, but the light back in her eyes after so long of it being dimmed is worth being poked by a dick. "I only put up with this for you, pretty girl," I whisper conspiratorially.

"Don't lie, dude. You love me," Ryder argues as he sits up and smacks a slobbery kiss against my neck. I wipe it off with disgust.

"Right now, I really really don't."

Scarlett stretches her body out in front of me, effectively distracting both Ryder and I from continuing our odd but not rare banter. Noah's arms wrap tighter around her waist as he mumbles in her ear, "Let's just stay in bed a little longer."

Her fingers trace patterns on the back of his hands and I laugh as Kade's huge hand reaches over Noah to fall on her hip as well. "Yeah, what Noah said."

I shake my head, but Scarlett's amused smile is everything we all needed. "Don't you three make the cutest set of spoons."

"Big words from someone who was being spooned by Ryder," Kade retorts.

"Touché," I concede. "But we are about to land."

Kade and Noah groan, but this rest has lit a spark for Scarlett. I can see it in the way she eases out of their holds and

jumps to start getting ready. Luca comes in and throws clothes at all of us, stopping only to kiss the shit out of Scarlett. When he finally releases her, he presses a chaste kiss to her forehead. “Rachel and Holden are already getting dressed. Joe is ready and on the phone with Tyler. Him and some other guy are already waiting for us on the private landing strip.”

A new buzz runs through the room and Scarlett practically bounces in place, her signature savage grin spreading across her features in a promise of the retribution to come.

“There’s my pretty girl,” I praise.

“More like our pretty psycho,” Ryder quips, stealing a kiss from her too.

“Definitely that too,” I agree.

More banter is passed easily back and forth between us all. Scarlett actually joins in, teasing Kade about his own signature grin. It eases the tension that has been wrapped around my heart for weeks now. It took far too long to find Romano, and after the bomb that is Charles exploded on all of us, she hasn’t been the same. But she isn’t gone, even if she was lost for a little while. She never left us.

I watch her as she pulls her phone out to send everyone back home an update. No one was happy to stay behind, but our family has grown too large to have everyone go on every mission. They have the more important job anyway of keeping the kids safe and distracted while we’re gone. Though I don’t anticipate us being here long enough for them to even notice we’re gone.

A thrill runs down my spine at what is waiting for us back home. Scarlett arches a brow as she catches it. I pull her into the seat next to mine and buckle her in as the plane begins to descend. “Just thinking about finally moving Roe in with us,” I whisper in her ear. That’s always been the plan.

Kill Romano, bring Roe home.

She gives the soft smile she saves only for our sweet girl. “It will really feel like home once she’s there with us.” The

corners of her lips tilt up further. “I hope you’re ready for a different type of midnight cuddles.”

I laugh with her. “Guess we’re gonna have to start putting clothes back on before we fall asleep.”

My fingers itch at the picture that paints in my head. I’ve never wanted Romano dead and buried more than this moment so I can make this dream a reality.

Landing on a private airstrip is vastly different from going to an airport. As soon as the plane stops moving, we’re given the all clear from the flight attendant to start deboarding. I grab mine and Scarlett’s stuff, making her roll her eyes as she leads us off the plane. I catch Rachel’s huff of amusement as Ryder does the same with her. We might be psychos, but we’re still gentlemen.

As we descend the steps, my eyes land on Tyler and the young kid standing next to him. Is that really his contact? He can’t be older than nineteen, maybe twenty years old. We get closer and something about him pulls on a distant memory and he looks vaguely familiar, but I can’t place him. He’s tall, just an inch or two shy of Tyler’s height, but where Ty is as broad as he is tall, this guy is lean. Similar to Noah’s build without any of Noah’s softness.

There’s an edge to the kid. Something hard in the glint of his blue eyes and written in the long lines of his body and tense posture. He’s no regular teen, that’s for sure. From the car he leans against, to his clothes, to his attitude, I know one thing for sure. The kid comes from money. Old money. He must feel my eyes on him, but all he does is give me a sardonic look, before turning his attention to Scarlett.

He stands up straight as we stop in front of them. I nod to Tyler as Scarlett just gives him a grin. Luca stands at her other side, Noah directly behind her. Kade and Ryder flank his sides, two steps back with Rachel between them and Joe and Holden flank the rear. Kade’s and my positions are usually flipped, but he fell back easily when he noticed me checking the kid out. I know it’s just a matter of time before I place him.

“Boss.” Tyler nods to Scarlett, only somewhat teasing with the way he addresses her, before gesturing to each of us as he introduces us. “Ash, this is Scar Everhart, Luca Cole, Declan James, Noah Frazier, Kade Meyers, Rachel Caruso, Ryder Keating, and in the back are Holden Ingram and Joe Lambert.”

His blue eyes trails over all of us. I didn’t miss the recognition in his eyes at some of our names, mine especially, or the surprise he didn’t bother to hide at Rachel’s. “You’re a big crew,” he says with no inflection.

Kade snorts. “You should see who was left back home.”

Tyler ignores Kade, though he does have a point. For once. “Crew, this is Asher Donovan.”

Donovan.

I arch a brow and tension lines the kid’s shoulders. “Everyone knows you can’t trust a Donovan.” It comes out almost as a reflex. It’s something that was drilled into me. At least now I know why I recognized him. My tone may not have been accusatory, but that doesn’t stop Luca from yanking Scarlett behind him at my words.

Weren’t the Donovans the very reason Tyler was sent here in the first place?

The kid watches, but barely reacts. “At least I know you’re not stupid.”

Yeah, there’s obviously no love lost there. Can’t say I blame him. Appears we’ve found another like us. I can’t help but smile at the cheeky little shit. I know exactly what that attitude is born from. A shitty fucking life. Apparently Luca doesn’t feel the same.

“Watch your mouth,” he growls. “We don’t stand for disrespect. I’ve killed for less.”

Aww, he does love me. I trade knowing looks with Scarlett and she grins behind his back.

Asher barely even blinks at the threat, making my grin grow wider. I can already tell I’m going to like this kid. Especially when he just shrugs. “I remember when my father

tried to kill me.” Scarlett’s brows raise in intrigue. “Didn’t work out so well for him,” he finishes.

I have to hold back my laugh at how casually he throws it out there, but fail when Scarlett peeks her head around Luca’s broad back and exclaims, “Twins!” I’m not the only one who chuckles at the absurdity of her excitement.

Luca tilts his head in confusion as he watches the kid, no doubt having thought he would have been easy to intimidate because of his age.

Tyler shakes his head and bumps his shoulder against Asher’s. “We’re never going to stop hearing about you surviving a bullet to the chest. Are we?”

As soon as the words are out of his mouth I already know what’s going to happen next. Sure enough, Scarlett steps around Luca, putting herself between the two of us again. I put my face in my hands and shake my head at her as she says, “We really are twins.” Pure delight coating every word. “Let’s see yours then.”

I sigh, knowing there’s no stopping this odd exchange. Luca tenses on the side of our girl, and Asher regards her carefully before smirking and lifting his shirt to show off the scar that runs down most of his abdomen. A scar that looks all too familiar.

Scarlett steps up to him and runs her fingers over the mottled flesh, not that Asher seems to care. Tyler watches him, surprise flickering across his features and I get the feeling the kid isn’t one to allow many people to touch him.

My pretty girl rolls her eyes as she steps away. “Pussy shit,” she teases and I catch a brief glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Don’t even think about it, Letty,” Luca curses, but it’s too late and she’s already pulling up her shirt to show off her scars as she completely ignores him. I hear Kade also cursing behind me while Noah and Ry just chuckle. She has to remove the blade that always sits snugly between her tits, and pulls off

the holster that holds several more blades and one of her guns and hands it to me.

Her fingers dance over the scar that starts on her sternum. “My momma gave me this one,” she tells Asher and his eyes dance with curiosity. “But this one,” she says, tracing the scar that covers her stomach. “This one is from my Daddy.” She infuses her voice with a soft southern charm and it makes me want to gag. It’s all too reminiscent of our pasts.

Asher’s fingers reach out to feel her scars the way she did his and I start to laugh. Oh, this is going to be good.

Kade’s arms wrap around her as he pulls her away. “Touch her and I will sever that hand from your body,” he threatens. It amazes me that he ever once was able to hold back from murdering every dude that Scarlett hooked up with before they were official.

She slaps his hands away and moves to stand on her own two feet again, throwing him a dirty look. “He’s a child, Kade,” she snaps, grabbing the weapons she tossed at me to restrap them on.

His eyes narrow at her choice of words, but must decide not to snark to her, instead changing the subject. “As soon as Tyler called, I knew we had your guy.”

Scarlett’s entire posture changes and we all follow suit, snapping to attention as we focus on the shift in conversation.

“We had a body show up this week. Turns out he disrespected the Italians and they were quick to make a mess. Problem was, no one knew where the guy had turned up from. We don’t like unknowns in this town, so we were already looking into it. There are more than a couple houses left empty after the,” he hesitates, trying to find the right word to use. “Cleansing my friend gave the town,” he finishes with a smirk, pride and affection clear in his tone.

Scarlett nods along with his words, no doubt knowing more about this town than the rest of us do. She wouldn’t have sent one of our own without knowing every last detail. “Atkins was a part of that.”

He nods. “We hadn’t realized the estate had sold. It was all very quiet and quite frankly, we hadn’t given a damn about what happened to it.”

“It was never listed. Just bought silently from a shell corporation and left to sit empty until now,” Scarlett explains. Noah and Charles had been able to find it from going through the financial records of CGK. It had been an educated guess that it would lead us to Romano, but it wasn’t until we got confirmation from Tyler that we knew for sure. Everything else in that company’s files had to do with Scarlett, so it only made sense this purchase did as well.

“The good news is, we’ve been there before and we still have the plans and blueprints. Getting you in and out will be a piece of cake.” He scoffs slightly, “Of all the places to buy in Black Hallows, they really went for the one that had already been compromised.” His face falls as the words slip out and his features harden in contemplation.

Scarlett’s brows lift, reading his thoughts perfectly. “You can come with us and while we have our fun, you can scope out anything that may have made the place special.”

He nods his thanks, checking his watch. “Some of the others are going to meet us at my place. I have everything there we’ll need to finalize a plan and gear up.”

Luca steps away to instruct the staff unloading the plane while the rest of us split up and pile into the two cars. Scarlett leads us straight to Asher’s car, climbing into the front seat. We exchange looks and sigh. She looks over at us and sticks out her tongue as we slide open the door. She can be such a brat. Noah and Ryder take the back row, while I take the middle row and leave the first row for Kade and Luca. It’s a huge car, but still a tight fit for the guys sitting next to each other.

Rachel, Holden, and Joe will have a much more comfortable ride with Tyler, but it wasn’t like any of us were willing to leave Scarlett’s side.

Asher climbs into the driver’s seat and stares at all of us in the back before turning to glance at Scarlett, happy as a clam

in the front seat. “Now I know why Tyler insisted I drive the Sprinter,” he mumbles.

Luca comes around and walks to the front seat before spotting Scarlett. “Dammit, Letty,” he growls before giving up and climbing in next to Kade and slamming the door behind him.

As soon as Asher starts to drive, Scarlett turns to him. “Tell me more about the last time you went to the Atkins’ estate.”

His fingers tap against the steering wheel as he begins to answer her. “It’s a large piece of property, but surprisingly not all that difficult to get in. Arrogance can be a person’s downfall, after all. There’s an iron-wrought front gate, only opened by the guard tower. No pin code. Cameras line the street and driveway so going that way will give them warning to our arrival. But there should be no cameras at the back of the property. There wasn’t last time.”

She turns back to meet Noah’s eyes. “There’s been no money spent on the house other than to purchase and for a deep clean shown in the accounts,” he answers her silent question.

Asher hums his acknowledgement. “Any real work on the house wouldn’t have gone unnoticed. They’ve been keeping real quiet since they got here.” He turns off the highway and into a residential area. “There’s a wall that encloses the back part of his property line. That’s how Elle, my friend,” he stops to explain but Scarlett waves him on. “I’m familiar with who Elle King is.”

His brows furrow as he turns to look at her. “That’s how she and the others got in last time. Climbed over the wall and walked right through the back patio. The doors weren’t even closed the last time.”

Kade leans up and sticks his head between the two front seats, assessing Asher. “And how did you get in?”

Asher pulls the van into an underground parking lot of an impressive building and pulls into a designated space next to

an elevator.

“I went through the front door,” he answers with a cocky grin as he shuts off the van and jumps out of the seat.

As we all climb out, Kade gives him an appraising look. “You’re not so bad for a kid.”

I roll my lips as I watch Asher’s eyes narrow yet again at the word choice. This time though, he doesn’t hold back. “Call me a kid again and I’ll choke you with your intestines.”

The threat only makes the dopey grin on Kade’s face grow wider.

Scarlett beams at him. “Aww, you’re adorable,” she praises. And though it should sound condescending, it somehow doesn’t feel that way. Asher drops his glare as a blush rises on his cheeks, making Scarlett smile again.

Ryder nudges Noah, scoffing. “They really are twins. I’ve seen her do that.”

She turns to flip him off. “I didn’t choke him with his intestines,” she defends, looking to Asher. “Play with a guy’s intestines one time and all of a sudden you’re a psychopath.” The corner of his lips twitch as he leads us into the private elevator that takes us to the top floor.

“It’s definitely happened more than one time,” Kade whispers as the doors open to lead us straight into the penthouse.

She rolls her eyes and follows Asher to where we can get serious and actually plan this mission out. He checks his watch again and looks straight to Scarlett and says, “Elle and her friend, Linc, will be here any minute now. She’ll want to know what the plan is. Having to clean up after the Italians has made her even less trusting of others in her town.”

Scarlett rolls her lips and I know she’s holding back from calling him adorable again. “Don’t worry about the cleanup. We’ve got that covered.” The elevator door opens again and Tyler leads in Rachel, Joe, and Holden. Rachel detaches from the guys and moves to Scarlett’s side, her earlier jitters clearly returning.

Asher observes her. “How do you feel about explosives? I might know a guy who could take care of it.”

Of course he does. They’ve got their whole own little crew down here.

Scarlett shrugs. “Why not? Less work for us.”

“I keep liking him more and more,” Kade faux whispers to Ryder.

As the two begin to insult each other back and forth, Rachel creeps closer to Scarlett’s side. The adrenaline of what’s to come is getting to her, but based on the grief in her eyes, I think she’s missing Alec more than ever.

The air is knocked from my lungs as I picture what her last moments with Alec must have looked like. They were all together, no doubt razzing each other just like we all are now. I’m not the only one who notices as Scarlett reaches out and grips her hand in hers and squeezes. Asher clocks the action, but doesn’t comment on it. Thank fuck. I’m not sure how Rachel would react if he did.

Before anything gets out of hand, Asher pulls out the blueprints of the mansion we’ll be visiting shortly. Scarlett and he start to scour over it, noting down the height of the wall, number of doors and windows.

Scarlett looks down at Rachel’s feet and smirks. “Gonna have to ditch the heels for once.”

Rachel hesitates for only a second before pushing the sadness away and scoffs. “You really think I couldn’t scale that wall in my Louboutins?”

“I mean, do you want to?” She raises her brow in question and I have to agree with her on this one.

“Probably not,” Rachel concedes. “But I definitely could.”

“I like her,” a new voice says as a girl with blonde hair walks into the room. She must be about the same age as Asher and I assume this must be the Elle King they mentioned in the car. Behind her is another kid. Does everyone in this town have light features? His hair isn’t as blonde as Asher’s or

Elle's, but it's not brown either. Sharp green eyes are partially hidden behind his glasses, but I can see the intellect in them as his heavy gaze weighs on each one of us. Never thought we would find such an interesting group of kids here.

Both women turn towards the newcomer and appraise her silently, sharing an intrigued look. Scarlett drops her gaze to the knife openly strapped on Elle's thigh. She nods, a small smile playing on her lips. "I like your knife," she says in greeting.

Elle takes a moment, studying Scarlett back, before she responds slowly, "You can't go anywhere in this town unarmed." It's less of an explanation and more of a warning as she looks for Scarlett's weapons and comes up empty.

Scarlett clicks her tongue. "You can't go *anywhere* unarmed," she corrects, lifting the sleeve of her jacket to show the blade strapped to her bicep.

Asher looks back and forth between the two of them. "Don't worry, Hells Bells, she's got more weapons hidden on her than even you do." His tone makes it clear how much he appreciates that fact. It's hard not to roll my eyes at the mini psychos. Who would have guessed we'd find a matching set to our crazy here?

The other boy who followed Elle in adjusts his glasses as he stares at Asher dumbfounded. "How would you know?"

Asher's features morph into a bland expression as he gives his attention to him. "How else? I saw them when she took her shirt off."

His mouth drops open in shock and I struggle to stifle a snort. Asher has no idea how his friend just took that comment, and based on the tension radiating off of him, I don't feel the need to correct his assumptions either. It's been a long time since I've been this entertained.

My girl, on the other hand, is completely oblivious as her, Rachel, and Elle have huddled in the corner to show off their weapons to each other.

Noah chuckles as he gestures to them. “It’s like there are two Scars.”

“I know, isn’t it great?” Ryder grins.

Luca runs his hand over his face in exasperation. “Just what the world needs. God help us.”

Joe walks up behind Luca and pats him on the shoulder. “You already know Jade is well on her way to being a mini Scar. And do not get me wrong, I love the little girl something fierce, but if Roe’s made of sugar, they doubled the amount of spice. She’s gonna be more like her momma than you think. We need more than the lord’s help.”

Elle’s ears perk up as she turns to him. “There are more of you?”

Tyler snorts. “This is only like half of us.”

She narrows her gaze at him. “You’ve been holding out on us, Ty.”

He shrugs her off. “You never asked about back home. Just how I knew Max.”

She huffs but turns her attention back to Joe. “So this Jade,” she starts, and Scarlett and Rachel both immediately tense. Still very protective over her. “She has a kid? A daughter?”

Both women relax and I’m not the only one who laughs. “Jade is in training,” Scarlett explains. “Roe is my daughter.”

Elle beams at her, even brighter than when they were talking about their weapons. “How old is she?”

Asher watches with a soft smile. It throws even me for a loop as I study him. I could tell Scarlett was drawing unusual reactions from him, but his expression doesn’t fit with the image I have of him.

“She’s five,” Scarlett shares, her features softening in the way only Roe can make them. I blink as I stare between the three of them.

Elle and Asher trade looks and he gives her a slight nod. I already know what's coming even before she opens her mouth and I shoot a warning look to the other guys. Especially Kade and Ryder who aren't exactly known for their filters.

"Ash and I have a baby girl the same age," Elle says excitedly. "When this is all over, we should get them together."

Holden chuckles. "Only if you're willing for her three sidekicks to tag along."

She shrugs. "Cassie likes friends. She could use more."

Asher shakes his head at her. "We need to finish this first," he reminds her, bringing us back to the topic at hand.

He hands over the blueprints to an old mansion to Scarlett and she immediately begins pouring over them. "This is the wall you mentioned?" she asks, dragging her finger over a line in the back of the property.

"It wasn't a hard climb," Elle adds, pointedly looking at Rachel's heels with a smirk. "Though it would be easier without those."

Rachel waves her off, taking in the mansion in front of her. "This almost seems too easy," she notes.

"Except it took us weeks to locate him," I remind her. "They have no way of knowing we have contacts here. Ty has been flying under their radar. It was part of the reason he was the one sent here. Without the help, we would have needed at least another week to survey, get our hands on this, and finalize plans." After everything we've been through, it finally feels like luck is on our side.

"We don't think it's a trap?" Luca asks. "It was Charles who led us here after all."

I can feel a headache beginning to creep up again, already knowing how she's going to react. She flips him off. "Already been over this."

Him and Kade both grumble but sulk in the corner.

Elle watches them carefully before speaking directly to Scarlett. "We've had our eyes on the place since that body

turned up. There's been nothing to indicate this being an ambush."

Scarlett weighs her words before shrugging. "An ambush might make it more fun." I'm not the only one who groans at her words.

On the other end of the spectrum, Elle seems absolutely delighted by them. "Need any backup?"

Scarlett looks around the room, obviously thinking about taking her up on her offer. It's enough to tell me just how much she's taken to this girl. She may be young, but she's obviously fierce.

"Nah, this little psycho is more than enough backup," she decides, pointing to Asher, who once again blushes at her words.

The quiet one, Linc I think I might have heard someone call him, drops his mouth open again in shock as he tracks the heat rising on Asher's face. He near silently whispers, "What the fuck?" before pulling out his phone and snaps a somewhat discreet picture before rapidly tapping away on it.

We definitely have to come back to this town. Maybe with popcorn next time.

Elle nods, wearing a smug smile as she grabs Linc's arm and begins to pull him out of the room. "Call us if you need us. Happy hunting." She winks at Scarlett.

"Send Jace for his favorite type of clean up," Asher calls out before she leaves.

She arches a brow. "You're blowing it up?"

"Why not?" he answers with a shrug.

I chuckle wryly. These kids are a hoot. We definitely need to come back to this town.



Chapter Fifteen Scar

TIGHTENING the straps of my backpack, I stare up at the wall. They weren't wrong, should be a piece of cake to get over.

Now it's just a matter of what's waiting for us on the other side. I check my watch and wait for Joe to give us the all-clear from the van where he's watching a live feed from a drone. Elle wasn't exaggerating when she said they had eyes on the place before we got here. Asher handed over not only the blueprints but surveillance notes. They were almost as good as my own, including the number of guards, their rotations, and the routes they take around the perimeter with approximate times. It was more than I could have expected to have going into such a last minute mission.

It isn't like us at all to rush into something like this, but after weeks of sitting on our hands, none of us have enough sanity left for caution. We're now putting our fate in the hands of karma and hoping these connections have pulled through for us.

I'm already rather fond of these kids. I don't see a reason to doubt their skills after everything they've already pulled off in this town. I watch Ash out of the corner of my eye, but he doesn't seem fazed or jittery at all. He really does fit right in with us.

I trade looks with Kade when I notice him also watching the kid, a sly grin on his face. "Just like old times," he mouths

to me as we wait. I shake my head, but he isn't wrong. It does feel a bit like old times, the two of us scaling walls and waiting for an all-clear signal. The only difference is I never used to have a tsunami rushing through me on our old runs. A calm would always wash over me any time I knew I was about to have blood on my hands.

Not today. I have to force down the churning in my gut and push the anxiety and excitement away in order to stay sharp. I focus on the plan again. Simple but effective. Divide and conquer.

"Team one, clear," Joe's low, rumbling voice sounds in my ear and I breathe a sigh of relief. Here we go. We hold our position and I close my eyes to imagine Luca, Noah, Ryder, and Rachel getting over the east end of the wall.

"Heard," Luca responds. Only moments later adding, "We're in. No sign of guards. Holding position."

"Guards turning the west corner, team two is clear to move." Both Kade and Asher nod for me to go first. A grin is my only acknowledgement before tackling the wall and dropping silently on my feet on the other side.

"Heard," Kade says, a huff in his voice. I wait for him and Ash to make it over the wall and land at my sides.

"All in, still clear," I finish.

From here we can't see Luca and the others, nor will we be able to see the last group with Holden, Ty, and Declan. We will follow the same route Elle and her crew took, directly through the back patio while Luca's team should have split off with him and Rachel moving to the front to dispatch the guards before coming in through the front doors. The remaining teams will use their respective side entrances to clear out the guards and isolate Romano.

"Guards are back to posts by the front gate," Joe informs us. "Team three is clear to move."

"Heard," Declan answers. In the same pattern as before, it's only a few minutes before he adds, "We're in and clear. Holding position."

“In position,” Luca answers as soon as the final team has made it over the wall.

I hold my breath as we hear a guard call out, close enough for the mic to pick up clearly, followed by the sounds of a struggle and gurgled words.

“Two down,” Rachel says, far too chirpily.

Joe rumbles a deep laugh. “Clean kill, girly.” The pride in his voice unmistakable and I wonder if it soothes some of her past hurt from her neglectful father the way it always does mine. “All teams clear to move in,” he adds, amusement still coloring his tone.

Silence follows as we all drop the antics and focus on moving in as silently and stealthily as possible. I’m impressed with the way Asher matches Kade and I stride for stride, never making any more noise than we would. I knew I didn’t have to worry about inviting him to join us.

We reach the back doors and don’t even need to utilize Kade’s skillset to get in, opening the door easily. I motion for them both to stay close, eyeing Asher a beat longer to emphasize my point. He doesn’t seem the type to take directions from just anyone, but I don’t care if this is his town, it’s my mission. He nods his head in acquiescence. I believe him, even if it was a bit reluctantly he did so.

We know the floor plan, but no way to know where the guards will be within the house or where Romano currently is. It was the biggest reason why we decided to attack the house from every angle in order to ensure the least amount of damage to us, while being sure Romano had no chance to slip out of our grasp.

We move on silent feet as we move through the back of the mansion. The first two rooms we pass through are empty, but just as we’re about to exit the second room into a long hallway, voices rise. I hold my hand up and all three of us pause. Kade flattens himself against the wall behind me, as Asher does the same on the opposite side of the frame. Dropping to my knees, I hold my breath as I listen for the footsteps and different timbres of voice coming down the

hallway. I hold up two fingers to indicate how many guards there are. Asher acknowledges me with a nod while Kade presses a hand firmly to my back.

They're coming down the hallways from our side, meaning Asher will be the first to lay eyes on them. I stay in my crouched position, watching his eyes for the moment they enter his line of sight. His eyes harden and his lips quirk up in half a smile, and he takes several steps back to stay hidden. Giving me the perfect amount of notice before two bodies are passing the doorway.

Both guards are oblivious to our presence as they focus on the conversation between the two of them. Idiots. I guess we shouldn't really be surprised. It isn't like Donahue was going to waste his best men on protecting someone he isn't even sure is worth keeping alive.

As soon as they pass the open doorway, I launch myself from the ground and wrap my arm around the neck of the guard that was further away and cling to his back. I expected Kade to be only half a step behind me, to silence the other one, but huff a chuckle as I find Asher's blade in his throat instead. The guard under me struggles and Ash raises a brow where my feet dangle. I shrug, well as much as I can, as I put the majority of my strength into choking out the beefy guard as he tries his best to dislodge me.

A laugh eddies up through me as Asher knees him in the nuts, making him drop his knees. I land on my feet, and release the chokehold only to snap his neck instead, now that I have the momentum and balance to pull it off.

Kade studies him but before he can say anything Asher begins ticking off his fingers. "It was faster than him slowly suffocating. And two, I took care of the other one so you'd stop babying me."

"Fair enough," Kade concedes and the three of us begin to move in unison again.

We kill three more guards before running into Luca and Rachel at the designated meeting spot just behind the stairs that lead to the upper floors. Still no sign of Romano. It's only

a few more minutes before the other teams reach us as well, both Declan and Ryder shaking their heads. I shouldn't be surprised, they would have said something through the coms had anyone found Romano, but an antsy feeling slithers down my spine at not having my hands on him yet.

I force myself to remain calm as each team discloses how many guards they ran into, bringing the total of dead guards to thirteen. There should only be two guards and Romano left. I check the time, but no one else should be arriving until tomorrow morning for a shift change. Joe is parked down the street but between the drone and his vantage point, he will be able to warn us with plenty of time of any unexpected visitors.

Trying to get all of us up the stairs without drawing attention is another matter altogether. Even as quiet as we all are, that's a big feat considering just how many of us there are. I gesture for Noah, Tyler, Declan, Ryder, Holden, and Asher to stay here. None of them seem happy, but at least no one gives me lip. We need someone to stay down here to watch our back and block the exits and the two guards left should be a piece of cake if we can just make it to the top of the stairs.

Ryder and Tyler follow the rest of us to the base of the stairs, their weapons drawn and ready to cover our backs as we make our way up. The others fan out around the bottom of the stairs, their eyes trained at the top.

I meet Luca's eyes and nod to Rachel. He grimaces but agrees, he'll have her back, even if it means not being able to focus entirely on me. As we climb the stairs, all four of us stay in a single file line, hugging the wall and taking each step carefully, weapons held against our thighs. Ready to use, but only as a last resort. We don't want Romano to know we're coming. Let him have a few more moments of delusional peace.

We make it to the top without incident, much better than the gun fight that was happening in my mind's eye as a worst case scenario. Luca and Rachel take the left, while Kade and I begin to move towards the right. We clear each room as we go, but don't find anyone. With each step, the tension ratchets higher and I become more and more sure that he must either

be in the office or master bedroom. I can see both doors from here, but both are closed.

Kade and I edge our way towards the office door. We pause and I press my ear against the door and hear the low rumble of conversation. At least two people are behind these doors. I hesitate, waiting to confirm all three are in there before kicking down the door. It takes a few minutes but I finally hear the familiar drawl of Romano. I crack my neck and grin savagely at Kade.

I click the safety on my gun off and raise it in my hands. Kade follows suit before sending the door crashing open. We lift our weapons at the same time. I barely spare a glance for where Romano sits behind his desk, a laptop in front of him. My focus immediately lands on the two guards, one standing at either side of him.

I've fired off my shot and hit the guard on the right between the eyes, before he ever had a chance to yell, let alone pull his weapon. The other guard drops only a moment later and both Kade and I lower our weapons to Romano's shocked form before he's even processed his last two guards are dead.

"Did you really think you could hide from me?" My heart races as elation fills me as his mouth drops open and he desperately begins to scramble. Kade moves swiftly to his side, pressing the gun to his temple and Romano freezes. I can't help the chuckle that escapes at finally having him in my grasp, under my thumb, completely at my will. My hands shake from the influx of emotions in a way I've never experienced before.

Luca and Rachel appear in the doorway and Luca immediately moves to Kade's side to pull Romano's arms behind his back. Kade holds him in place as Luca searches his body and pulls a few weapons off his person and tosses them on the desk in front of him. With them he also tosses a phone, a wallet, and a small journal down.

"Asher, you're free to begin your search. Ty and Holden, stay put and keep watch. Make sure to have his back." They both grumble at not being able to watch but it dies down

quickly. “The rest of you can head up to the office, we have him bound and secured.” Even I can hear the slight manic edge my voice has taken but no one calls me out on it, even if I do hear a few chuckles.

“Still clear from out here,” Joe adds. “Another kid is here, said Asher sent for him. If he needs more backup I can send him in.”

“Tell him to stay put,” Asher practically growls, making me snort. “He’s only here for cleanup.”

“Got it,” Joe responds, laughter in his tone.

Kade and Luca have gotten Romano perfectly situated in the middle of the room as everyone else gets settled. As soon as Declan, Ryder, and Noah make their way into the room, we’re all ready to go.

Rachel drops her bag with a loud thunk as it hits the floor in front of Romano’s bound feet. Her face is still heavily lined with grief, but at the moment, it’s almost untraceable. A mere shadow that only serves to contrast the brilliant glow of her finally getting her vengeance.

“What do you have in there?” I tease her, excited to see how she works up close and personal. It was an easy decision to let Rachel take the lead here. She needs this more than any of us. He may have answers for me, maybe the missing piece I’ve needed all these years, but he stole something irreplaceable from her. Her wound is fresh, still aching and bleeding. There’s been no time for it to wear down into a scar, to heal enough to not still steal the air out of her lungs every morning when she remembers Alec is gone.

“You’ll see,” she promises, a wicked glint in her brown eyes.

The guys span out around the room, knowing exactly what is needed from them. Silent support. We’ll take our cues from Rachel.

I click my tongue as I watch her preparing. “He likes to pull out teeth when he tortures people,” I tell her conversationally.

“Oh yeah?”

I hum as I nod, even though she isn't looking at me. “Tried it once,” I admit. “When I was killing that senator and framing him.” I shrug as I remember that kill. It wasn't as sweet as this one will be. “It was kind of fun. Messy though, not as satisfying as I thought it would be. I probably wouldn't do it again but it was worth trying.” Romano pales behind the gag and I can't help but smile over that reaction.

We always knew he was going to be easier to break than William. Romano never expected to be in a position like this. If he was smart, he would have killed himself before we ever got our hands on him. But he's too much of a coward for that. Always having other people do his dirty work, never really getting his hands dirty. I'm not even sure if he knows how.

Cunning. Ruthless. Greedy. A businessman. Those are the things that made him successful. Not his strength or loyalty or bravery. No, he doesn't have any of the things you really need to be able to keep your mouth shut when under torture. He'll be easy to break.

“I think I'm going to pass on that,” Rachel answers lightly.

Declan stands directly behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders and squeezing gently. Instinctively, I lean into his touch, resting against his chest and allowing him to encase me in his arms.

A sigh escapes, just loud enough for him to hear. The abundance of energy that's been ravaging through me settles just a little bit in his arms. Just enough for me to think clearly again. To feel more in control. We're too close for me to forget who I am. Who I've forged myself into. I don't lose control. I can't afford to change that here. Not when answers are so close.

Who raped me?

Who tortured me?

Who ruined my life?

How did they know to go after the club?

Why did Alec have to die?

Romano knows all that and more. We just need to pry the answers out of him. Good thing, we can have so much fun while doing that.

Rachel leans down and pulls something long and slender from her bag. It takes me a moment to realize it's a cattle prod. She brandishes it in front of him, letting him get a good look before she stabs the prongs against his neck. His body convulses under her touch as the voltage shocks through his system.

"I'm more of a minimal effort, maximum impact, kind of girl." Her smirk is full of savagery and vengeance. She looks powerful as she stands over him, hitting him again with the prod before he's even stopped trembling from the first shock.

Ryder whistles as he watches her go at him again and again in the same spot. Moving away briefly before hitting him again back where she started. The acrid smell of urine burns through the air. Now we're getting somewhere.

Romano's face flushes red as tears and sweat pour down his face. He pants heavily, struggling to catch his breath as she backs away.

"I think he might be ready to answer some questions. What do you think?" Rachel asks.

I push away from Declan as I move to stand by her side and he lets me go, his arms falling back down to his sides. "Did you know we were going to attack the auction?"

"Of course not, you stupid bitch," he pants, the words coming out thready. "You ruined everything with that stunt. If I knew I would have put a bullet between-" His words are harshly cut off in a scream as Rachel hits him again with the prod. This time in the dick.

"We don't need a fucking monologue," she hisses. "Did you know? Yes or fucking no?"

He shakes his head rapidly.

We trade looks and I see my own thoughts reflected in her eyes. If he knew it was going to happen, he would have stopped it before we had a chance to pull it off. It wouldn't have gone off as perfectly as it did had he had any inkling.

Rachel crosses her arms in front of her chest, as she studies Romano. He shifts uncomfortably in the chair, but is tied too tightly to really achieve much movement. Sweat drips down his forehead and into his eyes, making him squint as he tries to meet my eyes.

“Where were you that day?” Rachel asks, lifting the prod, but holding off on using it.

He sucks in air, fear palpable in the air around him. “Why does it matter?” Wrong answer. I grin, knowing what's coming without Rachel ever having to make a move. His shriek of pain is music to my ears as she hits him with the prod again.

“Want to try again?” I taunt him.

A different kind of pain enters his eyes. “I was looking for Ciar.”

I can't help but laugh. “You found him, alright.” His gaze hardens on mine and he begins shaking the seat as he fights to be freed from his restraints. No doubt to wrap his hands around my throat and squeeze the life out of me.

Rachel shuts him up with that nifty little tool of hers. I should really consider adding something similar to my own arsenal. I watch with a sick satisfaction as his body twitches and convulses in his restraints.

“So where exactly were you before you found him?”

He grits his teeth as he stares me down. “The warehouse district.”

Rachel and I trade looks. There's nowhere near Unbidden Desires. How exactly does it all tie back to there?

“What did you do when you found out the auction had gone up in flames?” I push.

“I went back to my hotel,” he sputters. “Found Ciar where you left him and left town.”

I tap my fingers along the arm of the chair Romano's strapped in. "You didn't seem too concerned about your son when you abandoned his body there." I point out. "Seemed to care only about yourself as you tucked tail and ran for the hills." I turn my attention to Rachel and give her a subtle nod before backing away from him.

Rachel starts back up with her prod and I turn my back to focus on Declan again. We can let her get some of her rage and aggression out, get her pound of flesh before we try and dive back in for more answers. Maybe after that, he won't have so much to say. Maybe he'll stick to just the answers we're wanting from him.

She takes her time, adding in new methods every once in a while to keep Romano from figuring out a pattern. The smell of burning flesh fills my nose and I finally pull away from Declan once more. He isn't giving us anything useful. Nothing that would indicate how he knew to attack the club, or even that he did attack it. Rachel has asked every question we could think of. Danced around the topic in an attempt to trip him up, but nothing. He's giving us nothing.

Still, I was right. He's too weak to be holding up this well under torture. He's a sniveling, sobbing, coward. He isn't giving us answers, not out of some righteous last fight, or even out of loyalty to someone else. No. He's not answering because he doesn't have the answers we want.

Rachel's moves become less precise with every blow. Her agitation gets the better of her as she rears back and uses the prod to smack him across the face. His head snaps back, blood and spit flying in an arc across the room.

I cross my arms in front of my chest, watching his chest heave as his head drops back in front of him. Time to stop beating around the bush. "What's your connection to Unbidden Desires?" My eyes stay locked on him, watching, waiting, needing to see how he reacts to the question.

He keeps his head bowed, but it's just enough that I can still see his emotions flicker across his face. A furrowed brow,

a momentary pause, a slow smile that spreads across his beaten face before a maniacal, bloody cough wracks his body.

“You want to know about the explosion.” He doesn’t say it as a question, he already knows that’s what we’re after. But I have my answer. I search out the eyes of first Luca and then Declan, they have more experience with men like Romano than anyone else. I see my conclusion reflected back in their eyes. Rachel is just too emotional to see it. “There were lots of reasons to blow that place up,” he says smugly, the blood dribbling from his mouth detracting from his sense of a win. “Hearing it took out one of your own was just a cherry on top.”

His laugh is caustic, grating on the very edge of my nerves. There’s nothing more I’d like to do than silence him once and for all, but we aren’t done. Not yet.

His glare lands on Rachel where she’s firing up a brand, turning the metal that red hot color that glows. His smile never falters, his words the only weapons he has available to him now. “I couldn’t have planned a better hit on the legendary Snow Queen if I tried to.” He coughs, but Rachel doesn’t falter. “But I was never your enemy, Rachel.” His eyes dart to her side, where they land on me. “Maybe you should be looking a little closer to home.”

Her torch goes out, and Ryder quickly grabs it from her before she can drop it. Rachel smirks, ignoring his words as she presses the brand into his chest, right into the tender flesh over his heart. His screams make my ears ring and the burning scent makes my stomach turn, but Rachel holds steadfast, pressing the brand into him even harder as he fights to separate himself from it. She pulls back, leaving a perfect rose in the brand’s place.

“That new?” I ask her.

She gives me a small grin. “Thought it fit.”

I nod in agreement. It most certainly does. She takes a step closer to me, and I grip her arm to pull her into my side. I whisper into her ear that I think it’s time to change lines of questioning. It’s clear he’s trying to plant seeds of doubt in

Rachel's head about us. I'm not worried about her regretting her choice to trust us. We're far too past that point now. But he's given us everything he can on Alec. The attack on Unbidden Desires wasn't done in retaliation for the auction. Now that I know that, I'll get the rest of the answers on my own.

Her eyes are still filled with pain as she studies me, hesitating. She doesn't want to be done yet. I shrug and gesture for her to continue. Allowing her to continue being the one to question him should keep Romano from guessing what else we're truly after.

I turn my back to him, dismissing him for what he will soon be—irrelevant. Forgotten. Moving behind the desk he was sitting at when we first walked in, I kick the dead guard's body out of my way as I settle behind his computer to take a look at what he was doing.

After a few minutes, it's easy to tune out the cries and whimpers as Rachel has her fun. When she gets to the real questions I'll start paying attention again. Right now, all she's doing is laying the foundation.

Clicking through the tabs he had open, I don't find anything of immediate interest. Some email correspondence between him and Donahue. Not entirely surprising. They've always been far too blasé about their security. That is what got us into this entire mess after all. Leaving evidence so easily accessible. Turns out they haven't learned much.

Even after reading through several of their emails, there's no new information. Nothing at all that interests me. Just a bunch of complaints and whining. I'm almost surprised Donahue hasn't already killed Romano based on these emails alone. Demanding little thing.

Noah takes over going through his files as I begin to get bored. Antsy. Patience has never been a huge struggle for me, but all of a sudden everything is taking too damn long. I want answers. I want them now.

Rachel is dragging useful information out of him about his gun trades and work with the Alvarados. A flicker of pride

momentarily eases my frustration. She seems more herself here, taking charge. Asking her own questions that will give her a leg up when she does begin her dealings with them.

She switches gears again and begins to ask about the human side of his trafficking enterprises. He laughs, but it isn't as smug this time. More disbelieving. "Don't tell me the Snow Queen and Little Miss Rose over here are getting into the skin markets."

The very idea repulses me and I shudder where he can't see me. Rachel, however, keeps her cool. At least one of us does. She shrugs. "We have our own reasons for wanting to know." Her smile is pure malice. There's no more sign of cattle prod, seeming to have fully moved on to branding his flesh if the overwhelming smell is anything to go by.

I trail my fingertips over the desk, watching Noah work on his computer when I spot the book we found in Romano's pocket. It's small, dark, and worn. Like it's very old and something that has been touched quite a lot. Shaking my head, I finger through the pages, huffing a breath of annoyance. Names and names and names. So many names. Ones I recognize.

How on brand of him to have a little black book. It's easy to see with just a quick glance that we already have many of these names on the list we've been compiling. I toss it in Noah's direction and am surprised, as well as a little turned on, when he catches it in his hand and gives me a droll look. I grin as I move on to Romano's wallet.

Throwing down several IDs we've already discovered, I roll my eyes. Credit cards, boring. Not very much cash. I pocket it anyways. As I pull it out, I notice some other cards in a slip. Taking them all out, I toss the insurance cards out of the way. How ironic. A coupon? Really?

I freeze.

Black edges over my vision as my fingers tighten over the remaining stack in my fingers. Hallucinating. I have to be hallucinating. I don't remember falling asleep, but there's no

other explanation than being stuck in the middle of a new nightmare.

The smell of smoke rises up in my nose until it's the only thing I can breathe. My lungs tighten as I fight to take a full breath, but my vision blurs. My mind already knows how futile this fight is. Flames lick up my exposed skin and I can feel the blood soaking my clothes. Smell the coppery tang in the air that mixes with ash and something that turns my stomach.

Vodka.

I drop my free hand to the desk, tightening my fist around it. Trying to ground myself back into reality. Shaking my head to clear the haze of my past, I let my eyes wander over the desk once more. A clear crystal glass sits in front of where Romano was sitting. Half full. A clear liquid inside.

All of my focus is on that insidious liquid. It can't be. I don't want to believe it, but I have to check. Raising the glass to my nose, I take a small whiff. My stomach churns, the contents of the breakfast Noah forced me to eat about to make a reappearance.

I don't black out. I'm starkly aware of every moment that happens as I scream a sound so full of hurt and rage and agony, it doesn't even sound human. Glass shatters, raining shards of crystal over the floor as the glass that was just in my hand hits the wall on the opposite side of the room.

Everyone freezes, no one even breathes. Their eyes on me, confusion and worry warring in their heavy gazes as they track me. I'm aware of every step I take towards Romano. The knife I pull from my holster and stick in his gut, twisting it as he squeals. I'm aware of all of it. But I'm in control for exactly none of it.

Instinct, a primal need for revenge has taken over me. Something inside of me finally breaks as I'm forced to face the worst night of my life in full color. Preserved in pristine detail in a handful of polaroid pictures clutched in my hands.

A mad woman, a psychopath, a loose canon, a serial killer. I've been called all that and more, but never have I felt that need inside me more than this moment.

My face is level with Romano's, his eyes so full of pain I almost want to snap my own picture to take as a keepsake. Keep it in my wallet and carry it with me everywhere for the next decade to memorialize the very worst moments of his life. To capture the pain I was able to bring him that couldn't possibly compare to the pain he once brought me.

Always there.

He has been right there in front of us for so many years. I never saw it. Still can't remember it. Can't remember him.

I show him the stack of photos clutched in my hands. There's three or four of them. I know there must have been more at one point, but seeing the very first one was enough to kill the last bit of sanity I had left.

"Let's go down memory lane together," I whisper, my voice rough and unrecognizable even to myself. I show him the first photo that caught my eye, that stopped me in my tracks. The familiar cheer uniform, ripped and bloodied. The tangled mane of blonde hair, streaked with the same blood, fisted by none other than the sick man in front of me. The side of my face is visible, pressed against my father's desk, one eye squeezed shut and my mouth open in a scream I can almost hear. Can feel in my bones. The pain that nearly speared me in half rises to the forefront of my mind as I dig the blade in his gut deeper.

He coughs, blood dribbling from his mouth. The opposite of how he looks in the photo. Standing behind me, one hand on my back, pressing me down to keep me in place, the other in my hair. A look of bliss on his face. Bliss. A stark contrast to the agony of my own young face.

I throw the photo to the ground, an inhuman laugh slipping past my suddenly parched lips. The next one shows what I already knew to be true. A close up that proves that Romano was the one to sodomize me. To tear me open in a whole new way. To cause damage that took nearly a decade to finally even

begin to recover from. A pain far worse than even my virginity that Donahue stole only minutes prior.

The last photo is of just me. Beaten, bloodied, broken on the floor. Eyes closed, looking almost lifeless. I almost laugh. Maybe I do laugh.

“What made it so special you had to keep tokens in your wallet all these years?” I spit out the words, my blade digging through his flesh as I jerk the knife up.

He tries to answer, or at least I think he does. But all that comes out is more blood.

Blood. Blood. Blood.

Everything is coated in blood. All the time.

“Who else was with you that night?” I force the question out through my panting breath. I can barely breathe. The phantom pain rips through me, leaving barely any room to think. “Donahue? Who else?”

Recognition lights in his eyes as they lock on mine. The only part of me that hasn’t changed in all these years.

“Who else was with you the night you raped me?”

His mouth opens once more, but all that comes out is useless sputters. His eyes slowly close and I scream, pulling my knife free from him and stumbling back. My feet slide and strong hands catch me, steadying me back on my feet. I blink as I stare down at the knife in my hand, dripping into a large pool of blood that surrounds Romano’s now lifeless body. I blink again, not comprehending how he could already be dead. Where did all the blood come from?

How can it already be over?

I didn’t get my fucking answers.

I scream again, salt filling my mouth. I don’t understand it. The saltiness that hits my tongue. Shouldn’t it be blood, like every fucking thing else? I use the back of my hand that is still wrapped around the blade to wipe at my face. I feel the blood that smears over my cheek as I do, but as I stare at the back of my hand, I realize I’m crying. For the first time, I notice the

gaping hole in his midsection that goes from his bellybutton to his sternum. Rage like nothing I've ever felt before fills every ounce of my being and I throw myself at him again, sinking my blade into him again and again and again.

It still isn't enough.



Chapter Sixteen Ryder

THERE'S an immediate shift in the room, a moment before all hell breaks loose.

Scar gets this lost look in her eyes and everything goes into slow motion. She doesn't realize it yet, but all eyes are on her as her fingers tighten on whatever she has in her hands. Even Rachel pauses in her work as Scar picks up the discarded glass on the desk and brings it to her nose to smell.

There are no words to describe what happens next. The pain emanating from Scar as she launches first the glass across the room before moving in on Romano. My hands sweat and my heart races as I watch her drive the blade into his stomach.

Nothing about this is like her at all. Scar is always in control, even when she seems her most chaotic, she never releases her tightly wound hold on her control. Now, we know why.

I move forward, and Declan grabs my arm, preventing me from interfering with Scar, but that's not who I'm after. I nudge him off and wrap my arm around Rachel's elbow and slowly pull her out of Scar's vicinity. She's no longer aware of anything but Romano. None of us can know what to expect next.

Rachel turns wide eyes to me. Seeing Scar like this is a shock to all of us, but Rachel especially. She's never seen Scar

even the slightest bit broken, but here she is falling to pieces in front of us. Discarding the last remnants of the girl she once was as evidence of that past is scattered to the ground.

Luca grabs the first two polaroid photos as she discards them and my chest heaves with the pain of knowing what they contain. He doesn't look at them, silently slipping them into his pocket as he keeps his eyes on Scar. There's only three of them. I don't know if she could bear anymore than that.

I'm not sure she can bear the three that she did find.

I meet Luca's eyes, but he looks as helpless as I feel. It feels like that night in the van all over again. It happened so fucking quickly this time. Too fast for any of us to react. And now? Now, it's already too late. She hasn't realized it yet, but Romano is as good as dead.

Scar didn't stop when her blade found its new home in his stomach. She's completely gutted him, hitting probably every vital organ on her way. The raspy wet cough as he sputters to answer her questions makes me think she may have even nicked a lung.

He was too far gone to answer even a single question the moment she dug her blade in.

I can see the moment she realizes he's gone, taking the answers she so desperately craves with him. For a second, I think she's about to drop to the ground and cry but am startled when she jerks back, slipping in the blood. I catch her, tightly gripping her arms and setting her back on her feet. I whisper her name, but there's a fog over her eyes. She isn't focused on me. She isn't focused on any of us. She's still locked in her own world. Staring between the knife in her hand and the wound it created in Romano.

Tears and snot and blood run over her face. I try calling her name again as Kade and Luca step up to pull her out of the rapidly growing puddle of blood. But none of us reach her before she launches herself at his dead body all over again.

I hiss in surprise. Wanting so fucking desperately to be able to help her, but knowing there's not a single thing I can do

for her. She simultaneously got answers and lost the chance to them today. Faced the very worst moments in her life. Unexpectedly.

There's no way to even begin to comprehend what is going through her head right now. She obviously needs to fill the desire to lash out, to hurt him as much as he hurt her. Even if he's gone. It's not like he deserves peace even in his death anyhow.

Even after his body is mutilated beyond recognition and her body shakes with her sobs, she still doesn't react as we call out her name. Real fear pulses through me. What if we can't reach her? What if facing her abuser has shredded the last piece of her. Shattered her all over again.

I want to believe in her. Trust in her strength, but as she falls to pieces in front of me, it's hard to hold onto that. Scar is not the infallible leader we often see her as. She isn't beyond hurt and failure. She's stronger than anyone I know, but no one should have to live with and survive what she has had to cope with. I can't blame her for breaking. I just hope she comes to enough that we can at least be there for her.

Thank fuck Noah cleared the desk of the journal and laptop already. Romano may be dead, but answers may still be found in what he left behind. Something I know is not on Scar's mind as she flips his desk over. Picking things up at random and hurling them across the room.

Her rage begins to abate as her despair takes precedence. The sobs replace the screams as her hands find her hair and begin to pull. Immediately, I move in, wrapping my arms around her and holding her tightly to my chest. Her long nails sink into the skin on my arm at first as she thrashes in my hold.

"Shh, Scar baby," I murmur. "It's just me." The rest of the guys and Rachel slowly move towards us, their hands raised in front of them, taking small measured steps. Her wild eyes bounce from one person to the next as they treat her like a wounded animal. Her body shakes as she collapses in my

arms, her nails no longer digging into my skin but her fingers tightly latched onto me.

“Ryder,” she sobs.

Declan drops to his knees in front of her, brushing her hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ears. “Shh, pretty girl. We’re all here. We’ve all got you.”

Her body convulses with her sobs, making even my own frame shake with the force as I just hold onto her tightly. The last photo lay face up in the pool of blood next to us. My eyes lock on the horror that she lived. She’s stronger than I’ve ever given her credit for.

My eyes burn and my cheeks itch as tears trail down my face at the amount of damage they did to my girl. She was so young. So small. So different from the larger-than-life woman I’ve fallen in love with.

Rachel snuffles as she grabs the photo, wiping it on her pant leg before handing it to Luca. Never letting her eyes linger on it more than necessary out of respect for Scar. The only reason we even need them is because of the possibility they may hold clues to who else was there.

“Letty,” Luca’s deep voice barely rises above a whisper as he calls her attention. Her eyes drift up to lock on his steely ones. I’m shocked he’s able to hold it together as much as he has. “Let’s get you home.” The words come out in a hushed growl. Like it’s the most he can manage if he’s going to stay in control of himself. Kade is just behind him, in no better control of his emotions, his hands fisted at his side as his body trembles with unleashed rage.

She slowly nods but clings to me tighter. I rise slowly with her in my arms, cradling her against my chest. She seems so much smaller in this moment, more like the broken and defeated girl in the photo than the strong and brazen woman that had hoped this would be a trap.

It wasn’t what we expected at all. Romano was never supposed to be one of her abusers, just the man who had facilitated her abuse. Not any better; in a lot of ways, he’s a lot

worse. But a different type of horror. Not her own personal demon that has stalked and haunted her for almost a decade. An abstract terror is easier to face, no matter how horrifying, than the hands of evil that have already dug into your body and stolen pieces of your soul.

The fight and life drains from her small frame as she trembles in my arms.

“Do we have an all clear?” Joe’s wary voice filters in through the comms. Fuck. What the last hour must have sounded like to everyone out of this room as Scar absolutely lost her shit.

“Romano’s dead,” I answer, my voice sounding just as dead. It doesn’t feel like enough. Not even with the torture Rachel did inflict on him. He died too fast. Too easily.

“Everyone else is okay,” Noah adds, answering what Joe was really looking for. I don’t think okay is the right word.

Kade must agree because he snorts. “No one is injured anyway.”

Tyler, Holden, and Asher wait in the hallway outside the office when we walk out. All three keep their eyes downcast, away from Scar’s fragile state, but standing guard.

Though no one asks, Holden explains, “We ran up when we heard her scream.”

“We figured out what happened pretty quickly from there,” Ty adds, a look of concern in his eyes as they drift down to her. Scar’s face is pressed against my chest, her eyes open but unseeing. She isn’t really here. Not right now. Too lost in the chaos of her own mind. How could she not be?

Asher studies her carefully, his eyes trailing over the blood covering her nearly from head to toe. “She gonna be okay?”

Kade nods and claps his hand down on his shoulder and squeezes. “Yeah, kid. She needed that.” If only his voice held as much certainty as his words did. “Did you find what you needed?”

Asher gives him a clipped nod. “Think so.”

Luca takes the lead, pulling his weapon out. “Keep us updated on what you discover,” he instructs Asher, who gives him a wary look. Luca must sense it because he sighs, giving in where he normally would push back. “She may have needed that,” he echoes Kade’s words, “but there are three more men she needs the names of more that we didn’t get today.”

His words weigh like a ton of bricks on my back. This isn’t over yet.

It’s only just begun.



SCAR STAYS in a daze the entire way back to Asher’s place where he sets us up with our own apartment in his building. It isn’t as large as his, but spacious enough to be comfortable for our crew. Tyler hesitates as he says his goodbyes to all of us, his gaze lingering on where she still rests in my arms.

It’s Kade that finds the words to get him moving to catch his flight. Scar would want him back at his post. With Josie. He can do far more protecting her than watching Scar be vulnerable. Holden and Joe offer to take him and ensure he gets out of town and on his flight safely, leaving us alone for the first time.

Luca and Kade practically vibrate with their fury, sending anxious and uneasy glances at Scar as she remains unchecked from reality. I want to help them, but words escape me. I’ve never been the type to lead. I don’t have the right words, or know the next step. That’s always Scar. If not her, then Luca. But neither one is currently capable of seeing past their own immediate emotional turmoil.

“Go use the gym,” Declan instructs. His calm, steady voice, a soothing balm to my own disquiet. Both Kade and Luca look like they want to fight him on it, but all it takes is one pointed look at their clenched fists for them to concede. We all need to clear our heads, to reset from the bomb Scar dropped today. She needs us too.

We promised her that she could break, she could be weak, she could stumble along this journey because she has us. We would be her strength, her balance, her safe place in the storm of her trauma.

We can't do that if we're all breaking too.

Silent acknowledgement ripples through the five of us. Though none of us put it into words, I can feel their understanding in the heavy looks we all trade.

Noah clears his throat. "I'm going to get started on his computer." Not only his way of helping her the best way he knows how, but I've come to see how he uses computers and algorithms and programs to get out of his head. To put his whole focus on something else so he can let go of the things holding him back.

Luca and Kade nod, grabbing a bag from off the couch before stalking silently out of the room to find the gym Asher told us about. They'll both come back bruised and bloodied, but with less weight on their shoulders so they can help ease the burden of hers.

Declan studies me in the remaining silence and my grip tightens on Scar. Still unresponsive in my arms. Clueless to the happenings around her. I'm not leaving her. She's all I need in this moment. To see her, feel her, be with her for the moment she comes out of this awful paralysis I can't even begin to understand.

He tilts his head in acquiescence. "Let's get her cleaned up and in bed."

I'm thankful he included himself in the plan. It's not something I would have been able to comfortably accomplish myself with the dead weight she has become. Declan washes and rinses her body, paying close attention to her hair as he scrubs the dried blood from it, while I hold her upright.

Together we manage to get her cleaned up and tucked into bed. She doesn't fight us even a little bit, closing her eyes and allowing us to take control. A part of me believes she's just

turned everything off. Hidden from the realizations of today and the terrors of her past.

Slowly, her breathing evens out. Declan and I lay on either side of her, encasing her in our warmth, our hands resting against the places of her body where her skin is exposed. Her shoulder, her thigh, her chest, her stomach. Anywhere where she can feel us. Even as she slips into sleep, she needs to feel we haven't left her. We're still here. Still protecting her. Always supporting her.

Unlike other recent nights, when she wakes up, it isn't a slow, arduous process of clearing the nightmares and becoming aware of her surroundings. She snaps awake, her eyes wild and filled with terror, a sheen of sweat over her skin, as her breath comes out in heavy pants.

Declan immediately begins soothing her, but she pushes his hands away, putting her head between her knees as she takes deep breaths in and out. My hand lands on her lower back and I can feel her body trembling under it. I rub circles into her skin and Declan kisses her temple, but she shakes her head.

"It doesn't feel good." My hand immediately stops and Declan withdraws. Scar normally thrives on gentle touches through and after her nightmares, they calm her, replace the horrifying memories.

"It hurts. Everything hurts." The words are torn from her raw throat. A shiver runs down my back and my hands shake as that useless, helpless feeling rises again.

"What do you need?" Declan asks, his firm commanding tone once again forcing a calm through me. Through Scar too.

Her wide, green eyes lift and flick between the two of us. "Hurt me."

I rear back as if she slapped me with her words. "What?" I ask in disbelief.

She nods her head, her eyes now filling with tears. "Hurt me," she repeats in a whisper. "Replace the pain they branded me with with your own. Make me forget about my scars." She

huffs out a breath so full of resignation and defeat, I don't know what to make of it. "Make me forget their touch. Please," she begs.

I don't know if I can. Not the way she means.

Pressing my lips against hers, I silence her words. I always want to give her what she needs, but this is something I don't know that I'm capable of doing. Get rough with her? Sure. Spank her ass? Hell yes. But intentionally hurt her the way she's asking? I wouldn't even know where to start.

She pushes me back in a huff. "Not like that," she snaps, a wild look in her eyes. "Fuck me like you hate me. Fuck me like you want to destroy me." Her words come out hard and desperate. So unlike how she normally speaks to any of us. It's different from the needy moans that slip past her lips in the heights of her orgasm. There's a fine tremble in her hands and I know she isn't herself.

I let my eyes rove over her face and body and notice her pupils are blown for the first time. "Scar," I whisper. She's always so strong, so sure, I almost don't know what to do when she seems just a hair's breadth away from shattering all over again.

I never realized how fragile she really was until I saw her face her worst nightmares. Now she wants me to become one. Needs me to.

My eyes flick behind her to where Declan stands, watching the entire interaction with apprehension lining his every feature. He meets my eyes and gives me a slow nod. A silent promise he will stay, watch to make sure she's okay, to make sure nothing I do goes too far. He's always been best at reading her silent cues.

My decision is an impulsive, snap second. I thought I could never hurt her, but it turns out what I really can't do is tell her no. I lean back into her space, this time instead of kissing her, I catch her lower lip between my teeth. Her eyes widen, and as I sink them in deeper, a spark of life enters her gaze. It emboldens me, eases my fear, and I increase the pressure until a sharp tang of blood rolls over my tongue. My

instinct is to soothe it with my tongue, but I don't. I pull her against me, kissing her fast and hard, the blood from her lip smearing over both of our lips.

Trailing my lips down her chin and neck, I leave bloodied marks as I go until I reach where her neck meets her shoulder. I sink my teeth into her skin, feeling the muscles tense. I bite her hard enough to bruise and her moan fuels a desire I wasn't aware of having.

There's no room here for tentative touches or gentle caresses. Only fast, hard, painful. My dick stirs in my pants as I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze the sides and force her to look up at me. Desire burns there, vanquishing any remaining hesitations. I grip her pajama top in my fist and rip it from her body. The thin fabric of it shreds easily in my fist and I discard it on the floor. Her gorgeous tits sway with the force of the motion, but her nipples tighten as they're exposed to the cool air.

Using my grip on her throat, I yank her to me and smash my mouth against hers. Wanting her lips swollen and sensitive. She gives in easily, her body and lips both pliable against me, moving wherever I direct her. No fight. No fear. No resistance.

I pull my knife from my pocket and cut her sleep shorts from her body without ever pulling away from her mouth. She whimpers against my lips and I take that moment to sink my teeth into her lower lip again, making the bleeding start again. Dropping my knife, I trail my free hand over her exposed skin, loving the way goosebumps rise in the wake of my touch.

She starts to pant as I put distance between us, releasing her throat, I force her to turn over. She lays flat on her stomach, her head resting on a pillow and turns her face to watch Declan at the side of the bed. I strip quickly, wrapping my hand around my dick and give it a few, slow pumps while I focus on her satin-covered ass. I like the way the dark color looks against her creamy skin.

It would look even better against red.

A crack fills the air as I bring my hand down sharply over one cheek. The strike hits directly over the line of her

underwear. She cries out in surprise, her skin immediately reacting to the hard slap and rapidly turns a bright red. My eyes flick to Declan and he gives me a nod of reassurance. The sound she made didn't give away whether she liked the smack or not, but something on her face must have.

My hands grip her hips to yank her ass up and put it on display. Declan slides a pillow under her and I bring my hand down against her ass several more times in rapid succession until both cheeks are bright in color.

I was right, the dark purple of her panties are stunning against the red. I decide to leave them on.

Sinking my fingers into her hair at the back of her neck, I pull her up until she's on her elbows and knees. I keep one hand locked in her locks of hair, and use the other to slip her panties off to the side. I run my finger through her slit.

She's wet, but not dripping. Not like how I normally take her. How we all normally do. There's been much less foreplay, but isn't that all part of what she wants? The pain of having to force my way into her.

Without hesitation, I do exactly that. She cries out as I bottom out in one hard thrust. She's tight, and not wet enough, but she still feels good. I keep my eyes locked on Declan, trusting him entirely to be able to read her, to know her and not let me go too far.

I tighten my grip on her hair and feel her pussy spasm around my hard length. It eases my doubts, but I can't tear my eyes away from D. I trust him more than myself in this moment. I pull out of her, and slam right back in, all the way to the base. This time, I slide in easier. Her wet heat welcoming me instead of fighting against me.

Some of the anxiety trickles away as I begin to read her body like I normally do. Her soft pants are music to my ears as I pick up the pace. Keeping it rough and brutal as she currently craves. The sound of flesh hitting flesh drives my needs higher. I pull her hair, making her cry out again and the sound is so sweet.

“More,” she begs. I tighten my grip and meet Declan’s eyes again before pointedly dropping my gaze to where his hand is straining the front of his jeans. He tilts his head, this time he’s the one hesitating, but I nod in encouragement as I yank Scar’s head back.

I catch sight of her abused and swollen lips and grin. “Open that pretty mouth, babe.” She immediately complies and my dick twitches inside her, making me groan. Using my grip on her hair, I tilt her head to the side and beckon Declan forward with a tilt of my head. “Take Declan down that sexy throat like the good girl I know you are.”

He hesitates only for another moment, studying her face. Whatever he must see in her gaze evaporates all his doubts. Trusting her with herself now. He pushes his jeans down and I watch entranced and Scar licks over her split lip. He slides into her mouth and almost immediately her lip starts bleeding again.

The spark of pain makes her tighten around me and I groan, picking up my pace again. Declan follows my lead, sliding down her throat at the same pace as I drive into her. Blood slicks over his dick as it pours from the wound on her lip. But with each thrust, she grows more and more wet around me.

Keeping my hold on her hair tight, I use my free hand to reach around her front and begin to pluck and twist her nipples sharply. She cries out, but only a garbled sound escapes around D’s dick. He cuts her off as he pushes back into her throat and she gags, clamping down on me tightly. Fuck, she feels so goddamn good like this. I praise her endlessly about how good she looks, how hot it is to see her blood covering Declan, how greedy her cunt is for us both.

Instinctively, I know her ass is off limits today. The trauma that caused her fear is too close to the surface right now. So I focus on every other part of her. Alternating between plucking her nipples painfully, pulling her hair, and spanking her ass until she’s a dripping mess. I can barely hold back any longer, but even if she wanted pain, I need her to come before I can even think about doing so.

Declan starts losing his rhythm as he pushes into her mouth. I force her head down as far as she can until the tip of her nose brushes against his pelvis, cutting off her air. He groans as he spills down her throat. She begins to tighten around me and I bring my hand down against her ass again. The pain and oxygen deprivation send her over the edge and I feel her orgasm crash through her. D pulls free from her mouth and she immediately begins cursing as I start to thrust into her harder. I follow her only a few strokes later, filling her with my come.

Crashing down into the soft bed, I pull her with me. I brush the hair from her face and gently begin wiping the tears from her cheeks. "You're so goddamn beautiful, Scar." Declan strips and climbs into bed behind her, offering gentle caresses down her back and massaging her ass that has to be sore. I get up and go into the bathroom, grab several washcloths and run a couple under warm water and another under cold water. Once I get back to the bed, I hand D the cold one and he places it against her stinging skin.

Meanwhile, I use the warm cloths to clear the blood and tears from her face, being careful with her abused lips. Scar keeps her eyes open and vulnerable as they flick between both me and Declan. A small smile playing on her lips as I take a new washcloth and gently clean up between her legs. Her entrance is red and swollen and I know I was far rougher than I've ever been before. I worry for a minute, but I don't see any sign of tearing. After cleaning her up, I press a clean cloth against her entrance and cup her pussy through it, hoping it helps soothe the discomfort.

With each gesture of aftercare, her body settles more and more between us. No longer trembling, the wild look in her eyes easing as her eyelids grow heavy. There's no sign of the lines of tension on her face that were just there a little while ago, leaving only a sated, sleepy look.

"I love you both," she whispers dreamily.

Declan rains kisses over her shoulders and back. The touch something she was pulling away from only a short while ago, but now she leans into him and melts under his ministrations.

“We love you, pretty girl. So fucking much.” The emotion in his voice reminds me of the time we first found out who she was.

Those photos.

I know we will have to look at them. Study them.

The thought turns my stomach and I already know that what we will see will forever haunt all of us the way that it has haunted Declan for all these years.

I press a kiss against Scar’s forehead. “Get some rest, Scar. We won’t leave your side.”



Chapter Seventeen Kade

AGITATION BURNS THROUGH ME, making me jittery and tense. I crack my neck, then my knuckles, then force myself to stretch. None of it helps ease the discomfort from being in my own skin right now.

I thought I would feel some relief when we got back home after taking out Romano, but it's only gotten worse with each passing day.

Wait.

Stay low.

No big moves.

Wait some fucking more.

Is it any wonder I'm slowly going insane? I understand why we need to keep a low profile while we wait to see how Donahue reacts to the news of Romano's death. The entire mansion going up in flames wasn't exactly subtle. There's no way he isn't aware something happened, even if he doesn't know the finer details.

At least the explosion hid the signs of torture. The roses that were branded into his skin. Not that I would mind us taking credit for our work. The whispers all sing our praises. At least that's how I take the rumors floating around about our merciless attitudes and depraved revenge. Donahue shouldn't

have any fingers on the pulse of St Graves though. He should be blissfully unaware of our influence and desire to tear him down.

We can't risk tipping him off that he is our bigger target after all. Let him come to his own conclusions about what happened to Romano. We don't need him becoming even more careful with his own security.

Knowing all of this doesn't change the incessant itch all over my body from being on lockdown. I need a fight. A few fights. Anything to relieve the images of a broken and beaten Charlotte. Those fucking photos have tortured all of us in more than one way. Every time I close my eyes, they're all I see. I can't even recognize the girl they left behind like that. No signs of the woman she's become either.

I look at those photos and see the girl I lost so many years ago, not the girl that stands strong in front of me with a raised brow and a tapping foot.

"Hey there, Ladybug." An easy grin spreads across my face. She fell apart after Romano's death. We could all see the cracks as she forced herself to get back up and get us all home. She hasn't been the same since. Her nightmares are worse than ever. Days where she refuses to get out of bed.

It makes the days like today all that much sweeter. Her strength and life present in the spark of her eyes.

"Why does Luca have a new black eye?" she asks accusingly.

My lips twitch as I shrug. "Someone won't allow us to go to the fights. Gotta work out our feelings somehow."

She narrows her eyes at me, making me laugh. "How are your swollen lips and bruised ass, Ladybug?" A blush rises on her cheeks and we both laugh at the levity of the moment. We all have our ways of coping.

"Fuck off," she says, but there's no real heat behind it. I pull her into my arms and kiss her until we're both breathless. Her small hands rest on my shoulders. She's seemed so much smaller, so much more fragile ever since we got back from

Black Hallows. It makes me want to cradle her in my arms and protect her from everything that hides in the shadows of our ugly world.

It's an odd thought. One reminiscent of our time in foster care, though the woman in front of me has changed so much.

Maybe she's finally letting some of Letty out after burying her deep down for so long.

Somehow, she seems so much softer now. Maybe she got a piece of her old self back when she watched the life drain from Romano's eyes.

She sighs in my arms, resting her head against my shoulder. I scoop her up and fall to a seat on the couch, holding her against me tightly. She laughs, shaking her head. "Declan is looking for you."

I arch a brow in surprise. "D is?"

She rolls her eyes. "That's what I just said, isn't it?"

I save my sassy comeback and just pinch her side instead. "Does this mean I get to leave this fucking house?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. You're the ones with a secret, not me."

I freeze under her before cursing. Of course she would figure out we were hiding something from her. Did we really ever think we'd manage to keep her totally in the dark about her surprise?

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I lie smoothly.

She pats my cheek condescendingly. "Whatever you say, big guy." So smoothly.

Scar climbs out of my lap and stretches her arms over her head. "You can keep your secrets," she teases. "If you guys are going to be gone, I have some work I need to get done."

I sit up straighter, locked into her words. She hasn't said much about work since we got back a few days ago. It took us all by surprise as she's the type to usually throw herself into

work instead of confronting her feelings. This is the first time she seems ready to tackle our next big problem.

“What are you going to work on?”

I recognize the coy smile that graces her face and know she’s going to be sassy before she even opens her mouth. “Maybe I want my secrets too.”

Darting off the couch, I wrap my arms around her and pull her back down into my lap, tickling her sides as I do. “Nope. Not allowed.”

She smacks my arms and curses me out, all while laughing. “Stop it, you big brute.” Of course I ignore her, continuing to tickle her until she finally relents. “Fine, fine, I’ll tell you!”

I stop tickling her but as she attempts to pull free from my hold, I grip her tighter. She can tell me from right where she is. “It’s nothing that surprising,” she finally says. “I’m going to do some shit for Steel Roses. I can’t go there yet, but I want to check in with the contractor about where we’re at in the renovations. Make some plans. Check in with the girls. See who’s planning to come back. All that shit.”

I perk up and loosen my hold. “Do you think we’ll be ready to reopen soon?”

She shrugs. “With Romano gone now, what’s holding us back? We shouldn’t have any more direct threats to us while we work out the last bit of revenge planning.” She says it nonchalantly, but she can’t hide her feelings behind a bravado. Not from me. Not anymore. But today is a good day. I’m not dragging her into her anxiety when she has finally managed to shake a bit of it off.

“That’s brilliant,” I exclaim, slapping a fat, wet kiss against her cheek, making her laugh again.

“I was wondering what the hold up was,” Declan drawls slowly from the doorway.

I grin, feeling lighter than I have in days after hearing Scar laugh and joke again. She’s really going to be okay. Even if this hurts, even if it’s hard, she needs this and she will come

out stronger and better for it. “No offense, dude,” I joke, “I’d just rather kiss her.”

He flips me off and rolls his eyes. “Let’s go, there’s work to be done.”

I whine when Scar climbs off my lap again, even though that itch from earlier is finally turning into a shiver of excitement. “Don’t worry, pretty girl,” he says as he kisses her forehead. “We’re gonna take the tunnels.”

Fuck yeah we are. They’re an integral part of our plan after all. Let’s fucking do this.

We leave Scar with Noah and Luca and head to the office to leave through the tunnels. As soon as the door closes behind us, I turn my attention to Declan. Him and Luca have really been keeping this project of ours going with everything else that’s going on. “How’s it coming along?”

He responds with one of his rare beaming smiles. “Fucking perfect. Should be completed soon. Charlene is going to suggest a family party in a few weeks where we can surprise her.”

I clap my hands together in excitement as we both break out into an easy jog. I wonder if golf carts would fit down here. Would be even easier to get around. Maybe some of those electric scooters or bikes. Not a bad idea.

“Who won?” I ask a few minutes later. I know it can’t have been either Luca or Declan, because they definitely would have already bragged about it by now. Smug assholes wouldn’t be able to help themselves.

Declan grumbles incoherently. I wait and he curses. “Fucking Ryder.”

I scoff. What a fucking dick. “Is that why he’s missing today?”

D rolls his eyes. “Too fucking smug to be around her without giving the whole thing away,” he grumbles.

“Fucking prick,” I curse and Declan snorts.

“At least you didn’t get Luca.”

The words make me stop short. “No,” I say, my eyes wide. One look at his face and I bend over as I cackle, my entire body shaking with the force of it. Oh, I can not wait for Scar to realize her surprise.

It’s going to be epic.



Chapter Eighteen Luca

THE DOORBELL RINGING jars me out of my thoughts.

Looking up, I find Scar in the same position she's been in most of the day, hunched over her laptop with her phone against her ear. Yesterday, she started working on Steel Roses reopening and has barely done anything else since. It reminds me of the days when we first opened it. The thought makes me smile.

The doorbell rings again and I curse. There's only so many people who wouldn't just open the door and make themselves at home. Opening the door, I find my least favorite option being the one behind it.

I grunt an acknowledgement to Charles, and open the door wider to let him in. He gives me a tight, awkward smile and nod in hello before walking past me and heading straight for the kitchen. I follow behind him, annoyance simmering at his presence. I promised to be okay with her forgiving him, doesn't mean I have to like the guy.

As soon as he walks into the kitchen, Scar looks up and beams when she sees him. "Oh perfect timing! I want your opinion on something."

What the fuck?

Before he can respond to her, I ask, "Do you have updates on Donahue?"

Scar gives me a cool look over her laptop before rolling her eyes. Charles rubs the back of his neck. “Yeah, should we wait until everyone gets here?”

I don’t answer, instead just grunting as I pull out my phone to text everyone to meet in the kitchen. I’m not leaving them to go find everyone.

He turns his attention back to my girl, walking over to sit beside her. “I’ll give you my opinion while we wait.” His smile is soft and hesitant, like he also can’t believe her willingness to let him back in. It annoys me. Everything about him annoys me.

Scar ignores me as she points to something on her screen to Charles. “Which design do you like more?”

His brows scrunch together as he studies the screen, pressing his face far too fucking close to hers while he does.

“I like them both, but what are they for?”

She starts explaining Steel Roses to him and how we built the club up into what it is now. Noah walks into the room and comes to stand at my side. “What is happening?”

“Don’t fucking know,” I grumble under my breath. “She’s telling him about our clubs.” Even I can hear the thread of bitterness in my tone. Noah doesn’t call me out on it. He watches them just as warily as Charles laughs at something she says.

Declan comes in next, his gaze less wary and more curious as he takes in the scene on the other side of the counter. He picks up an apple from the fruit basket and takes a loud bite from it. “What are we all staring at?” he whispers sardonically.

I narrow my eyes at him but don’t even bother to respond as Charles starts explaining why he likes one design over another for our waitresses. I don’t care what he says, I vote we go with the opposite of what he chose. Not that Scar would ever let me choose something like this anyways. Why does he get to?

Ryder and Kade are the last to come in together. Kade stops mid-sentence and Ryder’s quick reflexes are the only

thing that stops Kade from putting his foot in his mouth with our girl. His eyes flare in anger at how close they're sitting together, but he also made a promise. No more punching Charles. No more being openly antagonistic toward him. For Letty's sake.

Declan looks to me to get things started but I just grunt. Apparently, I'm not feeling very eloquent today. Much more caveman if I had to choose how to describe it. "Okay then," he says under his breath, a slight smile playing on his lips. Fucking asshole.

"Hey, Charles. How are you?" he asks in a louder voice, calling Scar's and his attention towards us. Scar's gaze flickers between the five of us, a spark of amusement there, but Charles looks surprised at D's friendly demeanor.

"Hey, yeah I'm good," he answers somewhat hesitantly. "Just got back from seeing my father. I wanted to update you on everything."

Scar sits up a little straighter, eagerness radiating off her in palpable waves. Charles notices and smiles down at her. "You guys are in the clear," he cuts to the chase.

"Oh, thank fuck," Scar curses. "I'll be able to go see Steel Roses in person now. After talking to Tim about the renovations, I'm excited to see them in person."

We're all eager to get out of the house, to be able to move around freely once again. It's been a long time since we've been able to go about our normal routines. It almost feels like we've won, though we've only surpassed the first hurdle.

I'm not satisfied with just the outcome though. I need to know more about how Donahue reacted. I can't trust Charles to really know if we're truly free to move back into the open. "What did he say?"

Charles watches me for a moment. "He didn't tell me everything. But I was able to pick up a fair amount while I was at the estate. There was something else in the house where he was keeping Romano," he explains. I keep my expression

blank. This isn't news to us. Scar and the kid had figured that much out. Why else buy the house that had been burned?

"I don't know what it was," he continues, "but whatever it was, it's held his interest more than Romano's death. He thinks the house going up in flames has to do with whatever was already going on in that town."

I nod and make a note to let the kids know of this intel. It's the least they deserve in thanks. Somehow, I don't think they'll be too concerned about it. Donahue won't be alive long enough to retaliate anyway.

"So, we're really in the clear? Back to business as usual?" Ryder asks.

Letty shrugs. "Romano was the one who was actually after us and openly attacking us. With him cleared from the board, I don't see why not."

Charles looks at her appraisingly. "Don't drop your guard completely," he warns. "My father is still actively hunting you down, and he's moved to the west coast now. I saw more invoices for CGK on his computer before I left."

Scar grunts, but doesn't acknowledge his words. The light in her eyes has dimmed though and I get a twisted knot in my gut at how quickly she falters. "Any news on narrowing down our culprits?" She redirects the topic.

Noah nods, stepping forward. "The notebook we took from Romano has helped us mark a lot of the names off our list. He also had dates next to each name indicating when they started doing business, which eliminated quite a few more. We still have about fifteen possibilities though. You and Charles can look through to pick out the most likely."

I don't like it. Based on Kade's expression and the tightening of his fists, he doesn't either. I meet his eyes. "We should go to the fights tonight. Check in on them in person. See how the new recruits are doing. Maybe Ian and Jade have made some progress in that idea of theirs."

Anything to distract both of us. Anything to get us out of this house finally. We've all had brief reprieves as we prepared

Scar's surprise, but it isn't the same. We should show our faces around town again. Make a show of our strength and that we came out of this war on the winning side. No one else needs to know our fight isn't over. The rest of this war will be a silent one. One that never leads back to us. One that can't lead back to us.

Scar is not The Fallen Prom Queen any longer. The notoriety of that name doesn't need to follow her into this new life we're building for ourselves. It puts her at risk even if we do eliminate her demons.

The front door opens and we all whip our heads around. "Hello, hello," a warm, familiar voice calls out.

Motherfucker.

I didn't realize Charlene was coming over today.

"Mommy," a small voice calls out, followed by the pitter-patter of tiny feet. Scar beams as she climbs out of her chair just as Roe turns the corner and runs into the kitchen, Blu chasing her. Scar scoops our sweet girl up in her arms, and it's the first time I've seen her truly radiating happiness in weeks. She kisses over our baby's face and Roe's giggles ease the tension out of the room.

Or most of it anyways. We all dart looks at Charles where he still sits, his eyes wide as he stares at the scene in front of him. Of course he didn't know of Roe's existence. This moment, more than anything else, tells me everything I need to know about Scar's feelings toward Charles.

She's forgiven him. Decided to trust him. Has let him back in. Fully.

Anxiety twists in my gut.

You'd think I'd be over this jealousy born from insecurity when it comes to him, but apparently I'm not.

"Yes, hello to you too, sweet baby Blu," Scar greets the dog as Charlene enters the kitchen.

"It's quite the party in here," she says in lieu of hello. We all take turns hugging her and pressing kisses to her cheeks.

“I didn’t know you guys were coming,” I say after I release her.

Kade narrows his gaze at her playfully. “Yeah, and where is Joe? He better not be leaving our girls alone.”

Just then, the older man enters the kitchen, his arms laden with bags. “Oh, fuck off. You know better than that, kid.”

Noah and Ryder jump to help him with his load, stealing peeks into the bags as they place them down on the counter.

“Scar invited us for dinner,” Charlene explains.

Scar pointedly stares at the bags. “I do know how to cook, you know?”

“Of course, dear.” Charlene waves her off. “But I know how busy you are.” She gestures to the laptop and papers strewn all over the table as if to make her point. “Now you don’t have to.” She finishes with a bright smile. One she knows none of us are capable of arguing against.

“Thank you, Charlene,” Declan says before moving toward Scar and stealing Roe from her arms. New giggles erupt from her as he kisses her head. “Hi, sweet girl. Come help Daddy do some introductions, yeah?”

“Okay, Daddy,” she beams up at him, thrilled to be of help. I can’t help but smile while watching her. Even if I’m less than thrilled about who else is in the kitchen right now.

“Charlene, Roe baby, this is our friend Charles. He’s helping Mommy with some work.” Declan makes the introductions. At some point Charles got on his feet, but I must have missed it. He extends his hand out to Charlene first.

“It’s so nice to meet you,” he says genuinely. I kind of hate that he seems like an okay guy. I definitely hate when Charlene pushes his hand away and gives him a hug, easily accepting him. And I fucking loathe when my baby girl mimics the handshake and sticks her hand out to his.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she copies, a proud smile on her face. She’s so goddamn adorable. He doesn’t deserve all that

cuteness directed at him. I watch as he studies her appraisingly, shaking her tiny hand in his much larger one.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Roe. I love your name,” he compliments.

Her smile grows even wider, and even Scar is smiling as she watches them. “Thank you.”

I walk up to them and pull Roe out of Declan’s arms. “You gonna say hi to the rest of us, sweet girl?” She giggles as I carry her away, turning my back on Charles and heading straight to stand at Kade’s side. Noah tries, and fails, to suppress a grin and Ry doesn’t even try.

I don’t care if I’m acting like a child. He said hi, that’s more than enough.

Noah pulls Roe out of my arms to give his own kisses and as he passes her off to Kade, my eyes harden on the way he’s still smiling. “That paperwork filed yet?”

He chuckles and I consider punching him. “I knew you loved D,” he taunts. I shake my head and push him away. He just laughs harder. I should have punched him. “Yes, I’ve gotten it all taken care of,” he finally answers.

“Good.”

Charlene clears her throat and draws our attention back to the kitchen counter where she’s unloading the bags. “Roe baby, go get cleaned up for dinner while your daddies help your momma get this mess sorted so we can eat dinner together.”

“Okay, Grandma,” my little girl chirps happily as Kade sets her on the floor. There’s something in Charlene’s tone that says there’s something she needs to say away from little ears. My spine snaps straight and I click my tongue ring against my teeth in agitation.

The front door opens and Roe halts in her tracks, her gaze swinging back to her grandma. I raise my brow at Letty but she shrugs. Charlene claps and Joe rolls his eyes. “Perfect timing. Roe, go grab those boys and send the adults in here please.”

“Yes, Grandma,” she agrees as her excited feet carry her out of the room, the house already four times as loud. At least we know who our unexpected guests are.

Charles looks at Scar. “I can go help?” he offers sheepishly. “Keep them distracted so you have a chance for,” he hesitates gesturing to Charlene’s bags, “whatever this is.”

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off but Charlene is already clapping her hands together in delight. “That would be lovely, Charles. I need to talk to all the parents.” He rushes out of the room, following the tiny voices, before I even have a chance to argue. Not that any of us can really rise against Charlene. I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the counter.

It’s not sulking if you could kill a grown man with your bare hands.

Holden, Ian, and Jade all walk into the room with matching bewildered expressions on their faces. “Roe is really starting to take after her momma,” Holden says wryly in greeting.

Jade snorts. “What he means is the girl is getting bossy as fuck.”

“Sounds like Scar,” Ryder laughs, earning a smack to the chest.

Charlene waves away their banter, pausing in her dinner preparation to pull out stacks of paperwork. “Hush up now,” she scolds. “We only have a few minutes before poor Charles loses control of those little hellions.” I scoff at describing Charles as poor but the warning look Joe gives me is enough to keep my mouth shut.

Letty enjoys the silent smackdown as she smirks at me from across the counter and I narrow my eyes at her, promising retribution at some point in the near future. I can think of a few ways to get back at her.

“I’ve left this for as long as I possibly could, but you all really need to be making a decision now. We’re almost out of time.” She sets about organizing the stacks of her papers into

smaller stacks and putting them in front of different people. “Lucky for you lot, I covered all of our bases so all you need to do is make a decision. But I still need to prepare different things based on your choice. So chop, chop.”

Letty’s eyes widen as she stares down at the paperwork put in front of her and red rises on Jade’s cheeks while she looks at hers.

“What are you talking about, Charlene?” Kade asks, rubbing his hand over the scruff on his cheeks.

“Kindergarten!” she exclaims dramatically and all of the air is sucked out of the room.

There ain’t no way in hell it’s time for our baby girl to go to kindergarten.

“No.”

Charlene rolls her eyes. “You can’t say no, Luca,” she chastises, smacking me over the head with yet another stack of papers. There’s no way kindergarten requires this much fucking paperwork. We could save an entire forest with all the fucking paper in this kitchen right now.

“I enrolled all four kids into the top three private schools in Southern California, as well as the several public schools closest to us here. But some of those schools start next week and we need to prepare.”

Scar rubs her face with her hands. “Why can’t she stay at the preschool?” she whines.

“Yeah,” Jade agrees. “I thought they did Kindergarten there.”

Holden sighs, looking through the paperwork with a gleam of guilt in his eyes. “They do, but not first grade.”

Ah. It all clicks. Trevor is a year ahead of the other kids in school. He’s already been through the Kindergarten program and will be entering first grade.

“I completely forgot to even get him enrolled somewhere else.” Holden’s shoulders slump forward and a heavy sense of parental guilt coats the room. None of us have been the best

parents as this whole mess has gone on. It's been out of a sense of love and protection, but I don't really know if that's enough to justify the balls we've let drop.

Jade squeezes Holden's thigh in comfort and he rests his hand over hers as Charlene kisses his cheek. "This is why you all have me. Don't feel guilty for making this town a safer place for your kids."

Easier said than done.

Declan stands from where he was sitting at the counter, leaning over Scar to grab some of the papers. "We can't change the past, so instead of wallowing, let's move on to the next step." He pins his attention on Charlene. "What are our options, Char?"

She claps her hands together in excitement as she gives us a rundown on all the schools she picked out. It's instantly clear she's already done all of the leg work, putting a lot of time and effort into looking at each option for our kids. There's no bad choice, but I instantly don't like the options that take the kids far out of the city. Even if they are the best schools on this coast.

Based on the dour expressions on everyone's faces, I'm not alone in the sentiment.

Letty clicks her tongue. "We're making this city our own, are we not?"

Joe nods. "We sure are. Ain't no one in this town who will think to cross a Rose."

She shrugs as she throws the papers back down on the counter. "Then there's nowhere safer for a child of a Rose to be. The kids don't need the glitz and gore that comes with the price tag of these private schools." The second half is said with a derisive sneer.

Declan tilts his head as he reads something on the papers. "Scarlett is right. There's nothing these private schools can give the kids that we wouldn't be able to provide. I vote keeping it closer to home."

Ian folds his hands, pushing away the papers as he does, stopping only to trade looks with an overwhelmed Jade. Secretly, I think we all feel the same as her, but are better at hiding it. “You said you chose several public schools?” he asks.

Charlene nods her head. “I wanted to make sure not to rule any out in case you all liked a certain one.”

Panic flashes over every face in the room except for Joe and Charlene, the former looking openly amused at the rest of our options.

Declan clears his throat. “Do we all agree to stay in St Graves?” he asks carefully.

Everyone in the room nods eagerly, almost too much so. I add my own quick affirmation and Declan sighs in relief. “At least that’s the first step.”

Charlene starts to launch into the pros and cons of each of the elementary schools in our neighborhood but more than one adult in the room looks like they’re going to be sick. Ryder stands and walks over to Charlene, patting her on the shoulders.

“What if we let the expert choose?”

Sighs of relief come from every corner of the room as the bobbing of heads starts all over again. Charlene looks around confused, opening her mouth to question but Ry cuts her off. “We trust you more than ourselves with the kids,” he explains simply. Pulling a wry chuckle from not only me. Truer words have never been spoken.

“You know far more about this than we do and have already done all the work. We trust you.”

Charlene beams. “Well, good. Cause I was really going to push for Bayview Elementary school. They get good funding, are known to have a very active PTA with a lot of parent involvement in the school activities, and lower student to teacher ratios. They even implemented some new teaching programs to really help the outlier students succeed as well. I

was very impressed with what they've managed to do as a public school."

Joe nods and pats Ryder on the shoulder. "Good call, you all were going to end up at this decision anyway," he whispers. "You just cut out her having to lead you to it."

Charlene rolls her eyes. "I wouldn't have been upset by those private schools if that was what they wanted. They've just fought so hard for this town. It's only right to treat it like home." Scar and Jade both hug her and place kisses on her cheeks as they thank her for doing the leg work. None of this would be possible without her holding the fort down behind us. Keeping the home and family for us to come back to.

"The kids will start in just about two weeks then," I hear her explain and my heart drops to my feet. My panic at making the right decision made me completely forget what we were actually discussing.

Roe baby is going into Kindergarten.

Holy fuck.



Chapter Nineteen Scar

SOFT MUSIC PLAYS from my phone as I tuck Roe into bed and climb in next to her. A soft smile plays on my lips. She really has come so far. I can't believe we're already talking about sending her to elementary school. The few months after we brought her home with us, she couldn't sleep alone. For a few months after that, she couldn't fall asleep unless someone was laying with her until she was out. Nowadays, she can put herself to bed like a champ.

Even though she doesn't need it anymore, she gives me a huge smile when I cuddle into bed next to her. I want to soak up these moments of her still being small, still wanting us close to her.

"You're staying?" she asks in a small but thrilled voice.

"I've missed cuddles with my favorite girl," I tell her honestly, stroking her hair back from her face.

A big yawn overtakes her expression and I smile, enjoying every bit of this small moment between us. "Will I get to live with you again soon?"

Her question breaks my heart. Her transition was never going to be easy, not after everything she was forced to endure at such a young age. All the turmoil and upheaval of our lives haven't made it any easier on her. Just when she thought she found her forever home, we shipped her off to Charlene and

Joe. Then, she got used to being there only for us to relocate all of them and put them into hiding.

I still have a lot of doubts about how good of a mom I could ever really be, but the thing about Roe is she makes me want to try. Makes me want to do and be better. To give her everything I couldn't give my sisters. Everything she should have gotten from her birth parents and didn't.

"Yeah, sweet girl," I whisper. "We're going to all be together soon," I promise her.

She smiles, fully trusting in every word I say and that pulls at something deep in my soul. The love and trust she puts in me. To hold such a fragile flower's life in my hands. It makes the evil of this world that crushes that innocence all the more confusing to me.

"Will you sing to me, Momma?"

"Always, sweet girl." Her eyes flutter as she fights sleep, but it takes less than one of her favorite songs before she's completely out, a soft, light snore filling the air between us.

I lay with her for several minutes longer, soaking in her innocence, her resilience, her strength that is so different from my own. She somehow managed to retain her innocence even after being abused so violently.

It's like trying to extricate myself from an octopus when I do decide to climb out of her bed. Her little legs are intertwined with my own, and her arms are tightly wrapped around my neck, gripping tighter every time I try to move. Even in her sleep, she knows what she wants.

I grab my phone and text Noah to ask for backup. He appears in the doorway only moments later. "I thought you might need help," he whispers, smiling widely. He helps me slip out of Roe's grasp and replaces my neck with one of her favorite stuffed animals. I roll my eyes when I see he chose the dolphin he won for her.

Maybe it wasn't that she was able to retain her innocence, maybe we were all able to give just a little of it back to her by loving her and treating her like the baby girl she still is. The

thought brings me some peace, softens one of the hard, jaded edges that has brought not only me, but others around me, pain for a long time.

We slip out of her room quickly and head to the office. I was surprised when the guys allowed Charles to follow them there, even if it was reluctantly. No more surprised than they were when Roe showed up and I didn't freak out, I'm sure.

Despite what Luca may believe, based on the dirty looks he couldn't help but throw my way, I hadn't planned it. However, I could have called it off once Charles had shown up and made the decision not to. I want my girl home. With us. Always.

If we continue to hide her, we'll never get to that point, never be able to put her in public school, pick her up and drop her off normally. I'd rather claim her as ours, blanket her in the protection our name alone gives her, and slaughter every enemy that ever thinks they could use her as a pawn to hurt us.

Noah and I walk into the office and go through the open doors to our real work domain. An awkward and tense silence hangs in the air, no one in the room looking at one another. All except Declan, who has one side of his mouth tilted up in just the slightest suggestion of a smile. He's enjoying this a little too much. Of course, he's the one that has the easiest time accepting Charles. He understands him in a way none of the other guys can.

Maybe in a way even I can't.

My stomach turns as I remember the story of his fiancée. How easily that could have been me. Had I not found Kade and Luca to keep me afloat. If Charles hadn't pulled strings behind the scenes.

I clear my throat as we walk into the room in an attempt to break the silence. It hangs heavily in the air, feels almost wrong to break it.

"So," I drag out the words carefully, swinging my hands in front of me to clasp them together. "Any thoughts on how to find the last two men?"

Noah squeezes my shoulder as he brushes past me to get to his favorite computer on the left side of the room. He hits a few buttons, the clacks of each press loud in the silence that follows my words. Thanks for that assholes.

“Here’s the list we were working off of,” he explains as he pulls up the familiar color-coded data sheet. “This is the updated book thanks to Romano’s records.” The new list is much shorter, but not color-coded. Still too long to work through one by one. Though they should all die. Every name in that book is as good as dead as far as I’m concerned.

That will take longer though. I couldn’t buy enough cops, judges, and agents to make that many influential deaths go unnoticed. Revenge first. Housekeeping after.

How sweet it will be when they start to realize they’re being worked through, one by one. I wonder if they’ll know why they all have death knocking at their doors? Will they figure it out? Go into hiding? Wouldn’t that be fun?

I shake my head. Focus. One plan at a time.

“Are there any links between those names and CGK?”

Noah shakes his head in answer. “Not yet, anyway. I’m still going through records, but nothing has been a hit yet. It could still happen.”

“I don’t think it’s likely,” Charles adds. “Everything we recovered from CGK’s files has been embezzled finances and expenses used directly to find you. I think the only reason he used that account to purchase the house is because it was a snap decision where he didn’t have time to move his other funds around. I’d bet whatever else was there also had to do with trafficking. And of course, he would view Romano as a connection to you, but it’s still a unique situation.” He shakes his head, a million thoughts running across his face. “I can’t see him tying anyone else related to that night into his business to find you.” He gets this strained look on his face as his gaze drops to the floor. “I, umm, I don’t think he would want to share you after all the work and money he’s put into finding you.” His eyes meet mine. “He always felt like you were meant to be his.”

The sick words etch their meaning against my soul. The rightness of them making my stomach turn as icy blue eyes flash behind my eyelids. I force air in and out of my lungs. I shake my hands out and feel a semblance of calm settling over me when Luca presses against my back.

A caustic chuckle slips out as I shake my head. “I guess that’ll make it harder to get all three of them together when we do figure out their names. Me as bait is off the table.”

Luca growls behind me. “You as bait was never on the table.”

Kade gives me a mischievous grin. “You can be a meal on my table, Ladybug.”

His easy nature makes me laugh, a real one. Some of the tension bleeds out of me. “I guess we can figure that plan out once we get through this one.” I wave the words away. Maybe I can push away the negative feelings they evoke with the motion too.

Declan clicks his tongue. “What about CGK’s other records? We’ve seen they have a headquarters, warehouses, bank accounts. Is there anywhere he would have hidden the rest of the photos? Blackmail against his associates? A tell-all diary? Have we checked his home office?”

Noah and Charles begin to answer him at the same time but Noah stops and gestures for Charles to continue. He nods his thanks. “As for his home office, I’ve gone over every inch that I could. Noah helped me loop the cameras there so I could take my time. I found loads of shit I wish I could unsee, but nothing that led to the other men there that night.”

“Were there photos of me?” I demand, sharper than I intended.

The grimace on his face is more than answer enough. “I promise we will destroy all of them. Light them on fire,” he swears. He must read the question on my face I can’t force through my lips. “They held no answers, Scar,” he whispers, sounding almost as heartbroken at their existence as I do. “Just

you. You and him. I don't think he'd want a reminder of the others close to him. Those aren't the memories he's reliving."

Nausea rushes through me, bright and hot. I need a way to purge these feelings slowly building up inside of me. A slow crescendo of what I know will be my own destruction if I can't find a release. The feeling of bile rising in my throat, the burning of tears behind my eyes, the oil that slides through my veins.

Ryder is handing me a trash can before I can even fully process my body's reaction. My hands shake as I grip it tightly, the dinner Charlene made us making a reappearance as I push my face down into the trash can.

My stomach clenches and my throat burns as the puking stops. Warm, strong hands are on my back. Someone held my hair back as I emptied the contents of my stomach. Even after purging everything, I feel sick as Charles' vile words play on repeat in my mind.

There's a hissed argument on the other side of the room and I look up to find Luca and Charles angrily exchanging words. Well, one of them is angry, the other is ashen.

I sigh, feeling even more exhausted than I did just a moment ago. Noah pushes a wet paper towel into my face, forcing me to turn to him. He takes his time wiping my face of the tears, and snot, and saliva, and puke. It's a wonder these men still love me after all the different ways they've seen me.

Declan is right behind Noah with a glass of water, which I take gratefully. Before it even reaches my mouth, Ryder lifts the trash can up again. I smile as I rinse my mouth out several times and spit it into the trash can he so helpfully holds for me. Kade's hands never leave my back.

It's this support that gives me the strength to wave away Luca's anger, to push Charles' words from my mind. My thought of Roe's innocence from earlier comes back to me. It's too late to get my innocence back, it's not something I want back, but maybe I have more light in my life than I realized. Maybe these moments give me back something even better than innocence.

“I’m fine, Bossman. Promise.” I push the trash can away and move away from it to plop down on the couch Rachel and Jade usually prefer when they’re here. I miss them. I wish they were here for this, but at the same time I’m glad they didn’t see me lose it like that. It’s bad enough Rachel saw my mental breakdown over Romano.

Declan and Luca claim the spots on either side of me and D holds out a piece of gum for me. I take it with a nod of thanks and toss it in my mouth immediately. The water was nice, but I won’t feel better until I brush my teeth.

“Back to what Declan was saying. What about the warehouses or headquarters?”

Noah and Charles exchange looks, this time Noah takes the lead. “There are a lot of potential places to hide records or other things. There’s nothing to indicate one place as more likely than another and it would take us ages to go through one by one. With no guarantee we wouldn’t miss a hidden safe in any of the places. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack when there are hundreds of haystacks.”

I groan and lean my head against D’s shoulder. “Course it couldn’t be easy.”

Luca sways in his spot next to me, I can see the vein in his neck twitching as he contemplates something. I settle more firmly against Declan and lift my feet into Luca’s lap. He rests his hands over my legs, gently squeezing as he works through whatever he’s struggling with.

“We just have to make most of the haystacks disappear,” he says suddenly. “Until there’s only one.”

“Narrowing down our search would help,” Noah agrees. “But how?”

“Getting information from some of Donahue’s men, like we did with William, would be a good place to start,” suggests Ryder.

Kade hums in agreement. “But we need it to be someone who specifically does this work for him. Someone he’d have

to trust at least somewhat. Otherwise they'd have nothing helpful to share."

There's a new type of quiet as we all think about his words. It's so different from the silence that hung around them earlier. They're actually working together now. The thought makes me smile.

"But we do know someone," says Charles.

"I don't think you count," Declan deadpans, making Luca laugh. We all turn to give him surprised looks, but his smile has already morphed back into his blank look.

Charles gives him a wry look. "Didn't mean me. I know how my father works. If he's determined someone as a potential key to answers enough to have them watched for *years*, he has his best men on that duty."

His meaning hits me like a ton of bricks to the fucking face. "Josie," I whisper.

He nods in agreement. "We don't know who they are, but we know where to find them."

Back to the East Coast we go.



AFTER DECIDING we didn't want to put all our eggs in one basket, Charles and I agreed to rank the new list from least to most likely based on their interactions with both of our fathers.

It took us a little while to go through the list and finally come to an agreement on the final rankings of each one. Noah will use this to begin digging into each of their lives and dig up any potential connections.

Some of the confirmed names surprised me, like the Dean of our high school as well as one of the teachers who came from one of the elite families. No one ever understood how he got into teaching, but now I'm starting to see his cool teacher act as something else entirely. For what it is. Just another tactic to groom young students.

Charles and I both shuddered as we remembered our time in his class. The truth of who he is completely coloring all of our interactions. The rose-colored glasses are truly and wholly off now. He had been one of our favorite teachers in our second year. We would even visit him at lunch sometimes in our third and final years. Before that night anyways.

Goosebumps rise on my arms even thinking about him possibly being one of the men.

Though his creep factor was high, both of them ranked low on our list of likelihood. Neither had the same type of money or influence as our fathers. They weren't very often found together outside of school functions.

In contrast, our top of the listers weren't all that surprising to either one of us. The close friends of our parents. Some of our high school circles' fathers included. Jackie was evil enough after I came back to school, I wouldn't doubt if it was her father at all. That was one of mine and Charles' disagreements. I felt he deserved the top spot if evilness was genetic. He didn't think their family had enough prestige to be that close to our asshole elitist fathers. He thought my best friend's father was more likely. What a heavy dose of irony that would be if it were him. My boyfriend's and my best friend's fathers as my rapists.

Then again, don't know if we can really call her a friend after the way she was so quick to drop me. Josie was the only real friend I had before that night. I guess Charles too.

I smile at the thought. They were always my two favorite people anyways.

My eyes trail over each of their names, committing them to memory.

"Each one of them will die," Charles whispers at my side.

I grin at him, feeling like old times when he could read my mind. "You took the words right out of my mouth."

The smile he returns pulls at something in my heart. Reminds me so much of our younger days. I wait for the stab

of pain that will follow. That always has before when I'm reminded of who we used to be. It never comes.

I relax a little more in my seat beside him. "Okay, I think it's done."

"Close as it's going to get," he agrees, handing it over to Noah who barely acknowledges us before diving into work.

I watch him silently. His tongue always sticks out just a bit to the side when he really focuses on something. It's one of my favorite things about him.

"I can't believe you have a daughter," Charles whispers suddenly.

Tearing my eyes away from Noah's face I look at him and shrug. "Me either," I admit with a huff. "But there's nothing like it."

He watches me, fighting with himself about something he wants to say. I know my reaction from earlier is still weighing on him. "I won't break," I promise him. "Don't start treating me like I'm fragile."

At least he isn't one to doubt my words. "She looks just like the twins," he points out.

I nod. I had a feeling that's what was weighing on his mind. "It's part of what drew me to her, but I would have been impacted by any baby in that situation." Rowan looking like my sisters isn't why I fell in love with her, isn't why I saved her. Every baby and child deserves a chance, to have a protector. To live. Her looks just shook something loose in my heart that had been tied up for a long time. She could have been the twins' opposite in every way and I still would have fallen in love with her.

"You didn't birth her?" I can't blame him for his surprise. She truly looks so much like I did when I was younger, what the twins looked like.

"No blood relation at all," I admit, holding up my hands. "Trust me, I looked. Even had our blood tested."

“That’s insane,” he stammers. “She reminds me so much of Harlee. It almost hurts.”

A tear slides down my cheek. “They would have made great aunts.”

Tears shine in his eyes, my pain reflected in his features. The only person left alive who misses them like I do. Who loved them like I did. “They really would have,” he agrees, the tears spilling free to run down his cheeks. He clasps my hands and both our tears silently drip and splash against our skin as we silently mourn the girls.

It’s a few minutes later when he chuckles. “Do you remember the first time they borrowed your makeup?”

A laugh eddies up out of me, almost against my will. “They looked so cute, I couldn’t even be mad.”

He grins. “Oh, I remember. You could never get mad at them. No matter how ridiculous their antics got.”

A new sensation rises up in me, an unfurling of a new leaf as I share the good times with someone who remembers them as fondly as I do. It feels good. But all of a sudden exhaustion swamps over me like I’ve run a marathon.

Declan appears out of nowhere, materializing at my side. “Bed time, pretty girl.” He picks me up in his arms like he would grab Roe and I roll my eyes. “There are guest rooms if you want to stay the night,” he offers to Charles. “We need to finalize travel plans tomorrow anyway.”

I don’t know what surprises me more, that he offered or that Charles accepts it.

“Take her to bed,” Noah says from where he sits behind a computer. “I’ll show Charles to a room.”

Lifting my head off D’s shoulder, I watch as Noah doesn’t tear his eyes away from the screen in front of him. “Not coming to bed?” I already know that answer, but still have to ask.

He shakes his head. “I want to get started on organizing everything we discussed today. There’s a lot of information to

wade through.”

I open my mouth to offer to help, but Noah is already waving me off. “You need sleep,” he says firmly. It’s hard to even remember the time when I was the one primarily behind screens. Luca and Kade ran the front of everything, minus the few jobs Kade and I would run together when stealth was required.

Declan squeezes me in warning, cutting off my argument before I make it. This is their way of taking care of me. A defeated sigh escapes me, but I concede, resting my head against his shoulder. He smirks as he carries me over to Noah, who kisses my forehead before Declan carries me out of the room, through our office, and down the hall toward his bedroom.

“Where is everyone else?”

Declan shrugs, jarring my body a little bit with the movement. “Not sure about Luca, but Ryder and Kade went to the fights now that they have the all-clear and were going to check on Rachel afterward.”

He pushes into the room and slowly drops me to my feet, our bodies sliding together perks me up. His devilish smile tells me everything I need to know about that move. His hands fall to my waist and his fingers tickle the sensitive skin there as he sits down on the edge of his bed and pulls me between his legs. One hand releases me only to trail up my back and through my hair, giving me a scalp massage that makes me moan.

His chuckle sends a rush of pleasure through me, the sound husky, full of promises and desire. “I’m proud of you, pretty girl,” he whispers in my ear a moment before pulling me against his soft and demanding lips. He doesn’t give me a chance to question what I did to earn his praise and I open for him willingly, loving the teasing way he runs his tongue over my lips before beginning to explore my mouth. I forget all about my question anyway.

Declan’s kiss takes my breath away, leaving me panting and desperately wishing for more even as he puts everything

into this kiss. My fingers lock in the fabric of his shirt, trying to pull us closer than we already are. Nothing is ever enough with them. No matter how much they give me, it only makes me crave them more.

He hums against my lips before putting just enough space to answer the question I never got around to asking. “For the way you’re letting us take care of you.” His lips caress my own with every word. Delight trickles through me and it dawns on me that Roe and I aren’t so different after all. My men are the first people in my life who have really shown me what it means to be loved, cherished, taken care of. I soften to him and his kiss becomes more demanding, hungrier. The teasing and tantalizing is gone, replaced by something much hotter, much fiercer. A passion and a love that could consume me.

It’s so rare for us to just kiss and makeout like this without taking it any further. It’s nice while at the same time excruciating. It makes me feel safe, closer to him. Brings the affection and love to the forefront of my mind with every tantalizing stroke of his tongue. But it makes me burn with lust, ready to beg for more. Beg for everything.

I push to get closer, trying to crawl into his lap, but his hand on my waist tightens, keeping me in place. I’d pout, but my lips are fully preoccupied with the way Declan is ravaging them. A small gasp slips through my lips to his when a new pair of lips find my neck.

Hot, wet, commanding.

Declan’s kiss becomes even harder.

A dark chuckle knocks me off balance. “If you didn’t want to share, you should have closed the door.” Luca’s low growl in my ear reverberates through me, making my body pulse with need and anticipation.

Declan breaks our kiss and smirks at him over my shoulder. “Maybe it was an invitation.” His hand leaves my hair and wraps around my throat, the barest touch without any real pressure. My mouth parts in surprise and my eyes grow

heavy with desire. “Pretty girl looks beautiful under me, but I’ve come to learn how she looks even better between us.”

A whimper escapes my lips, the only sound between the three of us. I’m trapped between my two most dominating men. The ones who don’t share as easily and freely as the other three do. Pressed tightly between their hard bodies as they meet each other’s gazes. It gives an entirely new and erotic meaning to stuck between a rock and hard place. The way Luca presses against my ass proves something is most definitely hard.

Declan’s fingers tap against my erratic pulse. “You want that. Don’t you, Scarlett? My pretty girl wants to be taken care of. Wants to be filled. Needs to be.”

I nod my head in agreement. That’s exactly what I need.

“You need us both, Letty? Need to be so tightly pressed between our bodies you can’t tell where you end and we begin?”

Luca’s hands get to work ridding me of my clothes, one article at a time as he whispers dirty things in my ear. Declan removes his hands and leans back on the bed, watching us.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous, Scarlett,” Declan’s words come out on a heavy exhale.

Luca’s lips press against my throat, his tongue leaving a warm trail as he traces my pulsing vein. “And so fucking sweet,” he growls against my skin.

Declan pins me with a hard stare, too serious for the lust in his eyes and in my bloodstream. “Are you going to be a good girl for us?”

“Always,” I promise with a coy smile. He rolls his eyes.

“Best behavior tonight and you’ll get rewards.” There’s something hidden in D’s words. Something that gives away that he has a plan. Has had a plan this whole time. Coming to his room is starting to make a lot more sense than when we first came in here. Especially when he leans over into the drawer next to his bed and pulls free a long, dark piece of fabric.

“We’re going to blindfold you now.” My mouth parts open in surprise, but I don’t argue. A sudden thrill races through me. It isn’t the first time one of them has deprived me of one of my senses, but it never gets old. The rush. The anticipation. The not knowing. It heightens everything. With these two? I have no idea what to expect.

I can’t see Luca’s reaction, if he knew it was coming, if he likes it. But I can feel him grow harder against my ass, so I guess that answers that.

I hold still, not even breathing as Declan moves to tie the piece of fabric over my eyes. He adjusts it a few times, making sure it fits snug but still comfortable.

“How’s that?”

“Good,” I breathe out. He hums in satisfaction with my answer. His fingers trail down my throat to my peaked nipples, brushing over them ever so slightly. Barely even a touch. My breathing speeds up as I feel new hands, Luca’s hands, rough from years in the ring, squeezing my thighs and running lightly over the sensitive skin on my inner thighs.

They take turns, hands coming and going, brushing light, gentle touches over erogenous zones. The first smack against my ass makes me moan with the unexpectedness of it. When one of them twists my nipple, I feel my pussy pulse with need.

Neither one of them says anything, just touching me, moving me when they want me to turn in a different direction. The sound of our heavy breathing the only one in the room. I can hear every caress as their fingers brush over my skin. I tense as I hear the sound of something opening, not the drawer but something else.

Before I can try to decipher what I’m hearing, someone is pulling my face toward them. As soon as his rough lips bruise against mine, crushing every other thought in my mind, I know it’s Luca. His kisses always feel like a brand against my soul, burning everything but my need for him away.

Luca pulls away from me and I instantly miss the heat of his body against mine. His hand falls to my shoulder, gripping

it as he pushes me forward, another hand landing on my hip to keep my feet in place. I bend at the waist, trusting Luca won't let me fall. He guides me down until my arms and chest rest against the soft comforter on Declan's bed.

The click of a lighter makes me tilt my head to the side, but fingers between my thighs begin to distract me again. So close to where I need touch, just teasing me. Taunting me with it. A new scent slowly begins to fill the room. Something familiar, relaxing. Almost soothing.

A lavender candle?

Kisses trail down my spine and I shiver, my ass feeling exposed and empty. I whimper as the light touches from earlier are replaced with soft kisses. No pattern, no rhythm, nothing to give away where they may fall next. Heat pours through me, my skin feels flush with need and warm with desire. It makes the first shock of cold dripping down my spine all the more shocking. I cry out, but my pussy spasms as ice cold drops of water begin to pour one after another down my spine, following the same pattern as the very first kisses did.

They stop right at the crease of my ass, only a few of the cold drops running down to hit my pussy. More than just ice water drips between my thighs, making them slick. The familiar cadence of Luca rumbling his approval sounds from beneath me.

Declan. He's the one who was responsible for the cold.

I sense more than feel Luca move away from me and don't know what to expect next. My body is wired like a tightly wound coil. Tense and waiting for their next move. I shiver with anticipation for the next icy sensation to trail over my skin.

Only it doesn't come.

More kisses. More teasing. More touches.

Just as I begin to relax a new sensation is added.

Heat.

Fire.

I have a singular moment of panic and fear at the first drop of molten heat that hits the base of my neck. “Stay with me, Letty.”

Luca.

More drips down my spine, each one dripping before coming to a stop. Unlike the water that continues to roam over my skin, this slows and sticks.

Candle wax.

Luca is my fire and Declan is my ice.

They begin to take turns, alternating the hot and cold without warning. My nerve endings all vibrate at the dichotomy of the sensations, each one making the next more intense. My thighs grow slicker with need, and my legs shake at having to hold my body up. Both men make different sounds of their appreciation.

A dark chuckle when I cry out at the first touch of the ice cube against my neck.

A sigh of delight when I gasp at hot wax sliding between my crease.

“Please,” I finally pant, shaking with the need to be touched more.

The ice cube starts at my knee and begins to slowly ascend. “You need more, pretty girl?”

I nod frantically, barely capable of a cohesive sentence at this point.

The ice reaches the mess between my inner thighs and Declan’s chest rumbles in his approval. “Such a good girl. Needy, desperate, and so wet for us.” It rapidly melts against the heat of my entrance as Declan traces it over my folds, the icy run off adding to the mess and heightening the sensation. Declan presses the ice cube against my clit and I cry out, pain and pleasure mingling in an icy battle for dominance. My clit immediately swells and he backs off, leaving it throbbing and begging for attention.

The cold overwhelms me, even as Luca begins to pour hot liquid into the skin on my back and massages it into my sore muscles. All I can focus on is the cold spreading through my core that somehow makes me feel hotter. Breath escapes me when Declan pushes the ice into my entrance, and the cold seeps into my veins. It's too much and not enough all at once.

"More," I beg, making them both chuckle.

Luca pulls me back from the bed, leaving only my arms and face resting on it. This creates enough space for Declan to slide between my legs and the bed. His cold fingers find one nipple and begin to roll it between them.

Hot liquid pours down the crease of my ass, such a contrast to the iciness in my cunt. I'm a live wire, ready to light up with the right touch. So fucking close I can taste the release on my lips but nothing is enough. Tears wet my cheeks as I beg.

There's a sound I can't place and then cool air blows against my clit and I cry out. It's a different type of cold, not the same icy feeling but familiar all the same. It feels too good for me to even try and think about it though as Declan's hot mouth presses against my clit and begins to devour me.

Right there.

My fists bunch in the comforter and my hips rock into his hot mouth that still somehow sends rushes of cold through me.

Menthol, it hits me. He's chewing gum.

Oh fuck. He slides his fingers alongside the ice into my cunt and I begin to tighten around them. My mind short circuits when Luca begins to press the hot liquid against my ass, getting first his knuckle in and then sliding his finger all the way into the tight channel.

My release crashes into me from every direction and I'm completely lost to the hot and cold sensations as they both fuck me with their fingers, pushing my orgasm higher and longer. Each wave like a kiss of snow followed by the heat of a fire. My body shakes as pleasure takes every thought from

my mind and my body feels wrung out, held up only by their commanding hands.

“So beautiful,” Luca praises, continuing to stretch out my ass, now with the two fingers scissoring the hole.

“Fucking perfect,” Declan agrees, dropping the ice away from me. My cunt feels swollen, the cold remaining even without its presence anymore. I smile even as I pant and try to catch my breath. Hands land on my face, cradling my cheeks as a gentle kiss is pressed against my lips.

The damp blindfold is pushed over my head and falls to the floor, revealing Declan’s handsome and smug face. I can’t help the content smile that spreads across my face as I meet his blue eyes. His blonde hair is getting longer and starting to fall in his face. “You ready to take both of us?” Luca takes that moment to remind me of his presence by twisting his fingers inside my ass and pressing in a third.

A moan is my only answer and Declan smirks. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

He moves away from me and strips his clothes off until he’s as naked as I am. Sitting back on the bed, he spreads his legs wide, his long, hard dick bouncing up to hit his abs. I lick my lips as I stare at the heavy vein begging for attention. He growls as he yanks me toward me. “Next time. Right now I need you to feel me all the way in your soul, pretty girl.”

I yelp and Luca curses as his fingers fall free from me, making Declan laugh. He grips my hips and picks me up easily, settling me on his lap like it’s nothing. I wrap my hand around his hard length and give it a few strokes, loving the way he feels in my hand. So hot, so ready, a drop of precum already leaking from the tip.

Using my thumb, I swipe it up and slip it into my mouth. Declan grins as he watches, entranced by the small movement. He takes control away from me and taps my thigh in a signal to lift. I listen because we want the same thing. Moving high enough to give him space, he moves his erection to my entrance, teasing me by getting it wet, sliding it back and forth through my folds before finally stopping at my entrance. He

holds my gaze as he pushes in, my breathing immediately changes. I spread my knees as I straddle him, lowering myself to take him faster. I sit in his lap, feeling him in every part of me and throw my head back in bliss.

Already, I'm so sensitive, the cold left from the ice finally subsiding and being replaced by the heat that is Declan. I can already feel the beginning of another orgasm building. I start moving my hips, riding him, enraptured by every expression that crosses his face.

Luca's demanding hand lands on the middle of my back, pushing me forward. Declan leans back, taking me with him and takes over the rhythm of fucking me. I run my fingers through Declan's hair and tighten my fingers in it as he lays back and fucks up into me, leaving my ass on display for Luca to begin prepping again.

He's quick and hot and demanding, never letting up, barely letting me breathe as he moves his fingers in and out of my ass, stretching me. When he finally adds more lube and the head of his thick dick presses against the tight ring of muscles, I'm begging for it.

Declan moves up on his elbows, helping prop me up as Luca slowly pushes in. The first few seconds always burns, but as he pushes through the resistance, he slides in and bottoms out. Feeling this full will never get old. It burns away every feeling of loneliness I've ever had. Makes me feel more whole than anything ever has in my life. Fucking complete.

I cry out both of their names as they move in tandem, reading my body perfectly to work together and bring all three of us to new heights. Never doubting for a moment that they know what I need, that they're capable of giving it to me. All I can do is hold on and attempt to breathe the best I can, letting the pleasure they pull from my body wash through me in endless waves.

It would have been impossible to predict how well they work together, how perfectly they balance each other out. Different in every way, opposites, and yet two sides of the

same coin. My fire and my ice. The men who light me and keep me anchored.

My body stiffens and I tighten around them both as I crest that peak, Luca moans behind me and I feel a rush of warmth as he follows after me. Declan slows under me, elongating each stroke as he drags my orgasm out. As my body starts to calm, he picks up the pace and follows after us in a few more strokes.

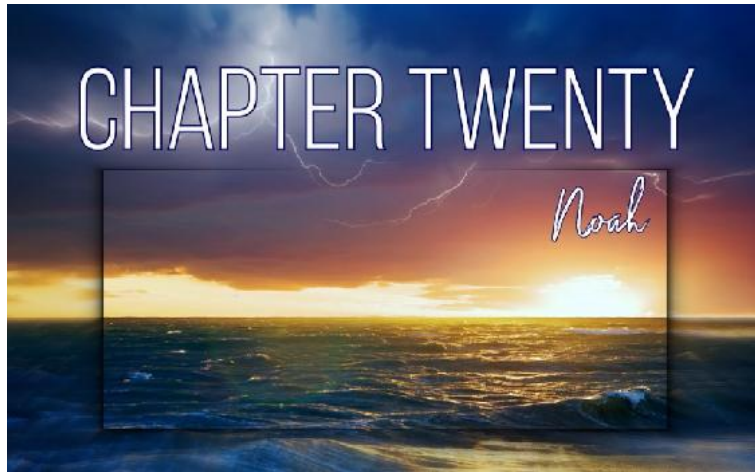
I collapse atop D as Luca pulls out of me. His strong arms wrap around me and he kisses my forehead and Luca walks into his bathroom. I'm not surprised when he's back a moment later with a wet washcloth and begins to clean me up, humming in satisfaction at the mess they've made of me. An even bigger mess than usual.

"Sharing does have its perks," he murmurs as he works. Declan's arms tighten around me, but he doesn't disagree.

A yawn escapes me and my eyes begin to flutter as I fight to keep them open. Sleep has been awful lately, but maybe with my two most possessive men here, I might find a few moments of peace. Declan moves up on the bed, pulling me with him and tucking me in under his covers. I catch Luca's hand in mine as he begins to turn away.

"Stay," I ask softly.

He gives me that little smile he saves only for me. "Of course, Letty." He holds up the wash cloth again and nods to the bathroom and I realize he wasn't turning to leave at all. I relax back into the pillows and drift off to sleep almost instantly.



Chapter Twenty Noah

“BRINGS back memories of the last time you were getting ready for a gala,” I tease Scar.

There are dark circles under her eyes that even her expertly applied makeup can’t quite hide, but her smile soothes some of my worry as she gets a mischievous glint in her eyes. Declan stands in the corner, adjusting his tie, but I catch his smirk.

Charles whips his head back and forth between the three of us, finally landing on Scar. “Do I want to know?”

Declan’s smirk falls off his face and I can’t help that my smile does too. I don’t hate Charles, but I also can’t help but be filled with satisfaction when Luca pushes past him and growls, “Not your business.”

Scar rolls her eyes and flips Luca off behind his back, making me chuckle.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, turning her attention to Charles. “Nothing memorable.”

I snort as Declan stiffens. “Take that back,” he demands, glaring at her.

“Stop being a dick,” she fires back.

“I’ll show you a dick.”

Ryder and I exchange looks and throw our heads back in laughter. It's rare to see Declan acting so childish, even if we're all feeling the same way. Scar has been lighter since allowing Charles back in. We're all grateful for it. There should be no but after that statement. Of course there is though.

Before Scar can say anything snarky back, Joe raises his hands and eyes all of us. "Children, behave." Ryder and I both shut up, but both Scar and Declan begin to grumble. Joe rolls his eyes and mutters something I don't catch under his breath. Don't think I want to know what he says.

Scar walks over to me and begins to fix my tie for me and I forget all about how close she and Charles have gotten. How easily he can make her life better. How quick their bond was able to flare back to life. How he sometimes whispers things to her that take her to a different world, one only the two of them know. It's hard to compete with history. Okay, so maybe the thoughts weren't driven completely from my mind, even with her fingers pressed against my chest.

I force myself to focus only on her. Her gorgeous green eyes, ringed with heavy black, and framed by long, full, dark lashes. The sparkling shadow makes them shine all the brighter. "You look beautiful, baby girl."

She smiles in delight and taps my chest as she finishes with my tie. "And you look very handsome, Handsome."

"Are you ready for tonight?"

Something I don't understand enters her gaze and her eyes flick to where Charles stands. I grit my teeth but don't react otherwise. I know why he had to come, but it doesn't mean any of us are overly fond of how much time has been spent together since he showed up at our house after we got back from Black Hallows last week.

"Yup." The word is far too chirpy for the expression on her face, but now is not the time to push her. Not when we all need to be leaving for the gala in just a little bit. Josie and Tyler know to expect us, but also not to have any contact with us during the party.

Charles will take Ryder in with him. Declan will take Scar once again. His name provides the best cover for her. Kade and I are both entering as waitstaff, though I blend in way easier than he does. And Luca is going in on his own. There will be enough of a mixed crowd at this event that no one should notice an unfamiliar face.

Joe, Ian, and Holden will be watching from the van outside the venue to give us a quick getaway option if things do turn bad. There's a sick feeling in my gut as I remember the last time we were all set up like this. None of us thought it was even possible for someone to recognize Scar, but Charles did.

His father was in that same room. What if he had been the one to hear her laugh and recall her smile? Recognized those green eyes even when every other part of her is completely different from how she used to look? The thought turns my stomach and makes me feel ill. I push a strand of hair behind her ear and kiss her forehead.

It's a different crowd tonight. A different mission.

We aren't here to find the men who abused Scar, we're here to find a lackey. The team they have on Josie, monitoring her moves. At a big event like this, they'd have to be in the room with her to see who she associates with. If she's meeting someone new. It would be the perfect place to stage a meeting without anyone becoming suspicious. Of course, they'll have eyes on her all night.

Probably have for every gala and fundraiser and social event that Josie has been to over the last decade. How else would they be sure she wasn't using the events as a cover to meet with Scar? Or I guess I should say Charlotte. That's who Donahue cares about. Not the woman Scar has become, only the girl she once was.

"I'll be fine," Scar promises, leaning up on her toes to kiss my cheek.

Her words should reassure me, but there's something off about them. There's something in the glint of her eye that tells me I'm missing something. It only makes me feel worse.

She walks away and brushes past a distressed-looking Charles. I eye him up and down, trying to sort out my own feelings when his eyes meet mine. He nods, but he can't hide the way his eyes widened only moments before. He quickly turns away and rushes after Scar.

The bad feeling in my gut gets worse.



LESS THAN AN HOUR into the gala Scar and Luca have already pinpointed two of the members of Donahue's team watching Josie. I walk around the room with another tray of champagne flutes, and spot Scar and Declan making small talk with an older couple. They've positioned themselves next to one of the men and Scar keeps a cool gaze on him even as she giggles at something the older man says to her.

I smother a scoff at the interaction. She's really playing up the innocent, just here as an accessory act of hers. I hate how well it works. No one here sees her for the leader she truly is.

Making another round of the room, I spot a suspicious man in the corner of the room closest to the exit. Moving into the shadows of the staff-only hall, I keep him in my line of sight and study him. His body is rigid, his eyes alert. He's ready to move at a moment's notice. To intercept anyone trying to leave, or follow them.

Josie is standing toward the front of the room, at the bottom of the stage where the speeches should be starting momentarily. She's laughing with Tyler at her side, his arm wrapped possessively around her waist. There's a young man talking to the pair of them, his eyes locked on where Tyler holds her. Is it like that between them? Another situation like Ian and Jade? Has Scar really been playing matchmaker again?

Whoever the guy is, he doesn't find the possibility as funny as I do. Even from here, the way his hand shakes is visible. I'm not the only one watching the interaction either. My friend hiding in the corner has been locked in on the trio the entire time since I've noticed him.

I press my finger against my earpiece and murmur the location of the third man I believe to be watching Josie.

Almost immediately, Luca's voice fills my ear. "Spotted."

Shortly after, Charles agrees, "Three would be the minimum I would expect."

It's been awhile since I've spotted either him or Ryder, but there they are, slowly making their way to my side of the room. I pull back and refill my tray of champagne flutes and head back out to make another round. Charles said at least three, that means there could be more. It's too early to let our guard down now.

Kade stands in the hallway, pulling at his bow tie as I make my way back out. Slapping his hand away from his shirt I point to his nonexistent tray. "What the fuck, dude?"

He rolls his eyes. "This was a stupid idea."

I huff a sigh of annoyance. "You've done far worse. Just grab a tray and pass out appetizers or drinks or something. It gives us the excuse of moving through the room unnoticed."

"I know that," he growls.

I give him a look but don't even bother to point out he's acting out for no reason. He grumbles but stops objecting. "I can't wait to get back to St Graves."

A laugh eddies up without permission. "Don't we all?" I agree.

As soon as I step back into the room, I search out Scar, not even paying attention to the other extravagantly dressed attendees, relieving my tray of glasses at what could be seen as an alarming rate. She's still at Declan's side as she should be, but they're talking to someone different now. A young woman who is looking at D in a way I'm shocked Scar hasn't spilled a drink on her for yet.

To no one's surprise, Scar is quick to guide Declan away from her and they bump directly into Charles and Ryder. Both stop and chat amicably, doing their best to appear as if they

don't know each other, but Charles tenses as he shakes D's hand.

Suddenly, I feel warmth at my side, and look over to find another young woman pressing against me. I smile politely and use the tray to create some distance between us.

“Champagne ma'am?”

She giggles and her hand falls to my forearm. “I'm too young and pretty to be called ma'am.”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Apologies, miss,” I attempt to correct, still trying to extricate my arm from her hold without causing a scene.

She hums and looks up at me through her fluttering eyelashes. “That still seems,” she hesitates, twirling a long lock of blonde hair around her finger, “so impersonal.” She beams up at me and I cough. I'm so far out of my league here.

I lower the tray and step back, forcing her hand to fall away from me. “I need to continue my rounds.” I keep my voice gentle but firm. I have no idea how a normal waiter would respond in this situation, but the best I can do is not cause a scene.

Moving around her, I attempt to continue on my path, but her hand falls on my arm again, almost making me almost drop the tray. I balance it quickly and she gives me a sheepish grin. “Oops.”

Biting my lip, I tamp down a sigh. If Scar sees her, there's no way we're getting out of this gala without causing a scene. Dread builds in my gut at the thought.

“Excuse me, miss, but I really must continue,” I try again.

Her bottom lip juts out in a pout I'm sure she thinks is enticing. It just makes her seem all that much younger to me. “But I want a drink.”

I lift the tray again to her silently and her pout drops, replaced by a satisfied smirk. “Not champagne. I'd like a glass of rosé. Do you know what they have?”

Why me? Why tonight?

My agitation is growing as that knot in my stomach from earlier comes back tenfold.

“Let me go take a look for you,” I offer. Anything to get me out of this situation. I don’t even wait for a response before I head to the staff-only hallway. With any luck, maybe Kade will still be there and scare the girl off for me.

I realize too late that she’s only a step behind me. Since when were such young girls so aggressive? She can’t be over eighteen, yet here we are. In a hallway she has no business being in, pressing her body up against mine. Almost making the tray of drinks topple over once more. I set it down at a table thankfully close by, and wrap my hands around her biceps to gently push her away from me.

Her pout is back almost instantly. I run my hand through my hair and sigh. “There’s no reason for someone as pretty as you are to waste your time on someone like me,” I say, going for the complimentary route. Though at this point, I’d love to be able to just storm off.

Her smirk tells me I’m not getting through to her at all. “Shouldn’t that be for me to decide?” she teases and I want to groan.

“I apologize, but I can’t—”

“There you are,” a familiar and all too-welcome voice calls out, cutting me off. My body sags with relief as Kade saunters over to us. His arm wraps around my waist and I cover all of my surprise as his lips find the top of my head. “Valerie is looking for you, babe. You’re supposed to be doing rounds.”

The young girl’s eyes are wide as she looks back and forth between the two of us, understanding slowly dawning on her naive face. Heat flushes my face, and my cheeks burn. Fucking Kade. Of all the ways he could have extricated me from this situation.

“That’s my fault,” she offers. “Your boyfriend was just checking what rosé you have in the back for me,” she fishes.

Kade chuckles and my blush gets worse as he squeezes me. “You asked the wrong waiter,” he teases. “My husband

knows nothing of good wine. I can bring you a glass of La Grande Dame if that suits your taste?"

She eyes him up and down, weighing his words before giving him an embarrassed smile. "That would be fabulous, thank you." Fucking finally, she spins on her heel and heads back to the gala.

I groan and sag against the wall. "I fucking hate you," I say half-heartedly to Kade.

He gives me his signature dopey grin. "No, you don't. You never would have been able to get out of that by yourself, husband."

I roll my eyes, but can't deny his accusation. "Did you really have to go that route?"

He shrugs. "She seemed the persistent type."

I scoff, that's one way to put it. Even with her gone though, the sinking feeling in my stomach hasn't disappeared. "You go get that drink, I'm going to head back out. I'm feeling uneasy."

His jaw locks and his eyes harden. "You too?"

I give him a clipped nod. "Feels like we're missing something." His steps are hurried as he turns away from me and I follow suit, stepping back into the ballroom with my tray once more.

Josie and Tyler are still near the front. Luca isn't too far away from them, his attention locked on one of the marks. The third mark is in the same spot as when I first noticed him. The second one, though, is nowhere to be seen. I make my rounds, continuously surveying the room.

Ryder and Charles are now alone, sitting at a table in the middle of the room. Kade comes back out from the hallway, a glass in hand, as he searches out the girl who accosted me.

Still no sign of Scar, Declan, or our third mark. Did they follow him out for some reason?

Anxiety grows, clawing at my insides as I continue to search. It turns to full panic as I catch sight of Declan. Alone.

A stricken expression on his face as he stares at Kade.

I move quickly, cutting through the crowd as more and more people begin to find their seats and head to the back. Declan catches sight of me and his fingers move to his ear.

“Scarlett followed Kade,” he says through the comms.

I press my own comm. “Hallway, now,” I snap, not bothering to watch any of their reactions. We need eyes on Scar now.

I abandon the tray and begin to pace back and forth as I wait for everyone to meet me. Declan and Luca are the first to appear.

“What the fuck do you mean she followed Kade?” Luca snaps.

Declan runs his hand over his jaw, looking more wild than I’ve ever seen him. “She was worried about Noah and saw Kade following. She was only a few steps behind him.”

“I never even saw her,” Kade says as he walks into the hallway, ripping his bow tie off and throwing it to the floor.

“The second mark is also gone,” I force out in a choked voice.

Their heads snap in my direction. “I couldn’t see him,” I explain. “When I came back out, I had a bad feeling. Everyone else was accounted for except Scar and the second mark.”

Luca’s fist hits a wall, and I almost miss Ryder and Charles showing up. That is until Ryder throws a new body on the ground at our feet. Glass breaks, but it all happens too fast for me to even comprehend what’s happening.

When my brain does finally catch up, Ryder is on the ground atop the man he threw there, a broken champagne flute in his hand pressed against his throat. A jagged edge digs into the fragile skin there, blood drips onto his white shirt.

“You’re not going to open your mouth until I tell you to. Got it?”

The man doesn't react, not even a flinch or a blink. This may be harder than Ryder is anticipating. I look to Declan or Luca to take control, but neither one makes a move to stop him. Both too shocked at the scene in front of them.

"Shake your head yes or no to answer. Lie, and bleed out in this hallway. Open your mouth, and find out what a nightmare really is."

Still no reaction, but no one moves to stop Ryder. Charles stands behind him wringing his hands nervously. He can't be used to this type of thing. I'm not sure I am either. Not like this. Not with Scar missing. Possibly in danger.

Fear shakes me to my core.

"You work for Donahue," Ryder pushes, jumping straight into the heart of his interrogation. The man doesn't nod, but he doesn't need to. His surprise gives away everything we need to know.

Ryder chuckles, a malicious, terrifying sound that grates on my nerve endings. I can't imagine how it must feel to be at the receiving end of it. More blood begins to seep into the man's shirt as he presses the glass into his throat. Dangerously close to his aorta. "Don't even bother answering. We already know."

He tilts his head and smiles sardonically. I can almost see Scar in his expression. It would be horrifying if it wasn't so amusing. I wish I could really enjoy watching this side of Ryder blossom, but the nausea in my gut and the pounding in my head keep me from doing anything but be terrified for Scar. If this is going to get us the answers we need, then by all means. Let the psycho flag fly.

Crossing my arms across my chest, I lean back and let Ryder do his thing. Maybe unhinged is what we need. Better than anything the rest of us were doing.

"You're here watching Josie Turner under his orders." He drags the glass over his throat, slicing open the delicate skin. Enough to make him squirm, but not nearly enough to actually nick the aorta, though he dances right on top of it. "You've been

watching her for years. Reporting who she meets with, where she goes, anything suspicious. Do you even know who or what you're looking for?"

The slightest shake of the man's head makes Ryder laugh again. The cut opens further due to the movement.

"No, you don't know? Or no, you're not watching her?"

The man's eyes widen in panic, the mask he was working so hard to maintain finally cracking under pressure. He doesn't know how to answer.

"You don't know?" Ryder repeats and the man shakes his head, making Ry click his tongue. "Go ahead and use your words now, but be warned, don't waste them or I will rip your vocal cords from your throat." The threatening tone sends shivers down my spine.

"Easy money, you know?" the man stutters. "Watch the girl, report her movements, anyone new she meets with, anyone she talks to at these parties. If she acts like she's hiding something. She likes her routines. The reports are never interesting. It's just an easy job."

Ryder nods along with him, a sadistic gleam growing in his eyes. "How many of you are on this easy job tonight?"

"Three of us," he stammers.

"Names," Ryder demands. Instantly, I have my phone in my hands and take down the names and send them off in a text to Joe. He has all the equipment he needs in the van to run the basic checks on them. I wish I could do more, my fingers itch with the need to be behind my laptop, but there's only so much my phone is capable of.

"What's the report tonight?" Ryder continues.

"I won't say anything about you," he swears, making both Kade and Ryder cackle. He turns white at the menacing sound.

"Before that," Ryder pushes, digging the glass in to remind him of its presence.

"Andre said he saw something suspicious, but I don't know more than that. He said he would follow her and report

back.”

“Follow who?” Ryder’s fist wraps around the blood-soaked collar of his shirt and yanks him off the ground to growl the question.

“Some woman, I don’t know more than that.”

My phone buzzes in my hand at the same time as Ian’s voice comes through the comms. “Andre DeLeon. Just sent his photo and details to Noah. Scar already had us looking into him before she disappeared.” I hold my phone and show it to the rest of the guys. I recognize him instantly as the second mark that disappeared.

“Start running through the footage of the gala,” I tell Joe at the same time Luca nods to Ryder who happily obliges the silent order, slashing the jagged edge of the champagne glass across his throat. Blood spurts from the multiple wounds that shred his throat. He’s dead before his body even hits the floor, the life gone from his eyes before he had a chance to realize this was his end.

Charles clears his throat, wiping the splatter of blood from his face. “Scar wanted me to give you guys a message if she disappeared tonight.” One moment, he’s wringing his hands together nervously, and the next Luca has him pinned against the wall by his throat.

“What the fuck do you know? Did you do this?”

Charles shakes his head rapidly, or as much as he can. He taps Luca’s hand, but he doesn’t relent. Sighing, I step up and place a hand on his shoulder. “Let him answer.” The calm I infuse in my voice is a complete lie. I remember the strange looks between the two of them all day. The feeling like I was missing something. The way her words didn’t put me at ease. That glint in her eye. I knew something was off.

“She said if anything went wrong or if she disappeared, to remind you guys not to panic.”

Declan snorts, encompassing how we are all feeling. As if we wouldn’t.

“And that you guys can track her.”

Air is knocked out of my lungs as I stand stupidly with my mouth open. The panic had taken over, made it hard to breathe, hard to fucking think. All of the guys mirror the same expression back to me. We were all so stuck on the last time she disappeared and we couldn't trace her. Not this time. She's not running. She wouldn't do that to us. Not anymore. Not like this.

I pull up the program on my phone that has all of our locations on it and lock in on hers.

“Let's go.”



Chapter Twenty-One

MY WRISTS STING, but not enough to stop me from pushing the ropes free of the tender skin.

What an idiot. Can't even properly tie someone up. I'd roll my eyes, but that would give too much away. This needs to be timed perfectly if I'm going to manage to still get the answers I need from him.

The clock on the wall behind him tells me I've been gone for just over an hour. The guys must have panicked. It's the only explanation for why they aren't already here. Still, it should only be a few more minutes if Charles did what he was supposed to. I started counting down the moment I was thrown into the back of a car.

Andre DeLeon stands in front of me, pacing with a smug smile on his face as he tries to make a call again. He has no idea who I am. I've at least been able to confirm that much since he grabbed me when I walked out of the ballroom. But I know him.

As soon as I spotted him at the gala, I had Joe running basic background checks. He once worked at one of the shell companies we know Donahue owns and now works for Mending Hearts. He has a position that, while not directly under Josie, is close enough that he has reason to be near her at all times. Has access to her schedule. Her emails. There's no denying he's Donahue's main set of eyes on her. The man he

has trusted the most with monitoring her and reporting everything he deems vital. He may be unaware of the true nature of his search, that he's looking for Charlotte Devereux, but he's not clueless to the empire Donahue has behind him.

He hangs up the phone and shoves it into his pocket, his frustration boiling over. His earlier excitement is dissipating, now that his calls are going unanswered and this won't be the simple drop off he had anticipated.

The messages he's left and the short conversation he had with someone else has told me that much. I hadn't been sure that slipping Josie a note when the guys weren't paying attention would be enough to do more than draw his attention. The tail when I gave him the opportunity was a given, but the kidnapping was not wholly expected.

Of course, I had planned for it. I just didn't think he would take the bait so easily. That is until he revealed if it was a dead end with Donahue's obscure mission for him, selling me into the skin market was still money in his pocket.

Just how many women have fallen prey to this same scheme of appearing suspicious?

"What should I do with you while we wait?" he asks menacingly.

I keep my mouth shut, but the look in my eyes dares him to try it.

I know my men. Trust them. They'll be here before he can even lay a finger on me.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the door crashes open and a blur that can only be Luca launches across the room and rips Andre away from me and throws him into a wall, holding him there by his throat.

Declan and Noah rush into the room behind him, running directly toward me. Noah reaches me first and drops to his knees at my side.

"Right on time." I beam up at them.

“Baby girl, you are in so much trouble,” he growls. I lift my arms above my head and stretch, rubbing at my sensitive wrists.

Declan narrows his eyes. “You weren’t even tied up?”

I tilt my head. “I was, just not well.”

Ryder chuckles from the doorway and I smile at him, before doing a double take. They’re all soaked in blood. I move in front of Ryder and swipe my finger through the blood on his skin that hasn’t had the time to completely dry yet. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“What plan?” Kade snaps, leveling me with a glare.

“Hey, you can’t kill him yet,” I curse at Luca as I realize Andre is starting to turn a very unattractive shade of blue.

“Did you guys kill both of the other marks?”

“What plan, Scarlett?” Declan growls from behind me.

I wave him off. “Did you kill them or not?” I ask Ryder directly. He’s the most likely to give me answers. He also has the most blood on him. He nods, daring me to yell at him over it. I raise my brows as surprise filters through me. He never gives me attitude. That’s more Kade and Luca, Declan maybe, sometimes even Noah, but never Ryder.

“You went rogue again,” Kade accuses.

I roll my eyes and flip my hair over my shoulder and adjust this obnoxious dress. “Did not. You all were part of my plan. You guys are the ones who went rogue,” I accuse right back, eyeing the blood that splatters them.

“What fucking plan, Letty?” Luca demands this time.

Damn. Testy motherfuckers.

“I didn’t know if he would take the bait,” I finally answer, shrugging my shoulders to dismiss the statement.

A quiet curse breaks the deafening silence in the room and Charles pins me with a heated stare. “You didn’t tell me you were going to use yourself as fucking bait.”

All eyes swing towards him before coming back to me.

“You planned this ahead of time,” Noah says and I can see all the pieces clicking together in his head and grimace. Oh shit. I’m in trouble. I kind of thought I’d be able to play it off like a last minute decision.

Fucking Charles.

I glare at him but he immediately starts shaking his head. “Oh, hell no, Scar. Don’t give me that look. You know I never would have agreed if I knew this was your crazy ass plan.”

“None of us would have,” Kade reiterates.

Fuck me. It’s bad when they can all put aside their differences to gang up on me.

“I was just prepared for it to happen. The goal was just to find out if he even knew what he was looking for. What the protocol was when he did find something suspicious,” I defend.

“Alone?” Declan growls.

“I wasn’t really alone,” I argue. “I knew you guys were coming.”

“What if we were late?” he demands.

I roll my eyes. “I’m not exactly a damsel,” I remind him, tossing my blade up in the air and catch it deftly. “He didn’t even search me for weapons or know how to tie a proper knot. I was never in any real danger.”

“It was a fucking gamble, Letty,” Luca curses, taking his anger out on Andre and slamming him against the wall again. I bite my tongue and decide not to call him out on it. “The kind of gamble you swore not to take anymore.”

Guilt begins to creep up my spine. A part of me knew this plan would upset them, but I was confident that it wasn’t actually reckless. Which is what my promise was actually about. Somehow I get the feeling trying to split hairs here will just land me in more trouble.

“Well, I did get some answers,” I offer as a white flag. The looks on their faces tell me this discussion is far from over, but at the very least we might be able to put a pin in it for now. “He calls someone when he has information and gets a location to drop it off.”

Ryder runs his tongue over his teeth, a manic light in his eyes. “So this isn’t the final destination?”

I shake my head. “He was waiting for a call back. But it seems there are a few possibilities that he normally drops intel off at.”

“The same ones?” Luca asks. Unsure if he’s asking me or the man hanging from his hands, I just shrug and point at him. Luca gives him a little shake and it does funny things to my insides that a therapist would probably be worried about.

Declan gives me a knowing look and I stick my tongue out at him, making his jaw lock. Oof. He’s still mad-mad.

My sanity might be breaking just a little bit after all, now that I think about it, because I really want to push him. Push all of them. Yeah, a therapist would probably have a lot to say about a lot of the decisions I’ve made today.

“Yes,” Andre stutters, transfixed on the blood that splatters over Luca’s skin. I tilt my head and try to find that place of peace in my mind, where I have total control, where I can push out all of the emotions, turn them off and turn into cold steel.

I shake my head and stretch my arms in front of me. I can’t find it. Can’t turn it off.

There’s an unfamiliar energy bubbling up from deep inside me, crashing through my body and making my thoughts and nerves go haywire. Surprisingly, it’s not unpleasant. It almost makes me feel powerful, invigorated, dominant.

Energy and elation soar through me, but where my usual steadfast control in these situations quiets my chaos, this feeling emboldens it. Makes the thrum in my veins and the pounding of my heart intensify, creating a roar in my ears as waves of emotions crash through me. It makes me feel invincible, unstoppable.

My hands shake at my sides, not in fear or anxiety, but I can't say why either. The sensation is both new and somewhat familiar, but I can't place where I know it from. When I've experienced this type of chaos in my mind before. Understanding my thoughts are erratic and not wholly mine, yet not being able to care enough to find that peace.

For the first time in a long time, I don't trust myself.

Hands wrap around both of mine. Declan on one side and Noah on the other. Their eyes are filled with hesitation and concern. Declan slips the knife out of my hand and slips it into his pocket without a word. Relief and anger pour through me in equal measures at the move. I shake my head trying to clear the confusion. Am I finally losing my mind?

The thought makes me laugh.

More concern. In every single set of eyes as they turn my way. Heavy stares that weigh on me with the emotion ricocheting through them. Pressure builds in my chest and it's all too much. My mind screams and my fingers twitch. The manic energy demands to be set free, to be fed blood, to finally have the answers that will lead us down the next step on my path to revenge.

My hands begin to ache and I look down to find Noah's grip has tightened on me, his eyes pleading for me to clear the haze and come back to him. The same understanding and plea shines in Declan's eyes on my other side.

I wrap my fingers around their hands and squeeze back gently. I'm still here. I haven't lost my mind. Yet. My anchor and my peace are here, keeping me tethered to reality while reminding me what calm feels like. I grip their hands tighter and they both step closer to me. Their tall bodies should overwhelm me as they bracket my sides, towering over me with their shoulders pressed against mine, but instead I find just a bit of that comfort, that control again. Not enough to begin to trust myself again, but enough to remember why I can't.

These situations, runs, missions, recon, every step that we've taken down this path has been methodical. We don't

gather intel recklessly without intention. There's a method to our madness. A control in our chaos.

I've been reckless with my safety, but never with the job. It always gets done. Gets done right. But as I stare at Andre shaking in Luca's hands, all I want is his blood. I want him dead. I crave to feel the blood against my skin, to feel my blade slide smoothly into his flesh, to hear his cries as he begs for a mercy that will never come. There's no control here, no method in this state. Just chaos and madness.

That's all that's left of me.

I lost control with Romano and I haven't been able to find it since.

Tears spring to my eyes and heavy arms wrap around me, one around my waist and one over my shoulders. They bring me comfort but the familiar control I've held onto is still nowhere to be found. There's only one choice left to be made, to give up control, to step back, to let them lead and accept that I am unable to. Not like this, not right now.

Declan understands with a single look and some of the fear is chased away as Noah presses a kiss against my hair. "We've got you, baby girl."

A silent exchange happens between Luca and Declan and relief pours through me at the savage grin that spreads across Luca's face when understanding takes root. He's going to enjoy extracting payment for every second of fear he had to experience at my disappearance in the blood of the man who took me.

Why did I ever think it would be okay? That they would be okay with this plan? I know them better than to think that. Of course they would panic and fear what had happened to me.

Guilt begins to churn in my stomach. I fucked up. Again.

Reality begins to seep in and I can't quite understand my own thoughts from just a few moments ago. I've never felt quite like this. Lost and confused, but different.

Luca throws Andre into a chair and Kade materializes at his side, a knife already in hand as he stares down at Andre,

taunting him with a malicious gleam in his eyes.

“Let’s start by showing you how to properly secure someone to a chair, shall we?” Luca says casually as he begins to tie Andre’s hands and feet down. He struggles to fight against him, but Kade is ready and already holding him in place gleefully before he can make any real effort to escape.

“It’s too bad you won’t ever be able to utilize this lesson,” Kade taunts. For all their fear and anger, neither one of them struggles to find their control as they methodically torture Andre. Taking turns without ever having to speak a word of their plan to each other. When one steps back, the other is already there to take his place, inflicting the next precise wound. Each one more painful than the last, all without a single question being asked.

They want to break him, make him desperate for relief, for just a small break in the neverending pain. So when they offer him the chance, he’ll take it. The more he talks, the longer his break will be. What better way to get him to spill all of the secrets he’s collected over the last eight years?

My mouth parts open as I watch them, entranced by the show they’re putting on. I fidget, wanting to be a part of it, wanting to be next to them, claiming my own pound of flesh. My mind is still not my own, not completely. I can’t trust that I wouldn’t just kill him too soon like I did with Romano.

A new feeling begins to stir, overpowering the conflicting emotions. I shift between Noah and Declan, needing their warmth and strength like I need oxygen to breathe. Ryder whispers something in Charles’ ear and is met with first confusion and then exasperation before Charles turns to leave the room, winking at me as he leaves.

I don’t have time to work out what just happened before I’m distracted by the heat radiating from behind me and Ryder whispers in my ear, “You have a wild look in your eyes, Scar.”

I nod, knowing that I can’t deny it. They know me far too well to not see the storm brewing in my eyes, to feel the chaos I can’t control seeping out of me.

“It reminds me of something,” he continues. I feel more than see Declan and Noah looking at him, but neither stops him.

I lick my lips, trying to add moisture to the sudden dryness of my mouth. “What?”

His chest rumbles as he wraps his arms around my waist from behind, not pushing Declan or Noah away, just adding himself to the mix. “When I was having my adrenaline crash. That’s what you remind me of right now. Lost in the havoc of your own mind, dazed by the intensity of tumultuous feelings.” His fingers stroke over the clingy fabric of my dress on my stomach and my breath gets caught in my throat. “Do you remember how you brought me back?” I nod slowly, unable to form words as the heat in my belly grows into a raging inferno of need. “He can see you here. I don’t care if he will be dead before I’m done with you, he doesn’t get to see your desire. That is ours and ours alone.” His voice is a low growl in my ear, words meant for me and me alone.

The three of them move me effortlessly across the room until we stand behind Andre where he can no longer see me, but Luca and Kade have a clear view. The expressions on their faces as they enact our form of justice sends a shiver down my spine. There is no scarier monster than man, and my men are the fiercest of them all. Of course, it’s not fear that sends tingles through my body.

Ryder’s hand slips under the slit of my dress and begins to caress my thigh, teasing me with his touch. Kade smirks as he watches me closely, his eyes blazing with desire. The room pulses with lust and violence, a heady mix that drives every thought out of my head. Noah’s lips press against my throat, my pulse beats rapidly under his touch.

“Look at the way they get justice for you,” he whispers in my ear. As if in response, Luca drags his blade across Andre’s chest in a vicious slash. He grunts under the pain, but Kade shuts him up with a fist to the face.

I begin to pant as Ryder trails closer and closer to where I really want him, his fingers brushing against the edge of my

panties. Declan grips my cheeks in his hands and forces me to look at him. “He doesn’t get to see you, and he doesn’t get to hear you either.”

Ryder hums in agreement. “One sound and we stop, Scar,” he whispers. “Don’t make us stop.” His fingers slip under my underwear and are quick to find my clit, brushing over it in barely there pressure. A needy moan builds in my throat, but I force myself to swallow it down. My teeth sink into my lip as I force myself to be quiet.

One of the guys unzips my dress just enough to slip the straps off my shoulders and expose my breasts. Declan moves in front of me, taking my tits in his hands and roughly rolling my nipples. Ryder increases the pressure of his fingers, swirling through the mess between my thighs without giving me any real relief. Just enough to make me desperate for more.

“You’re gonna be such a good girl for us, aren’t you, baby girl?”

I nod frantically. Noah grins as he pulls my lower lip out from my teeth. “Of course you are,” he says just before he lowers his lips to mine and steals the breath from my lungs. I couldn’t make a sound even if I wanted to. My head spins as I kiss him back, letting all three of them move my body in every which way they desire to. I give up control completely, trusting them to know what I need far more than I could in this moment. All the while, watching Kade and Luca continue their torture.

Noah pulls away from me, replacing his lips with his hand to keep me silent. Declan drops to his knees and lifts my dress until it’s bunched around my waist. Ryder’s fingers slip inside my entrance and begin thrusting in and out of me, scissoring as he goes. It takes all of my concentration to not make a single sound and I almost fail when Declan’s tongue is added to the mix, set on torturing me. He traces tight circles around my clit until my legs are shaking.

Luca’s eyes lock on mine and his eyes heat with equal parts anger and desire. His attacks on Andre became more frequent and brutal with every nick of the blade against him. He

looks like a monster come to life, a dark force you have no choice but to succumb to. Nothing in the world could force me to look away from the blood he draws from Andre in the name of getting me answers.

Kade is another type of beast altogether. Larger than life, with fists that should be considered lethal weapons on their own. He's never needed a weapon to be deadly.

The two of them work together seamlessly, anticipating the other's moves and needs. Reading their body language and knowing from years of history when to let the other take the lead. It's a beautiful and magical thing to watch, their partnership. It reminds me of how their friendship has survived for so long, endured the turmoil that I caused between them.

Kade breaks his ribs one by one with deadly accurate punches before moving on to his fingers. Luca carves him up in between the beatings. Clean slices across his chest and face, long gashes over his arms, and huge chunks of flesh ripped from his thighs.

Blood spills freely over the floor under the chair and Andre is no longer hiding his desperation. I can hear the tears in his voice as he begs for them to just tell them what they want from him. I smile behind Noah's hands. Of course their plan is working flawlessly.

"Let's have a race," Noah whispers in my ear. "Who will get what they want first? Your answers or your come?"

My legs shake so hard, the only thing that saves me from falling is Noah's tight grip on me. He lifts me up and spreads my legs wide open. Giving Declan easier access and Kade and Luca a clear view of everything they're doing to me.

"Don't forget to stay quiet," Declan taunts before diving back and pulling my clit between his lips and sucking hard. Ryder's fingers slip free from me and he disappears from where he was pressed against me. There's no chance to miss him before hands find my ass and begin to massage the cheeks, a finger teasing the rim of my hole as it passes. I shudder in their arms and the only thing that's keeping me

quiet is the threat of them stopping this just as we're getting started. Pleasure wracks through my body in a way that makes it hard to keep my train of thought on anything but how good they feel. Still, I can't tear my eyes away from the scene in front of me.

Luca and Kade begin to ask their questions. Our questions. Andre is as desperate for relief as I am for totally opposing reasons. As I stay quiet for mine, answers begin to spill from his lips as easily as the blood that pours from his body. Kade wears a sadistic and satisfied smile as he presses down on one of the ribs he's already broken.

It must be the broken and brutalized part of my soul that loves this smile of his. The way I know he's wearing it just for me. It's blinding in its beauty yet born from the darkest parts of his soul. The part that matches mine. The part that craves violence and blood.

His smile widens as Andre squeals like a bitch and I can't help but match Kade's expression. As if he can feel the appreciation in my grin, his green eyes flick up to meet mine. A heady weight there as he dances his fingers over the bones he's already broken and watches as Declan devours my cunt.

It's a song and dance we've never played before, but feels like we've been here a million times before. Our whole souls bared to each other in a place where almost no one else would understand.

Ryder's finger presses against my ass and slowly works his way in. My mouth parts open but there's a challenge in Kade's eyes as he snaps another finger on Andre's hand.

Don't make a sound.

I bear down and Ryder pushes his finger all the way, slowly moving it to stretch me out. My attention is pulled in too many directions. The delicious sting in my ass. The overwhelming pleasure in my cunt and throbbing of my clit. And the sick satisfaction as Kade steps back, his eyes never leaving mine and Luca steps up, brandishing his blade.

Luca asks another question and before he can even finish it, information is spilling out of Andre's mouth. Too much for me to even try and process as Declan picks up the tempo and slides two fingers into my pulsing pussy. He and Ryder find a rhythm as they begin to fuck me with tongues and fingers and each passing moment gets harder to keep from any sounds spilling free.

Anxiety begins to hum in my veins as all my focus goes to staying silent and I miss everything about Andre other than the pain they inflict in my name.

"Shh, baby girl," Noah growls behind me. His nose runs up my throat until his lips find my ears. "Trust us. We will take care of this fucker." I can't speak, if I open my mouth the only thing coming is moans of their names. Maybe screams by this point. Noah doesn't need my words though. He already knows what I'm worried about. "We'll take care of the next steps too. Don't worry. I've heard every single detail this slimy bastard has already given up. It's locked in a vault and I won't ever forget. You can trust us."

I manage the barest of nods, but even that much communication feels almost impossible and Declan and Ry make it their mission to fuck me up, increasing their pace as I squeeze around them. Tears prick at my eyes at the intense concentration of not making a single sound.

More blood pours as Luca digs his knife into Andre's shoulder. He and Kade are having a silent conversation as they stare down at Andre's beaten form. Fuck, everything feels so goddamn good it almost hurts. Luca nods and Kade grins savagely, looking up to catch my eye once more.

I feel Noah move behind me. Not a huge motion, but something. I don't understand it, but before I can think about it more, his lips press against my ear. "Come on, baby girl. Let go."

Like a magic spell, the command in his words drives my need higher. My brain shuts off and all that's left of me is the heady sensation of being thoroughly fucked. Ryder adds a second finger into my ass without warning and that alone

almost makes me scream. I have to sink my teeth into my lip to suppress the moan, but even with that a little slips out.

Kade's dark chuckle draws my attention. I don't know when it happened, but he has Luca's knife in his hand. It makes no sense. He has his own blades. It isn't in his hand for long though. Before my mind can comprehend what's happening, the blade is sticking out of Andre's ear. Luca reappears, another blade in his hand. He grins at me darkly as he mimics Kade's action, embedding the blade into Andre's other ear.

"He can't hear you now," Kade whispers with satisfaction.

My body coils tightly as fingers fuck in and out of both my holes, filling me in the best way. The pressure is mind-blowing as they work together.

"Scream for me, Letty," Luca draws.

Declan bites down on my clit.

Noah laughs in my ear before catching my earlobe between his teeth.

I implode.

My body shakes as my orgasm overtakes every thought and feeling I've ever had. There's nothing but pure bliss as wave after wave crashes through me. My eyes squeeze shut and my throat burns with the scream I release and my come drenches Declan's face and my thighs.

A smug smirk rests on D's face as he looks up at me. "That's my pretty girl."

The heavy atmosphere that hangs in the room breaks at his words and laughter begins to spill out of me. It doesn't take long before they all join me. Tears stream down my face and Noah cradles me to his chest as I finally come down from the high only they create.

A soft kiss is pressed against my forehead and my tears slow. "Let's get you home, baby girl." Noah's soft voice is so much gentler than the one he used to tease me only moments ago.

I lift my eyes once more as Noah begins to carry me out of the room and take in the brutal scene we're leaving behind. Andre's beaten and torn-apart body tells a very vivid story. One of torture and pain. One most people would be sick to find themselves in the middle of. To me, to us, it just leads to my salvation. The excited buzz that runs through the guys tells me I'm not the only one excited about the intel they collected.

"Don't worry, Letty," Luca soothes as my eyes rove over the dead body. "We got everything we needed from him."

I hum at his words, looking at all their eager faces once more. "You know you're going to have to fill me in on everything, right? I was a little distracted."

"Dickstrated," Kade faux coughs and I roll my eyes even as I smirk at him.

Before I can form my own retort, Ry kisses the top of my head. "Anything you say, boss lady."

Luca gives a sharp nod before leading us to the car. As soon as we are safely headed back to our hotel, they all take turns sharing the new information they'd been able to pry from Andre before his death. The rest of the ride is spent planning how to use it to our best advantage now that we know all of his drop-off locations.

My brain moves slower as they toss out their ideas and plot together. There's an answer just out of my reach that I can't seem to grasp. A way to finally end this buried in the intel we received. But my doubts won't stop peeking through the cloud of hope I'm trying to float on. Can it really be this easy? After all these years are we really going to find my answers in some random drop-off location we gained from a lackey? It seems impossible.



Chapter Twenty-Two Scar

MY BODY ACHES in the most delicious of ways. The jitters from earlier have finally subsided and clarity has cleared the last of the daze I've been in for the past several days.

Looking back, I can recognize the odd thought patterns, the irregular behavior, the inability to sleep, but while going through it I couldn't see just how off I was. How out of sorts I felt until I started to regulate again. It's a new and disorienting feeling.

Kade and Luca lead us down the hallway and push open the door to the hotel room, barely having to stop. Declan and Noah are right behind me, practically touching my shoulders with theirs as if they need to be concerned about me trying to bolt. I'd roll my eyes, but I can't exactly blame them after the stunt I pulled today. At least they weren't too furious.

I push through the guys and my weird mood evaporates when I catch sight of Josie sitting on the couch, looking out the window. She jumps to her feet as soon as she sees me and we both throw ourselves at the other, laughing.

Her eyes shine with moisture and I cock my head in confusion. She releases me from her hug and lands a resounding slap on my ass. "You weren't supposed to disappear!"

I cringe at the rebuke. Apparently I'm not done being raked over the coals for the decisions I've made today. "It all worked out," I say, adopting a casual air I don't feel. Several grunts behind me tell me the guys aren't quite as over it as I may have thought. Maybe torture and orgasms weren't enough to make my mistake disappear. Who would have thought? It probably would have worked on me.

Josie's eyes travel past me and she smirks and huffs a near-silent laugh. Charles gives her an awkward wave and half smile, clearly not knowing how she's going to respond to his being here. Josie may not have been in a high position at our high school, but she never let that stop her from doing her damn best to defend me during the worst days of my life.

"Never thought I'd see the two of you in the same room again." She gives me an appraising look. "And so cordial too."

I wave away her words. "People grow up, new truths come to light, yada yada."

Charles hangs his head in shame. He takes a deep breath and meets her eyes, a sincerity burning in his gaze I know for a fact wasn't there when he had this conversation with the guys.

"If I had the power back then to do more, I would have. I swear, even when it didn't look like it, I was always doing my best to protect her."

Josie walks up to him, her heels clacking against the tile of the entryway. I should really get her and Rachel together. We could probably plan world domination between us. She pats him on the cheek. "It is quite nice to discover you aren't the monster douche canoe we once thought you were."

I can't help the snort that escapes me. I don't know what's funnier, the fact that the always eloquent Josie just said monster douche canoe, or Charles' face when she did.

The guys all break up into different conversations, breaking the moment up. A slight tremble begins in my fingers and they twitch with the craving of control and the sweet burn of nicotine. As everyone begins to split up into jobs now that

we have new intel, I decide to slip into the adjoining room and finally change out of this dress. Luca has this under control, they don't need me for now. At least not until I can pin down the sense of unease in my gut.

After changing into comfier clothes, I sneak out onto the balcony with my old lucky lighter and a pack of cigarettes. Somehow, I don't think one will be enough to settle the riotous emotions building in me.

It doesn't even surprise me when Josie plops down beside me before I even have the chance to light my first cigarette. She eyes it distastefully, but I don't react as I lift it to my lips, inhaling deeply as I hold the lighter to the tip of it.

She waits for me to take several inhales and exhale the light clouds of smoke. My eyes focus on the wisps as they ascend above us, floating away into nothing and disappearing. For so long I wished to follow those wisps and escape into the nothingness. Wished that the fire had destroyed what was left of me.

Was the girl who made that decision today the same girl who wished for that? Or was it something different? Some new part of myself I don't understand? I don't know what's more terrifying to me.

“What has you feeling out of control?”

I flick the ash off the end of my cigarette and roll the smoke over my tongue, slowly exhaling it before I answer Josie, “I fucked up.”

She nods, not even bothering to try and console me that it wasn't that bad. “It's not the first time,” she points out. Some may think she's teasing, but we know each other better than that. She knows I'm not one to wallow in my own mistakes.

“I thought I was past these types of fuck ups.” An arched brow pushes me to keep explaining. “The reckless, putting myself in danger, not caring if I live or die types of mistakes.”

“Is that what this was?”

Her soft, soothing voice makes the tension ease out of my shoulders as I drop the defensiveness as I fully consider her

question. It isn't until I'm halfway through my second cigarette that I finally respond, "I don't know."

She claps her hands together, never fazed by anything I throw at her. After all these years, I should know she's as solid as they come. An unmovable rock that will forever be on my side, and yet she still surprises me. She doesn't fit in this life. The blood and greed and mayhem we're surrounded with. She's the light at the end of the dark tunnel, the path to a better life, the hope people like me cling to on our very worst days. Yet, she's as infallible as ever.

"Then let's go through it." Her tone is far too cheery for the subject matter and my expression must say my thoughts because she flips me off. "Come on, it'll help. Tell me about a time that you made choices that weren't in your best interest. Other than today."

It doesn't take long to come up with the day I hid the fact I had been shot in the arm while we were saving Roe. She glares at me as I fess up to the incident that hadn't reached her ears, but she doesn't lecture me.

"What was the thought process behind that?"

I take a moment to reflect back on those moments, the pain in my arm, the slickness of the blood seeping into my clothes and running down my skin, the weight of my baby girl in my arms for the first time. "I knew I could handle the pain and blood loss more than she could handle her fear. She was more important to me, even then. It didn't matter if it hurt me in the long run, as long as she was okay, as long as she was safe. It was easy to just push through."

She tilts her head to the side as she studies me. "Would you make the same call now?"

I chew my lip and put out the butt of my cigarette but don't reach for a new one. At least not yet. "Probably," I admit. "I'll always put that little girl's needs above my own and she needed me in that moment even if I was hurting." Before she can chastise me, I put up my hands in my defense. "But I would come clean as soon as we were in the tunnels. Instead of running injured, I would have asked Luca and Kade to take

the few minutes it would take to patch me up to minimize the damage it inflicted on me. At least mitigate some of the blood loss.”

She scoffs. “At least that’s somewhat rational.” I don’t have anything to say to that. I have a hard time believing any mom would do anything different. We aren’t rational about our kids and that girl was my daughter from the moment I laid my eyes on her, even if I didn’t know it right away. “Why didn’t you though? It wouldn’t have hurt her to wait for just a few minutes, like you said.”

The answer weighs heavily on me and brings up an old sense of guilt. “I just didn’t care enough.”

“About yourself?” she clarifies and I nod. The agreement sits thickly between us. Her voice is just above a whisper, the emotion evident in the husk it takes as she continues. “And what about today? What was running through your head when you decided to use yourself as bait? Noah said you kept referring to a plan, but it was one only you knew. That’s not like you.”

“I know,” I whisper back. Confusion and anguish at the distress I caused them drowning me. “A lot was running through my head. A lot,” I admit. “This fear that even if we went to the party and found your tails, it wouldn’t lead anywhere. That someone else would recognize me and my cover would be blown and I wouldn’t get to have my revenge on my terms. Hope that answers were just at the tip of my fingers. Anger that Romano had them and I killed him in a rage. Guilt that I lost control.”

“Did you think using yourself as bait would help you regain that control?”

My head aches as I try to sort through everything that was running through my brain and try to explain it in a way that makes sense. An impossible task when I consider how fast and erratic the thoughts were.

“Maybe?” I shake my head. “It was this fleeting thought that just crossed through my mind, and then before I knew it I recognized an opportunity to put it into action and I didn’t

hesitate. I was already tied up in his back seat before I even really realized what I had done.”

She shudders and I know she’s doing her best to push away her own fear at my impulsivity. “And when you were tied up in his back seat, were you scared?”

I shrug as I check my nails. I don’t think she’s going to like my answer. “Not really.”

“Why?”

My fingers twitch and I crave another cigarette. “I knew I was stronger than him. Knew I could escape at any time I wanted.”

“And why didn’t you?”

I cave and pull out another cigarette and light it up. It’s a twisted logic that ran through my head, but it still makes sense to me, even if it was the wrong call. “I trusted the guys to find me and knew there were answers to be found right where I was.”

She claps her hands together again. “Well, there you go.” She rolls her eyes at my silence. “While reckless and stupid and dangerous, it wasn’t out of a passive suicidalness. It wasn’t because you didn’t care what happened to you, you just got so lost in the big picture you didn’t take into account the step-by-step of how to get there.”

I exhale slowly, thinking about her words. “So I’m not suicidal, just stupid?”

She clicks her tongue. “You said it, not me.”

We both break our serious expressions and burst out laughing. Some of my agitation eases but I can’t help but still overthink the whole thing.

Josie sombers as she watches me. “In all seriousness, I think the problem is something different. Something you’ve probably experienced but never had the tools to truly realize how out of sorts you were feeling because you didn’t have a good baseline of emotions and now you do.” She taps her fingers on the side of the wicker loveseat we’re sitting on.

“I’m not a therapist, but I think you were having something like a manic episode.”

I sit back in the chair and focus on the smoke again. I’m not a therapist either, but I know a bit about mania. It can be associated with a few different disorders, but I’m not an expert in any way, shape, or form. “Maybe,” I concede.

“Would you ever consider talking to someone?”

I give her a droll look. “And how would that therapy session go? I was feeling a little amped up from not being able to kill my abusers fast enough so I hunted their minions down and tortured them for hours while three of my boyfriends made me orgasm multiple times?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Probably too much information, even for me.”

“You know how I feel about therapy. It really helps so many of the victims we’ve saved.” She nods her agreement. “But there’s always the exception. I’ve gone too far into the shadows to try and heal the healthy way now. I don’t think murdering people will ever be an acceptable coping mechanism.”

“Fair enough,” Josie concedes and we both burst into laughter again before slipping into a comfortable silence. Her theory makes sense, and while new and still unsettling it’s something I can handle. Something to look into and learn about. I don’t feel as lost anymore.

The door slides open and my brows furrow when it’s Tyler instead of one of my guys.

“Hey, Ty.” Josie smiles as she squeezes my knee. “I was just about to head in.”

He pulls out a cigarette from behind his ear. “Was just coming out for a smoke.” She gets up and heads inside while he plops down beside me, lighting up. I follow suit as I watch Josie close the door behind her. His eyes don’t follow her.

“Thought you might be into Josie for a second there,” I admit.

Ty snorts and gives me an exasperated look. “What made you think that?”

I shrug and inhale slowly. The burn is not as satisfying now that I’ve calmed down but there’s still a certain peace I can only find with my lungs full of the poison smoke. “You were so eager to take this job and then at the gala you had your hands all over her.”

He laughs wryly, not giving much away. He’s always been the most closed off of our not-so-little group. Almost as much as Mikey when I first met him. Though I don’t think anyone can master that level of stone-faced fuck-offness.

“We thought a lover was a better cover than just an ordinary employee. It means I can be seen coming in and out of her house without causing issues. It’s made for some interesting office gossip, but Josie finds it all amusing so we’ve rolled with it.”

Makes sense. Behind closed doors, I haven’t gotten any vibes from either of them like when we were at the gala. That’s good, I can’t quite picture the two of them together. They’re both too introverted. Tyler needs a girl that’s loud and full of life and sass and fire. Someone who will go toe-to-toe with him and challenge him to open up and relax.

Josie, on the other hand, needs someone that can be laid-back and easygoing. Someone that will teach her how to de-stress and unwind without cooping herself up in her house all weekend. She needs someone who will make her laugh but will never be the loudest person in the room either. Someone to draw her out without overwhelming her. Someone who shows her how much she shines and shines with her.

They both need different things that just don’t fit together. It only leaves one question.

“So why have you been so eager to get out of St Graves? What demons are chasing you?”

He gives me a dry look. “Your demons.”

I cackle. A throw-my-head-back in a body-shaking, soul-deep type of cackle. It feels good even as Tyler looks at me

like I really might have a screw loose. Probably more than a few.

“Obviously,” I agree, wiping my eyes. “But you knew what you were signing up for. We would have let you out at any point if it was too much. You know it too.”

His expression morphs into a somewhat guilty one. “It’s not that. I don’t regret being a Bleeding Rose, Scar. It’s the most secure home I’ve ever found.”

Relief pours through me at his words. I don’t want anyone to be feeling stuck due to obligation. That isn’t what our family is about. “Then why have you been the first to volunteer for every mission out of the city? Here, Black Hallows?”

He finishes his cigarette as he stares over the city below us. After several moments he sighs. “This needs something a little heavier.” He pulls a joint out from his pocket and I arch a brow but it’s only slightly squished. “You in?”

Obviously. It’s been awhile since I’ve smoked anything, but it used to be part of our regular routine. It sounds like exactly what I need to shake off the rest of my heavy mood. I nod as he lights up and we sit together, passing the joint back and forth a couple of times, letting the sweet and thick smoke fill my lungs and holding it until I can no longer stand it. It’s a different type of burn followed by something much sweeter than nicotine alone could ever give me.

By the time Tyler finally answers, I’ve almost forgotten what I had asked. “I have people I need to protect. For a long time, that meant always being at their side. But now...” he trails off.

I get it. “With the devil on our heels, distance is the best protection we can offer them.” I hate how much I really do understand. I always thought Ty’s only family left was his mother. He takes care of her, but I get the feeling she isn’t who he’s talking about. He doesn’t have any kids or siblings. They would have been with Roe and the boys if he did. That leaves only one option.

“Is it a girl?” The weed is going straight to my head and I can’t help but grin as I ask him. I must not be alone in letting the high take over, because Ty is more relaxed than I’ve ever seen him as he groans, putting his face in his hands.

I shoot up, making myself dizzy. “Oh my god, it is.”

He flips me off and takes another hit before passing it back to me. “Yes, she is a girl. My neighbor.” He cuts off my excitement by waving me off. “But not the type of girl you’re thinking of. She’s still a kid. Or at least, she was when I left.”

I hold my tongue, sensing there’s more than what he’s saying. Tyler is the youngest of the crew, if we don’t include Jade.

He checks his phone and sighs. “It’s been over a year since I’ve seen her.” I raise my brows in surprise. Yeah, our fight has dragged out, but he’s been in St Graves plenty over the last year. Why hasn’t he gone back to check on her if he’s so worried? “She’s seventeen now. I missed two of her birthdays,” he says dejectedly, full of self-loathing.

Okay seventeen. Not that far off from Jade after all. I was picturing a child the way he’s talking about her.

“You cut contact completely?” I ask surprised.

He nods. “It was better than risking her being linked back to me. She has more than enough demons chasing her without adding ours. It isn’t just her I need to protect. She’s got younger siblings. Her sister was just a baby when I left her and her mom is useless. They’re the only family I really know. I’d never forgive myself if they got wrapped up in this.”

At least that much I can relate to. “But cutting her off completely?” I can’t help but push. Family isn’t supposed to run away. The guys taught me that. Apparently I have grown after all.

“It was better until we got our situation under control at least. It’s hard to be in the same city, to be so close, and know I can’t go check on them. I can’t reach out to her and risk dragging them into this.”

Fair enough. I would argue that it's probably harder on both of them to do it this way, and we could protect her and her siblings, but it's clear he's made up his mind. I've been where he is before, nothing I say will change his mind.

"Well," I offer, "if you ever change your mind, you know we'll protect your girl."

"She's not my girl," he growls.

"To-ma-to, to-mah, toe." I shrug. They might all be his family, but he's talking mostly about the seventeen-year-old. It says enough to me. At least I know he's not just a creep preying on her, but no way seeing her as a child will last forever. He's going to be in for a rude awakening when he does go back home to find out she grew up without him. "We'll protect her either way."

His body sags. "I know you would, but I'd rather her just not have anything to be protected from in the first place."

"Touche." He puts out the joint as we finish it. We watch the sun rising on the horizon. Our sleep schedules are so fucked up at this point, I have no idea how we will ever regulate them again.

"You know," Ty drawls slowly. "You can't hide forever. They aren't going to let you stay out here forever."

Deny. Deny. Deny.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He scoffs. "Sure. You're definitely unaware you have five, still very angry, boyfriends just waiting for you inside. Even I know their preferred way of working out their anger."

I drop my smile and flip him off. "You're an asshole."

"You already knew that." He grins as the door slides open and I'm quick to jump to my feet as Ryder comes out. Oh shit, my time of hiding is quickly running out. Time to run.

"I was just heading inside," I murmur quickly. "Getting chilly."

"Uh huh," Ryder hums while Tyler cackles. Fucking ass.

I push past Ry and walk into the room and straight up to Charles.

“Charles, just who I wanted to see.”

His eyes widen as I beeline straight for him.

“Oh, I don’t think so, Letty. No more hiding.” Strong arms band around my waist and effortlessly lift me into the air. Next thing I know, I’m ass up with an ass in my face. A nice ass. A very nice ass. But an ass nonetheless. I reach out and pinch it. Hard. Unfortunately, it doesn’t make Luca drop me. Rather, his large palm lands across my ass. Harder.

I yelp. “Put me down, dickhole.”

“No chance, Ladybug,” Kade coos and pats me on the ass. At least he does it much softer than Luca.

“You deserve some punishment, baby girl.”

“Good luck,” Charles taunts and waves as Luca carries me out of the hotel room. I turn my head to find Noah grinning down at me.

“We have our own floor.”

That sounds more like a threat than a promise.



Chapter Twenty-Three Ryder

THE ANGER HAS BEEN REPLACED by something far more potent and dangerous for Scar.

Lust.

It flickers between us all like a live wire, just waiting to detonate. I, personally, can't wait to see the fireworks. They'll be even sweeter knowing each one is charged with the most intense feelings a person can feel. Fear, rage, love, and of course, desire. On top of all that, we're flying high from the success of gaining new intel. Even Scar is still buzzing from earlier.

Her body vibrates as silence reigns in the elevator on our way up to our floor. It was a good call to have our own space this way, gives her no one else to run to. Not that she will want to run for long, or will be able to. I recognize the gleam in Noah's eyes.

Those are his horny boss eyes. Reminds me of the look he had when I walked into the kitchen to find Scar naked and bound to the fridge. I hum to myself as the elevator doors ding and open to the penthouse suite. That little rendezvous was also in the name of punishment.

Scar walks out of the elevator, not hesitating or looking back. I can hardly suppress my anticipation as Noah steps up

right behind her, catching her by her throat. “Strip, baby girl. Don’t make me ask again.”

He doesn’t release her as she begins stripping slowly. Luca and Declan trade looks, but they shrug as they follow Noah’s lead. Kade and I are already moving into place at Noah’s sides. He guides her to the back of the couch, and Luca and Declan walk around to lean against the wall and watch the show. I doubt they’ll just watch for long.

Scar’s ass is tilted in the air as Noah presses on her back until she’s leaning over the couch. He hums in satisfaction and my dick twitches in my pants at the sight of her spread out the way she is.

“Do you remember what I said about how good it would feel for Kade and I to take you together? To feel our cocks sliding together through your desire with no barrier between us?”

Oh shit. I didn’t expect that.

Apparently, neither did Scar, but she likes the idea of it if her body shudder is anything to go by. She nods and Noah smirks, not tearing his eyes off her for even a moment.

“We’re gonna take you that way today, but we have to stretch you out first. Prep you to take us both.” She pushes her ass a little higher to him and he chuckles before slapping his hand down over the rounded slopes of her ass. “No coming until I say so, baby girl.”

Her body tenses, and I laugh. She forgot this was punishment. I remember damn well how they chose to punish her last time. I’m even more excited to be a part of it this time.

Noah starts slow, spanking her ass.

“This is for lying to us.”

Smack

“For disappearing on us.”

Smack

“For putting yourself in danger.”

Smack

His fingers slip down, running through her slick lips and bringing the wetness to his lips.

Smack

“For enjoying this too much.”

Her cheeks burn red, and I ache to soothe them with my tongue, my hands. To put my own marks on her. To leave bruises and bite marks on the soft flesh. Noah catches my eye, and nods me forward, stepping away so I can take his place behind Scar.

I growl my approval at how slick her cunt already is. It’s just as pretty and perfect as the first time I saw it. She’ll never stop entrancing me. I fall to my knees behind her, my lips skimming over the red marks Noah left. I rub the sting out of her flesh with my hands. She writhes under my touch, and I love how even the smallest touch gets a reaction from her.

Thinking about what Noah said, I slide three fingers inside her and she immediately clenches all around me. I pump my fingers in and out of her at a slow, taunting pace, spreading and twisting my fingers as I go. Just as she starts to relax, I lean forward and sink my teeth into the curve of her ass, biting down hard enough to leave a mark. I’m rewarded with her surprised yelp and feeling her pussy contract around my fingers as she grows wetter.

Kade steps up to take my place and I move back. He leaves her cunt empty, choosing instead to collect some of her desire and spread it over her asshole. “How do you think you’d feel with three of us in you? Hmm, Ladybug?” he asks, slipping his thumb into her tight hole.

She cries out. “Full,” she finally pushes out through her gasps of pleasure.

“You’d look stunning,” he whispers, dropping to his knees and pressing an open-mouthed kiss over her pussy. She spreads her legs wider, inviting him in. He laughs against her, but continues to lap at her. He teases her with soft licks and kisses, never giving her enough to get her anywhere close to

an orgasm, but more than enough to make her wet and needy. Desperate to be as full as we want her to be. Soon.

Luca and D continue to watch her from across the room, eyes heated and narrowed on her.

I lick my lips and watch as Kade replaces his thumb with two fingers, slowly scissoring them to stretch her ass out. I can barely imagine how tight she'd feel with three of us in her small body. My dick aches to be inside of her. To wring so much desire out of her, she has no energy left for anymore manic missions.

“Carry her to the bedroom, Kade,” Noah says in a low voice.

My heart races as Kade follows his directions, scooping her up in his arms and carrying her into the large bedroom and tossing her in the middle of the bed. She lands with a small bounce and a little laugh. A sheen of sweat makes her skin shine, her cunt already swollen and glistening with her need, and her nipples are erect, just begging to be tasted.

“Strip,” Noah says, to no one in particular. I shrug and begin to toss my clothes. I can't wait to be naked. Kade is just as quick to follow the command, making Noah smirk. But to no one's surprise, Luca and D wear matching looks of indifference as they lean against the wall with their arms crossed over their chests to watch Scar. Fully dressed.

Kade rolls his eyes, but Noah ignores them. “On the bed, Kade. Face up.” As soon as he complies, he turns to Scar. “Ride his face, baby girl. But don't you dare come.”

She huffs and mutters something under her breath that sounds suspiciously like her calling Noah mean.

He arches a brow in her direction. “We could always tie you up instead? It'll make what I have planned harder, though.”

She mimes zipping her lips.

“Come here, Ladybug. I'm starving.” Kade's hands land on her ass and pull her until she's resting directly over his mouth. Our girl doesn't need any more encouragement than

that, taking the reins of her pleasure back into her hands. She undulates her hips over his face, chasing the high his tongue gives her.

“Her tits look lonely,” Noah says with a smirk. “I’m going to go talk to those two. Distract her.”

Dickstraction? Absolutely the man for the job. I grin, jumping onto the bed at her side and taking her perky tits in my hands. She arches her back, giving me better access as Kade moans from underneath her.

I lean over and catch her nipple between my teeth, biting down sharply and making her cry out. I’ll never get tired of the sounds she makes. Fucking beautiful.

Kade grips her hips and lifts her off him. “No, no, no, Letty. Noah said no coming. I can feel how close you’re getting, grinding your little clit against my face.”

Scar huffs in frustration and I pinch her other nipple between my fingers. She narrows her eyes at me, but I just grin back at her. She loves it.

“You ready to be filled, baby girl?” She nods eagerly at Noah’s question as he makes his way back to the bed with us.

“Sink down on Kade.” Our girl wastes no time to follow his order, gripping Kade’s hard length in her hand before sinking all the way down on him. Her eyes close in bliss and she throws her head back, the ends of her hair dancing over Kade’s thighs.

“Good girl,” Noah praises. “Now, put your hands on the bed next to his head and lean forward. I want to see how well you take him.” He motions to Kade where Scar can’t see it and Kade nods in understanding. Keep it slow. For now.

Scar gets in the position Noah told her to and her ass opens in display for us. “Fuck, she looks good,” I curse.

Noah smirks. “Just wait.” He gets on his knees behind her, slipping two fingers alongside Kade’s dick as he slowly thrusts in and out of her. Kade and Scar both moan at the added touch. A drop of precum drips from the tip of my dick at the sight. I wrap my hand around my erection and squeeze.

“How’s that feel, baby?” Noah checks in with her.

“Good,” she answers in a husky voice. Noah hums as he begins to scissor his fingers alongside Kade’s dick. Fuck, she’s going to look so good taking both of them. He plays with her cunt like that for several long minutes, and I stand enraptured by the scene.

“Noah, I’m so close,” she pleads, her body shaking between them.

I hold my breath when Noah slips his fingers out of her and lines his dick up next to Kade’s. One hand disappears between her and Kade’s body and from her moan, I assume Noah is playing with her clit. Kade holds her hips in place and stops moving as Noah presses the head of his cock at her entrance, pouring lube over all three of them. Scar’s back arches as she takes him inside her, a long, drawn-out moan escaping her lips as he bottoms out in her.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck,” she cries. All three of them stop moving as she catches her breath. Noah and Kade seem almost as tense as she does.

“So fucking tight, Scar,” Kade groans and Noah’s hips give the smallest thrust, testing her reaction.

“Fuck yes. More,” she pants.

Noah complies, pulling out of her and moving back in. A moment later, Kade joins until they’re working in tandem, sliding in and out of her. “That’s my good girl,” Noah praises. “Come for us. Show us how well you can take our dicks. How much you need it.”

Scar’s orgasm crashes through her as they hold her suspended between them, working over her body as it shakes and writhes and she cries out in pleasure. It’s truly a thing of beauty. I curse as I stroke my cock at the sight of her losing control. Letting it all go. I hear someone behind me curse too, but I can’t take my eyes off her.

As soon as she comes down, Noah is pouring more lube over her ass. “You ready for more?”

“More,” she whispers, her voice hardly even there as the screams have ravaged her throat.

Noah calls me over and I’m quick to move to his side. I don’t even remember when I stepped back to just watch. His fingers get back to work, stretching out her ass as he tells me to stand over her in order to fuck her ass.

It’s a good thing we’re all comfortable with each other, because Noah and I are about to get real close. He pulls his fingers from her and I straddle her ass, my ass pressed against Noah’s front. He holds on to my hip to help me balance and both him and Kade pause their movements as I press the head of my cock against her tight hole.

Scar bears down as I push through the tight ring of muscles. Oh fuck, she’s never felt this tight. I pour more lube over my hand and coat my cock and her ass in it, slowly pressing forward. Her heat welcomes me as I bottom out in her with my own curse-filled moan.

None of us move as we all adjust to the new sensations. It’s almost too much. I run my hands over her back and shoulders, praises freely slipping out about how stunning she is, how much we love her, how fucking perfect she looks like this.

Slowly we find our rhythm, Kade and I pulling out as Noah thrusts back in. I can feel them through the thin barrier of her ass and fuck. There are no words.

Scar is helpless between us, too full to move, trapped between our bodies. She takes everything we have to give and still begs for more. There has never been a more perfect creature on this planet than her.

“I fucking love you, Scar.” The words slip free in a whisper without any thought as I’m overcome with awe of her, and her already tight muscles flex around me, making me groan. Her orgasm tears through her, making her body tremble between us. Kade and Noah curse while I hold my breath, not moving, and try to keep from coming myself.

Her breathing gets heavier as her muscles finally relax and Kade sets the pace once more. I can feel, rather than see Noah's smirk when he chuckles. "Ready for more, baby girl?"

Her body vibrates with her tired laughter, but she doesn't back down from the challenge. "Always."

Luca and Declan straighten from where they lean against the wall, remaining spectators this entire time. Enthusiastic spectators, but spectators nonetheless. "Well, you heard her," Noah taunts. "Gonna just stand there and watch, or are you going to do something about our needy girl?"

Luca growls at the remark, making me laugh, and Scar clenches around me and I curse at how fucking good she feels. "Fuck, Scar. Keep doing that and I'm going to come." Kade huffs out his agreement and Noah smacks me on the shoulder.

"No coming allowed yet."

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Daddy."

Scar chokes beneath me and I smile smugly. "That's not what you're supposed to be choking on, Scar." Noah smacks me again, but I can feel his laughter.

Luca shakes his head, stepping up to Scar and grabbing her chin to turn her face towards him. "Open up, Letty. Show me how well you can swallow me down. How well you can take all of us. How you were fucking made for this. For us."

Her lips part and I have a first row seat to watch just how well she really can swallow him down. Fuck, she's a goddess. There's no hesitation in the way she runs her tongue all over his cock in between taking him all the way to the back of her throat. Her head bobs slowly, teasing, torturous. Kade, Noah, and I find a new pace, a faster one. I don't know how much longer any of us can hold on with the way her body is clamping down around our cocks, choking them, begging for us to come in her. To fill her in a whole new way.

Scar's hand stretches out, seeking the last missing piece. Declan is quick to step to her, knowing what she wants, and bares himself to her. Her slender fingers wrap around his

length and begin to jack him off. Luca throws his head back in pleasure and a familiar tingling starts in the base of my spine.

More praises rush out, all of us worshiping Scar for the goddess she is. Lost in her storm of chaos and desire. Nothing else matters in this moment but the six of us. Perfectly in sync, reading each other's needs and wants through our body language and the innate, almost other-worldly, connection we have.

"Noah," I moan, a plea in his name. Why the fuck I'm even asking his permission to come, I have no idea, but it feels right.

"Yeah," he responds, his voice as ragged as my own. My hips stutter as I bury myself in her ass, she tightens and screams around Luca as I shout her name, filling her with my come. Noah and Kade are shouting only a moment later, and Scar's body shakes as she slips off Luca's dick and drops her hand from Declan to hold on to the sheets as the four of us come together.

Declan waits only a moment to allow her to catch her breath before he lifts her up in his arms and out of the middle of us. "You're not done yet, are you, pretty girl?" She shakes her head, too exhausted to even use words to respond, but her lips twitch in pleasure. He hums. "That's what I thought. Our girl is a needy little thing."

I collapse on the bed, Noah and Kade on either side as we pant and lay back to watch. Declan keeps Scar suspended in the air, spreading her legs wide and Luca steps in between them. Both of their cocks stand at attention, so close to the mess we made.

To my shock, Luca wraps his hand around Declan's dick and guides him to her ass. Declan lowers her only slightly, not taking him all the way in, but enough for Luca to release him and grab his own hard length and put it at her entrance. Scar throws her head back to rest on Declan's shoulder and the two men work together to lower her and lift her up.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the scene if I tried and already I can feel my dick stirring, even though I came harder

than I ever have in my life only minutes ago. Their dicks are covered in come as they move in and out of her and it doesn't take long for all three of them to reach their climaxes, her body writhing between them. Luca takes turns between teasing her nipples and the sensitive skin on her neck until all three are crying out.

“We should totally do that position next time,” I say to Noah, who watches just as eagerly as I am. He nods and Kade grunts his agreement from my other side.

Declan and Luca slip out of Scar, kissing her body and face as they lay her on top of me. She immediately cuddles into my chest with a yawn, her eyes already fluttering as that last orgasm took everything out of her. Even with my half-hard cock, I join her yawning and settle her between my legs, wrapping my arms around her.

I vaguely acknowledge someone saying something about cleaning her up, but I'm already half asleep and she is fully passed out when I feel warm washcloths touch my skin. I hum and allow myself to slip a little further into my dreams.

Found another perk of having so many of us.



Chapter Twenty-Four Declan

“I BOUGHT US TRENCH COATS,” Jade announces as she walks into the house with her arms full of bags. Scarlett doesn’t even bat a lash as she gets up to help her with the bags, a smug look on her face.

“Welcome to the dark side, J. Not making fun of me now, are you?”

What the fuck is happening?

Jade snuffles as she looks up at Scarlett and shakes her head. “It’s still funny to imagine,” she defends, “but I do get it now. I even bought big sunglasses.” She wipes her eyes and takes out a pair of black sunglasses and slips them on her face. They really are big, covering almost half her face.

It takes a second for their words to trickle in, tugging on an old memory before it dawns on me.

“No.” I’m already shaking my head at the two of them. They both turn with matching pouty expressions on their faces. “Absolutely not,” I repeat. “You guys are not going to stalk the kids at school.”

Scarlett widens her eyes in dismay, and Jade lets the tears flow down her cheeks. My heart tugs, but someone has to be firm with them. “Don’t look at me like that,” I scold. We all know it won’t be Ian who puts a stop to this nonsense. Luca

will have my back. Kade will probably ask for his own trench coat. Nope. Not even going there. “You’ll get arrested.”

Scarlett waves me off. “I can buy off a few cops.” Jade nods emphatically behind her.

I scoff, running my hands down my face. “For the sake of staking out an elementary school? You realize how ridiculous you both are being, right?”

“It’s their first day of Kindergarten,” Scarlett defends, emotion brewing in her eyes. “How else am I supposed to be?”

Holden walks into the room from the kitchen and cracks open a beer before handing it to me. “It’s actually Trev’s first day of first grade.” He sits back on the couch, eyeing Jade with a mix of emotions in his gaze, before taking a sip of his own beer and snapping his attention to Scarlett.

“All the more reason to be there!” Jade yells, swinging her hands out. “They won’t even be all together.” Scarlett wraps her arms around her, patting her back soothingly.

Holden shrugs as we both watch them, neither one of us knowing how to calm them down. At least Scarlett isn’t crying too. I sigh. “They’re going to be okay,” I promise.

Ian walks with his own beer in hand, his eyes immediately falling on the girls. He shakes his head, falling into the seat next to Holden. “We’re sending them to school, baby bird. Not war.”

Jade doesn’t even respond as she starts to cry more. Ian just chuckles under his breath. “She’s been like this all week,” he explains. “She hasn’t done a first day of school before.”

“Kindergarten is a big deal,” Scarlett defends. “Even for Trevor, it’s a big deal going to elementary school. More kids in the classroom, bigger playgrounds, interacting with older kids. It’s a lot. She’s allowed to be worried about them.”

I arch a brow at her. “We all want the kids to enjoy their first day,” I say. “Doesn’t mean we all need trench coats and large sunglasses to peer over fences and watch them.”

Holden lifts his beer in my direction. “It is creepy when you think about it.”

Jade huffs and wipes her tears away, turning her back on us. “Fine, we won’t use the trench coats.”

Ian sighs. “Or stake out the school?”

She growls under her breath and I don’t miss the way Scarlett’s lips twitch at the sound. She’s amused by Jade’s antics, but I know exactly where Jade learned it from. “Fine,” she agrees reluctantly.

“You already have the CCTV, right?” she whispers to Scarlett, who is already nodding.

“Of course. We can come back here after drop off,” she whispers back as if the rest of us can’t hear them. Not like I’m going to argue against watching the cameras though. I like knowing we can have eyes on our girl when she’s away from us. If Scarlett hadn’t done it, Noah would have.

I check my watch on my wrist and note it’s almost dinner time. “You two are going to have to get it together,” I start, but pause when they both glare at me. Ian and Holden chuckle and I roll my eyes. “The kids are going to be here with Charlene soon. If they see you two freaking out, they’re going to start freaking out.”

“Who’s freaking out?” Kade asks as he walks into the room with Noah and Ryder a step behind him.

“No one is freaking out,” Scarlett huffs.

“Sure, pretty girl,” I deadpan. She flips me off, making everyone chuckle.

Jade takes a moment to wipe up her remaining tears and takes a deep breath. “They’re just growing up so fast.”

No one argues against that. A lot has happened since I first met Rowan and the other kids. They’ve already gotten so much taller, and the way they all play together and even speak makes them seem so much older. They really are like little people now. The last traces of their babyhood fade a little more with each growth spurt.

Fuck.

Now I'm getting sentimental.

Based on how quiet the room is and the pointed looks at a lot of drinks, I'm not the only one. Just then, the front door is thrown open and the familiar pitter-patter of little feet can be heard. Kai is the first one around the corner, Roe right on his tail. His face lights up as he sees Jade and Ian.

"Dad!" he shouts as he throws himself into Ian's arms. The room quickly becomes a cacophony of little yells and giggles as Roe snuggles in Scarlett's arms, Cal wraps himself around Jade, and Holden scoops up Trev.

Ian is choked up and I swear I see tears in his eyes as he stares down at Kai. "You called me Dad."

I bite my lip to suppress the laugh as Kai tilts his head in confusion. "You are my dad."

Jade chuckles rather vindictively as she pulls Kai out of his arms and kisses his forehead. "Ignore your dad, he just has a lot of feelings about you two growing up so fast."

Cal, who is now in Ian's arms, kisses his dad's forehead the way Jade always does for the twins. "Don't be sad, Daddy."

Kai still looks confused. "But why is he sad, J?" he whispers to Jade.

She's got an evil smile on when she whispers back, "I don't know, buddy. You'd think we were sending you off to war instead of Kindergarten with the way he's acting."

No wonder Ian always caves to her demands, girl knows how to get even. I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my smile, but Ian just glares at her.

"Grandma said it's just for a few hours," Kai consoles his dad.

Cal nods his head along with his words. "You won't even have time to miss us," he adds.

“Is that what Grandma told you too?” Scarlett asks, a small smile on her face.

All four little heads nod just as Charlene and Joe walk into the room, arms full of backpacks and lunch boxes. Why are there more than four of each?

“You know each kid only needs one backpack and one lunchbox, right?” Luca asks as he finally enters the room and takes in the scene.

Charlene laughs and Joe narrows his gaze. “That’s what I’d like to ask you lot,” he fires back. “We’ve had more package deliveries this week than in the last six months combined.”

Several cheeks heat, including Jade’s and Noah’s, but Scarlett crosses her arms as Roe runs to climb up Kade’s legs. Her smile falls into her cool mask. Yeah, pretty girl, you’re not fooling anyone.

“How many, Scarlett?”

She looks in the opposite direction, acting as if she didn’t hear me. I shake my head. At least she didn’t buy her an entire store this time.

Charlene’s warm voice betrays her amusement even if she keeps her expression neutral. “I thought it would be fun for the kids to be able to pick their backpacks while we’re here with everyone.”

My chest tightens at the thoughtfulness behind those words. No one in this room ever thought we would be the type of parents to have someone else raising our kids for us. It’s one of the hardest parts about this first day of school. Charlene has been the one to do all the hard work.

She decided which school was the best fit. She filled out all the paperwork and got all four kids registered. She made all the plans. Did most of the shopping. The rest of us are just here.

I fidget, uncomfortable as the thought settles deep in my gut. I hate that it’s come to this. Guilt flashes across my pretty

girl's face and I know she's thinking the same thing I am. I pull her into my arms and squeeze her tightly.

Decisions had to be made. Hard ones. Everything we've done has been about protecting these kids, preserving their innocence. Soon things will change again. We'll bring them home to us. Be more involved. Very, very soon. Everything is almost in place for it.

The rest of the night flashes by quickly. Charlene makes dinner in our kitchen, while the rest of us help the kids pick out their outfits for the first day of school and pack up the chosen backpacks. To no one's surprise, they all wanted to match and ended up with the same backpack in different colors, monogrammed with their names. Scarlett looks too smug at the decision for anyone else to be behind them.

Dinner is a loud affair with all the kids wired in their excitement about what school is going to bring. Roe begins to get nervous and climbs into Scarlett's lap halfway through the meal, clinging to her and hiding in her hair.

"Are there really going to be a lot of people?" she asks in a small voice.

We trade worried looks at the panic in her voice. Roe hasn't exhibited any social anxiety in months. Then again, her preschool was very small with only twelve kids in each class. She hasn't been in big crowds of people who she isn't already familiar with.

Scarlett runs a hand over the back of her head, cradling Roe to her chest. "Roe baby," she soothes in a hushed tone. "You're going to meet lots of new friends, but Kai and Cal are going to be in your class."

I start, surprised she already knows that. We aren't supposed to find out their classes until tomorrow. Noah blushes as I pin him with a questioning look. I should have guessed. The two of them probably moved around the class rosters in order to make it happen.

"I'm always going to protect you, sweet girl," she promises. "You have a whole family now that won't let

anything happen to you.”

The vow hits me in the gut, and there isn't a single person who doesn't get a little emotional by it. Rowan has come so far, it's easy to forget how fragile she was. How fragile she still is. Her scars are much more deep-rooted than the ones painted on her skin.

“It'll mostly be other kids around you,” Scarlett continues to explain to her. “Other kids who are just as nervous as you are. It won't be adults surrounding you, but your teacher will be close by if you do need anything. Even if you need a little break. Just tell her and she will make sure to call me. Okay?”

A little nod is the only response we get.

“I'm only one phone call away,” Scarlett repeats, running her hand down Rowan's back.

Kai squints and cocks his head as he watches the scene, his own face scrunched in a look of worry. “I'll stay with Roe, Auntie Scar,” he says in his small voice. “I won't leave her alone.”

A warm smile spreads across Scarlett's face and a few chuckles sound throughout the room, breaking some of the rising tension. Charlene wipes tears from under her eyes as she pats Kai on the back.

“Hear that, sweet girl? You'll have your best friends right at your side.”

Slowly, Roe pulls herself away from her mom's chest and nods again, a determination in the tilt of her head. “No monsters?” she asks her mom in a small voice.

My stomach turns and violence rushes through my blood. She's far too young and innocent to have survived the horrors she's had to. All the revenge in the world isn't enough to give her back everything she's lost.

“No monsters,” Scarlett promises, her voice catching. “School is a safe place. A place full of protectors and heroes. If anyone scares you, there are lots of people you can tell. That you can run to. You're not alone anymore, Roe. Never again. I'll slay all the monsters for you.”

Roe sighs and tension bleeds from her small body as she begins to relax, her momma's promises finally seeping in and easing her anxiety. Maybe the trench coats weren't such a bad idea after all. My fingers tap out a beat on the table as I begin to contemplate it.

Scarlett gives me an amused smirk as if she can read my mind, but it's Luca who catches my eyes and shakes his head. Okay, maybe not staking out the school. Might be a little over the top. But I am going to need those feeds on my phone. I wonder if we could get our own cameras in their classrooms to make sure she's okay during class.

There's an idea.

Scarlett and Noah may have already set it up. I'll have to remember to ask them later.

The rest of dinner passes without any more worries and Roe is quick to snap back to her normal self. She laughs and plays with the boys until it's time to get ready for bed. The four of them are used to sleeping in the same room, but not a single one of them puts up an argument when we separate them tonight.

They really are growing up so fast, their minds developing at speeds that are hard to keep up with. How much longer will they stay this little? It feels like time is slowly slipping through our fingers.

Rowan is quick to fall asleep in her bed after we all take turns reading her a bedtime story and Scarlett sings her a lullaby. Her soft voice makes Roe's eyes flutter and my heart skip a beat when watching them.

Scarlett brushes hair off of Roe's face as her little hand tightens around her momma's. I arch a brow and silently ask if she's asleep, getting a nod in response, but none of us move. Moisture builds in my pretty girl's eyes as she stares lovingly at our daughter. Hushed tension balloons in the room around the six of us as we stand around Roe's bed, a content sigh passing her lips as she drifts off into her dreams. The conversation at dinner still weighs heavily on my mind.

“What if she grows up and realizes we’re the monsters?” The question is full of doubt and pain, years of believing she isn’t worthy of love.

Ryder is the first to move, but the rest of us are quick to follow, falling at Roe’s bedside next to Scarlett. I press a gentle kiss to her temple.

“We’re not the kind of monsters she’s scared of,” I say.

Ryder grins. “We’re the kind she and her momma hold the leashes for.”

I roll my eyes at him, but his words get a wry grin from our girl. “You don’t think she will grow up to hate us?”

Noah squeezes her leg. “She is going to be a teenager one day,” he teases.

Kade and Luca look stricken by that realization and I have to cover my mouth to stifle my laugh to not wake our baby up. Noah’s smile softens. “But no, baby girl. I don’t think she will hate us for the monsters we’ve become. She will be her own brand of destruction, one wrapped in sugar and spice, but destructive nonetheless. She’s already seen the worst of the world, survived fighting demons. She’s already marked in more ways than the scars on her skin. I hate that she will, but she’ll understand the darkness in all of us because she’s already survived it.”

Tears stream down Scarlett’s face and it takes me a moment to realize, she’s not the only one silently crying. “I don’t think that makes me feel any better,” she admits in a heavy whisper.

“Me either,” Noah agrees, squeezing her thigh once more. “But she’s a part of us.”

Kade takes her hand in his large one. “She has what we never did, Ladybug. Just like you said at dinner. She’s got a whole family behind her, supporting her, loving her. She’ll grow to appreciate the sharp edges she got from her momma.”

Luca leans over Scarlett and kisses Roe’s head before kissing Scarlett’s cheek. “A rose, thorns and all.”



THE MORNING IS as hectic as the night prior was emotional.

Wrangling four hellions is harder than any of us had anticipated, even with all the adults we have. It almost made it harder, bumping into someone with a lone sock in hand, every time we turned around. Charlene sat back and laughed as the chaos ensued. How does she manage to do this on a daily basis?

I run my hands over my face and stare at Kai and Roe as they eat the pancakes Scarlett made everyone. “How did you two manage to switch your shoes?” Not even both shoes, just the one. Each kid has one black tennis shoe and one teal blue one.

“Kai, how did you even get this on your foot?” I ask as I pull off Roe’s shoe from his foot and his from hers to put them on correctly. He gives me a little shrug as he stuffs another bite into his mouth and Rowan giggles at his side.

“One bite at a time,” Ian scolds as Kai shoves another bite in and I shake my head.

Kade stands behind Roe, brush in hand as he twists her hair into braids and pulls the hair off her face. Her legs swing back and forth as soon as I finish putting her shoe on the right foot. No sign of her panic from last night.

“All ready, butterfly,” Kade declares.

Scarlett comes around and beams. “You look beautiful, Roe baby!”

Roe’s giggle soothes the frazzled edges of this chaotic morning, making it all worth it. “Thank you, Momma.”

The kids all finish eating and we pile into separate cars and strap the kids in with promises of seeing each other again at the school. Kade climbs behind the wheel and Scarlett sits next to Roe, the rest of us falling into familiar seats in the car.

Several minutes of the drive go by quickly with Roe's excited chatter and the rest of our enthusiastic responses. Butterflies build in my gut the closer we get to the school. A heavy feeling grows in my chest. The pressure of knowing this is going to be one of those moments that changes everything.

This isn't just Roe's first day of school. This is the first time we are publicly claiming her as our daughter. We've made our names known, our faces recognizable. Now we are doing the same for our girl. Forever tying her to us and hopefully erecting a shield around her no one will dare mess with.

As much care as we all put into Roe's outfit and hair, even more thought went into all of ours. One thing I learned from my world is how to wield my appearance as a weapon. Something Scarlett knows all about. It's why her roses are so important to her at the club and have only grown to be even more significant over the course of this war.

Dressed in all black, it's hard to miss our group as we exit our cars. Ian, Jade, and the twins are right behind us, while Holden and Trevor are just ahead of us, waiting for us to catch up. Luca and Scarlett take the lead, Rowan swinging both their hands as she walks between them in her white summer dress.

Luca must be sweltering in his suit, but he has to be accustomed to the suffocating feel of it. It's his most recognizable look after all. The rest of us dressed far more casually, but no less calculating or intimidating. Roses fully on display.

It's impossible to miss the message we're sending.

If I thought our house was chaotic this morning, it has nothing on the pure bedlam of the first day drop-off. Parents and teachers everywhere, kids shouting and laughing, cars honking as they fight over parking spots. But even amidst it all, eyes are drawn toward our large group and the crowd parts easily as we all follow Scarlett into the elementary school. Whispers start as gazes weigh heavily on us, the children all but oblivious to the sudden tension at the front of the school.

Teachers slow in their positions as they watch us warily, all eyes eventually landing on the four young kids being herded between us. Looks of understanding begin to flash across faces, and while tension eases, there's still apprehension lining many adult faces.

It was a good call to set them up in the local public schools of St Graves. Even innocents know the significance of the roses we wear on our clothes like brands. What it means for us to be here. Private schools would not have had this immediate effect. Our reputations will serve as their security until they can grow into their own forces of nature.

Holden and Trevor stop to head to where the first grade classes are lined up and the kids take a moment to say goodbye to each other. Rowan holds onto Trev's hand, not wanting to let go and he has to promise her he'll be okay before she's willing to release him. Scarlett scoops her up in her arms to avoid another meltdown as the reality begins to settle in her mind. We find their teacher and all take our turn introducing ourselves to the woman who will be taking care of our kids during the day. She's young and energetic, a light in her eyes as she takes the time to get on the kids' levels and introduce herself before turning her attention to the adults.

Her eyes widen but her smile never falters as she takes in our group, her gaze catching on Scarlett's roses before turning back to Roe and the boys. We each introduce ourselves and she goes down the line, shaking each of our hands, treating us like every other parent.

I already like her.

She will be good for Roe.

The boys shift on their feet, watching the other kids playing in the line while Roe still clings to her mom's leg. Ms. Maize watches her curiously as she finishes shaking Jade's hand. She comes back and drops to her knees in front of Roe and starts to talk to her once more. About her dress and shoes, and all the things she's excited to show their class today.

Rowan nods along with her and she's even able to draw a couple smiles out of her, but not once does Roe answer back.

We all exchange worried looks. What if this draws Roe back into her shell? What if she goes nonverbal once more?

I never had to experience it, but I've heard how hard it was. How traumatized Roe was after Scarlett saved her, how she refused to speak. Maybe she wasn't ready for this. Maybe we should have kept her in the small school she already knew. Maybe this is all too overwhelming for her.

Ms. Maize catches our anxious looks and turns to the twins. "Why don't you boys go play with the others?"

Simultaneously, they both take a step closer to Roe, but it's Kai who answers, "We will wait for Roe."

Caution lines the young teacher's face, but she nods. "Roe is a beautiful name. Is it short for something?"

Roe nods.

"Can you tell me for what?" she gently prods.

I hold my breath and Scarlett runs her hand over Roe's head, but our girl stays quiet.

Cal and Kai share a look with scrunched faces and they're both quick to stand up for Roe.

"Her name is Rowan," Cal answers, while Kai says, "Sometimes Roe doesn't like words."

Roe nods again and when Kai reaches for her hand, she drops one hand from where she's clutching Scarlett's leg and holds tightly onto it. Cal starts talking to her, pointing out the playground to her.

Ms. Maize hums under her breath and Scarlett gives me an anxious look. "Maybe this was a mistake," she whispers, too softly for the kids to hear it now that they're distracted. Her eyes run over the crowds of kids and adults still all around us. The kindergarteners are separated from the rest of the school, but there are still three classes in this area. It's much louder and busier than anything Rowan is used to.

"It's clear Roe has some anxiety," Ms. Maize says. "May I ask if it's something specific? And if she uses anything to calm those worries?"

Scarlett takes a deep breath, brushing her hand over Roe's head once more. Her eyes narrow on the teacher as she weighs each word on her tongue before letting them pass her lips. "There are a lot of things she doesn't like."

For a moment, I worry that's all she's going to say, but she continues. "She doesn't trust strangers, and we've kept her out of big crowds since we adopted her. Loud noises unsettle her and sudden movements can trigger a panic attack. She has a stuffed animal and headphones in her backpack. She likes music, but even just wearing the headphones alone will help soothe her."

Her teacher doesn't respond for several long moments, thoughts and emotions flashing across her face. "Is she verbal?"

"Usually," I answer. "Though she has gone nonverbal before, it's been months since it's been a concern."

She nods, a small smile gracing her face. "It's a big and stressful day. Let's give her some time to adjust," she reassures. "I'll have the twins and Roe sit at their own table for the first few weeks until she warms up since she seems very comfortable with them. Will they always be dropped off together?"

"Yes," Jade answers before any of us get the chance to. I smile at the fierceness in her voice.

"Perfect." Her relief seems misplaced until she adds, "I'll have you drop the three of them off at the office from now on. Someone will escort them straight into my classroom through the back to avoid the crowds and loud noise. As she adjusts, we can come up with a new plan. Does that sound good?"

Scarlett's eyes mist as she gives a sharp nod.

"Yes, thank you," I respond. "We really appreciate the accommodations."

She smiles politely and points at the door behind her. "Why don't you head on in and get them settled?"

It only takes a minute to get the kids settled in at their table and the bell rings shortly after.

“I think that’s our cue to leave,” Noah says, but none of us make our way to the door. We stand behind the kids, watching as they color at their new table.

“She’s going to be okay,” I say to no one in particular.

“They’re all going to be okay,” Ian emphasizes. Jade snuffles and Scarlett has her mask in place, but she can’t hide the emotions brewing inside her.

I drop down to my knees at Roe’s side. “Have a good day at school, Roe baby.” She smiles as I kiss her cheek and nods, still not speaking even though it’s just us. I push away the anxiety and take a calming breath. “If words are hard, just whisper in Kai or Cal’s ear, okay?”

She sighs a breath of relief and nods eagerly.

“Good girl.”

Jade kisses the twins on their heads. “We’re proud of you for the way you look out for each other. Remember we’re just a phone call away if you need us.”

“Don’t worry, J,” Cal soothes. “We’re strong like Daddy. We’re Roses.”

Kai grins. “Thorns and all.”



Chapter Twenty-Five Kade

IT'S FINALLY THE DAY.

It feels childish, the excitement I have for this day to finally come together after so many months of planning and hiding things from Scar. It's a pure rush of joy and a type of thrill I've never experienced before.

I'm not the only one either.

The stress of not finding anything at the first three locations is starting to wear on all of us. Especially Scar. She's thrown herself into everything she can, reopening Steel Roses, finalizing plans for the new club, Poison, plotting next moves with Rachel, looking into the list Charles and Noah have created. She barely even sleeps anymore.

No one can survive being that on all the fucking time. We are past due for a fucking break and for something good.

Scar has known we've been hiding things from her. We all may have infallible poker faces, but I don't think anything could hide our anticipation. Not from her. She catches me staring at her and gives me an indulgent smile. Yeah, she definitely knows something is coming.

"Am I finally going to be included in the circle of trust?" she faux whispers. Noah pinches her ass and she yelps in surprise before smacking him.

“Yes, pretty girl. You finally get to find out your surprise,” Declan appeases her. “But first, we have somewhere we need to be.”

She gives us all a suspicious look before asking, “Does this have to do with the surprise?”

Yes. How much are we telling her?

Now that I think about it, how are we taking her there?

Luca and Declan have a silent conversation before Luca nods and takes the lead. “Yes,” he answers. “We’ll drive and then put a blindfold on you.” Okay, that answers that.

She thinks about arguing but decides against it, just nodding with a shrug. “Do I need to change?” She’s wearing ripped up black jeans and a loose crop top. Should be fine. We’re all dressed casually as well.

“You’re looking perfect, Ladybug.”

She gestures to the door. “All right, lead the way.”

Her easy compliance is amusing. She’s been acting like she’s happy to be left out of the loop, but I know she’s been dying to find out what we’ve been up to. She has more willpower than I expected. It’s hard to believe she hasn’t asked even once.

I grab the keys off the hook by the door and lead the way to the car. A different type of tension fills the car as we drive down a few streets. Not being too far was one of our requirements, but we did want it to be a bit further into the hills. More isolated. Not off a street that anyone could drive down.

Scar taps her fingers against the window as she watches all of us, showing her curiosity openly now. As we start to get close, Noah says, “Alright, baby girl. Blindfold time.” I glance at the rearview mirror and see the mischievous smile she gives him as he holds the long piece of black fabric in front of her.

“Oh, I like where this is going,” she teases.

She yelps as Noah scolds, “Behave.” He must have pinched her. It’s the only time she ever makes that sound.

“Not my forte,” she grumbles, but when I look back her eyes are covered with the fabric. Nerves build in my stomach and my fingers dance over the wheel. Luca catches it and gives me a look, silently asking if I’m good. I shrug, and I can see he understands. We know Scar better than anyone, and we all agreed she would love this. We thought about her every step of the way. Every decision made with our new motto, ‘What would Scar do?’ Might as well get WWSD tattooed across our foreheads at this point. She *should* love this. But... it’s a lot. Even I can admit it’s a lot.

What if it’s too much?

I pull out onto the private street and begin the climb up. Guess it’s too late now. No going back. I swallow thickly, catching the same nerves in Luca’s eyes. It unsettles me more. Ah fuck. I’ve never been this nervous before.

Large hands land on my shoulder and squeeze. Declan’s calm eyes shine back at me in the mirror. They help steady me and remind me how excited we’ve all been for this day. All the work that led up to it. Everything is going to work out. She’s going to love it.

The gate swings open as soon as it comes into sight. I wave to Adam in the guard booth, but don’t stop. Scar would definitely recognize his voice and he already knows he’s welcome to come up to the party after securing the gate behind us. We have enough security without the guards posted at the front, but if we’re no longer hiding, if Roe is going to be known as ours, we aren’t taking any risks. This place will be locked down tighter than any fortress.

Parking at the center of the circle driveway on the farside of the fountain gives the best view of the entire house for Scar to get her first look. House doesn’t feel like quite the right word. Coming from nothing, the extravagance almost makes me uncomfortable. But this is what Scar deserves.

Alright, let’s do it.

Taking a deep breath, I turn the car off and throw my door open. Noah and Ryder help Scar out of the car, keeping her blindfold in place. They situate her next to the car, just off to

the side of the fountain so she can take it all in. We surround her and I can't take my eyes off her face if my life depended on it.

We all hesitate, holding our breath but when Luca nods, Ryder takes the blindfold off. My chest aches and my stomach is filled with bees in anticipation. Her eyes widen as they scan over the large property.

The house is surrounded by lush, green trees, making it feel even more private than it already is. From every window in the house, all you can see is greenery and city lights in the background at night. Far enough to feel like a secluded getaway while being close enough to keep our commutes easy, no matter what businesses we have on the agenda for the day.

The rich greens seem all the more vibrant against the modern design of the massive mansion. We wanted to tone down the excessive opulence and mimic some of the elements of Luca's house. It's black with white trim but the accents of over-grouted stone and sawn wood siding on the garages keeps the structure from being too overwhelming or dark. The contrast reminds me of Scar herself. Intimidating, dark, but still warm. The perfect place to call home.

The stone driveway is empty except for us, just as we instructed everyone. The driveway curves around the farside of the house and leads to an underground parking garage.

"Surprise," Ryder whispers, breaking the silence.

Scar turns wide eyes to us, her mouth parting open in shock. I wait for her to say something, anything, my stomach flipping as she closes her mouth only to open it again. Nothing comes out.

Declan clears his throat, and Scar shakes her head slowly before turning and walking away. My nerves intensify, that doesn't seem good. I'm not the only one doubting this plan based on all the fidgeting among us.

We all trade looks before we follow after her. At least she isn't climbing back into the car? It has to be a good sign she's walking to the front door. Right? Fuck, I hope so.

Scar stops at the front door, her fingers tracing over the plaque we have on the stone pillar of the entry.

“Everhart Estate,” she whispers softly.

Noah grips the back of his neck. “Is this a bad time to mention this wasn’t the only surprise we have planned?”

A surprised chuckle spills from her. “You guys are insane,” she says. Relief washes over me like a storm pouring down on drought-ravished lands. More potent than almost anything else I’ve experienced when I see the smile playing on her lips and hear the affection in her voice.

“More than you know,” jokes Ryder, and fuck if he isn’t right.

“Is this real?” she asks.

I brush a piece of her hair behind her ear. “Of course it is, Ladybug. You deserve the best home. A place to let our family grow even more.”

Luca adds, “It really is the best, Letty. We’ve planned for everything, had renovations done to suit all of our needs. Added even more security features than the house has now.” He continues to explain to her as we stand on the porch, her fingers absently brushing over the name plaque while she listens to the features. The guard house, tunnel access from multiple points in the house, a new security room for us to work in that includes a separate section dedicated for our team meetings, the safe rooms in every bedroom, the hidden tunnels within the house. She laughs, and tears fill her eyes, and pride fills the rest of us as we watch her fall in love with the future she never dreamed of having. A future that looks past her revenge. That looks into the next chapter. There really is more for her on the next page.

“How the hell did you guys pull this off?”

Luca is smug as he shrugs. “Wasn’t my first time.”

She rolls her eyes. “So you used my plans for your house as a reference?”

Ryder wraps his arms around her waist and squeezes her until more laughter spills from her lips. “Obviously, boss lady. We’re all helpless without you. Don’t you know that by now?”

Declan smacks him upside the head. “We did expand on your plans,” he defends.

“You guys did amazing,” she soothes him. “I can’t believe you named it Everhart.”

Ryder kisses her cheek. “It’s our home, of course we had to name it after our family.”

Her brows draw up as silence balloons over our group once more. Noah clears his throat. “About that other surprise I mentioned.” At his cue, we all pull out our new IDs and hand them over to Scar. Confusion mars her features for only a moment before she throws her head back and cackles. She’s not getting it quite yet.

“You guys created new identities?”

“Wrong,” Ry taunts her and I can’t help but smirk. For some reason, this part doesn’t make me as anxious. The house had me worried, but she will love this. We did it the right way. The way she would have preferred if we did give her a choice.

“You legally changed your names? All to Everhart?” She sounds mystified.

“Getting hotter,” I tease.

She’s not going to get it on her own. I nod, and Noah grabs the papers to hand to her. Before he gets the chance to, Ryder sweeps Scar off her feet and cradles her in his arms bridal style.

“Welcome home, wife,” he declares as he pushes through the front door and carries her through the threshold.

I scoff. Should have expected him to go rogue. He’s been on cloud nine since we drew names out of a hat. Bastard saved up all his luck to be the one that got to be legally married to her.

Cheers of congratulations drown out anything she might have said in response, but we’re all quick to follow them into

the house where everyone is waiting. Confetti rains over us but Scar's brilliant smile as she laughs shines brighter than any of the glitter in the air.

She understands. She knows what we did. At least part of it.

It takes a few moments for everyone to calm down after Ryder steals a very thorough kiss in front of them all. But he finally releases her, putting her feet back down on the floor. Noah hands her a piece of paper to confirm what she already knows.

She snorts as she looks at the marriage license with her forged signature on the bottom. I wink at her. "It was an honor to be you for a day."

"Oh, did you also put on a big, white dress and walk down an aisle?" She arches a brow. "Because I don't recall doing that."

"I mean," Declan drawls, pulling her into his arms, "there's still time to arrange that."

"No," she shouts, making everyone in the room laugh. D steals his kiss and all the nerves and anxiety were worth it. The months of work we put into this house and marriage. For that smile, the light shining in her eyes. Yeah, I would have done all this a hundred times over to see her like this.

Luca pulls her to him next, and I can't even be mad. There's a reason they say save the best for last. She smacks his chest after he whispers something in her ear I don't quite catch. But she's happy, and that's all that matters.

Noah spins her in his arms before dipping her and kissing her. Everyone cheers, including me. The kids giggle and no moment has ever filled me with more peace and happiness. This really is our new home. Our new future.

When he pushes her into my arms, I don't hesitate to pull her in for my own kiss. One so consuming, so enthralling, it erases every trace of every other kiss I've ever had until all that's left is her. Years of filling the hole she left in my life

vanish under the truth and hope and depth of the feelings shared between the two of us.

She's breathless and grinning when I finally pull back, but I still don't release her. She feels too good in my arms. Everyone else already had their turn, another reason why I was willing to wait. No one to pass her off to now. I get to keep her.

"Did you also say yes for me?" she teases. "There are a lot of steps of getting married I don't seem to remember."

I run my fingers down her arm, from her shoulder to her forearm. My fingers trace the ink permanently marked on her skin. "This was our proposal," I explain. "It was also your yes." Her smile dips, but not in anger or disappointment. No, it's awe and understanding that fills her features. Of course she understands. There was never a doubt she would.

She is ours.

We are hers.

"The rest is just for legal purposes."

"Is that why you all changed your names? That doesn't change anything legally. You know that, right?" I don't know what's funnier, her concern that we may not have known that, the groans from Luca or Declan, or the amused chuckles from Noah and Ryder. Some of us found our solution a lot funnier than others did.

It's not even surprising it's Ry who gives her a cheeky grin. "Did you know when you file for your marriage certificate and change your name, there's no rules about what name you take?"

Her eyes dart from him to Declan rolling his eyes, to Noah blushing, Luca's blank expression, and finally landing on my own classic dopey grin.

"No," she drawls, shaking her head, laughter bubbling up.

"Oh yeah, baby!" I release her and startle Noah when I yank him to me and smack a kiss against his cheek. "Mrs. Everhart, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Everhart," I start

pointing to myself, “and Mr. Everhart,” I finish, patting Noah’s cheek where I kissed him. “And of course, our other lovely couple, Mr. and Mr. Everhart,” I add as an afterthought, pointing to Declan and Luca.

Even the two hardasses crack a smile as Scar doubles over in her laughter, her whole body shaking as the sound fills the room. She’s not the only one either. No one knew Noah and I and Luca and Dec also filed marriage licenses. We couldn’t all marry her, but there are definite perks to being legally married. While in most situations, we don’t care very much for legal avenues, it’s always best to have all of our bases covered.

Ryder has been the smuggest bastard ever since it was decided he would get to marry Scar and the rest of us were marrying each other. Luck has never been on my side.

Joe snorts from behind Scar. “This makes how you saved Noah from that waitress all the funnier.”

“Thank you!” I exclaim. I didn’t get enough appreciation for saving my husband.

“Congratulations, girlie,” he says, kissing Scar’s forehead as she finally calms down, wiping tears from her eyes. “I’m proud of you,” he whispers and her eyes shine with a different type of moisture.



Chapter Twenty-Six Charles

SHE'S DIFFERENT.

Even more so than what I first realized at our reunion. Maybe reunion isn't quite the right word seeing as how she drugged and kidnapped me.

I hide my smile in my glass as the guys throw me dirty looks when Scar isn't looking. I guess she isn't the only one who has changed if I'm over here laughing at not only my kidnapping, but also the murder in the eyes of some very intimidating people. The kind of people that really would follow through with the threats their expressions are promising. I've faced death enough times to know who is and isn't capable of following through. No doubts about the men Scar has surrounded herself with.

She's still the most formidable of them all. Though, she is oblivious to their obvious turmoil. For someone so aware of everything going on around her and frighteningly intelligent, she sure can be clueless. It seems some things never change even if it seems like everything has. There are still traces of the girl she left behind in that burning building.

Even in high school, every subject came infuriatingly easy to her. New and complex ideas or theories simply clicked in her mind. Facts, dates, and material came to her naturally and memorization was never something she had to practice in order to perfect. As much as she shined academically, it was nothing compared to her people skills. The way she could read

people. She would always notice when two people were fighting, who had a secret, who needed a helping hand or a shoulder to cry on. Yet, she never realized how many lusted after her, how many of our friends prayed for her downfall. Even the ones she had held out a helping hand to. Maybe especially them. It made it all the harder to watch her hit rock bottom and feel truly alone for the first time.

The room now is filled to the brim with people who would never abandon her, never pull the rug out from under her, would never hurt her. She finally built a family around herself deserving of the selfless, infinite amount of love she's able to freely give.

A shoulder bumping against mine draws me from my reverie.

“What are you thinking so hard about?” Scar's blinding smile is impossible not to respond in kind to. Think of the devil and she may appear.

“You're gonna get mad if I tell you,” I warn her.

Her brows draw together, but a light dances in her eyes. I've seen many sides of Scar since we reconnected. Angry, scared, distrusting, vulnerable, erratic, manic, happy, bloodthirsty, violent, strong. But each day she shows me something new. Something I didn't think could still be possible, except I think they're new for everyone here, not just me.

All her shattered pieces are finally coming together in a beautiful kaleidoscope of healing. There will always be cracks, different colors that melt together and illustrate her journey full of pain, heartbreak, blood, joy, love, and revenge, but who said being whole was the goal of healing? Her mosaic of chaos is far more beautiful than the unmarred porcelain glass she once was.

Each of the men that set their hate-filled eyes on me the moment her shoulder brushed mine, have helped her put the shattered pieces of her past back together to create something totally new that still somehow holds the soul of the girl who has been my best friend for my whole life. Even when she

didn't know it. Especially then. It's easy to say you would die for someone, but until you're faced with that choice, it's impossible to realize just how far you're willing to go for another person.

There's no other person in the world I would do what I did for her back then. The only other two lights in my life have already been snuffed out. A blonde ponytail swings as giggles fill the room and Scar's daughter darts through the adults, avoiding the boys as they chase her. Maybe there is another person now.

"I was thinking about how much you've changed," I admit, answering her question.

Her expression says 'you don't say' without even a twitch of her lips. I roll my eyes. That wasn't the part she isn't going to like. "And how much you haven't," I finish.

She huffs and crosses her arms in front of her chest. "A year ago, I would have been offended had you said that."

"And now?" She leans her head against my shoulder and the comfort it brings should surprise me, but she's always had this effect on me. It didn't come easily, she struggled when facing me for the first time after so long. It's not like I can blame her. I did break her. In a different but just as devastating way as what those monsters did to her.

Scar hums a song under breath. It feels familiar, some far away, all but forgotten memory that tickles the back of my brain. So close, and yet just out of my reach. Emotion chokes me as the memory crashes into me like a freight train. It's that Taylor Swift song she used to always sing to the twins. She was always singing to them, but this was one of their favorites. If I could just remember the name.

"For so long, I had to separate myself from who I was back then." I squeeze her hand encouragingly and nod. It's a feeling I understand a little too well. "I wouldn't have survived all these years if I was still her. Even the good parts." She wouldn't have. The Charlotte I knew wasn't strong like the woman in front of me. She had her own quiet strength, it shined in her fierce love for the twins, for me, for Josie. But

she wasn't formidable. Not a threat. She was naive and sweet and forgiving of people's flaws. Everything that had made her soft has been sharpened into talons and claws. Weapons to tear down those who stand in her way, who threaten the family she's built. She's moved up the food chain until there was no one left higher than her. The predator that tracks and hunts not prey, but other predators. The ones who thrive on feeding off of the weak.

"You're the strongest person I know," I tell her, my voice shaking as the words tear from my throat.

"It's comforting now," she sighs. "To know somehow some of the good survived the storm. That I'm strong enough now to be weak and still survive. To love and trust and feel things again without buckling under the weight of it all."

"It did," I assure her. Before I can say more, Roe runs up to us squealing.

"Mommy, hide me!" she giggles as Scar swoops her up into her arms.

"I don't think this is a very good hiding spot, Roe baby," she teases as Roe settles in her arms.

She shrugs her little shoulders. "They can't tag me if they can't reach me."

I lean over and bop her on the nose. "That is an excellent point. I like the way you think." Her smile heals something inside of me, and I can see how this little girl, this little bundle of light, was able to pull Scar out of the darkness.

"Thank you, Uncle Charles."

The name stops my heart in my chest. "You're so welcome," I whisper, the words soft and hoarse. Understanding shines back to me from Scar's gaze. I've only met Roe a handful of times, not even really that, yet she's easily adapted to my presence. Someone to be expected in her new home. She's Scar as a child. Open and bright and caring. Welcoming.

The boys come running up to us, promising Roe to not tag her if she comes back to play with them. Scar puts her down,

but rather than running away to continue their games, she pulls one of the twins down to her side as they sit on the floor. The other two boys are quick to follow suit, and faster than I can even comprehend, they're lost in a new game they make up on the spot.

"It's not only the twins she reminds me of," I say after a moment of watching them play at our feet. "I see you in her, and I see Charlotte in you when you're with her. The good survived." I finally understand why the guys took such an issue to me calling her that name after they kidnapped me.

She isn't Charlotte. She's Scar.

Her smile is sad but content, her eyes still locked on her daughter. "She brought me back to life."

I track her men around the room. "She wasn't the only one."

She tilts her head in acquiescence but her smirk gives her away. Each one of her men brought a piece of herself that she lost back to her. "She lit the match, they just kept the fire burning."

"Dirty," I tease, drawing a chuckle in response. Five heads snap in our direction at the sound of her laughter. Five expressions quickly morph into variations of irritation, anger, and annoyance when they see me standing with Scar still. I nudge her with my shoulder. "Something else hasn't changed from the old you either." She arches a brow in question and it's my turn to smirk. "There are some things you're still absolutely oblivious to."

She smacks my arm, looking affronted at my observation, but I just nod to emphasize my point.

"You're wrong," she declares.

"Oh yeah?" I taunt her, watching Luca and Kade excusing themselves from their conversations across the room. "I will bet you ten thousand dollars two of your husbands are about to walk up to us and two of the first five words out of their mouths will be *my wife*."

She snorts and flips me off. “They’re not saying it that much.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes and snort. “I’ve heard it at least a hundred times in the last few hours. No exaggeration.”

“Leave them alone, they’re just excited. It’s still new.” Her own indulgent smile tells me how much she herself is enjoying her new title. I can’t think of many people who wouldn’t have wanted to be a part of their own wedding, but somehow this fits her.

Luca and Kade are halfway across the room now. “Sure, but how many of those hundreds of claimings have been in front of Joe? Or Holden? Or Ian?”

Suspicion and amusement dance in her eyes. “No,” she drawls, finally understanding.

“Ten thousand dollars,” I repeat, sticking my hand out.

Her gaze narrows, but she shakes my hand. “Ten thousand dollars.”

Roe’s eyes dance back and forth between us. Just as two of her dads reach us she asks, “Can I have ten thousand dollars?” at the same time as Luca wraps his arm around Scar’s waist and Kade kisses her temple. “How’s my wife?”

“Of course, Roe,” I agree, grinning. “I suddenly have an extra ten grand to spare.”

Kade’s hand lands on his chest in a move that reminds me of an old lady clutching her pearls. The laugh I just barely manage to stifle slips free when he turns his attention to Roe. “I’ll give you twenty thousand.”

The smack echoes across the room as Scar scolds him. “Knock it off. Roe baby, why do you want ten thousand dollars?”

“I bet I could buy a whole toy store with ten thousand dollars,” she exclaims.

“I’ll buy you a toy store,” Luca promises. Scar’s face is in her hands as she shakes her head.

Ryder joins the growing group. “Oh, are we buying more businesses for Roe?”

I tilt my head and stare at Scar. “How many businesses does she already have?”

She waves me off. “Look at what you started?”

“Me?” I gasp. “You’re the oblivious one.”

As we banter back and forth, the last of her men show up. Declan pulls her against his chest. “What kind of trouble is *my wife* getting into now?” The emphasis on the words paired with the glare he tosses at me is enough to make me throw my head back and cackle.

Scar pulls out of his arms as she analyzes the way their body language begins to shift the closer she moves to me. Understanding dawns and she laughs in disbelief. I throw my arm over her shoulder and pull her to me just to antagonize them. Predictably, their expressions morph into murderous rage, making her laugh hard.

“I was a little offended they left me out of the whole proposal marriage thing,” I whisper conspiratorially to her. “As the only fiance you actually knew you were engaged to, I felt I should have been more actively involved. I think they were a little jealous.”

My life would have flashed before my eyes if Scar wasn’t so quick to push me behind her when Luca threw himself at me. “Are you seriously jealous?” she asks, disbelieving.

I poke my head out from behind her shoulder, enjoying all of the anger on their faces and her surprise. It’s not like me to poke a bear with a stick, let alone five of them, but their reactions amuse me. “Do I have to find my own husband to be like a package deal and get added into the harem now? Or do you prefer an odd set, Tootsie Roll?”

Her lips twitch as she puts her hands up to stop Luca’s advance again. “He’s going to take your head off,” she chastises me in a whisper.

It should stop me. It doesn’t. “Good thing I have you to protect me,” I say back, smirk in place. “Even if you’re not my

wife.”

She snorts and her men look murderous. It’s a good thing they love her as much as they do or my existence would not be guaranteed for much longer.

“You guys can’t be jealous of Charles,” she explains, trying to stifle her amusement. It’s not working.

“Why the fuck not?” Ryder snaps.

Declan turns his nose up. “He’s nothing but your past.”

Damn Declan. Ouch. I put my hand to my chest and defend, “My presence here says otherwise.”

Scar reaches back to smack me. “You’re not helping,” she scolds.

“Wasn’t trying to,” I admit impishly.

She rolls her eyes, but she’s enjoying this. The easy friendship that has come back to us. The natural ease we feel when we’re together. She has her men, and I’m more than okay with that. They’ve pieced her broken pieces back together, helped her heal, and grow. Built the type of life she never would have found back home with me. With her family. It doesn’t mean I’ll ever walk away from her again. She’s my family as much as she is theirs. Which I guess makes them my family now too. I’ve always wanted a big family that wasn’t so prim and proper.

A real family.

That loves and laughs and fights. And of course, antagonizes each other.

“They’ll have to get used to me eventually,” I say with a shrug. “You know I’m not going anywhere.”

Her smile softens, the edge of amusement fading into contentment. Reassurance. She wants me here as much as I want to be here. A shared past that hurts and soothes in equal measures. A peace and chaos only the two of us can truly understand. “He is right,” she agrees, talking to her men. My smile grows wider. Triumphant. “You do have to get used to him. But you don’t have to be jealous.”

Kade crosses his arms over his chest petulantly. “He can’t be a part of your harem.”

Scar puts her fingers to her temple and sighs, “Don’t call it that.” At the same time I ask, “Even if I bring my own husband?”

Noah shifts uncomfortably behind Kade. He hasn’t said a word during this exchange and I almost feel guilty. He’s always been the nicest and most accepting of me. Some points he even felt like a possible friend. But even he has struggled with jealousy as Scar and I have gotten closer. It’s not like I can’t understand. Our shared history is daunting. None of them can touch the seventeen years I did have with her, where we were the center of each other’s worlds. I’d be jealous of myself too.

“Maybe we should talk more about this and the implications,” he tries to reason with everyone.

“I’ll start husband hunting,” I promise.

“No!” All her men but Noah snap. “We agreed that we shouldn’t share outside of the six of us,” Declan adds calmly.

“Six,” Kade emphasizes.

Scar narrows her eyes at me. “Maybe you should go husband hunting.” Something in her tone is threatening. “Then I can antagonize your husband like you’re doing to mine.”

I grin, fair enough. “What’s family for?”

“You had your fun, now leave them alone. They can be sensitive.” Only she would call these five brutes sensitive. Love really is blind.

The guys all trade confused looks as they watch us. At least they’re starting to get it. I sigh dramatically. “Fine,” I relent. “Even if I do find a husband, I don’t want to share him with you anyway.”

She rolls her eyes. “I never thought you would.” Understanding begins to creep into some of the guys’ expressions. “And you five, no more caveman jealousy and

antics. Charles doesn't want me like that. He never has. He's gay."

Mouths part open in surprise and I wink at Kade and Luca. "Have you forgotten how stunning she's always been? Did you really think we would have stayed virgins until we were seventeen if I wasn't gay? What straight teenager would not have been absolutely floored at having her as his girlfriend?"

Stunned silence is the only answer I get for several long moments. Scar and I the only ones grinning as they process what I've said. I can't believe it's something they had never even thought about. They're thinking about it now.

Ryder is the first one to throw his head back and cackle, but the rest are quick to follow. I have a feeling my relationships with all of them will start to look vastly different now that they no longer see me as competition.

The rest of the party flows easily, everyone in much better moods after my reveal. The guys' attitudes immediately shift and become more welcoming. Or at least, more accepting. More alcohol flows, even past the kids' bedtimes.

It's a chance for me to see the life Scar has built for herself in a new light. A more relaxed one, a softer view. It's so much better than any life I had pictured for her over the years. Her happiness radiating from her in a way I never thought would be possible before. It infects me. My cheeks hurt from all the laughter and smiles we've shared. Something I can't remember ever happening since I lost her.

The raven-haired beauty that I've met only in passing sidles up to my side, her shoulder brushing mine. Rachel. I haven't seen much from her and Scar isn't one to share other people's problems, but I've picked up a bit here and there through staying at Scar's house on and off over the last couple months.

"It can be overwhelming at first," she says, taking a sip from her wine glass. "When you're so used to being alone, having very few people to trust and count on. But before you know it, you'll just be another part of the chaos."

I raise a brow at her. She seems to fit right in, like she's always been a part of this group. "Speaking from experience?"

She nods, a fond smile playing on her lips. "Scar couldn't decide whether to save me or stab me when I showed up on her doorstep bleeding and demanding answers. I've gained a lot since she took a chance on trusting me. Lost a lot too, but we all have." Her eyes fill with moisture as she looks over at the room, full of bodies as one of Scar's friends climbs on top of a table, dragging another girl with her. "I set out to find my sister, but never thought it would lead me to a whole family. They know how to pull you in and help you discover parts of yourself you never knew existed."

I smile, thinking about a little girl from long ago with blonde hair and a shining smile. "Scar has always been good at that."

Before she can respond, my phone rings. A familiar number flashes across the screen. I give her an apologetic smile as I excuse myself to take the call.

"What do you have for me?"

Dave's gravelly voice fills the line. "You were right," he starts and my stomach tightens in knots. The free-floating feeling of this day evaporating with that simple statement. "He knows Andre has been compromised. He went to each of the locations you gave me. Went in for less than ten minutes, came out with a black briefcase."

A rock sinks in my gut. This is it. It has to be. I knew having men in my father's inner circle would eventually pay off, but I never knew it would feel like this. An even mix of dread and excitement. Please be good news.

"He went to a house in the suburbs I've never been to before," Dave continues to explain. "Spent much longer in there. He came back empty handed."

I run my fingers through my hair, my breathing irregular. "You think he dropped whatever he collected there?"

"Yes, sir," he answers decisively.

I force myself to take a deep breath. “Any sign of him burning anything?”

“No, I got the impression it was more of a safe house,” he hesitates. “Somewhere for him to disappear alone for a while without being interrupted. Somewhere no one would expect him to be.”

It seems nothing like my father which makes it exactly what I should have expected from him. Hiding in plain sight. Middle class suburbia where anyone who knows him would say he’d never be caught dead there.

“Send me the address.”

“Already sent, sir.”

A headache begins to creep in as fear of what I’ll find in the house washes over me. “Thank you. Stay close to my father. Let me know if he so much as blinks strangely.”

“Of course, sir.”

I hang up the phone and shove it back in my pocket. There’s no reason to delay. If this place is what I think it is, somewhere not even one of his longest standing bodyguards has ever seen before, answers of that night won’t be anywhere else.



Chapter Twenty-Seven Noah

ROE'S soft snores fill the room as I brush her hair off her small face.

Her new room fits her. Full of all the toys and stuffed animals we've all bought her over the last year. The walls are of course a Tiffany blue, making it look even bigger and brighter than it already is. She showed her excitement so differently from Scar, with squeals and giggles, and of course jumping on her brand new bed. It instantly felt like her space.

Every room in this house has been designed to be perfect for our family. There's a difference between decorating a room that's already been in a house and renovating a house and its rooms to suit our needs. It still surprises me how much insight we each had to what Scar would want and need. Myself included.

Lots of conversations and debates took place over the course of months to finally agree on how the house should be designed, not only for the family we have now, but the family we hope to build together. A house that will maybe one day house siblings for Roe.

A house that allows us more space to host our ever-growing family while maintaining the privacy we've come to crave. From Roe's room I can't even hear the party happening downstairs in the main part of the house, even though I know

Britt and Jade are probably still doing their version of karaoke. Maybe even Scar has joined in by now.

I place a soft kiss on Roe's forehead and leave the room quietly, checking on the boys before slipping out into the hallway. With them still being so young, their rooms are set up on the third floor of our wing in the house. The floor also holds a private room for each one of us, none of us believe they will be used often as the master bedroom has a custom bed more than big enough to fit us all. But we all agreed, we sometimes need our own space, even if we've each used it as a place for our hobbies. At least we will have somewhere to lock Scar away when we need time with just her.

The house has several wings, including the main one and ours. Each is set up in a similar manner, almost like apartments in their own right. The third floor being all bedrooms, including extra ones for guests or sleepovers as the kids get older. The second floor of each wing is personalized to each intended resident, containing basics like smaller kitchens and living rooms, but more specific areas as well. Our second floor has a smaller gym than the main gym downstairs, as well as a dance studio for Scar and Roe, while the wing intended for Roe when she's older has a game room and private movie theater.

None of us were willing to sacrifice our freedom in taking Scar wherever the hell we wanted. So we compromised in having each wing act like its own apartment for privacy sake, with communal areas for our family parties.

Joe and Charlene have their own home within ours, on the opposite side of the estate from ours. They have their own private garage as well as a separate entrance to maintain their own space and privacy while still being here. Joe and Charlene moving in was one of the most shocking parts for Scar, but one she was the most excited about. Roe will be surrounded with all the people she loves under one roof. It'll make her adjustment all that much easier.

As I make my way back to the main part of the house, the noise slowly increases the closer I get. It isn't like Luca's

house where even though it's spacious, it's almost impossible to really get away from how loud our group can be.

I slip back into the room, almost unnoticed, but I should have known better. Scar is quick to fall into my lap as soon as I'm sitting on one of the couches. She wraps her arms around my neck and leans her head against my shoulder. I rub her back, feeling the tension ease from her muscles. "Is it your turn to be put to bed, baby girl?"

She tilts her head to wink at me. "I wouldn't say no."

I kiss the tip of her nose. It's been a long and emotionally exhausting day for all of us, but peace like nothing I've ever known before fills me as I wrap my arms around her waist and hold her to me.

"Did she go down easy?" she asks.

I nod. "They all did."

Ian and Jade catch our conversation and leave the loveseat they were sharing to join our couch. We knew we were going to need more seating space here.

"Thanks for putting the boys down too," Jade says.

I wave her off. "It's easy to get them down once Roe is out."

She doesn't argue back, we all know it's the truth. "What are you going to do with Luca's place now?" Ian asks, changing the direction of the conversation. "It's not like you can put it on the market."

He's right, of course. It holds too many of our secrets. The access to the tunnels. It's far too precious to give up. I rub the back of my neck. We had a plan for that, but all of the other guys are preoccupied in their own conversations.

"We actually thought," I start, then hesitate as I look to see if anyone is close enough to join this conversation. No luck. "We thought maybe you two would want to move in," I finish.

Scar lifts her head as she considers the plan. Jade's eyes grow wide as she looks to Ian for how to respond. Their house is nice, one of the safehouses Scar setup for them. But Luca's

house is bigger, closer to this one, has more security and privacy, and more room for the twins to grow. Not to mention, more amenities, like the medical rooms, the gym, and the office space.

“You can’t sell our house either,” Jade points out.

We had a plan for that too, but before I can even open my mouth to respond Scar already is. “True, but Ty isn’t in one of our houses at all. He’s still in the house he grew up in.” Of course she knew what we were thinking. “Luca’s place is in between this house and your old one, so you’ll be closer to us while still remaining close to him. We already don’t have to worry about school districts for the kids, and you’ll both be able to train without having to come to the gym every day.”

Ian and Jade have a silent conversation with just their eyes. “It is more secure,” Ian notes.

“Think about it,” I offer. “We don’t need an answer now. But you’re right. We can’t put it on the market, so someone moves in or it sits empty.” I shrug, because it’s not really any skin off our backs if it sits empty, but it does seem like a waste to not utilize all the resources we’ve built into that house.

Scar yawns and I know it’s time to take her up to bed. We’ll stay the night here before getting back to work tomorrow. We have three more locations to check out based on the information Kade and Luca were able to pry from Andre before his death.

Exhaustion sweeps over me at the thought. Another flight across the country to continue this wild goose chase. Each avenue that ends without answers takes a lot out of each of us. The travel on top of it has become almost unbearable.

“Bedtime, baby girl,” I whisper as I stand up, holding her in my arms. She must be even more tired than I realized, because she doesn’t fight me. Jade and Ian stand as well. “Do you guys know where your room is?” I ask.

“We’ve got it,” Jade assures me and I carry my wife off to bed. I can’t help the smile that plays on my lips at the thought. Our wife. She really is truly ours.

I head straight up to the master suite and start to regret not putting those elevators in like we discussed. Scar would have ribbed us mercilessly about it, but right now, it sure would be nice. She hums under her breath as I carry her up the steps, a dazed and happy expression on her face. She's definitely feeling those shots she took with Britt.

My phone ringing wakes me up. I curse as I dig through the sheets to find where it's been discarded. Charles. Why the fuck is he calling at four in the morning? I shake my head trying to clear it as I answer. "Hold on," I whisper. Everyone is still knocked out around me.

Scar looks more peaceful in her sleep with Ryder curled around her than I've seen her look in a long time. Lately all her demons have been chasing her in her dreams, making it hard for her to sleep at all, let alone through the night. Most of the time, she wakes up more exhausted than when she had fallen asleep. I can't risk waking her.

Luca and Kade are both behind me on the massive bed and I curse again as I try to figure out the best way to disentangle myself without waking anyone. Moving very carefully, I get out from under the blankets and move to the foot of the bed and rush out of the room, closing the door softly behind me.

"Sorry, didn't want to wake anyone," I explain as I lift the phone back to my ear. Heavy breathing, almost like panting fills the line.

"Noah," Charles gasps, pain etched into his voice. "It's bad," he whispers. "I saw her and it's even worse than what I thought," his voice breaks and I can hear the tears in his words.

Panic surges through me. "What do you mean?" I snap, changing direction from the kitchen to the office.

"The pictures," he answers. "I found my father's stash." A deep, shuddering breath, makes me hold my own. "I know who hurt her."

Ice. My entire bloodstream turns to ice at his words. Goosebumps rise on my flesh as the meaning of his words sink

in. No more searching, no more coming up empty.

Bits and pieces of the last year flash through my mind. The unanswered texts that led me to Luca's house in search of Scar. The news reports that I only realized led back to her after I showed up there. Finding out how steeped in blood my girl was. Meeting Declan. Seeing Scar broken. Being kidnapped. Declaring war. Torturing William. Hearing Roe call me Daddy for the first time. Ry and Scar coming home covered in blood after their murder party. Scar screaming in her sleep, lost to the pain of her past. Jade in a hospital bed. Scar in a cage. Scar with a bloody handprint around her throat and Kade's smug grin. Scar's last dance at Steel Roses. Bloody messages written on walls. Losing our own. Losing Alec. Rachel's screams. A jacket with a red rose. Burning buildings. So much training. Never ending files of information to sort through on the real monsters of this world. Romano dying. Those fucking polaroids.

Etched into my mind and branded on my soul. A sick feeling churns in my gut. All the good and all the bad over the last year. There's so much. Too much to even fully grasp as all the memories wash over me in no particular order.

Our path has been a wild and destructive one. Filled with pain and love and heartbreakingly beautiful moments. Laughter that carried us through the worst of the devastation left in our wake. All of it leading to this single phone call. To more fucking photos. At least these will finally hold answers.

It's time to prepare and finally begin the hunt.

"We can't let her see them," Charles cries, a sob wracking through his chest as he pushes the words out.

Respect and awe fill me for this man who only yesterday filled me with apprehension and jealousy. Regret tastes bitter as I realize how deep and true his love for Scar really is. He aches for her pain. Even if he weren't gay, even if he was romantically interested in Scar, the depth of his loyalty and devotion to her would have won me over in this instant.

"We won't," I promise. "We're going to protect her, Charles. All of us."

Each one of his cries is another lash against my heart. We never should have pushed him out. None of us are prepared to face how horrific that night was. The night where the girl we all have fallen head over heels in love with was born from the ashes of her past. A past so haunting, it has brought a grown man to sobs. A man who wasn't fazed by his own kidnapping, nor a gun to his head. A man who wasn't afraid to play with fire by taunting a room full of psychos. Who risked his life and destroyed his own heart to save our girl before we ever had the chance to help her.

"What happened?" I push hesitantly. "You were here just a few hours ago. Where did you go? How did you find the photos?"

He takes a few deep breaths as he tells me how he has had a man on his father's security team for the last few years. Genius, and it explains a lot of the information he's been able to pass on to us. Though, it also begs the question if he's been sent into a trap.

"Are you sure you can rely on this guy?" I can't help but ask. We're too close to the end to be derailed by trusting the wrong person.

"I'm positive," he answers shakily. "He's been keeping an eye on my father for me for years. My father went to all of the locations you guys got from Andre, plus a few more before coming to this house I'm at now."

A house? I sit behind a computer in the office and pull up all of the documents I've been working on the last few months to narrow down who we were looking for.

"Where are you?"

"A house in Mayview," he answers. I pull it up on my computer. How the fuck did he get to the East Coast without any of us noticing?

"When did you leave?" I can't help but ask as I look into the sleepy little town. Nothing about it stands out to me except it's only a forty-five minute drive from Scar's hometown. It's a larger suburb, known for housing middle to upper middle class

families. Good public schools. It's so insanely average, I can't connect it with the horror of his words.

"Just after you went to put Roe to bed and the redhead started singing on the table." His voice is starting to even out. At least that's something.

"Why would your father have a safehouse in the most mundane, average town?" Clicking through local newspapers just confirms my thoughts. Absolutely nothing of interest.

"The house is its own form of trauma," he sighs. "I think he planned to bring her here once he found her. Everything here is dedicated to her. It's like a house of horrors." With every word his voice becomes more and more hoarse. "Old clothes that must have survived the fire. Even an extra cheer uniform," he whispers and a new murderous rage bleeds into my vision, making it hard to focus.

I can barely stand to hear what he has already said, but he continues, painting an even more gruesome picture. "There's a soundproof room, with chains and all this terrible shit, Noah. I almost wish I had never found it," he admits. I can't blame him, just hearing about it is enough to turn my stomach. This conversation will haunt me for years to come. Maybe Scar doesn't need to know this part.

"Photos of him and her were already here. Tucked in drawers next to the bed in the master bedroom. Even more in a photo album. Fuck, sorry," he cuts off. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Nausea turns my own gut as I can hear Charles gagging and hurling over all he found. He's right. Whatever those photos hold, we can't give them to Scar. She's the strongest person I know, but the photos Romano had on him were almost enough to destroy her. She doesn't need to know there's a whole house somewhere on the East Coast dedicated to her trauma and humiliation.

"Sorry," he apologizes as he comes back to the line. "This is just sick. Worse than anything I had imagined." His voice has aged years since I last saw him mere hours ago. "The other photos," he forces himself to continue. "I think he collected

them from other places and dropped them off here last night. They were in a briefcase and put into a safe at the back of a closet.”

“You can break into safes?” That’s a useful skill. We normally have to rely on Scar and Kade for that. Luca could probably do it too, but I’ve never seen him have to.

He scoffs. “The code was her birthday.”

Chills run down my back. I guess no one else would make the connection or even remember her birthday if they did. We’re both silent at the depravity of his obsession with her even after all these years. How many other young women has he hurt and killed in all this time?

“Who were the other men?” I finally ask, looking at all the names on my screen. So many potential candidates, all of them need to be wiped from this earth. But two of them are out of time. Two of them were responsible for the pain in Scar’s eyes, the gauntness of her cheeks, the frailty in her heart. Two of them will be dead by the end of the week.

“Daniel Bernard.”

I reel back at the first name. He was on one of our lists, but as an unlikely candidate. Someone that had been seen with Donahue but only briefly. Not someone who has ever seemed to cross the line again. Has had a fairly clean history other than a few suspicious meetings years ago.

“The Dean?” I snap.

Charles sighs. “It explains a lot, actually. So much happened on school property that never should have been allowed. Even if she had lost the protection of her family. Scholarship students were always bullied, but the school never allowed it the way they allowed what happened to her when she came back.”

A new hate begins to bloom at his words. She never had a chance.

“And the other?” I demand.

“Jeffrey Schroder.”

At least his name makes sense. He was one of the names I would have bet money on. A business partner to both Scar's father and Charles' as well as a good friend of Declan's father. All the connections were there.

"How sure are you?" I have to ask. We need to be more than positive if we're going to convince Scar she doesn't have to look at the photos.

"I grew up seeing these men almost every day," he answers. "I promise it's them. We don't need her to confirm it." I breathe a sigh of relief as I begin to put their names into the program I've been working on. We will have every insignificant detail about their lives by the end of the day. Bank accounts, social media, addresses, possible aliases, associates, businesses, shell companies. Every bit of information that could even potentially be traced back to them will be in the palm of my hand.

"Noah," he sighs. "What do we do with this house and these photos? I want to burn it," he admits, emotion choking him.

"I do too," I agree. "But I don't think we can. It will tip your father off."

Neither of us say anything as we try to figure out the next best step. Declan or Luca would know what to do. We can't tip our hand, but we also can't just leave the house alone. As if summoned by my thoughts, Luca walks into the office, hair disheveled and a wary look on his face.

He studies me as he puts a cup of coffee on the desk next to me and takes a long sip from his own mug. "Why are you awake so early, Noah?"

His question jars me, but of course he wouldn't know. I motion to the phone. "Charles found the other men." Luca snaps to attention and holds his hand out for the phone.

"Tell me everything," he demands, but it's not as harsh as he normally speaks to Charles. I click through several of the documents my program has already spit out on Dean Daniel Bernard. Been in his position for sixteen years, happily

married, and has two grown sons. He's built his reputation as a family man, maintaining his position by pushing the school to higher academic achievements and bragging about a welcoming community of outstanding and talented individuals. What a fraud.

Luca nods along as Charles updates him on the situation. It only takes a few minutes to get all the pertinent information out. "Noah's already working on it. I want you to hold your position until someone comes to relieve you. Bring a few of the photos that clearly identify all of their faces."

I don't need to be able to hear Charles to know he's protesting.

"I understand," Luca concedes. "I don't want to show them to her either, but we need to have them. Just trust me." His entire attitude towards Charles has shifted, he's still his usual, stone-faced self, but he isn't being antagonistic. It's a subtle but huge shift.

Charles must choose to relent and bring a few photos with him because Luca nods once more. "Hold tight, someone will be there in a few hours. Sooner if I can make it happen." He ends the call and hands it back to me.

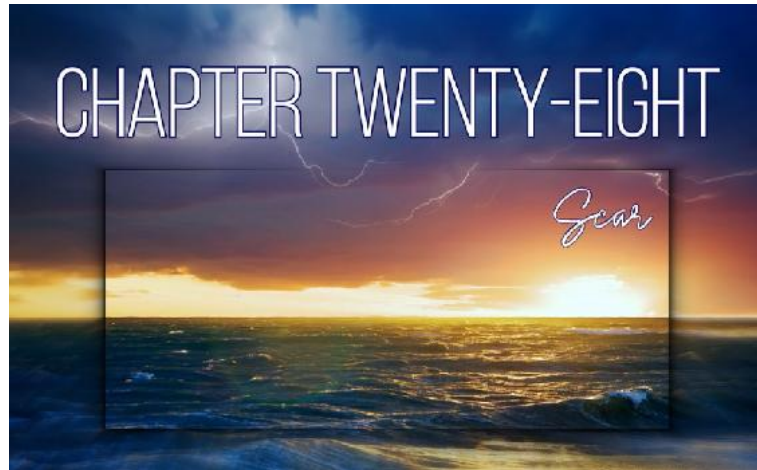
"We have to tell her."

I wince. He's right, but I don't want to.

"Go wake the rest of them up. We're going to need to start planning."

He squeezes my shoulder as he puts his own phone to his ear and walks out of the room, already calling the troops. I turn my focus back to what I'm good at. Gathering intel.

Let the hunt begin.



Chapter Twenty-Eight Scar

MY PEACEFUL DREAMS are shattered with a few simple words.

“Charles found them.”

I’m instantly awake, sitting up fast enough to make my head spin. I still don’t let it slow me down, jumping out of bed as I stare down Luca, waiting for more of an explanation than that. He can’t just drop a bomb like that on me. He can’t do that.

A million thoughts run through my head, questions, doubts, fears. Memories flash by, broken bits and pieces crashing down on me, making me flinch with the force of them.

I want to ask how, where, when? But only one word slips past my lips, the most important question of all and the answer I fear the most.

“Who?”

Declan wraps his body around me, pulling me against his chest where I can feel his rapid heartbeat. My own pounds so hard it’s almost hard to hear anything over the pounding in my ears. His arms band across my chest like a straight jacket, forcibly holding me together because he knows I’m moments away from completely losing it. Again.

Luca meets my gaze, his dark eyes a steel band of reassurance. It's true. We've really found them. After all this time, I'm finally going to know the names of the men who hurt me. Probably more than their names. I'll probably know them. Their families, their wives, maybe even their kids. Fear, shame, and something far more primal ricochet through me.

"Who?" I repeat, my voice cracking, and tears fill my eyes. I need to know and I'm fucking terrified at the same time. After so many years, I didn't expect to feel this way. To feel the familiar sense of dread and terror. How many more pieces of myself are left to break? Will the who behind that night take the last pieces of myself I managed to save? The pieces I've managed to rebuild.

Am I about to shatter all over again?

"Jeffrey Schroder and Daniel Bernard."

Five words. So decisive. So easy to push out.

Each one a whip against my bare skin. A new lash of pain and hate and humiliation.

Mrs. Schroder was my piano teacher. I used to babysit their daughter. Their miracle baby. They tried so hard for so many years to get pregnant and Mrs. Schroder was so happy when she finally got her daughter. A beautiful little girl the same age as the twins. Their friend.

Their family spent the second Sunday of every month at our house for a family dinner. Charles and his father were there often as well. It makes perfect sense for him to be one of the men. Of course, he was there. I almost hate myself for not seeing it earlier. It seems so obvious now.

New flashes of long forgotten memories begin to drown me.

A class ring against the dark walnut desk in my father's office.

Familiar loafers in front of my face as my head bounces against the floor.

A dark chuckle that sounds familiar but distorted.

The weighted gaze in the crowded hallway that sent fear pulsing through me.

The heavy hand that landed on my shoulder, pushing against my wounds as Dean Bernard steered me into his office.

The guilt and shame that coursed through me.

The final pieces of the puzzles of my past click together in my mind. Enough for me to truly understand why I had to endure all of the trauma I did. Why it didn't end with just that one night. Why I could never feel safe until I forged myself into a weapon.

Tears stream down my face. My body shakes in Declan's arms. Their words all fall on deaf ears. I can't hear them. I'm too busy processing it all. Men who were nice to me, who had families, kids of their own. Men who knew me. Really knew me. Didn't hesitate to tear me down. To tarnish the crown they put on my head.

I want to hurt them. To destroy them. To hear them beg and whimper and watch them bleed before finally stealing the life from their eyes, the oxygen from their lungs.

I just woke up and I'm already exhausted by the emotional turmoil rising and falling through me. My body has a physical response to the emotions I can't even begin to process.

I was right to be scared. To fear the answer. Somehow knowing makes that night all the uglier, all the more humiliating and painful. It makes every wound that much deeper, cut a little bit closer to the core. Anger at myself for not seeing it. For not noticing the lingering looks sooner, the odd behaviors, the manipulation that occurred after. The way the school stood back and allowed the sharks to circle me in blood-infested waters. For allowing the Dean to put the blame on me and never seeing it for what it was.

I was right to be scared. But I was wrong about it shattering me all over again.

I'm not breaking this time. I'm not alone anymore. I'm not the same girl they once knew and this time, we're going to

meet again on my terms. I'll be the one with the blade. With the power. With all of the control.

But first, I need to let it all go. So I do.

Luca has already taken control of starting a plan. Declan, Kade, and Ryder all hold me together. I'd bet money Noah is already sitting behind a computer. They're doing everything I should be doing, so I don't have to. So I can let go.

I can feel the pain and mourn a life I thought I had stopped mourning long ago.

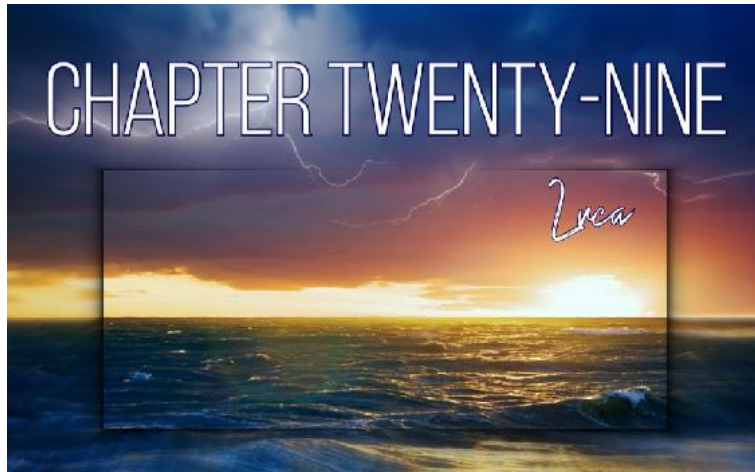
Sobs wrack my body, but this time I hear every word Declan, Kade, and Ry whisper to me. Each one gives me the strength to hold on. To not get sucked down into the whirlwind of despair building in my soul. I can feel this pain without drowning in it. Because I have them.

It could be minutes, or hours later when my tears finally subside. I feel wrecked. Broken words and half thoughts have slipped free as I tried to purge the thoughts from my brain. The guys stare at me with a mix of awe, devotion, and empathy in their eyes. They feel my pain as if it's their own.

There was a time I would have thought this breakdown would be a sign of weakness, but my men have taught me better. I've never been stronger than in this moment. As I let my emotions bleed out of me the same way they did that night as I laid in a pool of my own blood. And just like that night, I'm going to stand back up, pick up the pieces and put them back together. Build an even stronger armor around my bruised and battered heart and get ready to become the predator.

I have my prey in my sights, and soon it will be time to pull the trigger.

They won't be ready.



Chapter Twenty-Nine Luca

SHE MUST BE FUCKING INSANE.

I've questioned a lot about the woman I love. A fucking lot. I've even questioned things about myself. For all the insanity we seem to thrive on, the chaos she sets out to create, the thrill I get from fighting with her over it.

But this is the first time I'm really tempted to duct tape her mouth shut and throw her ass in the closet to wait for us to finish our game plan. Without her. She'd never forgive me. It just might be worth it.

My hand stings as I slam it down on the desk. Everyone jumps except for Letty. She meets my death stare with one of her own. She knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"You have lost your fucking mind if you think we are going to play some sick and twisted version of show-and-tell with those godforsaken photos, Letty."

She has broken many times over the years, in different ways. She's even come close to killing herself. She has the visible scars to prove it, and I have the mental ones. Being in love is supposed to be the best feeling in the world. The person makes your world make sense, becomes your home, is a source of comfort and peace. Scar is that for me. Sometimes. She also makes my blood boil, drives me to drink, and has taught me what true fear and grief are.

It's hard to be in love with someone who doesn't care if they see tomorrow.

She's not that fragile girl anymore she is firmly tethered to the here and now. Logically, I know that. But when she broke at seeing the photos Romano had, when she fully lost control to the chaos, I truly thought we may not be able to bring her back. I was terrified that was it. The demons of her past had finally claimed her from me, just when I had been starting to let my guard down. Just when I believed I'd be able to keep her. When I was starting to believe we could all heal and truly move on from our dark pasts. It all began to crumble as she fell apart.

We'll always be who we are. Born from the shadows others forced upon us. But I thought we'd finally escaped from the chains that had kept us tied there. A few photos were enough to shatter her, and that dream of mine as well.

We're still in a fragile place of healing, of growth. Setbacks are understandable, but how many can we truly handle before we give up entirely? I can't handle losing Scar. I'm not strong enough. There's nothing in the world worth risking her healing. The photos Charles found will do nothing but take her back to that night.

"I'm not saying pass them around the fucking circle, Luca," she growls through gritted teeth. Her anger is as palpable as my own. Good.

Her anger is better than her sadness. Her pain.

Even hearing their names, learning who they were, recognizing them from her past, it made the memories worse for her. She can put on a brave face now, show all of us how strong she is, but I saw the scared girl from that night still lurking in her eyes.

"There's nothing left to be found in those photos. Not for you. Not for me. Not for any of us."

"I want to see them," she demands.

Everyone else remains silent, their eyes volleying back and forth between us. No one is on her side, she knows it, but if

anyone else speaks up, she will double down. We all know it. We won't be able to outvote her this time. Noah or Declan would try to reason with her. Ryder can't really say no to her. He's her yes-man, through and through. Even if he's on our side here. Kade might have a shot, but she softens for him. She's playful with him. But me? I bring out her fire, her fight. That's what we need right now.

She isn't getting her hands on these damn photos if it's the last fucking thing I do. But I don't mind if she goes down swinging. Hell, I encourage it. I've taken a black eye from almost everyone in this room at one point or another. One from her would be a badge of honor.

"You're going to have to pry them from my unconscious hands if you want them."

Kade moves to his feet, ready to grab her if she really does launch herself at me like she seems to be contemplating. I wave him off as she threatens, "Don't tempt me."

I tap my cheek with two fingers, taunting her. "Come on, Letty. You want them? Come take them."

She growls, but doesn't attack me like I half expected her to. I wouldn't have been able to blame her. I was quite literally asking for it. Her body shifts to the desk in front of her and I know what's going to happen half a second before she screams and flips the desk. I wince. At least it was a desk without a computer on it?

"You're such a bastard," she curses, huffing.

Ryder stands beside Kade. "I'll punch him for you if that'll make you feel better, boss lady."

I roll my eyes and snort but some of my tension eases as Scar's lips twitch.

"I'm not punching anyone," she huffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "Yet," she finishes under her breath, making me grin. She's calming down. She's pissed, but she hasn't lost control, not for a moment of our fight.

"I know you want the confirmation," I concede. This is why I had Charles bring a few of the photos. She needs some

type of concession in order to walk away from seeing them. I nod to Noah and he pulls up the images he edited, taking the photos we had and only focusing on their faces. Pulling them closer, lightening them up, and cropping everything else out.

It was hard to watch him work. The color drained from his face as he clicked through each one, rushing to get the worst of the images out of the frame. Ryder and I both knew we wouldn't be able to handle seeing her like that. The murderous rage would far outweigh any logic we have. Kade wanted to be strong enough to do it, but even he knew he would fly off the handle. The emotional upheaval from the trauma depicted in those photos has no place in this room. Not right now. Not when we need to create a plan more flawless than any plan we've ever worked on before.

Declan and Noah are the only ones who were able to click through the photos methodically, quickly. Though neither of them were unaffected. What they saw will haunt them as surely as it will haunt Charles and Scar. Kade stood right by both of them, showing more self-restraint than I could ever manage as he held onto both their shoulders. Offering comfort the only way he could, all while keeping his gaze firmly planted above the computer screen.

Silence hangs in the room as she studies the faces on the screen. Charles moves to her side and grabs her hand. The sight doesn't bother me as much as it did just a few short days ago. In fact, I'm filled with relief as she rests her head against his shoulder. She's not shutting down, locking us out. I'll never be his biggest fan, don't think we can ever become best friends, but I can accept his role in her life. In this family. The way she needs him in a different way than she needs us.

"It really is them," she sighs.

Charles' sigh is just as heavy as hers. "It makes sense in a twisted way."

She nods against him. "Easy to see the signs now looking back."

"It's easy to see a lot of questionable behavior from the adults we were surrounded by back then. It was our normal."

His words make my hands tighten into fists at my sides. The reality of the world they grew up in is far darker and more perverse than should be humanly possible.

I wave to Noah and he takes the photos down off the screen, instead pulling up the information he's been able to collect on all three of the men who have become our prey over the last twenty-four hours.

"We need to start planning how we're going to take them out," I say, trying to steer us back on track. I watch the back of Scar's head as I talk. "Are we hunting them down individually? Broadcasting their sins? Making it look like an accident?" We've done all of the above. What type of justice does she need for this final step of vengeance?

Scar lifts her head from Charles' shoulder and begins to run her fingers over the desk Noah is sitting at. She chews on her lip and I wait for her answer. It needs to come from her. We will figure out how to give her exactly what she needs from this.

"I want them all together," she decides.

Of course, she does. I shake my head and smirk.

"In his office. Just like the night this all started," she continues, a faraway look in her eyes. "I want to recreate that night. Make them feel every bit of pain and humiliation I did. Feel what it's like to be bleeding out on the floor, helpless, incapable of moving, as smoke fills their lungs and flames inch closer and closer to their bodies. I want them to know the fear of slowly suffocating and being stuck, resigned to their fate as the heat becomes overwhelmingly oppressive. I want them to sit there and be forced to wonder if all the harm they caused was worth their fate all while knowing it's too late to go back and make different choices. I want pain, fear, shame, and regret to be the last things they ever feel."

"Oh, is that all?" Ryder asks dryly, but there's a delighted gleam in his eyes. He loves her plan. Of course he does.

Okay. We're going with the hardest option to pull off. Getting three grown, suspicious, wealthy men into a

designated place without making them wary. Nothing like a challenge.

“I assume you mean Donahue’s office?” He’s the one who took it further than any other, the ringleader of the ones left. She can’t mean her father’s office as it’s gone.

She nods and Charles hums. “Schroder shouldn’t be too hard to get him there, but my father has nothing to do with the Dean any longer.”

Scar moves to sit in Noah’s lap and starts reading through the intel he’s gathered, looking for a connection to get them all together.

“Why don’t we just kidnap all of them?” Jade asks, reminding us she’s even here. She’s been quiet since she and Ian showed up with coffee for all of us.

“Cause that’s a lot of work, J,” Declan explains calmly. “We could, but that’s three different teams, three different disappearances to cover up, less time for Scar to work.”

“Yeah, J,” Kade taunts her. “Why are you even here?”

She flips him off and he sticks his tongue out at her. “Moral support,” she answers. “Scar needs someone to hold her hand if she’s being forced to see your ugly mug all day.” Their bantering breaks up some of the growing tension in the room as they intended. Everyone settles in as ideas begin to get tossed out one after another for a way to get the three men together.

Each plan someone offers up is quickly thrown out by another. We go in circles until I begin to tune them all out. Maybe the answer is right in front of us. Something so obvious we’re just overlooking it.

A thread that connects all three men.

“Charlotte,” I whisper.

Heads snap in my direction. My stomach churns at the thought of using this route, but we don’t truly have to use her as bait. I stare at Charles and study him for a moment. He’s really come through for us multiple times. He’s the one who

brought the photos, who found the house, who led us to Romano. He's earned our trust and even my respect.

I fortify my resolve, even if it goes against everything I've believed in for the last several years. Everything we've fought to protect.

"She's the string that connects them all," I explain. Charles' eyes widen, the first one to understand where my plan is heading. It's risky, dangerous, not something I ever advocate for, especially when it involves Scar, but we can't find any other connections. Maybe it's time to go back to the beginning.

"You want to tell them where she is," Charles deduces. Hmm, he is smarter than I ever gave him credit for.

Tension ratchets up in the room as everyone's expressions range from shock to anger to intrigue. It would be Scar that looks intrigued. I raise my hands to placate everyone. "I'm not saying we actually expose her, okay? I think we're smarter than that." I'm a little offended they didn't immediately see that. "We've created enough fake identities, we just have to create another one," I explain. "Photoshop a couple photos of Scar, make her blonde, get rid of her tattoos. Make it look like she's been living a quiet life in some random town. Thanks to Charles we know where his father has searched for her and what leads he's followed. We can use that to create a believable past for her."

Noah's fingers are already flying over the keyboard. "I can do that."

"How are we passing this info off?" Declan asks, some of his disbelief being replaced with curiosity. "We can't just send an anonymous email to Donahue and expect him to fall for it. We might be able to use one of his spies but he's going to be on guard since several have already been burned. It'll feel too convenient."

I tilt my head as I watch Charles watching me. "Where does Daddy dearest think you are?"

He rolls his eyes and flips me off. Oh, he's getting bolder by the day. He might fit in better than I had thought. Don't know if I like that, I don't hate it either though. "Business on the West Coast is all he knows. He hasn't asked for any more information than that."

"He has come to believe she's on the West Coast," Ry points out. It's something we realized when we looked into his company. He's been creeping closer and closer to her all this time. Who knows if he ever would have uncovered the truth? I find it hard to believe he would have figured it out, but he was searching close to us.

"Is my stumbling upon her less convenient?" Charles asks, doubt and hope warring in his voice.

It's Noah who answers, "Not if we play on his ego, make him think he was headed in the right direction and close to finding her himself."

"He does have a big ego," Charles concedes. "I don't think he will be wholly rational about her either." A tinge of green crosses his face. He's thinking about the house he found. We haven't told Scar about it. I don't want to. It might be better to destroy it without ever having her know just how deep his obsession ran.

"Do you think it will work?" Scar asks, sounding more like herself.

Charles contemplates his answer. "I think it could," he agrees. "We just have to set it up perfectly."

"Leave that to me," Noah says.

The next several hours are a blur of taking photos of Scar, editing them to look nothing like who she is today and instead a grown up version of who she once was, debating where and how she would have been living her life all these years. The atmosphere is lighter than it's been since Alec's funeral. Jokes are tossed out freely as meticulous plans are made. Scar is smiling and laughing at creating this fake life for herself. None of the shadows that have seemed to plague her are present. Instead, a raw energy is filling the room. It vibrates with the

intensity, but in a way that makes all of us more excited, more amped up. It's reminiscent of the night we declared war on Romano.

Confidence runs through all of us that this is going to work. There's no room for doubts any longer. No chance of anything but blood and vengeance being dealt out at Scar's hand. The certainty of the end coming seems to smooth some of her jaded edges, her frazzled ends. I bet she won't have any nightmares tonight.

The day has passed in the blink of an eye as we've created this whole life around who Letty could have been. Enough personal touches to make it all the more believable. A dance teacher in a small beach town, not married, no kids, living in a secluded house with views of the ocean. She likes to run along the beach every morning. Those were the hardest photos to photoshop. Removing her tattoos but keeping her scars to help prove it's really her. No one would know those scars better than Donahue.

Charles just so happens to have a business associate that lives on the same street as our fictitious Letty, laying the groundwork for how he found her. We've even created a statement from this associate about how he doesn't know much about her. She tends to keep to herself and seems rather demure and shy. It should be enough to convince his father it's real.

It takes a few days to get the rest of our plan in order. As soon as we decided how we were going to lure the three men in Jade, Ian, Rachel, Holden, and Joe flew to the East Coast to keep an eye on our prey. We need to ensure they play into our hands before springing the trap or everything could unravel.

Charles got us photos and the blueprints of the Donahue estate. We'll hold our positions outside, while he heads straight into the house. We need him to be there first for when Bernard and Schroder show up so their arrivals won't raise any flags for security. Charles should have the authority to send the majority of the security away, making it easier for us to make our way in without any problems. His excuse for his father will be complete privacy.

We pull up to the tarmac of the private airport we prefer. I check in with each team to confirm their positions. Rachel and Holden have eyes on Schroder at his home in Eastvale. Ian and Jade are at the academy Letty once attended, keeping an eye on Bernard. And Joe is outside Donahue's office. The guard Charles has on his payroll gives him the go ahead as Donahue heads into a business meeting that is expected to last hours. He shouldn't have his phone on him for hours, giving us enough time to get there, get in, and set up everything we need to before he even knows what's sitting in his email.

Now, just to lay the bait.

We all collectively hold our breath as Charles calls his father from the plane. We have a plan if he answers, but his phone should already be off. We sigh in relief when he gives us a small nod.

"Sir," he starts, "call me back when you get this. I found," he stutters, letting his voice shake. "I have something you need to see. I think I may have found Charlotte." He bites his lips, letting emotion bleed into his voice. He's actually pretty damn believable. "Devereaux," he adds. "Charlotte Devereaux, I think I found her. I'm sending photos to your private email and am heading to the estate now to show you everything I found." He just needs to add the final touch to put the nail in this coffin. "I know what happened back then, Father. She's too much of a liability to leave her where she is. I'll see you soon."

He hangs up the phone and hangs his head. "That was fucking awful." He sits back down in his seat as Noah uses a burner email to send the photos to Donahue's private email. "That will get him to his home office. I can guarantee that much, but he won't call the others."

"No need for him to," Noah interjects. "I've already hacked into his private email to forward the photos you sent to both of them with a message to meet him at your estate. I haven't sent it quite yet. We'll wait until we're already there so we can eliminate the chance of them getting there before we do."

We settle into our seats and wait for the long but familiar flight to pass. We're so close to the end I can almost taste the ash on my tongue.



Chapter Thirty Charles

I FIDGET with the earpiece Scar gave me. It's foreign and uncomfortable, nothing like a headphone as she claimed. It feels far more invasive.

“Stop messing with it, Charles” she snaps and I startle at her voice. “We can all hear every time you fucking tap it.”

I wince as I sit in my father's office. “Sorry.” This whole thing is just setting my nerves on edge. My father should be finishing his meeting any moment now and it will only be about fifteen minutes before he walks through the front door. I don't know what to expect. From him or from the others.

“Bernard is on the move,” a male voice says. Ian, I'm pretty sure.

A female voice adds, “He just came flying to his car, white as a ghost.” Jade; I do remember her. She sounds amused by her observation.

“No movement from Schroder yet,” another female voice says. That's Rachel; she's the one who was talking to me at the party. It still baffles me how many people Scar has in her corner now. Not just employees, but friends. Family. Making all of this run a lot smoother with less anxiety than if we had to pay people to be our eyes and ears. We don't have to stress about any of them turning their backs on us or switching to the other side for a paycheck.

“Sending the text now,” responds Noah. He scares me a little bit. Not in the same way as the others, but I’m fairly positive it would be impossible to keep a secret from him. He probably knew I was gay even before we told them all. I wouldn’t put it past him to have a list of my exes. Hell, even my browser history. Nothing is safe with him around.

I sit behind my father’s desk and pull up the cameras from around the property. I click through each view to make sure I know where each and every security guard is. “All security except for my own has been cleared out.”

“Taking control of the feeds now,” Noah says and I sit back. He’s already walked me through how to download everything off of this computer and I slip the USB into my pocket for safekeeping. Who knows what other criminals they’ll be able to find with this? “Okay, cameras are disabled,” he adds a few moments later. “Deleting the last four months of footage. As far as anyone is concerned they stopped working and your father just never bothered to have them fixed.”

“Got it,” I agree.

“Here Schroder comes,” Rachel confirms.

“Also white as a ghost,” the other male voice laughs. I’m fairly sure his name is Holden, but I’ve hardly had any conversations with him.

As if on cue, my phone begins ringing. “Hello, Father,” I answer.

There’s an unfamiliar lilt in his voice as all his words rush together. “You really found her? I saw the photos and the resemblance is uncanny.” He laughs, an unhinged sound. “You really found her. Don’t touch her. Come home now and bring me everything you have on the girl.”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip in disgust. It’s hard to not respond the way I really want to. But I know this way is better. It’s the right thing to do. String him along. Just a little longer.

“I’m already at the estate, Sir. I have a file for you.”

He hangs up without another word. I fall back into the seat and wait. Any minute now.

My phone beeps with security letting me know Dean Bernard just pulled in through the gates. They already know to have him pull through to the back to keep his car out of sight when my father arrives.

“Bernard is here,” I say even though they should all already know. They are just outside the gates, ready and waiting to come in at my signal.

“Keep calm, Charles,” Scar soothes. She must hear the nerves in my voice. “We’re right here and we have your back.”

“I know,” I answer, a small smile spreading across my face at the determination in her voice. She has more strength in her pinky finger than most people have in their whole bodies. Me included. Her reassurance lets me borrow just a little bit of hers though. Enough to feel confident I’ll be able to get through this. One way or another.

The Dean doesn’t seem to have any trouble finding his way to the office. I instructed security to just let him in and point him in the right direction. Has he ever been here before? His eyes are shifty and nervous as he enters the room. Surprise and apprehension cross his face as soon as he sees me sitting here.

“Hello, Dean. My father is on his way.” I use my best calming voice to lower his guard. “Can I get you a drink while you wait?”

He fixes his cufflinks as he tries to regain his composure. Wouldn’t want to seem rattled in front of a former student. It almost amuses me, in a detached kind of way.

Many years have passed since I’ve seen him. They have not been kind to him. His hair is more salt than pepper and thinning to reveal the top of his head. His face is lined with more wrinkles and his eyes are sunken in, even his middle is much softer. Rounder. His eyes and skin have a yellowish hue that indicates how hard he’s been hitting the bottle over the years. He doesn’t hold the same authority he did in the past.

I see him so differently now that I know his true colors, but it’s more than that. He’s no longer a strong and fit adult that

commanded respect. He's nothing more than a weakling with no spine and even fewer morals.

"Bourbon would be great," he responds.

I move to my father's bar and pour him a generous amount.

"Incoming." I hear the warning from Scar at the same time my phone beeps with security. Schroder must be here. I grab two more glasses and fill both up with a generous pour. If memory serves me right, I believe this is Schroder's drink of choice as well.

He walks into the office just as I pass one of the glasses to Dean Bernard. His appearance doesn't surprise me in the same way. I've seen him as recently as at the gala where I first found Scar. She was so close to them, just out of their grasp and none of them even realized it. Thank god for small favors.

"My father will be here soon," I explain once more. "Drink?" I offer even as I'm already handing the glass over. He looks more haggard than usual, but not nearly as unhealthy as Bernard does.

"You were the one who found her?" Schroder asks as he takes the drink and a seat.

I nod, tapping my fingers against the desk as my nerves grow. These two were never really a threat to the plan being derailed. So far so good, but I can't help but feel anxiety crawling up my spine. My father is the wild card.

"Stumbled upon her while I was on some business. She's in a small beach town in Northern California. Secluded house up in the cliffs." I lift my drink to my mouth but barely let any pass my lips. I'll need every bit of my wits about me for when my father arrives. He's going to be angry with their presence. He'll be even angrier that I didn't give him a warning about calling them here. He would have never passed along her whereabouts to them. They would continue to live in the dark, wondering if she was truly gone or if she may come back one day to haunt them. They would have never known about the house in the heart of the suburbs just forty-five minutes away

from here that would have become her personal hell if she really was the helpless damsel we painted her out to be.

“What are our next steps?” Schroder leans forward on the couch, his elbows resting on his legs as he crosses his hands to lean his chin against. He’s calm, in control. The opposite of the Dean, who’s beginning to turn a little green.

I shrug. “My father will decide. I just brought the information.” I lift the file to indicate the truth of my words. My phone beeps once more and Scar’s voice fills the line, darker and heavier than the last time I heard her. “He’s here.” There’s an edge of sadistic excitement I can hear now. My lips twitch, but I force myself not to smile. It’s too early to smile.

“That should be him now,” I say aloud, checking my phone and nodding.

Schroder brushes imaginary lint from his shoulder. He clears his throat, feigning an air of indifference that isn’t fooling anyone. He wants to see her. “May I?” he asks, gesturing to the file.

I shrug as I hand over the file Noah curated on the fake Scar. It’ll send my father over the edge, but there’s really no avoiding that at this point anyway.

Even from the office, we can hear the front door slam shut followed by pounding footsteps. My father forcibly throws open the office door. “Let me see,” he demands, a wild look in his eyes. His hair is disheveled, so unlike how he normally looks. His cheeks are ruddy with exertion and excitement and his breathing is heavy.

It only takes a moment for him to realize we aren’t alone. His expression falls and a hard glint enters his gaze, malice radiates from him in waves as he notes the file in Schroder’s hands.

“Why the hell are they here?” he demands in a booming voice. A familiar yell that sends chills down my spine. I keep my feet planted but a childlike fear begins in my gut.

My voice is unsteady, but firm as I answer, “It’s a problem that concerns all of you.”

He's in front of me before I can even blink, the back of his hand slamming into my cheek hard enough to snap my head to the side.

I'm six again, the first time he ever hit me. A backhand across the cheek for talking back when he said Charlotte and I shouldn't be playing tag. I was supposed to be keeping her safe. Pristine. Helping her learn how to be the perfect wife. I didn't know what it meant. But my whole face ached for a week.

His spit flies in my face as he roars his displeasure at my making decisions without him. The other two men in the room freeze at his unseemly anger. "What is so hard about keeping your mouth shut?" he growls in my face as he forces me to my knees.

I'm twelve again, on my knees in my front of my father as he undoes his belt. I know the bite of the leather will sting and burn for days after he lashes my back. I also know it will be worse if I even think about making a sound. Tears will bring out his favorite knife.

"Charles," Scar whispers down the line, tears in her voice. "We're here. Say the word and we're coming in."

No, not yet. I push through the overwhelming memories of childhood abuse. It's been a long time since I've tasted my own blood on my tongue. But a little pain is easy to push through. I'll just borrow a little of Scar's strength.

"I apologize," I tell him what he wants to hear. What he expects. His foot hits me in the gut, knocking the wind out of me, but only a small grunt of pain is released. Still too much by my father's standards. To my surprise, he doesn't pull his blade on me.

I'm seventeen, a week before they tortured Charlotte. My father's sadistic side was no longer a surprise to me, but the evidence of his depravity was new as he laid photo after photo in front of me. The cold metal of a gun pressed against my temple as tears streamed down my face. Blood coated my tongue and my teeth dug into my bottom lip to keep the sounds

of my fear from escaping. My father was testing me, and I knew instinctively I wouldn't survive if I failed.

“Maybe this is better,” he mutters to himself, drawing me out of my horror-filled past. “I always hated that they touched her.” The words are said under his breath, not even really a whisper. Neither man seems to have heard him. They wouldn't be sitting so still if they had.

My father pulls a gun out from his desk and points it at me, out of the view from the two others. This is not what I expected. I don't think we have a plan for this. Real fear makes my heart race, not only for myself, but mostly for Scar. If she rushes in here, she will make an easy target for him. He won't even hesitate to pull the trigger on an intruder. There's no way he would even recognize her.

“I need to think,” he says in a hushed voice. “Tie them up,” he instructs me, pulling long lengths of rope from the desk. Don't even want to know why that's in there. He comes closer to hand me the rope and I don't recognize the gleam in his eyes.

He's always been sadistic. A cold, unfeeling bastard. Thriving on the pain and destruction he causes. But this is different. It isn't just his evil inner desires coming to the surface and breaking his businessman mask. No, it's far more sinister than even that. He looks completely unhinged.

His pupils are blown and I can see the vein in his neck pulsing. He lifts the gun from where he's holding it at his side and lifts it first to Schroder. I climb to my feet and follow his cues, moving first to Bernard who sits frozen, shell-shocked at the sudden turn of events. Schroder doesn't take it silently though, raising his voice as he screams for answers from my father. It won't get him far, but that's the least of my worries.

Tying Bernard is easier than it should be. The man must truly be in a state of shock. I'm more sure than ever that what he did to Scar was an isolated incident. At least as far as working with my father. There's no doubt he's a sick and twisted bastard. He's probably taken advantage of countless students over the years. Used his position and authority to get

away with heinous acts. But that night must have been a moment of opportunity, a fluke. He doesn't have what it takes to be in the same league as my father.

Schroder fights me, but my father just laughs, making a show of clicking the safety off of the gun and pointing it at his head. "Keep fighting and I'll just get rid of you now. You should know how this works," he mocks and Schroder goes still. "I just need time to plan my next steps," my father muses aloud.

Fuck, this went to hell a lot faster than anticipated. We just meant to get them all in this room, distract them enough with each other for Scar and her men to move in. It was just meant for them to take control quickly. How did it deteriorate so quickly?

I should have checked the damn desk for weapons. Why didn't I?

I push Schroder to the ground after tying him up the same way as Bernard and turn my attention to my father. He's already giving me a sinister smile, but not an approving one. He keeps his gun in his hands but moves it to his left before pulling out a blade with his right.

"You thought she was yours too," he whispers, walking up to me. I back up several steps until I'm close to the office doors. Just to the left of the open doors and I can see down the hallway. He uses the gun to motion me to stay put. My hands shake and I lock them behind my back. "I can always make a new heir," he says absentmindedly. A creepy smile twists his lips up. "An heir with her." He steps up to me, tracing the blade against my cheek and shivers go down my spine but I keep my hands locked behind my back and my lips sealed shut.

Any fight would make this moment worse. He has the upperhand and he knows it. In order to avoid his suspicion I left myself far too open. Should have known better but my focus wasn't entirely on myself.

The tip of the blade digs into the delicate skin of my cheek. Warm blood trails down my face and drips onto my neck.

“Did you think I missed the sound you made earlier?” he taunts as he pulls the blade away from my skin. “You never deserved her,” he whispers in my ear and my eyes shut against my will, trying to force him out. Wishing more than anything that she wasn’t also listening to this. “And you don’t deserve to be my heir.”

The blade slicing through my flesh is a pain unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. It sinks deep into my gut and my eyes fly open as I sputter in shock. I meet his cruel and delighted gaze as he twists the blade, making my vision white out as a soft groan escapes against my will. This is far worse than what I ever had to endure as a child. He’d carve my skin, lash my back, starve and isolate me. But he never fully embedded a knife into my body. Never truly inflicted life-threatening damage. Until now. He laughs as he wrenches the knife free, pushing down on my shoulder until I fall to my knees.

I gasp as my hands press against the gaping wound in my stomach. My breath comes out in heavy pants as I hear Scar yelling my name followed by pandemonium before it all goes quiet. Too quiet. The sudden lack of noise in my head makes my head spin. Where did she go?

Adrenaline crashes into my system, making it hard to think as I stare at my father as he sits atop his desk, drinking from the glass of bourbon I had poured for myself. When did he get over there?

“None of you ever deserved her,” my father says, staring at all the three of us with disgust in his eyes. “I should have killed you both that night and taken her for myself. Would have been less messy.”

He’s fucking lost it. I’m not the only one thinking it based on the looks on Schroder and Bernard’s faces as their eyes volley between my father and me.

“Maybe I never would have lost my little daisy,” he ponders as he drains his glass. He drops his knife to the desk and lifts the gun as he waves it between the three of us.

It lands on me after several moments. “Your sins are probably the least,” he admits, “but unfortunately for you, your disappearance is also the easiest for me to cover up. The other two might take a bit more finessing.” He cackles as if he just told the funniest joke. I don’t think it’s the liquor that has gone to his head. His obsession with Scar has poisoned his already weak and evil mind.

Hot blood seeps through my fingers and I sway where I kneel on the office floor, my vision going gray and blurring at the edges. I just have to hold on a little longer. Scar wouldn’t abandon me. Though maybe she should. Just light the whole estate on fire with me in here.

It’s like my father said. My sins might be the most forgivable. It doesn’t mean I don’t deserve to burn for them.

My father lifts the gun and takes aim at my head.

“She was always meant to be mine,” he says and the world slows down. The stroke of his finger over the trigger, the bullet releasing from the chamber, the malicious glee of killing his own son.

Is this what Charlotte felt like that night?

A knife in her gut, a gun pointed at her, a bullet tearing through her flesh.

I close my eyes, resigned to my fate. A karmic justice for what happened to her because I failed to protect her.

All that’s left is to let me burn.



Chapter Thirty-One Scar

A RESOUNDING SMACK fills the line from Charles' end and my stomach turns.

He wasn't supposed to get hurt. Not like this. Just a simple distraction.

"What is so hard about keeping your mouth shut?" a deep voice growls, the utter contempt hits me like a blow to the chest. He never said this would happen, that his father would react this way.

Declan grips my hand tightly in his, knowing I'm close to losing it. You don't hurt my people.

"Charles," I whisper, keeping my voice low. Tears prick my eyes, but I try my best to keep the emotions out of my voice. "We're here. Say the word and we're coming in."

He stays silent, almost as if he's even holding his breath. Fuck.

He doesn't want us to come in. Why the fuck is he having us wait? I look at the guys for answers but none of them have any for me. Motherfucker. We should have had eyes on the inside. We should have had one of us in there as backup for him.

I turn off my mic so he can't hear our end. "We should go in," I argue.

Declan squeezes me. “He hasn’t asked us to.” His words don’t calm me like they normally would.

I hear him apologize followed by a huff of air and faint grunt and begin cursing. If I wasn’t already going to kill this motherfucker, I would be now. I’m starting to understand why they all hate me taking the lead so much. Why they start to go crazy when I use myself as bait, or as a distraction. It fucking sucks being on this end of things. Clueless and fucking helpless.

Apologies to the guys in advance, but I refuse to ever be in this position again. The only concession I can give them is to be more understanding about why they don’t like it. That’s as generous as I can be. Never doing this waiting on the outside bullshit again.

I can hear his father begin to mumble and mutter things but can only catch every other word or so. Did he just ask Charles to tie the others up? It’s clear he wasn’t thrilled with their presence but none of us expected it to turn out this way. Anger? Yes. Confusion? Absolutely. Stealing the kills from me? Fuck no. Just what the hell is going on?

Turning my mic back on, I turn to Declan and Luca. “We need to move. He sounds deranged.” Every fucking word out of Donahue’s mouth is backing me up and I can tell from their wary glances I’m not the only one thinking it. Donahue starts talking about how he just needs to plan his next steps and I start feeling antsy.

“We need to make a decision and make one now. I don’t like the way this is headed and I think we’re hurtling towards an outcome I can’t live with.”

No one argues, but no one agrees either. It doesn’t make me feel better. Charles’ breathing changes and indecisiveness wars across Luca’s face. I get it. I do. We don’t know what we’re running into. Charles knows the signal to give us to come running and he hasn’t given it. He’s had plenty of opportunities and has remained silent on purpose. None of that matters when we didn’t account for the clear mental instability Donahue is showing.

“Inside the gate but hold positions,” Luca finally decides. Charles has already cleared the way for us, keeping only his men in place. Making it truly as easy as just walking through the gates.

“You thought she was yours too,” a raspy whisper breaks through the line. Dread builds in my gut as the madman whispers to Charles. I don’t hold my position. I’m already moving up the long driveway at a full sprint. I’m making the call for all of us.

“You don’t deserve to be my heir.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“No, Charles!” I can’t help the yell that slips free as I put everything I have into running to the front door. The more I listen, the worse it gets. It doesn’t take a genius to be able to guess exactly where this is heading. Donahue has officially lost his mind to a decades-old obsession. I never would have sent Charles into this fucking hellhole if I thought for even a moment his father would ever kill him.

Footsteps pound behind me and I know the guys are right behind me. Ready to have not only my back but Charles’ as well. A beep sounds in my ear indicating Joe has turned off my mic remotely from the van. The clarity in which I can hear Charles’ sputtered breath tells me it wasn’t only mine either. It was all of ours except for his.

Just hold on, Charles. I’m almost there. I push myself harder. Each footstep rocking through my body as I put everything I have into going just a little bit faster.

“Maybe I never would have lost my little daisy.”

Tears stream down my face as the front door comes into my line of sight. Almost there. I push away the nausea listening to this man induces. I don’t have the time to be sad and repulsed by the memories that are attempting to bombard me. Something happened. I can feel it. I fucking know something happened.

Charles doesn’t sound okay. Something is fucking wrong.

I throw open the front door, not even pausing as I vault through the entryway and head straight down the hallway to where his office is located. More memories of this place try to break in, but I push those away too. Every instinct in my body is screaming to just get to Charles.

As I hurdle down the hallway, I catch a glimpse of Charles in the office, just on the inside of the doors. He's on his knees, clutching his stomach as he looks straight ahead where his father's desk should be. Flashbacks of my father's office threaten to slow me down, but the resigned look on his face hurdles me forward through the pain. His eyes slowly close and I can see the moment he accepts his fate.

"Charles!" I scream as I burst through the doors, barely having a moment to process the scene in front of my eyes. His father has a gun raised, pointing in his direction. The ghost of my mother raising a gun pointed at my chest is just behind me. I'm watching my worst moments happening all over again and this time I don't know if I'll be able to heal.

My body is moving before I can even process the decision to do it. The gunshot explodes through the room, the sound reverberating through my skull and driving all thoughts from my head.

There's no time to even feel relief as I crash into Charles, forcing him out of the path of the bullet as pain explodes across my chest.

I'm seventeen again, looking up at the disgust and disdain in my mother's green eyes as she stared down at me and promised everything was going to be okay now. The bullet exploded in my chest, the coppery tang of my own blood on my tongue all I could taste. The smoke started to burn through my lungs as the heat got closer and closer to my skin. A plea for death the only thought left in my mind.

My body falls on top of Charles and blood coats both of us. The haze of memories clears, jarring me back into my painful reality. A cough wracks my body as pandemonium explodes all above and around us.

“Scar,” Charles cries as his hands begin to roam my body. All I can do is groan as I struggle to get a full breath into my lungs. Fuck. That never gets easier.

Another groan escapes as I roll off him and attempt to call out for D, but only incoherent mumbles come out. I give Charles a half-hearted thumbs up. Thank fuck for Kevlar. That shot was intended for right between his eyes. There would have been no surviving that. Based on how he looks right now, survival is already questionable.

“Declan,” I moan, finally getting enough air to push his name out. He rushes over, falling to our sides. His hands try to find where my damage is but I push him away and force him to focus on Charles. The blood is all his. My vest took the full impact of the bullet. I just need a few moments to catch my breath.

I stare at the ceiling and focus on my breathing as Declan gets to work stabilizing Charles. Oh, I am so going to kick his ass for this later.

I turn my head and watch as Ryder and Kade gleefully restrain Donahue as he fights and snarls at them. A madman unrecognizable as the man who once gave me daisies until the night he stole my innocence.

“It’s a stab wound to the abdomen. He’s going to need a blood transfusion at the very least, but it’s hard to determine if he’ll need a laparotomy at this point. I don’t think he hit anything vital, and he’s stable for now, but there may be internal bleeding. We can’t rule it out without further testing.”

Joe’s voice fills the line. “Ambulance is already ready and waiting.”

Charles grunts as Declan puts more pressure against his wound. “I think I’d rather stay for the show, if you don’t mind.”

A smile breaks out on my face and he grins up at me. He’s okay enough to be cracking jokes. “You should really go,” I encourage, but some of my fear dissipates at Declan’s silence. If he isn’t immediately protesting, it can’t be too bad.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” he argues.

Fair enough. “Me too,” I agree, climbing back to my feet. My chest still aches with every movement, but the relief of seeing Charles’ smile is enough to make me ignore it.

I wait for D to say one way or another and even his lips twitch as Charles gives him his best puppy dog eyes. He sighs. “I’ll keep an eye on him. First sign of hypertension...”

“You got it,” Charles cuts him off, getting a droll look in response.

Now for the fun to begin.



“I THOUGHT about hunting you down, one by one.” I admit as I get started on my work. “Using your blood to make a promise to the next.” Blood drips from Dean Bernard’s cheek as I drag the tip of my knife along his cheek, enjoying the way he shakes in his chair. It was kind of thoughtful of Donahue to have them all ready for me. He probably doesn’t see it the same way.

“Each murder more and more gruesome and violent, carving my name into your flesh as a message to not only the world, but the others. Each one knowing what was coming for you and praying that I wouldn’t find you. Put you in the very position I found myself in when I was no more than a child. A child being hunted by monsters for daring to survive their first attack.”

Tears already spring to his eyes and we’ve only just begun. He’s far too weak to handle half of what I did and survive. Good thing he won’t be. Surviving, that is.

“Not fond of being on this end of the blade?” I question gleefully, digging the blade in deeper until his tears escape and mix with his blood. Every ounce of rage and fear I felt for Charles while stuck outside is being poured into this revenge. Every nightmare, every memory that has come crashing into me. More and more pieces floating back to me as I stare at the

three men before me. I lean down and lick up his cheek, the salty tang of his tears hitting my tongue. “I like you bleeding and whimpering,” I whisper in his ear. “Wasn’t that what you said to me that night, Dean?” I lean back and press my boot against his groin and begin to slowly apply pressure. “Oh no, silly me,” I laugh. “That was Romano, wasn’t it?”

He whimpers behind his gag and I laugh all the harder. Of course, Donahue just had them tied up on the floor. It was Kade and Ryder that corrected that, got them all ready for the long day ahead of us.

“Are you wondering why I didn’t do it that way?” I tease, pulling my knife away from him and moving on to Schroder. “I really thought about it. It was a hard decision to make if I’m honest with you.” I climb into his lap, straddling him so I can get right in his face. There are sounds of disgruntlement from behind me, but I ignore them. Of course the guys would have a problem with me being this close to him. They just don’t understand how thrilling it is for me to be in this position. Over him. Dominating him. Violating his personal space when it’s so clear he would rather be anywhere but here. Under me. Under my blade.

My knife trails over the fragile skin of his face, but I don’t draw blood. Not yet. He trembles under me all the same. Fear and humiliation battle in his eyes. It’s like my cocaine. A heady sensation rushing through me, emboldening me, driving me. So much sweeter than just regular old adrenaline.

“But we started this together, in an office, just like this one. It’s only fair to end it the same way. Don’t you think?”

I lean back and tighten my fingers around my knife, suddenly bringing it down in an arc and slamming it into the top of his shoulder. He squeals and the sound fills the room even with the gag in place. “You probably remember more than I do,” I say casually, twisting the knife in place. “How would you say we’re doing? There’s blood, tears, pain, humiliation. What’s missing?” I tap my finger against my mouth as I pretend to think. “Hmm, what does it say that even at your very worst, you’re still forgettable?”

I leave the knife in place and climb out of his lap, moving on to my final target. The worst of the bunch. The ringleader of my demise. If it hadn't been that night, it would have only been a matter of time before he attempted to claim his little daisy. It's too bad he only realized too late that I was always a rose, and I always had fucking thorns. Dripping poison now. Ready to annihilate him. Erase his very existence. How could I be happy with a simple death?

He's the only one of the three not sweating, not crying, not shaking. He's twisted, depraved, revolting, but at least he has a spine. For now. I happen to be an expert in removing those. The obsession is there, though. Brewing in those ice-blue eyes that have plagued my dreams for so long. He still craves for me, my pain, my blood, my tears. It must be agonizing to be so damn close to what he's yearned for for so long and not be able to just reach out and touch it.

I twirl a new blade between my fingers as I stand over him. He isn't so scary sitting there, bound and gagged. At my mercy. I cock my head as I study him. Once a long time ago, I thought Charles took after his father. I can no longer see it.

I move behind him and get my first reaction out of him. A shiver of fear. Oh, how delightful. He doesn't like what he can't see. I can work with that. I throw my arms over his shoulders, my chest brushing the back of his head. My blade trails down his chest, cutting through the fabric of his button down as I go. "I've been waiting for this for so long," I whisper in his ear, pressing a kiss just above it when I finish. He tenses and shudders, and we get to see the first bit of his fight against me as he struggles against his restraints. He fought against Kade and Ry, enough that it made it fun for my two sweet psychos as they restrained him for me.

Something about their fight must have broken through his delusion though. The madman has faded back into the shrewd businessman. Cold, calculating, capable of hiding his lethal fixation. I enjoy his fight. I hope he struggles more. I hope we see that madman break through again as the last of his sanity crumbles to ashes at my feet.

“Are you finally putting the pieces together? Realize just who has hunted you down? I was worried I was going to have throw on my old cheer uniform for you depraved fucks to understand. After so long searching for me, you didn’t even recognize me when I was right in front of your face.” I can’t help but taunt them. Donahue shakes his head in denial, making me laugh. “You thinking about those cute little photos?” I ask. I grip his head in my hands and force him to look at where Declan has Charles propped up on pillows as he monitors him and tends to his wound. “You were wrong,” I whisper in his ear. “Charles has always been mine. Just like this plan was mine. Those photos were mine, but not exactly of me.” I stretch my arms in front of his face so he can see the tattoos. “As you can see. This whole thing was all mine. Your death will be mine too,” I finish with a promise. The pain isn’t enough. I want their humiliation, to degrade them, to make them lose every ounce of themselves before I finally take their lives. “Do you see it now? Or is your eyesight going in your old age?” I tap his cheek condescendingly. “Don’t worry, I’ll make sure the face you were so obsessed with seeing again will be the last one you ever see. Doesn’t that sound like fun?” I dig in the tip of the knife and draw first blood. This angle just isn’t working for me.

I toss my knife to Kade who catches it deftly. “Hold that for me for a sec.” He just laughs and shakes his head, gesturing for me to continue. Grabbing Donahue’s tie, I secure it over his eyes so I’m free to move freely while still depriving him of the security watching me gives him. He fights in the chair, but unlike some people, we know how to secure a knot.

Kade is quick to hand me my knife back when I step in front of Donahue and hold my hand out. I push his shredded shirt off his shoulders, baring his skin to me. Perfect. A blank canvas for me to work on. Now, where to start?

He doesn’t deserve to be branded with my name, not even the one he knows. Nor a rose. Something that fits him. I tap my blade against my chin as I consider a few different options before quickly discarding them.

Got it.

I get comfortable on his lap, loving his discomfort almost as much as the sounds of protest behind me once again. At least they're leaving me be. The tip of my blade slices easily through his flesh like butter. The blood doesn't slow me down, but I take my time. I want to make sure that every single stroke is flawless. My message needs to be clear. I'm not the same girl he once victimized. We might have been playing a game of cat and mouse for all these years, but the game has finally come to an end. With a clear fucking winner.

I lean back to admire my handiwork. It looks good, but it's missing something. I tap a finger against my cheek, the sharp smell of blood fills my nose as my finger slicks over my skin. It takes another moment before it hits me. I know what it needs.

He wanted his daisy so damn badly, he can die with the reminder of what dug his grave. His own greed, depravity, and stupidity. I carve each petal painstakingly, each stroke of my blade in his flesh gives me more satisfaction than the last. I can't wait for him to see.

We've barely even started, and that spine of his is already missing. He's shaking and crying under my touch, the power I hold over him enthralling, addictive. The need to drag this out for as long as possible rides me. I'll never reach quite this same high ever again. No murder will live up to these ones. To finally righting the wrongs from so many years ago.

I use his shredded shirt to wipe up some of the blood. It's a futile effort and I throw the shirt behind me and admire my handiwork. I climb out of his lap and turn to face the others. Ryder truly had a stroke of genius when he decided to position their chairs in a circle facing each other. Like a sharing circle. How nice they get to experience not only their own demise, but each other's as well.

"Fitting, right?" I ask, staring down the Dean first before turning my attention to Schroder. "I'm sure you guys feel the same defeat at the end of a chess game." I tear the tie off of Donahue's eyes. It's wet with his tears and his eyes are already bloodshot. "Want to see?" My voice has never been perkier, not even in the height of my cheer career.

Ryder tosses me a mirror and I have no idea where he even found it. Don't care enough to ask either. I hold it up for Donahue to see just what I carved into his chest.

Checkmate.

The little color left in his face is drained as he reads the word and stares at the daisy. I use the tip of my finger to dig into the petals of the innocuous flower. Tracing it while widening the cut. He screams behind the gag and it's sweet fucking music to my ears.

"Your first mistake was ever thinking I was a daisy," I confide in him. I push my finger tip deeper. "The second was thinking I could ever be yours."

I spy a glass with the bourbon Charles must have poured earlier. Perfect. I reach out and grab the glass and lift it over Donahue's chest. "Wouldn't want your wound to get infected, now would we?" I jeer. His eyes widen and to my delight, shame and fear waft off him as he tenses. I draw out the moment, pouring it slowly, letting it dribble into each stroke of the letters. Each line of the petals. Sweat breaks out on his brow as he shakes in the chair, his arms straining as he tries to pull away from the burn of the liquor.

The light reflects against the crystal glass in my hand. I move it this way and that, entranced by the little rainbow lightshow. It's empty now. "I guess you've earned a bit of a break," I say casually. "Or maybe I'm just bored of you." I test the weight of the glass in my hand before slamming it against the side of Donahue's head with enough force to shatter it.

Glass rains down the side of his face, sticking to his skin, the remains of his clothes, his seat. Now, every time he wiggles in his seat, glass shards will embed deeper into his skin. Blood drips down from his head where I hit him and a dazed look is in his eyes. He blinks slowly as he tries to clear it. Good luck with that.

The hit was hard enough to cause a concussion. I can't wait for the nausea to start.

“Keep him awake,” I murmur to Kade who takes up sentinel behind him. He’s probably going to enjoy that too much. I never said how to keep him awake. I think about clarifying but, eh. Oh well. Gotta let my big guy have his fun too.

What to do with the other two now? I step closer and sniff the air. I chuckle darkly. The acrid smell of urine. I’ve barely even touched them and they’ve pissed themselves. Or at least one of them has. It’s a good first step to the degradation I crave. But it’s nowhere near enough.

“Hey, Ry,” I call out, a playful lilt in my voice. He swallows a mouthful of water and raises a brow, intrigued. “What’s my favorite threat?”

A slow, cheshire grin overtakes his face. “Yeah?” I nod and the gleam in his eye can’t be described as anything other than sadistic. I love it. “I like the way you think, boss lady.” He takes another gulp of water, tapping Luca on the chest. “You do it, though. You can’t make her touch it.”

I raise my brows. Wasn’t expecting it to turn into a debate.

“I think she’s fine,” Luca argues but Ryder is already shaking his head.

“Gross, Luca. You can’t let her touch shriveled-up old dick. Come on, be a gentleman.”

Luca reels back and I stifle a laugh. “Why don’t you do it then?” he demands.

Ryder lifts his water bottle in answer. “I’m trying to drink my water, bro.” As if that is the most rational answer in the world.

What? Do I wanna... no. I don’t want to know. Not my business. I hold my blade out to Luca as he makes his way across the room.

“I’ll do it,” offers Kade. “If you don’t want to.”

Luca flips him off. “Fuck off, I’m doing it.”

I point to where Bernard is shaking in his seat. “You can do his?” I ask Kade. “We can do a little swap.”

This is the level of degradation I was looking for. Why use a normal gag when you can cut off their cocks and make them choke on each other's? It's probably the closest I'll ever get to the real pain they put me through. The trauma and shame of that night.

"I want to hear them scream," I decide as Luca steps in front of Schroder and Kade rips the gag from Bernard's mouth.

"The lady gets what the lady wants." Bernard's pale face leeches of the little remaining color he had left at the malice in Kade's words. I should have let him join in earlier. He's been looking forward to this day almost as much as I have been. Maybe they all have been in their own ways.

Luca doesn't bother with intimidation tactics, or even words. While Kade plays with and taunts Bernard, making him sweat and cry before even laying a finger on him, Luca drives straight to the point, making Schroder beg as he cuts through his pants. His pleas for mercy and forgiveness quickly turn into screams of horror and agony, much like my own did.

I hum as arms wrap around my waist. "Enjoy this," Declan's deep voice roots inside me. "But don't get lost in it." His calm reminder is enough to pull me back from the onslaught of terrible memories. He's right. This is about enjoying the here and now. The last step in letting the demons of my past suffocate the life out of me.

Schroder's screams do more to put the fear of god into Bernard than Kade's taunting does. Schroder doesn't even make it through the entire process as Luca's blade carves him up. Blood covers his hands and Schroder's lap, but none of it phases Luca as he meticulously dismembers the instrument of so much pain. He passes out just as Luca finishes and pulls the small lump of flesh free from his body.

It's not scary, or even slightly impressive.

It's small and soft and just a lump of skin and muscle that no longer serves any purpose.

True fear shines in Dean Bernard's eyes as he watches Luca casually walk over to him. He doesn't scream, or even

beg for mercy, he simply cries before fainting from the fright. What an absolute fucking bitch. There's no way he's getting out of this that easily.

“Smelling salts,” Noah whispers as he pulls his backpack off and begins to rummage through it. As he works on getting those to wake this piece of shit back up, Kade prepares him for the same thing he just witnessed. He removes his clothes and something about that feels right too. Knowing he's going to wake up to find himself in a state of undress he wasn't in prior to passing out. Knowing something happened to his body while he was unconscious. Something he had no control over, something he's unaware of. I quite like that.

The smelling salts do their job and I hold my breath as his eyes begin to flutter open. That moment of confusion, of trying to clear the haze, right before his reality sets back in, that's what I want.

He shakes his head as his eyes begin to slowly open, adjusting to the lights in here and fuck. That look is perfection. The dazed and lost look quickly vanishes in a blink of an eye as fear and pain takes over. His shame and humiliation so potent I can almost taste it in the air. It's beautiful.

Even as Kade gets to work, my eyes never leave Dean Bernard's face. Each flicker of tumultuous emotions that crosses his expression soothes one of my own. I've seen his fear, pain, and shame already. But the despair, fury, guilt, and finally the hope that flickers out as pure torment takes over and drives every other thought from his mind is what I've truly been waiting for. I watch as the black creeps into his vision and know how desperately he craves to fade into the nothing again. Know how he needs the oblivion to escape from the reality I have forced onto him.

It's a real shame I won't let him have even that comfort.



Chapter Thirty-Two Ryder

SHE'S ABSOLUTELY insane and I fucking love her for it.

I've never seen her look quite as enthralled as she is while watching Kade and Luca chop off their shriveled dicks. Kade takes it a step further and removes the balls from Bernard's body as well, making Scar's smile turn almost feral. I quite like that smile.

Maybe we should add disembowelment as well. She might like that. Seems messy, but I bet Declan could do it.

Luca's malevolent smile is one I've never seen before and I can't help but chuckle as he and Kade work together to pry open Bernard's jaw and force the useless, bloody handful of Schroder's flesh into his open mouth.

Scar pulls away from Declan's chest and walks up to her former dean, her eyes gleam with satisfaction as she watches her torturers fall prey to their own misdeeds. She stops in front of him and bends over to lean her face into his. Her ass looks fucking good in those jeans. Right. Not the point right now.

"You can keep crying, but you should know, your tears only turn us on more." Scar's finger traces through the tears trailing down Bernard's face, wiping them up before slowly sucking on her finger. My dick twitches in my pants. "Makes us want to see how far we can push you. Makes us crave your tears more. Isn't that right, Dean?" Her voice goes from a

sultry purr to a venomous growl. “Isn’t that how you all felt that night?”

Fury is like liquid magma as it burns through my system. The pain they put her through, the way they loved it. Every little bit more she reveals makes her revenge all the more beautiful to me. I don’t need to know all the horrors of that night to know they deserve every inch of the vengeance she dishes out.

Scar’s blade glints in the light as she holds it up to his face again. He chokes on a whimper as blood and saliva dribble from his mouth and attempts to pull away from her. She follows him, lightly tracing her knife down his cheek.

“Surprisingly enough, I don’t even think that night was the worst of your sins. Was it? No,” she drawls, digging the tip of the blade under his eye. He screams behind the cock, making himself choke further. He tries to spit it out to be able to breathe again and I’m moving even before Scar can.

Picking up the discarded gag, I wink at Scar as she digs the knife in deeper, forcing him to squeeze his eyes shut. Not that it helps him. I slip around her and put the gag back in place, making sure he has to keep that dick in place.

Scar hums her approval as blood fills his eye socket. “Your sins after that night were even worse. Don’t you agree?” She doesn’t stop digging the knife in until he nods. “That’s right,” she praises. “The way you isolated me, judged me. Made the place where every student should feel safe become my own personal hell. Then blamed me all for it. Your damage went far past that night.” His body convulses as she removes her blade. “I’d cut your tongue out for all the lies you’ve told, but I rather like knowing the last thing you will ever taste is another man’s cock and blood.” She wipes the blood from her knife on his shirt. “At least you’ll go out together.”

Veins pop from Bernard’s hands and forearms where he squeezes the arms of the chair we’ve tied him to. A small comfort, I’m sure, when his whole body is radiating pain. Not enough, though. I drop to my knees in front of him and chug the rest of my water before tossing the bottle behind me. Scar

pauses from turning her attention to Schroder to watch what I'm up to. Better make it entertaining for her.

I twirl my blade between my fingers as I enjoy the trembling beginning all over again. "You're too comfortable for my liking," I murmur low. Let's take away some of what's grounding him. Using the tip of my blade, I split each of his knuckles open, ensuring every time he clenches his fists it will only cause him more pain. It's still not enough, though. I drop my blade and pull pliers from my backpack. Oh good, I have another water bottle in here too. I couldn't remember how many I had brought. Let's deal with this first though. There will be plenty of time for everything else.

Classics are a classic for a reason. While less creative than shoving dicks down their throats or carving words into their flesh, removing fingernails is always a surefire way to cause agony. Especially as he continues to try and pull his hands free from the restraints. Every small movement will send more and more torment through him. Just as he deserves.

I almost wish I could hear his cries and screams. The muffled shouts behind his gag just aren't quite the same. Knowing what he's choking on is worth it, though.

Scar kisses my head as I drop the third fingernail to the floor in front of her feet, then makes her way back to Schroder. He's been left alone for a little too long. It's his turn to endure some suffering. I'll keep this one occupied.

Kade and Luca have already stuffed Bernard's dick down Schroder's throat and tied the gag over it. He's just ready and waiting for Scar to continue her fun. After all, that's all he's good for now. Her entertainment. Her pleasure. Her revenge.

She flutters from one demon to the next, like a butterfly flying from flower to flower. The only difference is she leaves behind a trail of blood and agony.

"I never should have expected anything but this from you," she whispers as she approaches Schroder again. "You were always so close to Donahue and my father. Of course you would be cut from the same filthy, disgusting cloth. Twisted and depraved just like them." Her blade sinks into his hand

where it holds the arms of his chair. “Too bad I learned from the best. It makes my revenge so much fucking sweeter being the biggest monster in the room.”

Schroder loses several fingers and toes after that. Watching her work is one of my greatest joys in life. Never would I have thought my life would lead me here, but somehow amidst all the blood and chaos is where I feel the most at home.

“Can’t have them bleeding out too soon,” Declan soothes Scar as he kisses her forehead, carefully avoiding the blood smeared over her face. She nods her approval and both Schroder and Bernard pass out as Declan cauterizes the worst of their wounds.

Scar cackles, making me smile. Noah is quick to bring back out the smelling salts, forcing both men awake. They don’t deserve to find peace in the darkness of their minds, but Scar has already moved on. Back to the beginning. Back to the man who started it all.

Donahue has sat quietly, straining against his ropes but making no progress and no noise. He’s held his composure better than the other two, but that isn’t saying much. His wounds bleed freely, but not enough to be a concern. Yet. Glass shards are embedded in his skin, something Scar notices immediately. She uses the back of her favorite knife to press some of the shards deeper into his skin. A muffled groan escapes from behind the gag.

“I hate your fucking eyes,” Scar muses as she continues to tap along all the glass in his skin. “I want to carve them out of your fucking head and make you swallow them.” He tries to lean away from her, but has nowhere to go. How amusing. His fear permeates the air, giving me a high as adrenaline rushes through my blood. “But then you wouldn’t be able to enjoy the show I’ve worked so hard to put together for you.” Her blade moves deftly from hand to hand as she tosses it back and forth.

She nods to herself, making a decision. One hand grips the back of his chair as the other wraps tightly around the black hilt of her blade. “Guess that’s why God gave you two eyes.”

Charles begins to laugh and I can't help but join him as Scar carves out one of Donahue's eyes. Even the gag isn't capable of smothering his cries as she does. When he passes out, I grab my extra water and chug half of it before moving to Scar's side and dumping the rest on his head. I've had enough water to be okay. His singular eye snaps open, none of the clarity or sharpness left in his gaze. He's barely holding on to the last bit of his sanity now. All three of them have been reduced to nothing more than the dirt under her shoes. Useless and small. Powerless. Just as Scar needed them to be.

"I'm ready to share," Scar announces and attention snaps to her. She lifts a bag from where she dropped it earlier and begins to pull out blades, handing the first one to me, before moving around the room. When she stops in front of a very pale Charles, we all hold six knives in our possession. Most of mine are strapped to the holster on my waist and I toss the remaining one in the air before catching it by the hilt. They have a good weight to them. Sturdy, but comfortable. Easy to toss and move.

Scar smacks her head. "Forgot something. Hold please."

I tilt my head as she walks first up to Schroder and rips his shirt from him. At least she doesn't climb into his lap like she was doing earlier. Don't really care that she was in control, still wasn't a fan of her being that close to them. Touching them. In his lap. I'm much more jealous than I thought I would ever be.

Scar leans over him, using one of the blades she kept for herself to carve a large daisy over his chest and stomach. Curiosity pricks at me, but I hold off on asking any questions. She'll explain when she's ready. As she finishes the last petal, I expect her to move on to Bernard, but doesn't. She continues to carve something on Schroder.

The blade weighs in my hands and I study the ones at my waist again before looking at the ones in everyone else's hands. They're the exact same. I squint my eyes to see what else she's drawing on the daisy. It takes a few petals before I finally catch on to her plan. I toss my blade up again. Yup, they have enough weight to be perfect as throwing knives.

Numbers.

What a perfect way to keep score.

The others begin to catch on as she repeats the process with Bernard before turning back to us. “Now I’m ready to share.” All six of us have two of our new blades in hand, waiting for her command. Our goddess of vengeance. Her twisted games and depraved desires. “Two shots per body. You have to call out a number for those two, or a letter for Donahue. Points for accuracy but any kill shots won’t be allowed in my bed for a month.” She smirks as we groan, but Charles just shrugs.

“Not much of a punishment for me.”

She glares at him and rolls her eyes. “I’ll make you clean up dead bodies for a month.”

Now he groans, even as the sound makes him pale more. He’s putting on a brave face, but he’s in a lot of pain and barely holding on. Scar must see it too, because she looks to Declan for confirmation that he’s really okay. I realized how much she truly loves him when I saw her fear and panic for him. None of us should be surprised, when Scar loves, she does it fiercely. Declan reassures her silently and she continues. “Winner gets to light the match on this bitch.”

With that last rule in place, Scar whirls on her feet and throws her first knife at Schroder. “10,” she calls as soon as she releases it from her fingers. To no one’s surprise, it sinks in exactly where she called, just between the one and zero carved into the last petal. Groans sound as she took the smallest target at the center of the daisy, gaining her the most points for her first throw. Kade comes in a close second, Luca and I tie, then D, then Noah, and lastly Charles. I’ve seen him train and he’s at least as good as Declan, but his aim and power definitely aren’t as good due to his injury.

Scar wins first again with Bernard and Kade accuses her of cheating, making her guffaw. But we all know she needs to be the one to light the match anyways. He’s too busy giving her a hard time, he doesn’t realize that Luca and I both take our turns, claiming the best targets. Luca edges me out just slightly

enough to take second place, but at least I beat Kade this time. Noah and D tie with their throws and I'm impressed with how much Noah has improved. He spends the least amount of training, preferring to be behind a screen. Pretty sure he would beg out of training altogether if Scar didn't force the issue. Charles waves off his turn. Probably saving his strength for the one who really matters to him.

Saving the best for last. Donahue has been her biggest demon. The one who has haunted and hunted her the most. Without him, she may have even been able to heal from that night. The other two most likely would have never continued to pursue her.

"First C," she says softly before throwing her first knife. It's barely even stuck before she adds, "M," with a smirk and lets her second blade fly. I roll my eyes when both blades find their marks flawlessly. Couldn't expect anything less from her. My competitive nature almost makes me forget we are using human dartboards as our targets. But the muffled whimpers bring that joyful little detail to the forefront of my mind once more.

I watch as Charles climbs to his feet and sways a bit. Noah steps up to hold him steady. There's more power behind his first throw than I thought was possible with the state he's in, but he doesn't even bother to call out where he's aiming. His energy is all going towards causing as much pain as possible without killing his father. Something I can respect.

Noah hands him his last two blades. "You need this more than I need points in a game we all know who's winning." Charles smiles, but his hand shakes as he takes the offered knives. Both easily find Donahue's flesh, sinking in all the way to the hilt. His face grows more and more ashen with each throw, his breathing becoming heavier as he leans more and more on Noah. But the gleam in his eyes at the betrayal in his father's must make it worth it.

The rest of us take our turns, not even really keeping score anymore. We all just enjoy watching him writhe in pain as each knife strikes him. As soon as we're all done, Scar tells us

to leave the knives in place as we get everything ready. It's as D said, can't have them bleeding out too soon.

Rachel, Holden, Ian, Jade, and Joe join us in the foyer with cans of gasoline. We each take one and spread out around the house, pouring it on curtains, rugs, and furniture. Soaking it into the very bones of the house to ensure nothing but ash is left of this castle of terrible memories. We work our way through every room of every floor until we make it back to the office where Declan stayed with Charles. He looks even worse than when we left. We need to pick up the pace.

Scar kicks Donahue's chair back, letting it crash and splinter on the floor. I kick Bernard's chair over in the same manner while Kade follows suit with Schroder. Working together, we drag the three of them together and cut the restraints free of them. Scar works quickly as she pulls each knife free with a twist. Making sure each and every wound is capitalized on.

None of them have the strength to fight back or even move with their newfound freedom. Each one has lost hope and submitted to their fate. They know it's impossible to make it out of this room. I don't think they even want to anymore. Scar has stripped them of their power, their dignity, and even their will to live. I've never been more proud or in love with her.

She stands back to admire her handiwork and a small, satisfied grin soothes my rough edges. It's not manic or edged with adrenaline but something much softer. Healing. She got what she needed from this.

"You're going to lay here in a growing pool of your own blood, watching the flames grow closer and closer. The smoke is going to burn through your nose all the way down to your lungs, making each breath more painful than the last. You're going to lay here, helpless, in pain, craving death as the heat from the fire grows oppressive. You'll watch the blood seep from your body and know there's nothing you can do but pray for it to be over soon. And just when you think it can't get any worse, when you can barely breathe and your head is getting light from the lack of oxygen and your lungs are shriveling up

inside, the flames will reach your skin. It'll be pain like you've never experienced before. I'd stay to watch, but you're really not worth it anymore. You're nothing but the soon-to-be ashes under my shoes. I hope you get used to the sensation of burning, because I hear there are lots of flames in hell."

She stands above them, powerful and fierce, stronger than she's ever been. Free from the chains of her past. Broken by her very own hands.

There's just one final touch needed before we light this bitch up and finally move on with our lives. She stands from where she crouched over Donahue and I grab her hand before she turns her back and walks away from them for the last time.

Thank god we're done because I don't know how much longer I could have held on. I release her hand as she gives me a confused look but I just smirk and unzip my pants. "They aren't even worth being the ash under your shoe," I say as I finally find relief and begin to take a piss. Scar gives a surprised snort as I cover all three of them. She shakes her head but she's smiling as she watches them cower under my stream, not even trying to avoid it. They've already accepted it. She has accomplished what she has set out to do, completely break them before wiping them from this plane of existence.

What better to show that than a golden shower?

It's a good thing I drank all that water.

Declan shakes his head while watching me. "I've always called you the messy one, but I think I'm upgrading you to the deranged one now."

I smirk. I happen to like that nickname. And by the twitch of Scar's lips and the way she grabs my hand after I tuck my dick away, I think she agrees. "I've created a monster," she sighs.

I plant a fat kiss on her cheek. "But I'm your monster."



Chapter Thirty-Three Kade

THERE'S something different about Scar as we walk out of the office. She seems lighter and darker all at the same time. One thing is for sure, she's stronger than she's ever been. Truly ready to discover whatever the next step in our journey is.

I'm almost jealous I didn't think to piss on the fuckers the way Ry did. Kind of unhinged behavior, but I support it. At least all the water he was drinking makes sense now. Sick bastard.

Scar stops at the end of the hallway and takes a deep breath before searching out Charles.

"You ready to say goodbye to this place?" she asks him in a soft whisper.

He leans against her, but he's barely staying on his own feet. Declan tightens his hold on his waist. He manages to kiss the top of her head softly. A few weeks ago it would have been enough to drive me mad, ready to launch my fist into his face. Now, I can't seem to dredge up that same anger or jealousy.

Understanding their relationship was never in a romantic way did a lot to ease my jealousy, but it's more than that. I never knew Charles in the past, only a jaded perspective of him. I never saw the way they leaned on each other, the way they supported and understood the other without needing words. I only ever saw the wounds he left her. I'm finally

starting to get it. If Scar can leave her past in this burning mausoleum, so can I. We may never be best friends, but I can at least accept Scar needs him.

“I’ve never been more ready for anything,” he says, his voice thready. As soon as he pulls away from her, Declan sweeps him off his feet and begins to carry him. Charles’ body sags in his arms and a flash of the pain he must be in crosses his face. “Oh, Declan. At least take a guy to dinner first,” he jokes in spite of his worsening condition.

Luca rolls his eyes, but I recognize the concern he’s trying to hide. “If he’s okay enough to joke, he’s okay enough to walk.”

Charles drops his voice to a faux whisper. “I think you’re making your husband jealous.”

“I will drop your ass right here and leave you behind,” D threatens. The banter does more than anything else could to lighten the atmosphere. None of us are ignorant to how huge this final step is. It’s years and years of work coming to an end. The last page of a story that has been waiting to come to a close for a very long time.

“Scar would save me,” Charles argues back. “Wouldn’t you, Tootsie Roll? It would be such a nice full-circle moment, you know? Save me and carry me out of a burning building.”

Scar snorts and shakes her head, but the light in her eyes is all the confirmation I need. “I’m saving you by proxy,” she responds and pulls a match from her pocket. Then another. “Together?”

He nods. “Together.” She lights one and hands it to Charles before lighting the other.

“Goodbye,” she whispers and they both throw their matches down the hallway. They stand for a moment, watching as the flames take root and begin to spread.

“Let’s go, Ladybug,” I whisper in her ear. She looks up at me and smiles.

“There’s nothing left here for us,” she agrees and leads us all out the front door.

We stand on the front driveway, clear of the flames as we watch them spread and begin to consume the entire mansion. It happens faster than I would have expected. I guess the gasoline is to thank for that.

Scar closes her eyes and takes a step closer to the burning building. Not close enough to be in danger, but enough to feel the heat press against her skin. She closes her eyes as we all watch her in awe. A million pounds lifts off her shoulders as she takes deep breaths, the sound of shrill screams in the background.

A single tear trails down her cheeks and I know it's not for the demons we finally put to rest but for the girl she used to be, the broken woman she's been all these years. It's time to say goodbye to both of them and become a new version of herself. One that is all the shattered pieces of her history, the deadly and vicious fragments all come together in a beautiful mosaic of loss and pain and hope and strength and love. Someone she never thought she could be. Healed but still dark. Whole but with both jagged and softened edges. A fearsome force to be reckoned with. A leader of a bloodthirsty gang. A loving mother. A cherished friend. A hot-as-fuck wife.

“Luca, do you have the photos?”

He hesitates at the shake in her voice, but caves as he hands a handful of photos to her. She smiles as she takes them and without even looking at the contents she wraps her hand around them and walks up to the flames and tosses the last of the evidence of that night into the fire.

Truly letting go.

The moment is broken as Declan shouts, “We need to move.”

Panic flashes across Scar's face as we turn to find Charles unconscious in his arms. Fuck. He was even worse than we thought.

“He's lost too much blood,” D explains as he rushes to the ambulance idling in the drive. He pushes the EMTs out of his way as he carries Charles' limp body and carefully drops him

onto the gurney. It's a new side of Declan as he begins calling out orders to the EMTs who are quick to jump into action, getting the right blood type and hanging a bag as Declan inserts an IV. Noah wraps his arms around Scar. "He's going to be okay, baby girl."

"He is," Declan vows. "But we need to get to the hospital so I can make sure he doesn't have any internal bleeding and can get him stitched up properly."

The familiar cool mask of control slips over her features. "Let's move," she agrees, giving her own orders. We're quick to follow her instructions, splitting up to finish this job and tie up the remaining loose ends. Noah follows Joe and the others to take care of the final pieces, while the rest of us climb into the Escalade and follow Declan and Charles to the hospital.

I stick close to the ambulance, running through lights with them as Scar sits anxiously at my side. She needs to be there with him. I finally understand it. Even feel it myself. Against all odds he's weaseled his way into our family.



"WELL, YOU LOOK BETTER," Scar teases as soon as we walk through the door into the private room Declan had prepared for Charles.

He flips her off, but his lips twitch. He really does look much better than when we last saw him. The color is back in his face, and while he's moving carefully, at least he's moving. "Who needs a gallbladder anyways?"

Declan sighs a huge sigh from the doorway. "You would have been able to keep yours if you had gotten help right away."

"And miss the fireworks? No way." He grins as Scar squeezes his hand and leans over the bed to kiss his cheek.

"I want to yell at you, but I happen to agree with you." Of course she does. Little minx would have made the exact same decision if she had been the one hurt. As a matter of fact, she

didn't make it out of that house without her own injuries. A few bruised ribs should have slowed her down at least a little bit, but unfortunately for all of us that has not been the case in the slightest.

Charles adjusts his bed to a less reclined position and Scar helps him adjust the pillows behind him. "How did the rest of the plan turn out?"

He lasted longer than I thought he would. "Have you turned on the news?" I ask and when he shakes his head I grab the remote and turn it on, quickly flipping through every major news network to show the story that's gripped the nation and rocked the people to their core. I pause at the last one as a female reporter runs through the story.

Answers to the almost decade-long mystery have been found in the ashes of the estate behind me. Many will remember the horrors that took place in a similar estate in this very same town eight years ago now. The tales of the Fallen Prom Queen and the Lost Princesses has haunted this nation since almost the entire Devereaux family was killed in a murder/suicide after the father raped and abused the eldest daughter. The mystery only grew stranger as the heiress survived the fire that took her family and childhood from her, multiple surgeries, and months in the hospital only to disappear from her foster home just weeks shy of her eighteenth birthday. Conspiracies have run wild with what could have happened to her and where she is now. Finally, we have some answers and they're even worse than the public ever could have imagined.

I turn it off and Charles beams at Scar. "Everyone knows."

She nods. "They died and will be remembered as the demons they are. Our tracks are covered and the public believes it was guilt that led them to their own suicide pact."

"They stabbed each other fourteen times and shoved dicks down each other's throats?" He eyes her sarcastically.

She shrugs with a familiar savage smile. She's the confident badass I met in Steel Roses that first night, but as she holds my hand and leans against me, she's also the Letty

that lit up every room she walked into. Light and dark in equal measures. Flames and shadows and ice. A true goddess.

“Coroner reported the bodies lost to the fire and dental records were used to confirm the identities.”

Charles huffs and I pull Scar closer to me, enjoying her warmth. “How much of the bodies were left?”

“Enough for our contact to call her up and give her shit for her twisted mind.”

Charles laughs and instantly regrets it as he winces. “Suicide notes?” His voice is strained as he tries to adjust his position in the bed to ease the pull from his stitches.

“Noah took care of all that,” Scar says, waving him off. “We knew everything would be lost to the flames. He took care of everything, even evidence prior to us setting the fire.”

“Remind me not to get on your guys’ bad sides,” he jokes.

I snort. “You’ve already been there. For all of us. Somehow you’re still here.”

He grins, reminding me how much of a cheeky little shit he actually is. Something I wasn’t expecting but should have seen coming. He and Scar are a little too alike. Their friendship makes a lot more sense now. “I’m resilient like that.”

“Like a cockroach,” I agree. “We just can’t get rid of you.”

Before he can retort, little feet run down the hallway. Surprise flickers in his eyes as he stares at Scar, but where did he think the rest of the guys were? Roe runs into the room, a beaming smile on her face. “Uncle Charles! I heard you were not feeling good.” She reaches the side of his bed and lifts her arms up. Scar picks her up and gently places her next to Charles, on the opposite side of his wound.

“I’m just a little sick.” His smile is soft and adoring as he pushes her hair off her face. “Your daddy fixed me all up and now that I can see my favorite niece, I think I’m all cured.”

She sticks out her bottom lip and assesses him carefully. “I don’t know, Uncle Charles.” My heart melts at how damn cute

my kid is. She looks to Declan and tilts her head. “Is he right? Is he all better?”

Charles answers before Declan can. “Of course I am, Roe baby. I bet I could even have a dance party with you right here and now.”

She turns wide blue eyes to him. “No way,” she says disbelievingly.

“No dance parties anytime soon,” Declan warns. “But he’s going to be okay, sweet girl. Your uncle will be ready to play with you and the boys before you know it.”

Roe’s little body sags with her sigh of relief. Our little drama queen.

“How about a movie for now?” Scar interjects, distracting Roe from whatever other questions she was going to ask. “We need to wait for the doctors to come by and clear your uncle to come home with us.”

Roe gasps a little sound of delight. “Uncle Charles is coming home with us?”

Scar nods. “He heard about all the bunnies coming to see the little butterfly that lives there.” Roe giggles as she cuddles into Charles’ side and Scar turns the television back on but is quick to switch it to Moana before Roe has a chance to see the news.

More people stop by to check in on Charles and make sure he’s on the mend. With each person his surprise grows even more and the space left in the room shrinks. It’s crazy to see us all together like this.

The war has finally come to an end, our mission for revenge over. We’ve gotten our answers, and found a new purpose and the accumulation of all we’ve gained is right here in the room with us. Understanding begins to dawn for Charles as he realizes what it means to be a Rose. To be family. To be one of us.

We’re the Bleeding Roses, we bloom in chaos, thrive in destruction, and we’re always stronger together.



Epilogue One Scar

3 WEEKS later

“It’s about time you made your way over here, Scar. Boss has been waiting for you.” Joe’s cheeky smile is impossible to not respond to in kind as he unhooks the velvet rope that leads to the second floor where the VIP tables are. His familiar sass is always appreciated, but especially on a night like tonight.

“You know making that man wait is one of my favorite pastimes,” I tease as I begin to shimmy up the stairs. “Surprised you’re here and not at the fights,” I continue as he follows behind me.

He gives me a bored look, not even bothering to call me on my bullshit. It’s Steel Roses’ first night reopening since we shut down. Like anyone would miss this night. The newly renovated stages alone are enough to draw them all in. They have to be one of my favorite things we’ve added, though it’s hard to pick just one.

The lone glass stage off the bar that hung over the lower level where I used to perform is no longer alone. We’ve extended it to create an entire platform that rings the club and hangs over the lower level, connecting the bar on the far side with a long catwalk. The catwalk holds three smaller boxed-in platforms for dancers to get more time over the crowd. Blue and black roses and lights are inlaid in all of the glass surfaces, making the flowers look like they glow from within.

I loved everything about our setup in the club before. It had the perfect blend of convenience, atmosphere, and mystery, but the renovations have taken everything to the next level. Making the entire club feel more illicit and decadent while still retaining its accessibility. Steel Roses has been and always will be where our worlds all collide. The fighters, the wealthy, the students, the doctors, the baristas and everyone in between.

The VIP area is even more luxurious than ever, with a table made just for our large group right next to the bar. Familiar faces are already seated there, looking more comfortable than we used to be as we crammed into a too-small table for us. It's a good thing Luca had the foresight to reserve an entire section for us when we were planning the remodel. We've gained even more usuals to our lineup since we first started the renovations.

I stop at the bar to get a drink and wink when Dare makes her way over to me. "Good to see you back in lilac roses," I tease. She grins and flashes her small tattoo at me.

"Never been out of them."

I hum my agreement as she pours me a shot of whiskey. The burn lights me up from the inside out and I can't help but feel like I'm floating. It's been so long since I've been reenergized by a magnetic crowd, loud music, and a good shot of whiskey. It sets all my nerves buzzing in the best way possible.

The attention, the noise, the energy. A shiver of delight dances down my spine. It's medicine to my fucked up soul.

Dare pours me another shot, knowing me too well. Tonight is about celebrating. About taking the next step now that the dust has settled. Finding our new purpose now that the war is over. That St Graves is ours. That my demons have been vanquished.

She lifts a finger to me as two men sitting at the bar call her attention away from me. I lean against the bar and watch her start to make their drinks for them.

I smirk as I listen in on their conversation. They're talking about the press conference Josie gave last week and Charlotte Devereaux's connection to the Mending Hearts foundation.

It wasn't surprising when the speculation and conspiracy theories started all over again after the fire and alleged suicides. I had considered that before deciding to craft their note we sent to police and news stations. It was still worth destroying their reputations and everything they had built.

Too much time had passed and I became complacent on how deep people would be willing to dig into an old mystery that now has been solved. All except the question still burning on everyone's tongue. Where was Charlotte Devereaux now?

I hadn't expected a connection to be made to MH after all these years. Back then, we weren't equipped to completely cover our tracks. I always knew we left traces. That Josie could be connected to Charlotte. It's why we've always been vigilant about when and how we meet.

She called me to help her craft a perfect statement and we finally decided it was safe enough to put all the rumors to rest.

Charlotte Devereaux was a good friend. Someone who stood behind me when I had nothing to my name. When I was nothing and no one and everyone always overlooked and underestimated me. She was kind and giving and had so much love to give. No one deserves what those demons did to her and to this day, it tears me apart to know what she's had to endure.

But even after all of that, she remained as kind and giving as ever. With the wealth her family left behind all she wanted was two things. Two very simple and simultaneously complex things. First, she wanted to save other people from the pain she experienced. She wanted to extend a helping hand in a way that no one did for her. To support people through the worst of their trauma, help them not only heal, but thrive in a new life. She wanted to protect people and make the world a better place.

So I'm here today to confirm some of the rumors that have been rekindled due to the resurgence of this case. It's true.

Charlotte Devereaux trusted me with the funding to create and build what is today known as The Mending Hearts Foundation. From the beginning, this company has been her idea, built on her morals and dreams. It has been an honor and a privilege to build this company out of the love she had to give and in the memory of the sisters she lost. I know she would be so proud of everything this foundation has become and all the people we have saved.

Which leads me to the second thing Charlotte wanted. The only other thing she truly craved was to disappear. She never asked for her tragedies, never wanted the media circus that followed. It simply was not something she signed up for. She never wanted to be the Fallen Prom Queen or anything else that came with it. She just wanted to disappear. To start a new life where no one knew her. Where people didn't already know the very worst moments of her life. She wanted to be away from the life that broke her and stole her family from her.

And so she did.

Charlotte Devereaux, my beloved friend who believed in me, said goodbye by leaving behind a business plan and access to a whole lot of money and I never heard from her again. All I can say is I hope wherever she did end up, she's safe and happy and has found a new purpose filled with peace.

I smile thinking about it, she was far more dramatic and eloquent than I would have been. I was happy with her leaving it at "she dumped this idea on me and ran," but of course, her version was more well-received than mine probably would have been.

"Where do you think she is?" One of the men leans into the other to ask in a low voice. I trade looks with Dare and smirk.

"Are you talking about the Devereaux girl?" I ask in a hushed voice. They both pause before nodding. I throw back my second shot of whiskey and lean forward towards them. "I don't know, but if it was me," I start and they lean closer with wide eyes. "I would have dyed my hair and ran to Paris. Got a nice flat. Ate croissants every day. Maybe become a dance

teacher. Keep enough of the money to be comfortable and never have to worry again, but spend it quietly to stay under the radar and away from the world she came from.”

Dare rolls her eyes as they hang off every word. “But who knows?” I shrug. “Maybe she’s a lot closer than we think.”

I leave them to their conversation, laughing to myself as Dare watches me with amusement. She helps out a few other people before making her way back to me and pouring two more shots. We cheers each other and throw them back. It feels like a million nights before, but somehow so much better. A weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

“You going to dance with me tonight?” I ask her.

“Wasn’t the plan,” she drawls, “but who am I to say no to The Original Rose?”

I hum in amusement. “As if you would want to. There won’t be as many nights of you dancing here anymore.”

“True,” she agrees. “But if people want to see me work, they’ll be able to see a whole lot more of me once Poison opens.”

I snort. Leave it to Dare to make jokes about her transitioning into working at a sex club. “Remind me to put that on the fliers when we open.”

Cherry joins us at the bar and bumps my hip with hers. “Hey there, girly.” My smile is warm and genuine as I greet her back. I’ve missed having these girls around. My girls. The first place Luca and I found a home, where we started to build our family. She hands her tickets over to Dare before sashaying away once more.

“Just pull me up with you when you’re ready,” Dare teases and I salute her before finally heading over to the table where everyone is waiting for me.

“About damn time,” Jade whines. “I thought you were going to stop and greet every person before me.”

I level a glare at Ian. “Her growing brattiness is somehow your fault.” Jade’s pout quickly morphs into a grin of

satisfaction while Holden snorts and shakes his head.

Ian rears back. “What the fuck? Like I’m the only one who spoils her?”

Rachel pulls the olive from her martini with her teeth and bites down on it. “You are the one who spoils her the most.”

Ian huffs and flips us both off. “Big words coming from the two women who just gave her a fucking house and a brand new limited edition Bugatti.”

Rachel places her hand against her chest, offended at his accusation. “She wanted to learn how to drive,” she defends. I struggle not to laugh, and I’m not the only one. Britt has her face in her hands and Kade is trying to not look anyone in the eye.

“So buy her a shitty Honda Civic to learn in!”

I would bet real money Rachel doesn’t even know what a Civic is. Ian must come to the same conclusion as he takes in her expression. “You know what? Nevermind.” He shakes his head, pointing a finger at Rachel. “You will not be buying the twins their first cars.”

She flips him off. “I can spoil my nephews however I want.”

Jade stops the impending argument by putting her hands in the air between them. “Simmer down. The twins are five. We have some time to fight about who gets to buy their first cars.”

Ian grumbles but slouches back in his seat. I lean over to Ryder. “This is why she’s spoiled,” I faux whisper. “Ian can’t say no to her.”

We all lose it and begin to laugh. Ian pulls Jade into his lap and whispers something in her ear, making her face heat. I can only imagine what he just threatened her with. Luca gets up from his seat and moves over to me, wrapping a possessive arm around my waist.

“Ready to dance after so long?”

I stretch my arms over my head. “More than ready,” I admit. In the whirlwind of everything else, I wasn’t good at

keeping up my dance practice. The last few weeks have really proven that as I worked to get back into good enough form to perform again. It's reminded me of how soothing dance is for me. The music that pulses in my veins, the way my body instinctively responds and I can just let go. Be free in those moments where I give up control and just move.

"Surprise song?" His dark eyes glint mischievously at me. He knows I would never turn down a surprise song. Our favorite game feels like it's from a million years ago. A different lifetime. With different people. But it was us. Just like it's always been.

"I'm excited to see what it is."

He winks in response. "I'm ready when you are."

Okay then. I guess we can do this now then. No time quite like the present. I climb onto the corner of the bar directly next to our private section. Luca moves behind the bar and all of a sudden all the lights in the club go out.

The noise cuts out like someone pulled a plug. Not even the sound of breathing can be heard as the entire club collectively holds their breath. Not in fear or panic, but in anticipation. I move carefully to the center of the bar, not moving out onto the catwalk quite yet. I want to see what song he's chosen first.

The first bars sound and oh boy am I fucking glad he hasn't hit the lights yet. Wouldn't want him to see my smile and give away my plan too soon. UPSAHL's *Good Girl Era* begins to play over the club as blue and white lights flash on, catching me in the spotlight. I wink at the crowd and move my hips to the beat of the song.

I pivot on my heel and change directions, pulling Dare up onto the bar with me. She kicks a glass and we dance our way to the center of the catwalk. We move together, my hips pressed to her ass as we move to the song. Her hands find my hair, and my tongue finds her neck, making the crowd go wild.

Luca got one thing right. My good girl era was never going to last and it's time to stir up some shit.

Steel Roses has always been just the first step to bigger things.



Epilogue Two Luca

SIX MONTHS later

Another Friday night at the fights. I swirl my whiskey in my glass before taking a slow sip as my eyes travel over the crowd below. The fights have grown larger over the last year and even more so in the last few months. Our own fighters becoming a force to be reckoned with as more of our time and energy are poured into this place.

Scar, acting as a trainer, has whipped a lot of the fighters into even better shape, and has brought on an onslaught of new recruits dying to receive one of our elusive cards. We've had to become even more selective with who we hand them out to, and it was already highly competitive.

These fights have once again become the center of underground activity, not only for St Graves, but for most of California.

I recognize a lot of the fighters warming up below. The girl everyone seems to love is here again tonight. Joe leans against a wall and talks to her as she wraps her hands. The way he looks at her is all too familiar. It's the way he looks at Scar. The way Scar looked at Roe and Jade and then Rachel. And of course Charles.

Can't ever forget Charles.

I smirk as I watch Joe throw his head back in a laugh. The little blonde has grit. I'll give her that. Even from our brief encounters, I know that much to be true. It's a good thing too. She'll need a hell of a lot more than just grit and good humor if Joe and Scar are adopting her the way I think they are.

A dark figure moves into my peripheral vision, but I don't move to acknowledge them until they pull out a seat at my table. Not many have the balls to pull a move like that here. Even fewer could do it and live. Of course, I happen to be looking at one of the few who has the right to behave in such a way.

"It's good to see you, Luca," he says and I gesture for one of our girls to bring another glass. Silva's quick to rush over and pour him his own glass of whiskey. She's one of the girls that Scar trained and is thinking about making the switch to Steel Roses. I'll have to tell Scar she'd be a good fit.

"Matteo," I greet as Silva nods to me and retreats. "To what do I owe the pleasure of hosting the Alvarado heir all the way over here in St Graves?"

His eyes are as dark as my own, but his smile more closely resembles Ryder's. I've heard he's about as unhinged as Ryder has become as well. I guess growing up in a world like ours will do that to you. At least he doesn't eye Silva or any of our other girls as they walk by. He knows better than to disrespect one of ours like that. Doesn't mean powerful men don't enjoy toeing the line.

"My father wanted to send his thanks," he answers, picking up the glass Silva left behind. I hold my own and lift it slightly in a silent cheers before taking a long swallow. The amber liquid burns my throat all the way down to my stomach, warming me from the inside out. A pleasant heat settles over my skin.

"Another flawless deal has gone through with Ms. Caruso," he explains. "We never would have found such a talent without your intel."

I shrug, but I'm pleased with how much the Alvarados have taken to Rachel. It's been a mutually beneficial

arrangement to both of them. The new project has provided Rachel with ample distractions as she expands her empire into new markets. It's given her a purpose and has rekindled her drive and ambition, even if not her passion. Eventually, she will find a way to open her caged-off heart again. But no one could expect more from her than what she's already giving.

"She should be here soon," I inform him instead of responding to his gratitude. Intel is why we are here. It's what we do. It's not only expected to yield results, it's guaranteed.

Matteo takes a slow slip as his eyes trail over the fighters and the growing crowd below. "Is she coming with Scar?"

I shake my head. Scar is on another run tonight. "She should be here with Ryder." Kade is acting as Scar's backup tonight. It should be a relatively easy in-and-out run. Just cleaning up a mess, actually, for the Alvarados.

My eyes narrow as I study Matteo once more. "Why are you fishing?" I demand.

He immediately puts his hands up defensively, but doesn't deny it. "You know my father has always liked you. He's just curious if you have any other aces hidden up your sleeve you're willing to share."

Leave it to the Alvarados to always be willing to push the fucking line. "Scar is on a run for your father and you damn well know it." I drain the rest of my whiskey. The Alvarados are an important ally, but fuck they're exhausting to deal with.

Matteo rolls his eyes. He's even worse than his father. At least Marcos is always straightforward. He doesn't play mind games or tricks to get what he wants. He just demands it. Something I can respect. Even relate to. "Don't be like that," he whines. "You have so many interesting things happening on the West Coast now. How can we not be curious?"

I level him with a dark glare. "Is there a job you need done or are you just wasting my time?"

He huffs as he sits back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. The position is in direct contrast to the tailored suit he wears. He looks all too childish compared to the

intimidating man that walked up to this table. I can only imagine what Marcos would say if he saw his heir pouting like a petulant child.

“I thought we were friends.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “We have never been friends, Matteo.”

“You gave us Rachel, who is your family.” He says this like it should explain his attitude and demeanor towards me tonight. It doesn’t.

“I did not give you Rachel,” I argue. “Rachel has never been mine to give to anyone. I simply made you aware of her existence and capabilities.”

He nods along with my words, straightening his tie as he sits back up in a proper position. “Sounds like something you would do for a friend.”

I smirk. “I did.” He grins, thinking I’m finally agreeing with him. “Rachel is my friend. I did it to help her grow.”

He huffs and I point at him. “For the Alvarados, it was an act of good faith. Romano was a dead man walking and your father was kind in my early days of growing. We were creating a hole in your business, so I offered a plug that benefitted my friend as well. I never expected you all to show up to the funeral or make a production of everything.”

Matteo places a hand to his chest. “Alec was a friend.”

I give him a droll look. “Your definition of friendship is quite loose. Friends don’t only meet for business.”

He waves me off. “Fine. I knew of Alec. Father thought it was a good first step in showing our support of the Bleeding Roses.” He says the name with as much amusement as we still often feel over the moniker. “You’ve grown enough to force even the Alvarados to be wary of you.”

I don’t bother to respond to that. It may be true, but we must also be wary of them. It’s what makes friendship almost impossible between us. Rachel and her growing empire is a

bridge that connects us, making our allyship stronger, but mutual benefits do not guarantee loyalty.

He finally drops the act and drains the rest of his own glass, giving me a genuine smile now. “You’re really not going to give me any new insights on people to take under our wing?”

I arch a brow at him. “Are you going to pay me?”

He flips me off but before he can respond, I spot Rachel and Kade making their way to our table.

“Matteo,” Rachel drawls. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here tonight.” Her perfect mask slips into place as soon as she recognizes him. She’s as formidable as ever in her armor of designer labels and signature Louboutins. The familiar click of her heels against the floor is soothing. Even after all these months of her taking the reins of her business back, it never stops being a relief to see her this way.

There was a time when none of us were sure she would find this part of herself again. Working with the Alvarados has solidified her position and brought back the fearsome woman I once knew. Hopefully through time, she will eventually heal her broken heart as well. Enough to smile without the glimmer of grief still in her eyes.

He shrugs as she takes her seat at my side. “Heard the fights have been gaining even more attention recently,” he says in way of explanation.

Hmm. Maybe his father is considering sending some of his own fighters to begin fighting here. Wouldn’t be a bad thing. For either of us.

“We have some excellent new fighters on the books tonight,” Kade explains with a grin.

I smile and begin to nod my agreement before snapping my head in his direction. “Why the fuck are you here?”

Oh fuck me. He has that mischievous glint in his eyes and a dopey grin. What the fuck have they done now?

“Ryder wanted to go with Scar.”

Motherfucker. Of course he did. I pinch the bridge of my nose and shake my head.

“It’s not going to be a clean in-and-out,” I apologize to Matteo. They didn’t explicitly ask for it to be that kind of job, but I had inferred it was their intention for it to be. He gives me a questioning look and I explain, “Ryder likes to encourage Scar to play with her prey.”

“I think I like Ryder,” he responds with a smirk. “Think he’ll be my friend?”

I sigh and choose to ignore him and the curious looks from Rachel and Kade. Instead, I text Mikey and Ronan to let them know cleanup might be a little messier tonight than I had originally said. Ronan is quick to respond he already knew as soon as Scar told him Ryder was with her, but they’re already in place and the job is almost done.

Thank god for small favors at least.

“You can ask him yourself,” Kade offers. “They’ll be here soon.”

Matteo sits up straighter. “I chose a good night to stop by. The whole family is going to be here.”

I’m starting to really hate the curiosity in his eyes. While I think it’s harmless and seems to be mostly intrigue, we are not close enough for this type of candor. His father has always been happy to let us have the West Coast while he dominates the East. It limits our competition and we trade in different markets as well. Keeping a healthy amount of separation has done us both well, but Matteo seems eager to blur those lines.

“Have you heard from Nicholis?” he suddenly asks, turning to Rachel.

She eyes him suspiciously, on edge as much as I am. “Why would I have?”

Matteo weighs her words. “He’s left the country. Doing some work for my father.” He’s fishing again. I just can’t figure out why.

Rachel is a pro at hiding her feelings. She doesn't flinch at his words and her expression doesn't even flicker, but I see the brief snap of pain that flashes in her eyes. Anger burns through me and I'm relieved Scar isn't here. It's been hard enough to talk her down from hunting the prick and taking him out once and for all. It isn't what Rachel would want though.

"I fail to see what that has to do with me," she answers primly. Short, sweet, and to the point. I'm proud of her.

"He didn't tell you?" Matteo pushes.

Rachel waves him off, taking a sip of the red wine Silva brought her as soon as she sat down. "Why would he?"

Matteo eyes her skeptically. "You were once engaged to the man."

I'm ready to shut the conversation down. The last thing Rachel needs is this man dragging her painful past back up. Isn't it bad enough she already lost Alec and then was abandoned by the last connection she had to him? But my interference isn't required.

She smiles like the cat that got the cream behind her wine glass. "And what of your ex-fiancée? She still in Paris or is it Milan now?"

I half expect shutters to fall over his eyes, but he just seems all the more amused at her barb. "Point taken. Maybe it would have been better to point out you were once childhood friends then?"

Rachel's smile turns predatory. She knows something I'm unaware of. Maybe it's time to set Noah and Scar on digging into Matteo's past. We never have out of respect, but if he's blurring lines, we may need to be better prepared. "Funny you should mention childhood friends. I heard a *rumor* that you had one once upon a time. Might have even been the cause behind the abrupt termination of your engagement. Have you heard from her lately? Know what she's up to?"

Matteo looks equal measures chagrined and impressed by her cutting words. We will definitely be looking into his past.

He puts his hands up in surrender. “Fine, fine. You win. Nicholis is no longer your friend.”

“He’s no longer anything to me,” she cuts in sharply. Atta girl.

He sighs again like this conversation hasn’t gone the way he expected it to. “You know, you lot sure are hard to get in with. I thought you would appreciate knowing.”

Rachel scoffs, “I no longer care. Want to get on my good side?” He nods and she smirks. “Pay me more money.”

I chuckle at her brazenness. This is the Rachel we know and love. It’s a risk, but Matteo was the one to drop the formalities first. She has just followed his lead. He shakes his head. “Are you sure you two aren’t blood related?” he asks, gesturing between Rachel and I. “What?” he asks defensively at our expressions. “You guys are so guarded. I’m not my father, okay? He respects you lot and prefers the distance, but I’m curious. I want to know more about you. Fuck the distance.”

“Haven’t you ever heard what curiosity did to the cat?” A slow smile spreads across my face to turn and find Scar has snuck up behind me, Ryder at her side. My smile is quick to drop and be replaced by exasperation. She’s still got blood in her hair and when she turns her head, I’m almost positive I see something that looks suspiciously like it could be bloody fingerprints at the side of her neck.

“Good thing I’m not a cat then,” Matteo snarks back, his eyes lighting up as he takes in Scar and Ryder’s disheveled appearances. They really did the bare minimum to clean up before coming here.

Oh fuck. I know that appreciative look in Scar’s eyes.

“I like him. Can we keep him?”

Matteo looks all too smug as he looks at me. “Told you someone would want to be my friend.”

Scar meets my glare with a shrug. I know damn well she knows who the fuck she’s talking to. He’s not someone we can just adopt like she has a tendency to do with others. “He’s

already working with Rachel. Might as well be friends.” She purses her lips in thought before beaming. “Hey, maybe he’ll even take out Nicholis Dickolis for me.”

Rachel snorts, her mask of indifference cracking as she throws her head back and cackles. The sound makes even my lips twitch. I’ve never seen her break character so freely in public before. Not that I can blame her. She’s wiping tears from her eyes when Matteo finally responds.

“Can’t kill him, but will be calling him that from now on. In thanks for such a magnificent new nickname, I’ll give him all the worst jobs.”

That’s it. He’s in as far as Scar is concerned. I don’t even have to see her face to know.

“Knew I liked you,” she beams.

Matteo puts his elbows against the table and leans forward on his hands. “So bestie, tell me all your secrets.”

Scar snorts. “I said friends, not family.” Her eyes harden as she smirks at him. “I can still kill friends.”

Well, at least she’s still a psycho. Just a psycho with friends apparently.



Epilogue Three Declan

ABOUT TWO YEARS later

Why did I even come on this run?

I heave a sigh and run my hands over my face, wishing at least Luca or Noah were here too. No, instead I'm with the crazies. How did I even get roped into babysitter duty for Scarlett, Kade, and Ryder? It's like trying to herd cats.

Pulling out my phone I send a text to both Luca and Noah to remind them they owe me for having to do this today. I thought they might grow out of some of their rashness after we finally settled old debts, but they seem to only get worse with age. More confident. More outlandish. Somehow, even more savage. Forever a game between the three of them to see who can top the others' ridiculous antics.

At least today is a relatively easy run. All we have to do is clear out an abandoned warehouse. One of Josie's teams already rescued and evacuated the visitors. All we have to do is go in and clean up the rest of the crew that missed the initial raid and have come back to salvage what they can.

It won't be much. Josie's teams are trained to be thorough. But since it was on our turf, it was obvious we could not only take care of this part, but also use it to send a clear message. We keep our city clear of the skin market. Publicly, we keep our noses out of it. As long as it stays out of our town.

Some brave soul thought to test that this week. Perfect time to set an example.

Which of course has the trio of psychos all excited as they come up with ideas for how to send a message. “We are not using intestines to spell out words, pretty girl. Absolutely the fuck not.” Why is she so obsessed with playing with organs? Kade opens his mouth to argue and I cut him off with a glare. Fucking cats, I swear.

“You guys are giving Declan gray hairs,” Noah laughs through the comms.

“That’s just his old age,” Ryder quips and I debate leaving them on their own and going back home.

“No, D,” Noah warns. “If you’re not there they really will decorate the warehouse with organs as Christmas decorations.”

Kade stops and looks thoughtful. “That’s actually a great idea.”

“No!” Noah and I both shout. Ugh. Fuck Noah for making a good point.

“What about painting the walls red?” Ryder asks. “With their blood. Obviously.”

I rub my temples as I motion for them all to start moving again. This run is going to take way longer than it should. I can already tell. “Why would you even want to?” The amount of work it would take for so little pay off. Make it make sense. “Just paint the rose like always.”

Scarlett huffs an annoyed sound. “We always do that,” she whines.

I eye her suspiciously. She’s always a brewer of chaos, a shit-stirrer, but why does she actually sound annoyed with me right now? Normally half the fun for her is that the three of us that are still somewhat sane become exasperated with her antics. She enjoys needling us. “That’s why it’s become your signature, pretty girl.”

“It’s boring.” She pouts, jutting out her bottom lip as she stops walking again. I sigh as I wrap my arm around her shoulders and kiss her temple.

“Would you feel better if I gave you the ax back?”

Her eyes light up. “Really?”

I nod. “Next run,” I promise her and am relieved when the annoyance in her eyes disappears.

“Do I get mine back?” Ryder asks.

“Absolutely not,” I answer at the same time Luca curses through the comms, “Fuck no.”

Now, it’s Ryder’s turn to stop walking and I force myself to take a deep breath. We should be jogging the route, but Scarlett didn’t want to. Which is shocking in and of itself. I narrow my eyes again as I study her at my side.

“If I suck your dick will I get it back?” he asks sarcastically. Luca doesn’t even bother to respond.

“Practice your pout,” I recommend. “When it’s as cute as hers, I’ll consider it.”

Luca snorts. “I won’t. She’s barely getting hers back.” He pauses as if remembering why the two of them lost them in the first place. “On a probationary period,” he warns her and Scarlett rolls her eyes but doesn’t argue.

“Don’t practice your ax throwing in the middle of a run next time,” I advise.

Ryder finally starts moving down the tunnels again and I check my phone. We should be close to the exit we need now. “He was going to die anyway,” Ry grumbles.

“We still wanted answers out of him but he bled out too fast after you accidentally hit his femoral artery.”

Scarlett leans her head against my shoulder and yawns, her pace slowing down a little bit. “If you let us practice more, our aim would be better.”

I kiss the top of her head. “When you learn not to get too carried away.”

“Friendly reminder,” Noah says softly. “Everyone is coming over in an hour and a half.” A not-so-subtle remark to get us moving. It wasn’t supposed to take us an hour to get there. It should have taken twenty-five minutes at most.

“You ready to pick up the pace, pretty girl?”

She sighs but straightens and pulls away from me. “I guess.”

Thankfully the rest of the run goes much more smoothly. Only running into a couple of disagreements with Kade and Ry about how to dispose of the bodies. Scarlett is at least content with just leaving the signature bleeding rose behind in a message. She’s always a bit more reasonable after being able to slit a couple throats. Coffee usually has the same effect at least.

“Pretty girl?” I call as I look over the final scene. Everything is how we want to leave it. And I was able to keep the mayhem to a minimum. Promising Scarlett her ax back worked better than expected. Where did she go? Maybe I spoke too soon. I call Kade’s and Ry’s attention before asking, “Where is Scarlett?”

They both shrug before looking around to realize she isn’t in our sight. The warehouse is a fairly open space, not many places to hide. I sigh and begin to move toward the back hallway. It’s the only place she could be where she’d be out of sight. Footsteps behind me let me know Kade and Ry are following me.

We find her crouched over in the corner, her back to us. “Pretty girl, what are you doing?”

She turns her head and looks up at me, her eyes filled with moisture. As she opens her mouth, the tears begin to spill down her cheeks. “Look how cute they are, Declan” she cries, holding up a tiny kitten. It squeaks a sound that can hardly be called a meow as she lifts it in the air. It’s barely the size of her hand. It can’t be more than a couple weeks old.

I crouch down beside her and see three more kittens just slightly bigger than the one Scarlett cradles in her hands. Their

eyes are just barely starting to open. They must not be even two weeks old yet. “They’re very cute,” I pacify Scarlett, gently rubbing her back.

“Where is their mom?” She cries harder, hugging the poor kitten to her chest. I’m not a vet, but the kittens look even smaller than they should. If I had to guess, I would have to say something happened to the mother cat. But I can’t bring myself to say that to her when she’s already so emotional about finding them.

I have to tamper down my smile. The picture is becoming more and more clear throughout the day, but I don’t want to say anything too soon.

“How about we take them home with us?” I offer instead of answering her question.

She uses the back of her hand to wipe her tears from her cheeks. “Can we really?”

“Of course, pretty girl.”

She looks down at the small kittens, gently running her finger over one of their backs. They’re a mix of black and gray and white. “What about their mom?”

I huff a laugh. Time for a little payback. “Kade and Ry will stay behind and look for her.” The fact neither one of them argues is enough to tell me they’re thrown by her emotional outburst. I wonder if they’ve landed on the most likely reason yet. Ryder was just saying her boobs seemed bigger this morning. I hadn’t thought anything of it in the moment.

She nods slowly as she climbs to her feet. I help her scoop up the kittens and ask Noah to pick us up outside the closest exit to the tunnel. Scarlett doesn’t need to make the long trek back through the tunnels. Especially not with our new friends who seem to be starving. Maybe we can get a vet to come to the house as well.

As soon as we get in the car, I’m pulling out my phone to make it happen. I want to get Scarlett home for a very important test. Noah meets my eyes in the rearview mirror and his smile mirrors my own. He knows.

Roe's about to become a big sister.



Epilogue Four Noah

ABOUT TEN YEARS LATER

Six phones chime at the same time and we all trade looks.

I'm the first to drop my gloves and grab my phone from my bag to find a text from Roe to our family group chat. My mouth drops open as I read the text. Then read it again.

"Roe baby is bringing boys tonight," I say, shocked. She might be fifteen now, but I never really thought this would happen.

"Boys?" More than one voice snaps from different directions.

Scar is the second one of us to pull out her phone. She hums and trades looks with Kade. "Think it has to do with what we heard earlier?"

He shrugs. "Only one way to find out."

"What the fuck did you hear?" Luca growls and I'm nodding. He took the words right out of my mouth.

Scar's text pops up on my phone, quickly followed by one from Roe and another by Kade.

BABY GIRL

Proving another point?

BUTTERFLY

Pretty much

HUSBAND

Do we turn the psycho up or down?

I can't look at my phone and not laugh every time Kade's contact pops up. Scar thought she was real funny when she put that in, but even after all these years I can't bring myself to change it. Not when it always makes both of us laugh each time.

The two of them are getting that look in their eyes again. The one that always spells trouble for all of us. Especially Declan, Luca, and me.

"I'm still stuck on the boys part," Jade drawls, making Luca glare at his phone again.

Okay. Me and Declan then.

I pull out my phone and begin typing quickly.

Always down. The answer is always down.

LUCA

If they're boys the answer is obviously up.

BABY GIRL

I agree with Luca

I shake my head and look for Declan. "Help me out here."

"I still wanna know about the boys," Jade repeats, but no one is paying attention to her. Though I still want to know what Kade and Scar heard earlier. No one can expect them to react sanely when our daughter is bringing home boys for the first time, but going straight to psycho is suspicious. Even more suspicious is them asking for permission. We're missing something.

“How many boys?” asks Jade.

DECLAN

You’re going to traumatize some poor fifteen-year-olds.

BABY GIRL

That’s the point?

“Three,” I answer absentmindedly. Oh fuck me. Now the twins are getting involved as well. I wipe my hand down my face as I read the texts coming in from Macey and Halle.

CRICKET

Does this mean we can invite friends?

RYDER

No, we can’t antagonize the teenagers if we are worried about the seven-year-olds.

Sweet girl, why would you even want to? We just got the news and already all hell is breaking loose. Does Roe know just what is in store for these boys coming over? On a day when the whole family is going to be there as well. Ballsy of her.

MAYFLY

Do you really want our friends there for this?

At least one of our kids seems to have some common sense. I can always rely on Halle to be the sane and rational one. Usually Roe is as well, but I don’t think she thought this through very well.

CRICKET

Good point Hal.

You’re brave Roe.

Apparently, her sisters also agree with that sentiment. I can't help but laugh. What the fuck is going to happen tonight?

HUSBAND

You guys are so dramatic

RYDER

I agree with the twins

LUCA

So we are turning the psycho up?

Dear lord, Roe baby, are you sure you want them to come over?

Does she hate them? I pause and tilt my head as I study Kade and Scar. Does she hate them? Is that why those two were so quick to jump to psycho levels? Jade's mumbling to Ian about still wanting to know where these boys came from.

"What did you overhear earlier?" I ask skeptically. "What point is Roe trying to make and why?"

Scar shrugs, her phone still in her hand as she waits for Roe to respond. "She called us during school earlier. Said something about proving a point and then she thought she had hung up but we were still on the line and heard some boy teasing her about her nickname."

My face scrunches as I think about that. Not exactly thrilled some shithead kid is giving our baby a hard time for any reason.

"Then we heard Roe threaten to cut his tongue out of his mouth," Kade adds proudly. Well apparently, I wasn't the only one not thrilled about it. Good for our girl. She's her momma's daughter, standing up for herself like that.

BUTTERFLY

Normal level of psycho, you don't have to change for these idiots.

DECLAN

You know their normal level is still pretty insane by any other person's standards right?

BUTTERFLY

Yes Daddy, that's the point.

BABY GIRL

Oh. I'm excited.

BUTTERFLY

See you when you get home from work.

I'm suddenly less inclined to try and stop the psychos from harassing some fifteen-year-olds. Seems like they may deserve it after all. I trade looks with Declan, who shrugs. We won't participate, doesn't mean we won't enjoy watching the fall out.

Scar has a wicked gleam in her eye that promises trouble. I wonder if Roe knows the can of worms she just opened. She starts a low conversation with Luca and the rest of us move to the side of the gym as we watch her.

"One hundred bucks she goes full crazy tonight," Ryder says.

Declan scoffs, "She's grown out of that."

We all give him exasperated looks and he waves us off. "Okay, of course she hasn't. But she won't go full throttle on some fucking fifteen-year-olds."

"I think I agree with D," I hum. "She's crazy but she won't go all out for kids."

Kade shakes his head. "I'm in. I'm betting full assassin gear. Tats on display, suited up with blades and at least one gun."

I roll my eyes. "They're just kids," I argue.

Kade shrugs. "Kids bullying our daughter."

I clench my jaw. I don't think Scar will go that far, but the reminder kind of makes me hope she will. Roe has been honest about her troubles at school, but she seems to have a handle on it. Though I'm curious how it's led to this. "Still kids." But my argument is only half-hearted.

"Just so we're all on the same page," Jade drawls, throwing her gloves down at our feet. "Roe's bringing three of her bullies tonight? Bullies that are also boys? To our family party? Tonight?"

I nod. "That's the gist of it."

She trades looks with Ian and chuckles. "So, who's going to tell the twins?"

My mouth drops open. Can't believe I forgot about that part of it. The twins are extremely protective over her. Even more so than Trevor who's at school with her.

Ian rolls his lips. "Okay, hear me out. Maybe, we don't tell them?"

"Oh, I like surprises," Scar chirps. "Someone should bring popcorn."

I huff a laugh. I still can't believe our little Roe has grown up enough to be bringing boys home.

Let the chaos ensue.

AFTERWORD

Roses...we made it. Finally.

This has been such a journey, not only for me, but all of you as well. From the bottom of my heart, thank you all so much for not giving up on this series. For not giving up on me. For being patient and kind and supportive.

I've written this note in my head so many times and now that I'm sitting here at my laptop typing, I have no words. Shattered Chaos was my very first book and this book makes it my very first completed series and I had no idea all the places this series would take me. What it would all turn into.

When I first started plotting and writing this series I put little pieces of myself into these characters. Ideas about trauma that I wanted to explore. I didn't always realize what I was doing, or what I was creating, but as time went on it became clear to me. I was pouring my heart and soul into these characters. Tearing open old wounds and bleeding on these pages. And I'm not the only one who figured it out. I have had so many amazing readers reach out to me to talk about the mental health aspects of this books. How they related and felt seen by words I had written.

Nothing in my life has made me happier than knowing that something I created has helped other people. Readers who feel the same way I do. And I've never been more disappointed in myself as when I felt like I was letting those same people down.

I won't trauma dump on you all, this series has done more than enough of that. But there was a reader in my group who commented how excited she was for this book, but even more excited to hear the positive mental health updates I was giving as I finished it. Her comment hit me hard because there are more ways than just my stories to connect with other readers who may be struggling. I can do it with my honesty and transparency too.

I put more of my own trauma in this series than I had ever realized. Put things in here that I wasn't quite ready to confront and process. I could write about the pain, the confusion, the loneliness all day long. But when I got to this book, the final piece, the piece meant to focus on healing and moving forward, I realized I didn't have the words. There were several incidents that triggered me into a downward mental spiral after the release of *Vicious Chaos*. None that were related to my books in any way, but at the same time deeply rooted in the themes I had put into this series.

Beautiful Chaos did not turn out the way I had initially thought it would. I was in an incredibly fragile state of mind for a long time and for months I called this book my Bruno because I wasn't strong enough to embrace the beauty in the chaos. To listen to the message I wanted to send to other people struggling.

It's okay to have scars, to be a little broken, or even a lotta bit broken. It's okay to forgive people, but it's also okay to not be ready to. To struggle with that decision and what it means. It's okay to move on and it's also okay to have set backs. Healing doesn't have an ending point and it's not always linear. There are ups and downs, and some times old wounds resurface and cut deeper than you thought was even possible. That doesn't mean all the work you've done up until that point isn't valid. Doesn't make all the healing and growth and trauma you've surpassed worthless.

Maybe you don't need to hear that message, but I did. And Scar did too. And it took me a lot of time to sort out my own issues to be able to write her story in the way it deserved, broken pieces and all. So thank you for waiting for us. If you

made it this far into the note, thank you for your patience. This book never would have been possible without all of my readers cheering me on, encouraging me to take care of myself first and foremost. And of course without my team.

My day one, the love of my life, the one and only, Gn Wright, has to deal with me more than you will ever know. She's my biggest supporter and the one who will always call me out on my shit. She's my partner in crime, the one who vibes out the plot with me, the one who listens to me cry, and never judges when I disappear for days, or even weeks, when I'm having my dark and twisties. If you spotted all the Black Hallows references and are intrigued to find out more about the mini psychos and what happened in their town, look no further than my girl's Black Hallows series, just remember Asher is mine.

And the rest of my team, Alysha, Vy, Heather, Nicole, and Jamie. Y'all help keep a girl sane. Somewhat. These are the women behind the words who help make this book that much better. That help keep the group running when I'm losing my mind, find plot holes, demand I write the sex scenes, fix all my typos and missing words, and are just there with me through the different parts of this writing process to keep it going. I can't say thank you enough to the team I have at my side. I love you all.

I love these characters with my whole soul, and I know I've said it before, but this is just the beginning of this world. There are many more stories and characters I want to explore. And yes, there are more than a few Easter eggs for what's to come in this book. I hope the Merry band of Psychos were worth the wait, that you all love them as much as I do, and that you're ready for all the chaos this world has yet to bring.

I mean it when I say this won't be the last we see of this crew, so until next time.

Xoxo

Samantha Bee

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Bee is a single mom who lives in Southern California. For as much as she's called a wordy bitch, she sure never knows wtf to say when someone asks her about herself. She likes chaos, coffee, and character banter. And that's all we've got folks. Her kid is much cuter and much more interesting. Maybe he will write books one day too.

Join her readers group for the most up to date announcements and to continue enjoying her sparkling personality.

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