



BRAZEN
Criminals

MAISIE KANE

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Maisie Kane



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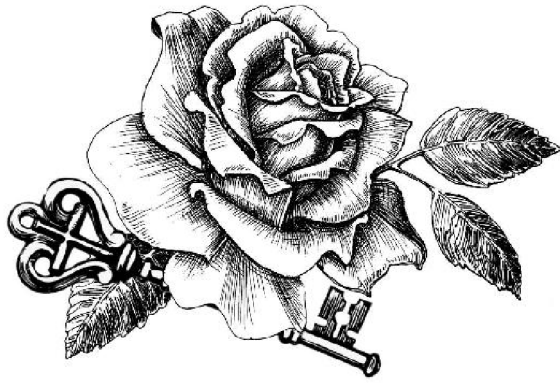
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Content Notes

This is an adult series meant for adult audiences. Mature themes, violence, and group sex all play a part in this series.

If you have any particular concerns, please check the complete list of content notes at:

<http://www.midnightmagnoliapress.com/maisie-kane-content-notes>



Prologue

RJ

I'm the last one back to the house, which is the first sign the plan failed.

The second sign is the yelling bleeding through the front door.

Shoving the heavy wood aside, I stride into the living room, letting my sopping wet bag slump onto the floor. I can clean it up later. My tech is already beyond salvation.

Trips whips around to glare at me, his blue eyes pure ice, like our carefully laid plan imploding is solely my fault. "Where the fuck have you been?" he growls.

Ignoring him, I head into the kitchen, tossing my helmet onto the counter before grabbing a hand towel to squeeze some of the water from my coils. Today is definitely not wash day.

Trips follows me. "RJ, seriously man, you were supposed to be first back."

I twist around, trying not to snap. Trips reacts to fire with fire, so I need to be water—considering the fact I’m dripping on the kitchen floor, I should be able to make that happen. “I was fishing my laptop out of the Mississippi. Oh, and the comm box, and the police scanner, and I don’t know, a few thousand dollars of equipment. You’re lucky I’m a solid swimmer.”

Trips paces, yanking at his red-brown hair like pulling it out might salvage this shit show. Spoiler alert—this gig is unsalvageable.

The absence of Jansen’s perma-grin shocks me as he trails us into the kitchen. Trips turns his rage against the happiest of our little band of thieves. “You—what the fuck were you thinking? You boosted a Porsche. Literally the worst possible getaway car you could have found. It was even red, you fool.”

Jansen pulls out his hair tie, his blond hair sweaty at the roots as it flops down around his shoulders. “I had the fob. How could I not take it? I didn’t even have to hotwire the thing.” He shrugs and springs up to sit on the kitchen island, his legs swinging like we didn’t almost lead the cops to our front door. “I can drop it at Tao’s at seven. He’ll strip it. We’ll get some cash. It’s a shame we can’t keep it.”

Trips sighs, giving up on scolding the unrepentant. “Where’d you stash it?”

“Campus parking lot by the McDonalds.”

Gripping the edge of the counter, Trips stares at his hands. “Walker. Tell me something good.”

Walker joins us in the kitchen, still looking like the good Asian boy he was pretending to be, his black hair parted on the side and his fake glasses perched on his nose. He tries ruffling his hair back to normal, his face grim. “I don’t have anything good to report. Shit got crazy before I could verify it was the piece we were looking for.”

Trips clenches his fists. “So no art, no computers, and cops fucking everywhere, practically up our asses.”

We all stare at the floor for a minute. I’m making a puddle.

“How much are we out?” Walker asks.

Trips rolls his eyes back, reading numbers behind his lids. “We lost the commission, and we were counting on that to fund our next job. How much for new tech, RJ?”

The puddle is getting ridiculous, so I walk to the sink and ring out my shirt. “Almost ten grand.”

“Fuck.” Trips’ll be hitting the heavy bag hard tonight.

“We’ll get some of that from the car,” Jansen points out.

My shirt no longer dripping, I turn back in time for Trips to squeeze his eyes shut, fists tight enough to shake. “We’re short almost \$25,000.”

“And the cops got close. Too close,” I say.

Jansen hops down and grabs another towel, wiping up my puddle. “Remind me why we’re still going to college? We’d save a ton if we didn’t have to pay tuition,” he says, the towel sweeping under my feet one at a time.

“It’s good cover and gives us time to make mistakes,” Trips reminds him.

A hint of Jansen’s usual humor flashes in his eyes. “Mistakes like today?”

Trips flips him off.

I shoot Jansen a “cool it” look. “So we need money,” I say.

“We have the next two years’ worth of tuition banked, as well as food and housing.” Trips grimaces. “It’s the seed money for Walker’s art heist this winter that’s missing.”

Walker takes off his fake glasses, setting them on the counter. “Can we fund it with your poker games?” he asks Trips.

“No. We’ll still be short. I can’t have the games too often, otherwise the cops will figure out we’re hosting illegal gambling in the spare room.”

Water trickles down my spine as we stare at each other over the island.

I have an idea, but no one is going to like it. “We could get a roommate,” I say.

The kitchen fills with laughter. Jansen is the first to huff out a response. “Dude—who would live with us? We’re freaking criminals masquerading as undergrads.”

I shrug. “It would be both additional cover and an extra revenue source. We could use the main-floor bedroom.”

“Where the fuck would I have my poker games?” Trips asks.

“The attic.”

Walker’s eyes light up. “There is a definite speakeasy vibe up there. That would be super cool. Old wood, reds and greens. It would look like money, but dirty money. It would be perfect.”

I jump on his words, spitting out another benefit of moving the game. “It would reduce the chance of police surveillance. There are only two tiny windows, and a pine tree covers one of them.”

Jansen hangs up the towel and bounces on his toes, excitement thrumming through him. He’s still high on adrenaline from the police chase. “We should get a girl,” he announces.

“Wait, what?” No way. If I’m at all into her, I’ll never be able to speak in my own damn house again. Immersion therapy is a bad idea with so much else going on this semester.

Walker grins, shaking his head at Jansen. “It’s not like you can just pick some girl off a shelf, man.”

“No, think about it. We get some nice, normal girl to be our roommate. Her friends come over and hang out. We look like a normal off-campus house. Nothing to see here, folks.” Jansen is practically dancing next to the stove.

“It’s not nearly enough money,” Trips argues.

“With better cover, you could have your games more often. We could just be another off-campus party house. That’s why

we chose this neighborhood to begin with, right?” Jansen counters.

We all watch Trips. He’ll make the final call—if the rest of us agree, he usually goes along with us.

He looks each of us in the eye before letting out a groan of frustration. “Fine. Post the ad. If you can find someone before the semester starts in six days, we’ll do that.” He leaves the kitchen but turns back in the doorway. “But no drama. Not one ounce from the chick. Or from any of you fuckheads. Got it?”

We all nod in agreement. No drama. We’ve got a business to run and a cover to keep.

Chapter 1



Clara

Bryce honks from the driveway promptly at 8:30 a.m. Dashing out, a few cords tumble to the asphalt from my bag, and I almost fumble my box of shoes trying to catch them. “Hey,” I say, grinning at Bryce’s beautiful blue eyes as I set down the box, piling the cords on the top.

“Hey, Clara-baby,” he says, his smile faded as he gets out to kiss me, the box a barrier between us. “I’ve missed you.”

“Me too,” I whisper. “I’ve got a few more loads.”

“You can toss your stuff in the trunk.” He settles into the driver’s seat, popping open the back end.

I haul out the rest of my stuff in paper bags and boxes, jamming them into the trunk, careful not to cover Bryce’s roadside emergency kit. I can hear him in my head. *You don’t want to dig during an emergency, Clara.* I’m so freaking lucky to be with someone who thinks ahead, who plans for not just today, or the next five years, but who even plans for the unexpected.

Grinning, I slide into the front seat, classical music filtering through the car. I drink in the sight of him, his brown hair glinting gold and red, a halo caught in a sunbeam. I've hardly seen him all summer, and I can't wait to get back into the rhythm of living together, of being his everything.

Bryce flashes another one of his crooked grins at me, and I lean over the center console for a kiss. His lips brush against mine, quick and sweet. "I'm glad you're back, baby. It's been a tough few weeks without you."

I pull on my seatbelt, my heart fluttery. "How has the start of med school been?" Curling up in the seat, I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. He taps my knees, reminding me it's dangerous to sit sideways, so I twist forward, fiddling with my purse strap as I tamp down the flood of anxious annoyance at the rebuke.

"I think it will be tough, but things have been going well," he says, pulling out of my parents' driveway. "I'm just glad you're back, baby. It's been so busy, I can't seem to keep on top of things, and you know how much I hate a mess." He curls up his nose, like the thought of his own apartment is offensive. I'm sure it's spotless.

Taking in the scrunch of his nose, the last of my anxiety over being separated during the summer slips away. This will be good. It will feel right to help again—med school is going to be stressful for Bryce—and whatever I can do to ease that stress, well, that's what makes me a great girlfriend. "I've got you, no worries."

“I know you do. Say, once you’re settled and the apartment is clean, do you want to go grocery shopping for the week? We could meal plan, have healthy meals pre-proportioned and ready for us. What do you think?”

“That would be nice. What were you thinking might be good?”

“I don’t care. Maybe you could look up some recipes? Nothing too spicy or sweet. And no tomatoes, beans, or onions.”

That’s the start of a grocery list if ever I heard one. “Are you sure you don’t want to do the meal planning, Bryce?” I tease.

He idles at a stop sign, the weight of his gaze forcing me to look at him. “Clara, I know you’re just joking, but I’m asking for help, and I would appreciate your honest assessment of whether you can take this on.”

I break eye contact first. “I’ll try. You know I’m not the best cook.”

“You can learn.”

Not if the blackened and bloody lamb he forced me to make last April is anything to go by. “I’m not sure I can, Bryce.”

He snatches my chin so I have no choice but to meet his glare. “If you refuse to try, you’re never going to learn.”

I swallow, watching his nostrils flare. “I’ll try. I promise.”

He holds me hostage for two breaths before a crooked grin creases his cheek. “Practice makes perfect, Clara. And we both

need to be perfect. Any flaws must be excised or covered. It's the only way we'll get where we want to be."

I stare out the window as we leave my neighborhood, the houses small, shabby boxes with wilting daylilies and rusted bicycles forgotten against broken fences. It's not where I want to be, not today, not in five years, not for forever. Bryce will be a doctor, I'll join the FBI, and I'll never feel at home on these streets again.

Bryce's fingers squeeze mine, the touch cold despite the heat of the morning, before his hands return to ten and two on the steering wheel. Perfection—anything less won't cut it. Not for either of us.

Once we've safely merged onto the interstate, Bryce clears his throat. "Have you had any breakfast yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Are you still running?"

I peek at him. "I'm training for another half marathon, remember?"

Bryce gives me a long look before turning back to the road. "Huh."

"What?" I ask, tugging on the bottom of my shirt, making sure the seams are straight. My fingers on my right hand drum on the outside of my right thigh, hidden from Bryce.

He sighs. "Nothing."

"It's not nothing." It's never nothing with Bryce.

Bryce glances at me again, disapproval written across his brow. “I just...never mind.”

I smooth my curls, pulling them back into a ponytail, before switching and dividing my hair in two. He always likes it when I wear pigtails.

My outfit is as classy casual as I could make it considering the ninety-five-degree heat forecasted, so that can't be it. There *is* the start of a pimple on my chin, but I covered it up this morning. I even redid my nails last night for him. What have I done wrong now?

He glances at me again as I pull one hair tie from my wrist and another from my purse, my hair neatly divided. I give him a small smile, a question without words.

“I'm not telling you. You'll get upset,” he says.

“Please?” I ask. If I know what's wrong, I can fix it.

He sighs again. “It's just, I don't know, did your boobs get bigger?”

“Did my what?” I squawk. Seriously? I'm running at least fifteen miles a week, and he thinks my boobs are too big?

He continues, oblivious to my reaction. “And I think your hips are wider, too. Are you sure you've really been running enough? You know extra pounds only slow you down. Either way, good call skipping breakfast.” He signals a lane change, finally glancing at me. “And now you're mad. I knew I shouldn't have said anything.”

I pant next to him, furious, but trying to tamp it down. Bryce will ignore my anger until I'm calm enough to talk like an adult—because in Bryce's world, adults never lose their tempers.

Only, I'm struggling to keep myself under control. I did not *skip* breakfast. I'd hoped we'd grab something on the way to campus. But now, he's decided I skipped food on purpose, and there's no way to convince him he's wrong.

I force myself to take deep breaths, my right thumb digging into my thigh, my fingers tapping *one two three four five, one two three four five, one two three four five* on my leg, working myself down from my rage. Bryce grimaces next to me as I force out another breath.

“I knew you wouldn't want to hear it,” he says.

I want to argue that if I hadn't asked, he'd have sighed for the next two hours until he couldn't keep it in, dumping it on me at the worst possible moment. Then he'd be pissed when I cried. But I don't. Instead, I say what I know he wants me to say. “I'm sorry, Bryce. It just took me by surprise.” Clearing my throat, I follow the script, preventing a full-blown argument. “I don't think I've put on any weight, but this shirt is new. Maybe that's it.”

He stares out the windshield. “You know how much I hate change, Clara. That's why I wanted you to stay with me all summer.”

Not this again. “I know, Bryce. But I needed a car to nanny, and my dad could share.”

“Why couldn’t you just work at that coffee shop?”

Weaponized forgetfulness should be banned. “I told you last spring that they have limited hours in the summer, and it pays a lot less than nannying.”

Bryce runs a hand through his hair, his nostrils flaring.

The rest of the drive is silent.

Eventually, we pull up to the swank new-build apartment complex Bryce picked out for us. I can barely afford my half of rent with what I saved from nannying, but it’s close to the med school, so it’s ideal for him. He drives into the garage under the glass monstrosity, pulling into his assigned parking spot. The engine clicks as it cools, counting the seconds before he turns and takes my hand. “I really need this year to go well, Clara. Med school is different from undergrad. I need your support.”

Brushing my thumb across the back of his hand, I wonder how hard the first few weeks of med school must have been for him to be this on edge. “I know, Bryce. I’m here for you, always. You know that, right?”

He leans forward and pecks me on the lips. “You’re a key piece of this future I’m building, you know that, right, Clara?”

I nod, wanting to say the right words, but not trusting myself to find them.

“Come on,” he says, “let’s get you set up.”

We both pull boxes and bags from the car, heading to the elevator. I hit the call button, but when I turn around, Bryce is

back in the parking lot, handing a cute teenage girl some cash from the ground, my box of shoes by his feet. He says something I can't hear, his smile bright, and the girl giggles. He waits for the girl to scurry to her car before he scoops up my box and meets me in the elevator.

Walking into the apartment, I'm unsurprised to find it clinically boring. I brought decorative pillows, towels, and sheets to make it homey. Bryce equates color with chaos; I find the lack hollow and cold.

Without fanfare, Bryce settles onto the couch with one of his textbooks and a highlighter, my box of shoes forgotten by the door.

I almost ask him to help. I'd imagined us unpacking together, him praising me for the subtle floral design on the dishes or the softness of the thrift store towels I bought. But med school is different from undergrad, so I guess I have to reset my expectations.

Four trips to the garage later, I have all my things piled on the floor in the living room. Needing a chance to catch my breath, I grab a glass of water from the kitchen sink. As the kitchen is as good of a place to start as any, I pull delivery cartons and boxes from the fridge, the dates scrawled on the tops in Bryce's jagged handwriting. Anything over five days old gets tossed into a garbage bag. The waste makes my stomach grumble and my wallet weep. All that food, just forgotten. I glance at a tub of yogurt, my mouth watering, but with Bryce as grumpy as he is, I decide not to risk it.

Eventually, I find a corner in one of the cabinets to squeeze my dishes into.

That done, I curl up on the couch, my knees brushing Bryce's thigh. I've missed being close to him, touching him. Phone calls aren't the same as being with the person you love.

Bryce shifts away, brushing his pants where my knees touched him. "Not now, baby. I'm concentrating."

"Sorry," I whisper, tugging my pigtails. What am I doing wrong?

Heading to the bedroom, I find a handful of dirty shirts on the floor—Bryce's definition of an unlivable mess. I toss them into the hamper in the corner, wishing for music while I tidy and unpack. If only Bryce wasn't so picky about sound, I'd be having a full-on dance party while I settle in. Maybe later, when he's out of the apartment, I can turn the music up high and just let loose.

Straightening the handful of knick knacks Bryce has on the dresser, I pick up the framed picture of the sunset over Lake Superior he's had since before we met. It's always been right across from the bed, like he wants to see it every night before he goes to bed and first thing every morning. I put it in the middle of the dresser, his commemorative varsity baseball to one side and the broken tip from his all-state winning ski pole on the other side.

Sneaking into the living room, I grab a few dresses on hangers from the pile and shove them into the closet. On my second trip, Bryce grumbles under his breath. On my third trip,

he slams his book shut and glares at me. “Could you possibly be any louder? I don’t think the people on the first floor heard you.”

Seriously? I couldn’t be quieter if I tried. *Keep your chill, Clara. Follow the script.* “I’m sorry, was I being loud? I didn’t mean to be.”

He hauls himself off the couch, tugging the clothes out of my arms and marching to the bedroom. “I’ll do it. At least I’m not impersonating an elephant.”

Barely holding my tongue, I follow him as he jams my clothes into the closet. Turning, he freezes. “Clara, did you move my stuff?”

“Your decorations were crooked. I know you like things a particular way, so I straightened them.”

He picks up the picture of Lake Superior, running his fingers along the frame. “Did you break anything? Did anything fall off?”

“No. Bryce, why are you being so weird?”

He locks eyes with me, fury in his gaze, crowding me against the bed. “Do not, ever, touch my stuff. Do you understand?”

I know this look. This is where I’m supposed to apologize. This is the point where I weep and ask for his forgiveness.

But I’ve done nothing wrong. Since he picked me up, I’ve loaded all my stuff into his car solo, skipped breakfast, carried my boxes upstairs, cleaned the kitchen, tidied the bedroom,

and started unpacking. And I've been doing it alone and in near silence. So I what, scooted his picture frame three inches to the right? He has no right to be so angry.

Bryce takes a step, looming over me, waiting for me to go through the usual motions.

But I'm too hungry to apologize. He's making a big deal over nothing. And I've been letting him get away with dumb shit all morning. I'm over it.

He waits for me to cry. I don't.

"I need your promise," he says.

I shrug, struggling to keep my emotions from coloring my words. "So, what? Now I can't sit on your couch? Sleep in your bed?"

Yup. Failed on that one.

Bryce crosses his arms over his chest, his blue eyes ice. "Real mature, Clara." He shakes his head, stepping around me to the door. "You know what? I don't think this is going to work."

"How so?" I ask, trailing him.

"If you're not going to respect my things, you obviously don't respect me."

"W-what?" I stammer.

He stands in the doorway to the bedroom—to our bedroom. "If you can't promise to leave my things alone, then this isn't going to work. You'll need to find somewhere else to stay."

His disappointment hangs heavy over the room before he disappears into the bathroom, the door clicking shut behind him.

What the fuck just happened?

I pace to the kitchen, trying to catch my breath.

Did Bryce just kick me out? Because I touched a photo of a freaking lake?

Yeah. I think he did.

He just kicked me out for moving his stupid knickknacks.

Oh my God, what am I going to do? Class starts in three days, and I'm officially homeless. Shit shit shit.

My heart pounds in my ears, but I dig into my purse, ignoring the rising beat of my panic. Because I'm not going to panic. Not yet. I can panic once I've fixed this. My phone in my hand, I click my brain into problem-solving mode and force a deep breath. Problem solving. I've got this.

So, what are my parameters? No car, so I need to be on a bus line that goes past the coffee shop. I can't move in with Emma because my bestie is on the St. Paul campus, while all my classes and work are on the Minneapolis campus. And I have barely any money. I was counting on sharing expenses with Bryce.

And...here comes the panic. Shit shit shit.

I scrape any sites I can think of for a last-minute sublet. I don't want to live with strangers, but what other choice do I

have? Holding my breath, I pray for a miracle. I fucking need some luck.

There are not enough options. They're all too expensive, too far, or not available until October. Only one place looks promising.

The hum of the shower drifts into the kitchen. God, why would Bryce do this to me?

I can't tell if I'm furious or heartbroken. My lungs aren't working right, and my heart sounds like waves instead of a drum in my ears.

Shaking, I make the call. It's this or nothing. I don't even have a car I can camp in while I figure things out.

The phone rings three times before a deep voice answers. "Hello?"

Am I really doing this? "Hi. My name is Clara, and I saw you had an opening for a roommate. Is that room still available?"

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Yeah, it's still available."

"Could I come and take a look at it?" I ask.

"What time?"

I glance at the clock. "I could be there around 11:30?"

"We'll be here," he says, hanging up.

The quiet phone mocks me. Looking at the bathroom door breaks me. How could Bryce kick me out like this? We lived

together fine last year. Have I really changed so much over the summer that I'm no longer roommate material? Am I still girlfriend material?

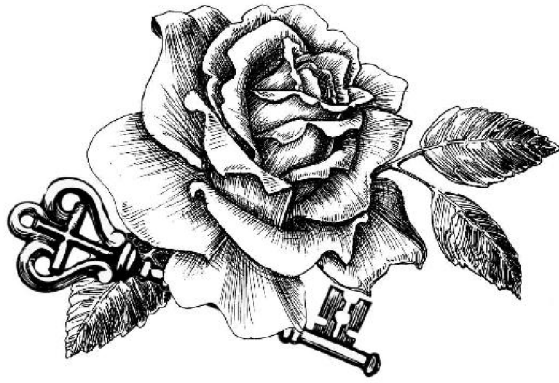
What happened to being part of his future?

Well, at least I won't be homeless. Thirty minutes of searching, and I found an okay listing. Right price, right place. That's good, right? Maybe I should be proud of myself?

That's right, I'm a resourceful bitch. And unless my new roommates are axe murderers or criminals or something, I can make anything work. I'm good at adapting, at fitting in.

I dash the tears from my cheeks, snatch the spare key from a bowl on the island, and head for the bus. It's time to go make the best of a shitty-ass situation.

Chapter 2



Clara

The old wood porch squeaks as I climb the steps. The house is larger and better kept than its neighbors—I don't see any broken windows or hasty patched holes. No couches in the yard either. Next door, a drunk frat guy wolf whistles as I ring the doorbell. This is not the best off-campus housing, but it's probably as good as I'm going to find with my pathetic budget.

The door opens, and a tall guy with dark red hair, broad shoulders, and angry blue eyes stares down at me. "You Clare?"

"Clara. I'm Clara," I say.

He grunts and opens the door wider, stalking into the house, not waiting for me. I spend a half second on the porch, honestly considering the merits of running away. I am pretty fast. Only, I have no intention of being homeless because Bryce had a temper tantrum, so I guess this is it. Sighing, I follow the grumpy muscleman inside.

At least the interior is nice. It's clean, with tasteful accents. Maybe it came pre-furnished? I pass what must be an old parlor, which is set up for reading and maybe meditation, with pillows all over the floor and books piled in the corners. The stairs up to the bedrooms are straight ahead, but the grumpy guy turns to the right, and I trail him into the living room.

Three other guys are sitting there. Four guys—but not one girl. Shit. As I come in, a blond guy with bright green eyes and an infectious grin hops off the couch. “Come in, have a seat,” he says, moving around the coffee table. “Can I get you some water or something?”

I'm surprised when I feel a smile cut across my face. “No thanks, I'm good.”

A guy at the other end of the couch, who appears of Asian descent, looks up from a sketchbook, his dark eyes glowing. “I'll take something,” he says, tucking his pencil behind his ear.

The last guy, Black with natural curls flopping over his soft brown eyes, looks up from his phone. “Me too, if you're taking orders, man.”

Broody redhead thumps down in the other open chair and says nothing.

The blond guy disappears through a door at the back of the room. The only seat available is on the couch, and two of the guys already have claimed spots there. If I steal the blond guy's corner seat, he's going to plop down right next to me.

I'm not sure I want to sit so close to him—I don't even know his name.

It's obvious these guys aren't thrilled with me here. Both the angry redhead and the artist are looking at me, but neither is smiling. I mean, I'm not delighted to be here at the moment either, so maybe I shouldn't judge. Ugh. Am I really considering living with three grumpy hotties and one nice guy? No one has even introduced themselves yet. Do they have any manners at all? How in the world is this going to work?

I shift my weight from foot to foot before weaving my way to the corner of the couch with as much grace as I can muster, careful not to touch anyone or anything on the way. The scent of real leather puffs up as I settle into the soft cushion.

I guess I'm starting, as no one else is. "So, um, hi. I'm Clara. I saw you guys were looking for a roommate," I say, rubbing the hem of my T-shirt between my fingers, trying to keep my hands busy so they don't shake.

The guy with the black curls sets his phone down and looks me in the eye. I gaze back, waiting. He doesn't break eye contact, but he doesn't say anything either. I tap my fingers, *one two three four five*, against my thigh, working up the courage to add, "Now's when you're supposed to introduce yourselves and we try to figure out if this is going to work."

This is ridiculous. Maybe I should just head back out and try somewhere else. Not that there is anywhere else—but I could keep looking. I could stay with Emma until that room

available in October opens up. It would suck majorly, but I might be able to swing it.

The nice blond guy comes back with a Mountain Dew, a bottle of kombucha, and two glasses of water. “Guys, don’t be jerks,” he scolds his roommates, then dazzles me with a smile. “I’m Jansen. Nice to meet you.”

He sets down the Mountain Dew in front of the guy who tried to stare me down. “This is RJ. Say hi, RJ.”

RJ pops open the can. “Hi, Clara,” he mumbles, still staring at me. I shift in my seat.

Jansen sets the kombucha down in front of sketchbook guy on the other side of the couch. “This here is Walker.”

Walker closes the sketchpad and picks up the bottle. “No need to fidget, we don’t bite,” he says, bumping my foot with his, the hint of a smile on his lips.

I freeze. Is he flirting?

Deep breaths. I need to live someplace. I can afford this room, and roommates don’t flirt, especially when one is in a committed relationship, right?

Jansen plops down between Walker and me, just like I feared he would. “Lastly, the grumpy lump over there is Trips. He just lost a buttload of money, so he’s a little extra pissy this week. Welcome to our humble abode, Miss Clara.” He hands one water to me while taking a sip from the other one, green eyes glinting.

I take it, the glass cool against my clammy hand. Not knowing what else to do with water I didn't ask for, I take a sip and set it down on the coffee table, then take a second to stare at my reflection in the huge TV on the other side of the room. It's big enough that I can see all five of us reflected back, four good-looking dudes and me. Sometimes it sucks to be me.

I take a breath. "So the ad said you had a room? Available immediately? Is that still the case?"

Walker takes a swig of the kombucha and sets it down on a coaster. He slides three more down the table, and Jansen sets all the drinks onto the coasters. They have coasters? And they use them? Now that I look, their coffee table is free of all the rings from beers and Solo cups I would expect to find in a house full of guys in this neighborhood. There's a thick multicolored throw rug on the floor and framed reproductions of famous art instead of posters and sticky-tack on the walls. I guess I could do worse than mostly grumpy guys with classy tastes and mild OCD. I'm used to it, I suppose.

Trips leans forward in his chair. "We have a main floor bedroom open. You'd get the main floor bathroom to yourself as well. You'd have two shelves in the kitchen, but no parking space. First month you'd pay today, then all other rent is paid to me a week before the last day of the month at the latest. The landlord wants the money on the first, and I want to make sure the cash is there when he pulls it."

"I can do that. Could I see the space?"

Silent communication shoots between the guys, then RJ rolls his eyes and stands up. “It’s in the back.”

I stand up to follow. No one else moves. I slip my purse over my shoulder and sigh, disappointed but not surprised.

RJ walks out the back of the living room and into the kitchen. It’s old penny tiles, black-and-white. A handful of dishes are in the sink, but nothing terrible. A fancy teapot sits on the counter next to a toaster oven and a blender. “Kitchen,” he says, motioning at the room. I nod. I’m not sure I should find the spotless floors and counters weird, but I do.

There are three doors in the kitchen—one from the living room, one that must go to the hallway with the stairs, and one last door to the back of the house. We push through the last door to find two more doors on the right and one at the end of the hall that goes out back. RJ pushes open the first door. “Bathroom,” he says.

I stick my head in. The same black and white penny tile lines the bathroom, an old clawfoot tub wedged at the back of the room. The tub is definitely a win for me. A good soak after my Saturday long runs is the only way I can still walk on Sundays.

RJ catches my eye, then steps over and pushes the last door on the right. The bedroom has nice hardwood floors, two windows on the side of the house and two windows at the back. There’s no closet. I switch the light switch on and off, then step in.

RJ follows me in, but I ignore him as I spin in a circle.

“No closet, but you could get a wardrobe or something,” he mumbles.

“I’ll figure it out,” I say.

Having run out of things to see, I step out into the hallway, but RJ touches my elbow as I pass. I stop and look up at him.

“Give them one more minute,” he says.

“Why?” Are they gossiping about me? Deciding my fate or something?

RJ shrugs. “We weren’t planning on having someone new this year.”

“Then why are you looking for a roommate?”

RJ looks down at his shoes, then back at me. “Security.”

I’m just about to ask what he means, but his phone buzzes. After glancing at it, RJ turns and leads me back to the living room. I follow, feeling like I’ve just been tossed onto a balance beam, but not really knowing why. Off-kilter.

Something is weird here, but I’m not sure it matters, does it? A room is a room. I get my own bathroom, and from the look of it, my own floor too, more or less.

Trips and Jansen are both standing when we come in, some sort of silent argument flashing between them before Trips flops into the chair, and Jansen moves to the other side of the coffee table, grinning as he sits on the ground. Walker slips his phone into his pocket and rests his ankle on his knee, leaning toward me as I settle back on the couch.

“So Clara, why so late looking for housing?” he asks.

“I had other plans, but they fell through,” I say. There’s no need to go into my personal life. We’re just going to be roommates.

Trips huffs. “Flighty or failed to plan?”

The edge of anger nips at my words. “Neither. I had a plan, and I had full intention of following through. My roommate was the flighty one.”

“Then why are you the one left homeless?” Trips asks.

“Because I couldn’t afford the rent solo. He could. So here I am.” I take a sip of the water Jansen got for me. “Why are you looking for a roommate so late? Poor planning?” I raise a brow at Trips, my bottled anger from this complete wreck of a morning flaring.

Jansen and Walker both laugh, but Walker answers. “We had a change in our situation and thought having some security might be helpful.”

There’s that word again. Security. Like, financial security? That makes the most sense. Before I can ask for clarification, Jansen blurts out, “Do you have a boyfriend?”

I look at him, confused. “Yes. Why?”

Trips raises an eyebrow. “Good. The last thing we need is drama.”

Gosh. This guy is just a total ass. “Do you really think that all single women are drama machines? Sexist much?” I scoff.

“I can keep to myself, can you? If you can’t, then I’m out of here,” I spit out. So much anger, just looking for a target. Luckily, this Trips jerk looks like he can handle it.

RJ turns his intense gaze onto Trips. “Would it kill you to use those manners your daddy paid for every once in a while? Damn.”

Jansen stands up and wipes his hands on his pants, glaring at Trips before clearing his throat. “I’m sorry, Clara. We really would love to have you. You can ignore Trips. We all do.”

Trips grunts. And I’m fiddling with the hem of my shirt again. Do I really want to do this? The room is really nice for the price. A full bathroom to myself with a bathtub? That’s something I never would have imagined possible at this price point, let alone in a last-minute rental.

These guys though—do I want to live with them? On the upside, they seem to be clean and not interested in “drama,” whatever that means. On the downside, I’m pretty sure Trips hates me on principle. RJ is cold and Walker is flirty. At least Jansen seems nice and safe.

Walker bumps my shoe again, a half smile twisting one side of his mouth. “Come on, it’ll be an adventure,” he says.

I don’t know why that’s the tipping point, but it is. An adventure sounds...nice. It sounds like I might get to take a deep breath instead of holding it all in. It sounds, honestly, close to paradise.

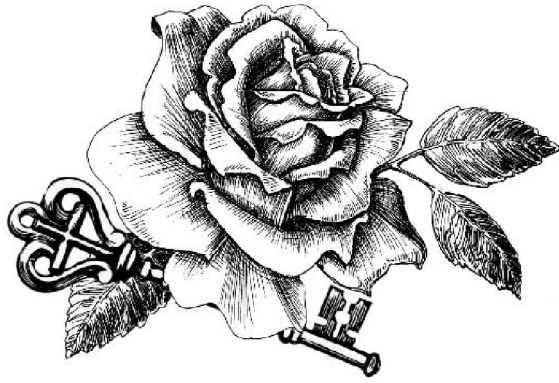
“Okay. I’m in,” I say.

Trips pulls a contract out of his back pocket, Jansen hands me a pen, and I sign the sublease agreement, passing over the first month's rent in cash from my purse. Walker raises an eyebrow, but I don't elaborate. They'll figure out I live off shitty coffee tips and nannying money soon enough.

As I head out the front door, Jansen stops me. "Hey, I forgot to ask. What's your major?"

I smile, the first full smile I've had during this weird meet and greet. "Oh! I'm a junior criminology major," I say as I step out the door. Jansen gives me a quiet, "Cool," before the door clicks shut behind me. I grimace as I look out over the front lawn. Moving twice in the same morning is bullshit, but what other choice do I have? I wipe my palms on my shorts and tread back to the bus stop. Time for moving, part two.

Chapter 3



Trips

Jansen takes the girl out the front. God. Some random chick is going to live here. I get we need the fake normalcy, that adding to the house will make us look cleaner, that a girl is probably the best cover we can get. But really, this is who we're inviting into our house?

If she has giggly girlfriends over all the time, I will lose my shit. She and her boyfriend better not have crazy loud sex all the time either. I can't believe we agreed to do this. I clench the sublease contract in my fist, wishing I could tear it in half.

Jansen comes back and plops down on the couch. He suddenly seems a lot less chipper than he was when he followed that tight ass out of the room. "What's the problem?" I ask.

Jansen clears his throat. "Funny you should ask. I think we have a medium-to-large-sized problem."

Walker looks up from his sketchbook. "How so? What changed between the couch and the door?"

Jansen picks up his water but doesn't drink it. "I asked Clara what her major is."

I grimace. "It's something like voice performance or some shit? Interpretive dance?"

RJ swipes through a few things on his phone. "Worse," he says, before Jansen can answer.

That backdoor he built into the student portal always has answers. "What could be worse? Spit it out," I say.

RJ looks me in the eye. "She declared criminology last spring with a minor in accounting. She also seems to be stocking up on pre-law coursework."

"Shit." Walker tosses the sketchbook down on the coffee table, his current Rubens obsession all over the page.

We all sit for a second. "Can we break the contract?" Jansen asks.

I shake my head. "We can, but we don't have legal grounds to do so. If she were some elementary ed major, maybe we could try, but with all the pre-law coursework..."

Walker unscrews the lid on his stupid kombucha. Such a prick. "Maybe she won't notice."

RJ and I both burst out laughing. "Dude, I have a game here tonight," I say. "Do you really think she won't notice twenty people sneaking into the attic for high-stakes illegal poker?"

Jansen suddenly sits up. "Shoot."

"What did you forget, Jansen?" I ask.

“Don’t worry. The beer will be here,” he says. Damn guy has daily alarms to get to his classes. I don’t doubt the beer will be here now that he’s remembered, but it’s also too late to order a keg for the night. I don’t want to know where he’s going to find one.

Walker sets his kombucha back down with a shrug. “I mean, as long as she isn’t in my room, I’m in the clear.”

“Same here,” RJ says.

“Dude, even in your room, you’d be in the clear. It’s not like she’s some white hat hacker on the side. You look like the typical computer nerd. No worries there,” Walker snipes.

I glance at Jansen. “Can you keep your sticky fingers to yourself? I don’t want her bitching about a missing computer or some shit.”

Jansen looks around at us all. “I don’t steal from friends! I only steal from...not friends...”

“Then I would love my new drone back,” RJ says.

Walker kicks back on the couch. “I was wondering where my last shipment of DMV-grade laminate went.”

“And I need my black book returned before five,” I add.

Jansen sighs. “That’s not stealing. That’s just testing to see if you guys are paying attention.”

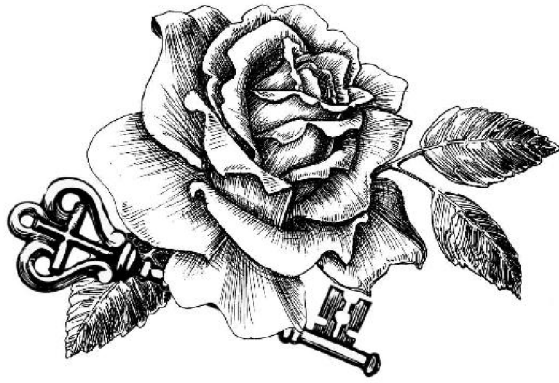
I glare at him. He flaps a hand like it’s settled. “So what do we do about Clara?”

We all look around at each other. RJ shrugs. “We wanted credible security. A girl going into law enforcement is about the best cover we could have gotten.”

Walker grabs the sketchbook and heads for the stairs. “So basically, we’re fucked.”

Yup. We are so fucked.

Chapter 4



Clara

I get off the bus too soon by accident. At least the walk to the apartment complex will help me figure out what I'm going to say to Bryce. I don't get why he's being such a jerk about this. We've been together for two years and lived together for half of last year—it shouldn't be this hard. I get that med school is a big deal, but that doesn't mean he gets to be a jerk. I haven't even gotten an actual kiss yet, despite only seeing him a few times this summer. Does he not want me anymore?

I shift my purse to my other shoulder. If only we'd decided on a two-bedroom apartment, I wouldn't be dealing with this right now. If only Bryce hadn't talked me into the fancy apartments closer to the med school, maybe we could have been able to afford a two-bedroom place. At least then I'd still have somewhere to crash.

God, if only he wasn't being so cagey and weird about everything, I wouldn't be moving in with four guys who don't want me in their house. If only, if only, if only.

I sigh as I reach the front of the complex. People are coming in and out, busy the Friday before classes start. I catch the door and take the elevator up to the sixth floor. Squaring my shoulders, I march in. “Bryce! I’m back!”

“In here!” he yells from the bedroom.

I follow his voice and find him making the bed—with the sheets I brought. My sheets. His bed. “Bryce, what are you doing?”

He looks up, the frustration from earlier gone from his eyes. “I’m making the bed.”

I don’t want to make him angry again, but why in the world is he using my stuff when he just kicked me out? “I see that. But those are my sheets.”

“You brought them for our bed,” he says, tugging the elastic over the last corner of the bed, not noticing that I’m getting mad. I try to tamp it back down, but I can’t. This is just too much.

I yank the sheet back off.

“Hey! Why are you doing that?” he asks.

“I’m taking back my sheets.”

“Clara, what the hell? You bought the sheets for our bed. So I’m putting them on our bed. Why the hell are you taking them off again?”

I stop tugging and look into those soft blue eyes, his wavy red-brown hair flopped over his forehead. “If I’m not living

here, why in the world would I leave my bed sheets here?" I ask.

Bryce shifts his weight from foot to foot, finally catching on. "Well, you'll be here almost every night anyway, right?"

"If you wanted me every night, Bryce, then I'd be living here. I'm taking my sheets."

He rubs his head like I'm giving him a headache. "Fine, take them," he says.

I jam the sheets into the paper bag he'd pulled them out of. Bryce watches for a minute before storming out of the room. The faucet in the kitchen kicks on. I bring the sheets out to the main room, adding them back to my pile, catching sight of Bryce across the room, a glass of water in his hand. Heading back to the bedroom, I pull my clothes out of the closet, neatly hung up just this morning, and add them to the mound too.

In the kitchen, I pull out the dishes I bought. I find the box I'd packed them in and rewrap them. Bryce stands watching. He doesn't offer to help.

He clears his throat. "Are you staying with Emma?" he asks.

"No. Emma's place is two bus transfers from the coffee shop. I can't live that far from work."

"Then what are you going to do?"

I stop wrapping and glare at him. "I found another place to stay."

"With whom?"

Shaking my head, I go back to wrapping. “I saw a listing, and I took it. I’ll be over on the other side of campus.”

“You’re moving into one of those dumpy party houses? Clara, that’s a bad idea. There are drunk and high guys stumbling through there 24/7.”

I shrug. “You didn’t give me a lot of warning here, Bryce. This morning I had a place to live. Before noon, I was homeless. At least I have a place tonight.”

His eyes flash, censure in his stance. “Clara, baby, don’t be like that.”

My head snaps up. “Be like what, Bryce? Upset that you kicked me out with no warning whatsoever? Bitter that I’ve had to scramble to find a fucking roof to put over my head? Annoyed that you’re just watching me pack and not even offering to help? Just how should I be, Bryce? Skipping through a fucking meadow with butterflies flitting around my head? Fuck you.”

He sets down the water glass, his expression jagged ice. “I’ll give you some time to cool off,” he says, grabbing his keys and stalking out. The door closes just short of a slam.

As soon as he’s gone, I slump down to the floor behind the kitchen island. The sobs catch me off guard, but I let them come. I’d been so excited this morning, my clothes in the closet next to Bryce’s. It was so perfect. So right. And now I’m packing it all back up. I’m furious and Bryce is gone.

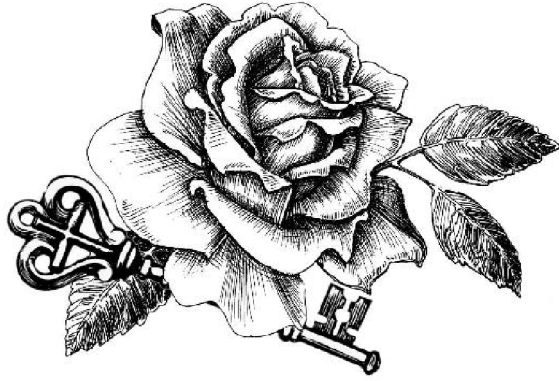
I sob for a few minutes before I force myself to take deep breaths. Once I'm feeling better, I stand up and wipe the tears from my cheeks. I finish packing the dishes, adding them to the pile of my things in the entryway. Then it dawns on me: without Bryce, I don't have a way to get my stuff to my new place—he just took the car.

With a groan, I pull on my backpack, stuffed full of my technology, then pile two paper bags and a box into my arms. There are a few granola bars in the kitchen, so I toss them into my purse. This move is now happening via bus.

Fuck this day.

I head out, locking the door behind me. Here's hoping the bus isn't too full to fit me and my first load of shit. Thanks, Bryce.

Chapter 5



Jansen

I wipe the sweat from my forehead, pulling my hair up into a knot at the top of my head. Carrying a keg solo to the attic was a lot harder than I thought it would be. It definitely requires different muscles from climbing or tai chi. Usually I'd get some help, but everyone disappeared after we met our new roommate. We may have just royally fucked up, and now everyone has gone to ground.

A roommate was a good thought. Someone else, someone on the straight that will make our house less of a target for the police. Because really, what are the chances that four entirely different types of criminals are all living together, let alone four criminals with some other random person who isn't bending the rules?

An additional layer of security, another way to keep us on the fringe of notice while we all up our game. Two more years on campus—we're all on the five-year plan—then we have to support ourselves without a hint of criminality. Two more years to create some sort of shell to mask what we all actually

do. Two more years of looking like normal college kids, slow to get their credits, poor, scraping by.

I flop down in my meditation space at the front of the house. I need some calm. If the twists in my stomach get any worse, I'm going to do something dumb. I already got away with something stupid today. No need to push my luck. So, being the nice guy I am, I returned RJ's drone and Walker's laminate. Trips is acting like an ass, though, so I hid his black book under his mattress—let him freak out when I say I don't have it.

Maybe I should teach him to meditate too.

Crossing my legs, I light the concentration candle on the small table, watching the flame while my thoughts collect, then pushing them aside as the light dances from yellow to blue and back.

I'm almost in the zone, my breath humming around me, when there's a knock on the door. Not enough time; the buzzing is still in my gut, urging me to take risks, to jump, to climb, to yell and run. I take three more breaths, bringing myself back to the surface, then stand to open the door.

Clara is waiting there with two paper bags, a box, and a backpack. Sweat drips down the side of her cheek, her brown pigtails damp around her face. "Hey," she says, "I think I might need a key."

I hold the door open as she walks through, heading to the back of the house. "I can find Trips and get you one. Where did you park? I can go grab some more of your stuff."

She pushes through the door to the kitchen. “I took the bus. I don’t have a car,” she says, before disappearing into the back of the house.

I follow. “You don’t have a car?”

Clara shrugs, dumping her stuff on the floor. “Nope. So I still have a few more loads to grab.” She turns back, the end of one pigtail laying over her shoulder, her brown eyes not meeting mine.

“Come on,” I say, “we can take my car. Then you only have one more trip.”

She shakes her head, the pigtail dragging back over her shoulder and onto her back. “You don’t have to do that.”

I grab her wrist without thinking. “We’ll do it together. Many hands make light work, or some shit like that, right?” I say.

She rolls her eyes with a grin, and an electric buzz shoots up my arm from where I’m touching her. I don’t know if I want to let go or hold on forever. The twisting in my gut spikes.

Don’t do anything stupid, Jansen. She has a boyfriend.

I tug her to the back door and out to my beat-up four-door sedan, not ready to let go yet. I open her door and she steps in, slipping her wrist from my hand as she sits.

She still won’t meet my eyes. Is she embarrassed? Angry? Annoyed? I shouldn’t have grabbed her like that. At least she’s smiling, though. That’s got to be an improvement.

I close the door for her. As I go around to my side, one of the idiots next door hauls themselves into the bed of a big blue truck parked in the alley.

“Ben, where the fuck is the good keg?” he hollers.

“I told you, it’s in the back of my truck,” another yells back.

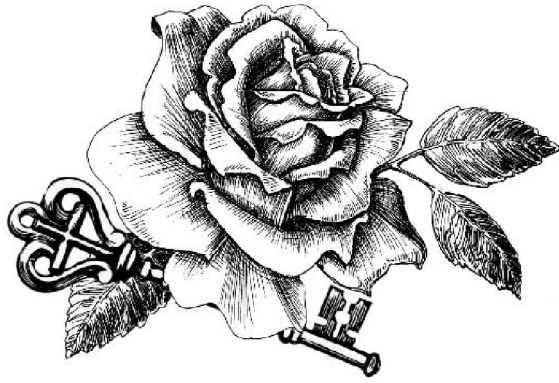
“Ben, you’re a fucking imbecile! There’s only Coors Light back here. I said two kegs, and one of those can’t be shit!”

“I got two kegs. What the fuck are you talking about?”

“If you got two kegs, where the fuck is the other one, Ben?”

I chuckle as I close the door behind me. Sometimes it feels good to be bad.

Chapter 6



Clara

I press my wrist where Jansen snagged it to pull me out to his car. The sensation of his warm fingers lingers on my skin, and it weirds me out. Why would it still feel like he's touching me? Why does his touch make me want to giggle? I don't even know this guy.

“So, where are we headed?” he asks, a smile bright on his face.

“East side of campus, one of the new-build apartment complexes.”

“Got it.” He pulls out of the gravel parking area and into the alley.

There isn't a single bit of mess inside the car. No empty wrappers or cups. No pens or change. Even Bryce's car has stuff in the cupholders. Maybe these guys really do have OCD, because this is...odd. I almost feel like I should have brushed off my sneakers before I stepped in.

“Do you want to grab something to eat on the way?” Jansen asks.

I pull a granola bar out of my purse, not wanting to inconvenience the guy any more than I already have. “I’m good,” I say. “Do you want one? I have a couple.”

“Sure!” He smiles at me, green eyes twinkling, his longish hair in a floppy man-bun on top of his head. I hand him a granola bar and we both tear into them.

“Where should I put the wrapper? Your car is really...neat,” I say.

Jansen grabs the wrapper, his fingers brushing mine. “I’ll take care of it when we get back.” He shoves both wrappers into his pocket. “Most of us don’t like to leave evidence, er, messes around. Except RJ. He’s a total slob when he’s in the middle of a project. Plates and cups tower over the guy and he doesn’t even notice.”

So the guys have collective OCD. Note to self: try not to leave my stuff in the common areas. “What other dirt do you have? I feel like I’m walking into this blind,” I say.

Jansen laughs, and my tummy clenches. It’s a surprisingly pretty laugh, bells and joy. I want to hear it again. “I think we all just walked into this blind. How about we trade? I give you something, and you give me something about yourself? A question for a question?”

“I can do that. Me first. I have to learn about four people; you only have to learn about one.”

“Sounds fair.”

I think for a second. “How long have you guys known each other?”

“We all met freshman year. RJ and Trips were roommates. Walker was down the hall from them. I had a semester-long group work project with RJ, and we totally hit it off. This will be our third year all living together.”

“You’re all seniors, then?”

“Nah. We’re all going to be here five years. You know how hard it is when required classes fill up before it’s your turn to register.”

“For sure.” Emma is having the same trouble. Because I came in with all my AP credits, I technically started as a sophomore, so my lottery number has always been better than other people in my class. I don’t say that, though. It feels like bragging.

Jansen drums his fingers against the steering wheel. “My turn. Who was supposed to be your roommate, and why did it fall through?”

“Right to it, huh?” I look out the window. “My boyfriend Bryce and I were moving back in together. An hour after I started unpacking, he told me it wasn’t going to work—the living together bit—so here I am.”

“Are you okay with that?”

Am I okay? I’m mad, but more about the timing than anything. “I think so. I don’t want to force him into something

he doesn't want, but I wish he'd said something earlier, you know?"

Jansen starts to say something, then stops himself. "Your turn."

"What are all you guys majoring in?"

"I'm a philosophy major, and before you ask, I have no idea what I'm going to do with it. RJ is computer science, Walker is art, and Trips is a finance major."

"Cool."

We're almost to my...Bryce's apartment when Jansen glances at me. "What's your biggest regret?"

"Whoa. We're going for the big guns now?" I pause, not knowing what to say. I hate self-reflection—it always makes me feel like I'm failing at life. After a minute, I give what feels like an honest answer. "I think it would probably be making all my choices based on the safe thing to do, you know?"

I glance at Jansen, but he's focusing on some pedestrians crossing ahead and doesn't respond, so I keep going. "I didn't apply to any super competitive schools because I was scared of rejection and loans. I picked my major partially because it was interesting, but also because it has a job at someplace like the FBI at the end of it. Security, you know?"

We sit quietly, the apartment complex one red light away. "You can park up there," I say.

My heart is in my throat as I consider my regrets. I could have added that I picked Bryce for the same reasons. He's safe. He's a sure thing, cute, smart, a future doctor, a good smile, and best of all, he chose me. He can be a little stiff and sometimes he makes me feel small, but that's probably just me thinking I'm not good enough.

But why did a question about regrets make me feel like I should add Bryce to the list? That's too harsh. I'm just frustrated. I love Bryce. He's not one of my biggest regrets. I tug the hem of my shirt straight as Jansen maneuvers into the spot.

"What about you?" I ask, not wanting to leave the car just yet, waiting for my heart to slump back down in my chest where it belongs.

Jansen pulls the keys from the ignition and looks over at me. "I think my biggest regrets are all the secrets I've kept from the people I love. I hate keeping things from my mom and my sister, but some things just shouldn't be shared." With half a smile, he nods toward my door. "Shall we?"

Chapter 7



Clara

Bryce jumps up from the couch when I walk in. “Clara, where’d you go? I thought you were moving your stuff to your new place?”

“I am, Bryce. You’re the one with the car. I can only carry so much on the bus.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Jansen follows me in. I motion to the pile I left between the door and the couch. “These are my things.”

“Got it. Anything particularly heavy?”

“Nope. Just clothes and stuff.”

Bryce looks between me and Jansen. “Clara, who is this?”

“Bryce, this is one of my new roommates, Jansen. Jansen, this is Bryce.”

Jansen tucks a box under his arm, then reaches out to shake Bryce’s hand. “Hey, nice to meet you,” Jansen says.

Bryce almost doesn't take his hand. When he does, I see the line between his eyebrows crease, the only hint that he's pissed.

Well, so am I.

They shake hands for a second too long, before Jansen fills his arms full of my stuff and walks back out. "I'll bring these to the car," he calls.

I move to pick up some bags too, but Bryce grabs my arm. "Who the hell is that, Clara?"

I try to shake him off, but he won't let go. "I told you, he's one of my new roommates."

"Where the hell did you meet him?"

"At his house, with all his other roommates. Seriously, let go. I want to get this stuff to the car so I can go buy furniture."

Bryce looks down, appearing surprised by his hand on my arm. He lets go. "Clara, what do you know about these people?"

"I know they have a room I can afford. I know they're neat and tidy. I know their majors." I shrug.

"This is crazy. Why don't you just go to Emma's? Try again tomorrow?"

I pick up a bag. "Bryce. You kicked me out. You don't get to dictate where I live now."

"I'm not dictating. I'm worried. They could be anyone. Clara, I need you to be safe. I love you."

The box of dishes slides under one of my arms. “I love you too, Bryce. But this is my choice.” As I look up at him, my anger mixes with sadness, my stupid heart climbing even higher in my throat. “You lost the right to an opinion when you kicked me out.” I grab one more bag and turn toward the door.

He yanks me back again. “I didn’t kick you out! I just need to focus. I can’t waste energy worrying about you rearranging the place around me. You can still come over, just not every night.”

I sigh. “Bryce, I need you to let go.”

“Just say you’ll come over tomorrow night. You know we’re perfect together. I need you.”

I tug at my arm again. “Bryce, let go.”

“Tomorrow. We’ll watch one of your stupid heist flicks. Please, Clara?”

“Bryce. Let me go.”

“Dude, when a girl asks you to let go, you really should.” Jansen is leaning against the door frame, watching. His green eyes look me over. “You okay?”

Bryce huffs behind me. He lets go. My hand drifts, covering the points where his fingers dug in, covering the hurt with care.

Jansen moves farther into the room and piles all my clothes on hangers into his arms, scooping up a box as well. “Can you grab the last of the stuff?” he asks.

I nod and collect the rest of my things, which is too much, but I want to get out of here. Jansen waits for me to leave first, then follows, putting himself between Bryce and me.

Bryce trails us into the hallway. “Clara, I’ll call tonight. We can talk. We’ll figure this out, baby.”

Baby. I hate it when he calls me baby. “Baby” means there won’t be any “I’m sorry.” It means there won’t be any conversation where Bryce will say he was an ass, that he messed up, that he should have done something different. That “baby” means that when we talk tonight, somehow it’s all going to be my fault. That my temper got in the way. That if I just stayed calm, rational, then we wouldn’t be in this situation. “Baby” dumps this whole mess at my feet, and I’m supposed to clean it up. I always clean it up.

I follow Jansen to the elevator, my heart racing. The thing is, I know this isn’t my fault. I didn’t make this problem. And I don’t want to feel the weight of Bryce’s blame, smothering me until I “take responsibility” and apologize, even though he’s the one who lost his cool. I don’t want to feel like I failed; I want to be proud of how quickly I landed on my feet.

When did I become the girl who shapes herself into whatever her partner wants? When did I become so predictable that I can plot the exact course of every conversation Bryce and I have?

What was it that Walker said? That living with them would be an adventure. When did I last have an adventure? When did

I just jump and hope? When did I last do anything unexpected?

The elevator dings. I'm done with regrets.

I look up at Jansen. "Give me a minute," I say.

I dump the stuff out of my arms and turn back to Bryce, reaching into my purse, pulling out the key to what was supposed to be our apartment. I walk back and try to hand it to him. He's a statue, refusing to take it. "You can keep it, Clara. We'll talk later, baby."

No. Just no.

I march past him into the apartment and set the key on the counter. Bryce watches me, one brow up, telling me he thinks I'm acting childish. I step back out, looking up at the man I loved, who, for some stupid reason, I thought I would marry.

Was he always like this? He didn't even offer to help carry my stuff out. What kind of partner doesn't even offer to help? Did he always expect me to fix all our problems by myself?

I gave two years of my life to a selfish prick.

I'm not giving him another minute. "Bryce, I'm not your baby."

"You're just upset, Clara. You're not thinking straight. Don't let your temper get the better of you. Be reasonable."

I walk back to the elevator. "Goodbye, Bryce."

"I'll call tonight," he says, still not getting it.

“And I won’t answer,” I say, collecting my stuff from the floor. Jansen added a few more bags to his arms, making my pile manageable. He’s holding the elevator, green eyes searching me as I collect the last few things.

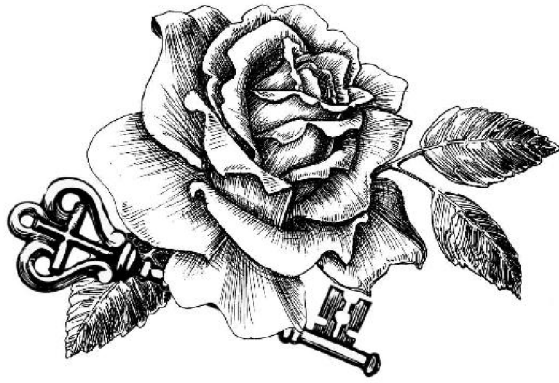
“Clara, don’t be like that. You know how you get. We’ll talk tonight,” Bryce tries.

I smile at him, even though I’d rather yell or cry. I want to show him just how reasonable I can be. “Bryce, I’m leaving. For good, if you’re confused. And just so it’s clear, I didn’t do this. You did.”

I step back into the elevator, and Jansen lets go of the door. The shaking begins as the elevator plunges down, my stomach flopping up to meet my heart in my throat. I make it out of the building and almost to Jansen’s car before the first sob explodes from me.

And here I was, promising a house full of guys that I wouldn’t come with drama. Shit.

Chapter 8



Clara

Jansen quickly empties his arms into the back end of his car, then comes back to grab some of my load. “No, I’m okay, I’ve got it,” I say, holding onto a token bag or two. I toss them into the backseat, the tears making it hard to see or care about how they land. Somehow, I manage to slide into the front and Jansen closes the door behind me.

I try to catch my breath. I can’t cry like this in front of some guy I just met. God, the poor guy had to watch the implosion of my relationship. I can’t believe I did that. Did I really just break up with Bryce? Perfect Bryce? Am I crazy?

Staring out the window as we drive, I’m careful not to look over at Jansen. I’m one hundred percent sure that I have snot mixing with my tears right now, and I’m sticky with sweat from hauling my stuff across campus. I want to call Emma. I want her to tell me I’ve lost my mind.

Sure, Bryce is intense. He likes things a particular way—lots of people do, and that’s totally okay. So why did I break up with him? Have I lost my fucking mind?

I try to take a breath, and I make a terrifying raspy weepy noise, which makes me cry harder. This is not the first impression I wanted to give my new roommates.

Jansen pulls up to a drive-thru, and I realize I haven't been paying attention to where we're going. I'm still whimpering when we pull up to the window, having missed the whole ordering part trying to control my sobs. I find a pile of napkins settled into my lap. "Here," he says.

"Thanks." I blow my nose a few times, wiping the tears off my cheeks. A cup hovers in front of me. "What is it?" I ask.

Jansen grabs his own cup and pulls back onto the road. "Hot cocoa. I know it's almost a hundred today, but I don't know where to find drive-thru pints of ice cream." One side of his mouth twists up into a tiny smile. "That's what my sister always wants after a breakup—a pint of Swiss chocolate almond ice cream and Flamin' Hot Cheetos. I don't get it." He makes a face, and I surprise myself by laughing.

He takes a sip of the cocoa. I take one too, the warm chocolate calming me more than I thought it would.

"What about you? What's your breakup ritual?" he asks.

I shrug. "I don't know. This is my first real breakup."

"Then I guess hot cocoa is as good as anything."

We sit quietly as we wind through the streets around campus. I'm grateful he's not asking about Bryce, that he's not making me talk. I sip my cocoa and try to turn off my mind. I don't want to be a mess when we get back. I can imagine the sneer

on Trips' face if I come in weeping. I just broke up with Bryce for being a demanding jerk. I don't need a stranger giving me the same shit.

Jansen clears his throat. "We didn't grab any of the furniture. Are we going to head back? I can just go or take one of the guys or something. You can stay home if you don't want to deal with that idiot."

I giggle at Bryce being called "that idiot." I guess there's a first time for everything. "No, I don't have any furniture. All of that was Bryce's. He only wanted expensive new stuff, so he got it himself." I take a few more sips of cocoa before I realize the car is turning onto the freeway. "Where are we going?" Panic grabs me, remembering that I met this guy less than three hours ago.

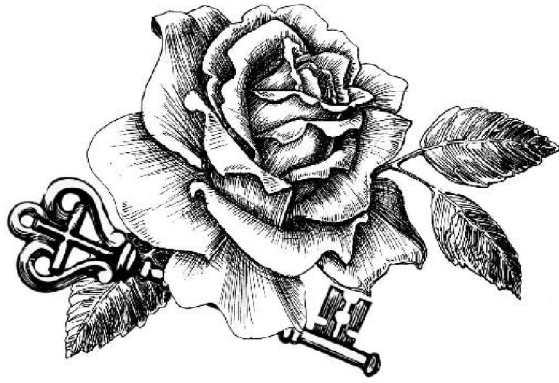
"I was thinking IKEA, so you'll at least have a mattress for tonight. You can thrift the rest if you want, but I heard once that it's illegal to thrift mattresses, so IKEA seems like a safe bet."

"You're taking me mattress shopping?" I look at this stranger. He noticed I needed a mattress, that I have no furniture. He listened when I said that I couldn't afford expensive things and assumed that I would prefer to thrift. And he keeps his car clean. Who is this guy?

"Unless you have a mattress hidden in one of those paper bags?" He grins and winks before looking back at the road.

I find a smile and look back out the window. "No secret mattresses. IKEA it is."

Chapter 9



Jansen

The twists in my gut are almost unbearable as Clara and I walk into IKEA. I've only ever been here with my mom or my sister, and this feels different—intimate. I tuck my hands into my pockets so I'm not tempted to take anything, pushing the jitters down further. *Don't be an idiot, Jansen. You can last until you're back tonight. Tonight, you can make bad choices. Right now, good choices. Only good choices.*

“So, do you want to do the full walk-through? Or just go straight to the mattresses?” I ask.

Clara finishes her cocoa and tosses it into one of the garbage cans inside the door. “Your car is full of my stuff. I'm not sure how we'll even fit a mattress in there, let alone other stuff.”

She weaves through the checkouts, totally disregarding the carefully etched arrows directing customers, and my rebel heart rejoices. She dodges around other shoppers until she finds what must be the cheapest queen-sized mattress in the place, wrapped up like a churro in plastic.

“Shoot, we need a cart,” she says, looking around. Her pigtails are falling out, her eyes puffy from crying, and I can feel the nasty glares pointed at me, like it’s my fault she’s upset. The hum in my chest is turning into a roar.

“I’ll grab one. Why don’t you look at the ‘As Is’ section and see if they have anything else you might like. I’ll meet you there.”

She seems shocked at the offer. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” I say, heading back to the front to snag a cart. On the way, I do a bump lift of a wallet from a man with a mullet—anyone with taste that bad needs a wake-up call—and shove it into my pocket. It hardly soothes the buzzing.

Once I have the cart and the mattress, I find Clara over by the discontinued curtains. “Are there any coverings on the windows in my room?” she asks.

“I have no idea. I’ll call RJ and ask him to check, if it’s okay he goes into your room.”

“That would be great!” She fingers some curtains with floral patterns and birds, her eyes drifting from them to the busy warehouse.

I pull out my phone and call RJ. He’s the only one who will answer—the other guys are more “text when I get a chance” people.

On the third ring, he picks up. “Hey.”

“Hey. Clara and I are at IKEA. Do you know if her room has any blinds or anything?”

There's some rustling and a huff. "I'll check."

I wait, watching Clara pick up a pink lamp and set it back down. "Nope, no curtains. She'll need some."

"Okay. Thanks for checking."

"Jansen, wait, don't hang up yet. Aren't you supposed to be helping Trips? Weren't you supposed to be a fake waiter tonight?"

I turn and take a few steps away from Clara. "Yeah, I'm helping."

RJ groans, and I know that I've messed up somehow. "Jansen, it's 5:17."

I freeze. I was supposed to be back at five to go over plans before the players started showing up. "Oh no. I'm on my way."

I hang up on RJ, then call Walker. When he doesn't pick up, I call him again. The third time, he answers. "Damn it, Jansen. I'm in the middle of something."

"I lost track of time and need to be back to help Trips."

"What's new?" Walker sighs. "Do you need me to run interference?"

"No, but I do need you to come down to IKEA and pick up Clara."

"I need to do what where now?"

"She needed a mattress. And apparently curtains. She'll meet you in the pickup area." I hang up before Walker can really

yell at me.

Clara comes up behind me, the mattress churro weaving through the broken couches and chairs like a wino on a Friday night. “What’s the verdict? Do I need curtains?”

I turn around. “Yup. You need curtains.” I shift from foot to foot. “Also, I forgot I have a thing. Walker will meet you in the pickup area here in thirty minutes. He has a little orange SUV—you can’t miss it.”

Clara looks horrified. “You’re leaving me here?”

I shrug awkwardly and move away. I really messed up this time.

The buzzing in my gut is making it hard to even hear myself speak. “Oh, your stuff! Here, take my car keys. I’ll make sure the car’s locked up behind the house, so your stuff stays safe.” I toss her my keys. “I’m so sorry. I’ll catch you later, okay?”

I leave her standing, holding my keys, looking reasonably pissed, and hurry out the doors, grabbing a few things that I need off the displays as I go.

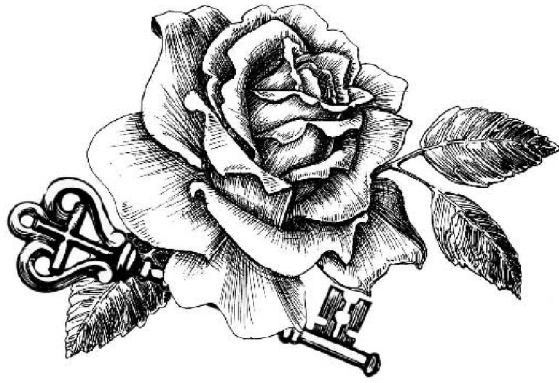
It turns out the hanging plant hook is only so-so for breaking into my car. A soccer mom holding the hand of a toddler pauses to watch me work. I smile and wave. “Locked my keys in the car,” I say. After a long look, the mom picks up her tot and walks into the store, eyeing me a few times until the sliding glass doors block me from view.

Once she’s gone, I pop the lock, and I’m in. I pull my multi-tool out of my pocket and plop down under the steering wheel.

After a little finagling, the engine purrs, my ancient car successfully hot-wired, and I take off for home.

It's only after I'm halfway back that I realize Clara doesn't have any of our numbers. I might be the biggest idiot yet.

Chapter 10



Walker

The drive to IKEA gives me some time to get over my anger at Jansen. Am I surprised I'm suddenly picking up a string he forgot about? Nope. Am I annoyed that he broke my flow? Damn right I am. I was finally getting my wrist loose enough to mimic the fluidity of Rubens' sketches. Once the feeling is ingrained, I should be able to take on some more ambitious "reproductions" of Rubens' work.

At least I'm not working Trips' game tonight. Jansen can pick pockets and verify IDs. RJ can look up the players and evaluate whether that high roller is betting their life savings from working at Mom's craft store or whether that miser is tossing in pennies from Daddy's billion-dollar empire. If it's the latter, Trips will extend credit. If it's the former, well, poor guys should always play it safe. Trips isn't the most generous when he's making money. He's a beast when he's losing it.

IKEA is busy with other students buying last-minute things before the semester starts Tuesday. Most of the colleges in the area started either last week or this week, so a younger crowd

makes sense. I pick out Clara hovering near the exit, chatting on her phone. Backing into an empty loading spot, I hop out, my hands weirdly sweaty.

I wave at her, and she waves back, a cart with a burrito-shaped mattress next to her. Grabbing the cart, I roll it to my SUV. “Never mind, Emma,” I hear her say, “I guess he was telling the truth. My ride is here.”

There is a pause as whoever Emma is answers. I heft the mattress into the back, then toss the curtain rods and flowery fabric in after the mattress.

“Yeah, I’ll call you later. I know. It is a lot. It’s been, well, it’s been a day. You’ll be off at eight? ‘Kay, call me when you’re home. Love you too, babe. Bye.”

I’m about to push the cart to the sliding glass doors, but Clara dodges in front of me. “I’ll bring it in,” she says, taking the cart and disappearing into the store.

Once I’m back in the truck, I turn on the radio, then turn it down before adjusting it back up. I’m tapping at the steering wheel as she climbs in next to me, debating turning it back down a click.

I’m not usually this anxious, but Jansen pushed me off center with this girl. How do I apologize for one of my best friends’ extreme time blindness? *I’m sorry my friend forgot he had a prior engagement and abandoned you at a big-box store?* Probably not that. Sighing, I pull out and head home.

Clara tucks a flyaway chunk of hair behind her ear, fidgeting with her shirt again. I don't like that she's so uncomfortable with us. It makes me want to fidget, too.

"Thanks for coming to get me," she says, looking straight out the windshield.

I roll my eyes. "No problem. It's not the first time I've had to clean up after Jansen. No worries."

"Does he usually..." she starts.

"Not this bad, no, but Jansen gets caught up in whatever is in front of him, at the expense of whatever else he's supposed to be doing. The guy has alarms for every one of his classes. I'm surprised he didn't flunk out freshman year before RJ recommended the alarms." I laugh, and there's a hint of a smile from Clara. "Are you okay?"

She does a weird serpent-like head wave, then just shrugs. "I'll be fine. It's been a long day."

I give her forearm a squeeze, snatching my hand back once I remember she's not only my new roommate, but has a boyfriend. *Hands off the pretty girl, Walker.* "Did you get all your stuff? All moved in?"

"Not yet. My stuff is in Jansen's car. He left me the keys."

I can feel her gaze burning into the side of my face as I change lanes. Oh no. What now?

"I'm a little confused, to be honest," she continues. "If I have his keys, how did he get his car home? Does he have a secret hide-a-key or something?"

I try to keep my face blank. Oh Jansen, you idiot, you couldn't even last an afternoon without doing something suspicious? Not even a whole day before you decided to hot-wire your own damn car because you were late? I could kill him, I really could. "Yeah, something like that," I say, oddly reticent to full-on lie to Clara. I better move this conversation onto a safer topic. "Say, let's order a pizza. We can pick it up on the way back."

I pull out my phone and try to open the food delivery app. She snatches it out of my hand. "Eyes on the road," she chides.

"You got it, boss," I reply. I sneak another glance at her and get a hint of a grin again, but she still looks bummed.

"What should we get? Is it for the whole house or just us?"

"Just us. The other guys have a catered dinner tonight. There'll be leftovers, but not until late."

"Catered? Fancy. Well, I know most people aren't a fan, but I'm a Canadian bacon and pineapple gal myself."

I poke her shoulder. "Ew. Fruit on pizza is an abomination."

She sticks out her tongue at me, and I laugh. She actually smiles this time and something inside me relaxes. "I'll take anything as long as it isn't fruit. Because that's gross."

We end up with a supreme—no green peppers—and place the order only a minute or two before we get to the store.

Throwing the car in park, I twist to look at her. "We've got a few minutes. Let's play a game."

Clara huffs and turns toward me. “What kind of game?”

I think for a second. “Highs and lows. Three highs for the day and three lows. Any order.”

Her smile drops again, her brown eyes suddenly glassy. “Only if you go first.”

I nod, realizing this game might be a bad idea. Damn it. I guess I’ll just forge ahead and hope for the best. “Got it. Me first. I’ll start with a high. I think I’ve almost gotten the right tension in my wrist to mimic Rubens’ sketches, which I’m super excited about.”

She glances up at me, eyes open and maybe even curious. “Who’s Ruben, and why do you want to draw like him?”

I look around for my sketchbook, but it’s still at the house. “I’d show you, but I don’t have it here. Peter Paul Rubens was a baroque artist. He did these super vibrant and detailed sketches of people and animals that not only look real, but it’s like they’re just waiting to jump out of the page. I’ve been working on my wrist all summer, trying to mimic that dynamism, and I think I’m almost there. I’m probably way too excited about it, but here, let me look it up.” I reach for my phone, but Clara holds onto it, not giving it back.

“I saw you drawing this morning. And Jansen said that you’re an art major. I’d love to see your drawings. Maybe you can show me when we get back?” Clara has a small smile again, but it’s still not bright, not vibrant. She continues, “Either way, that’s a pretty big high if you’ve been working on it all summer.”

“It is. I almost had it when Jansen called.”

“Oh no! I’m so sorry,” she says.

I huff out a halfhearted chuckle. “Not your fault. It’s totally Jansen’s, and I plan to let him know tomorrow. That would be one of my lows for today, though, Jansen interrupting me. I’ve done one high and one low. Your turn.”

“Can mine be both a high and a low?”

“Sure.”

She sighs, tucking that same bit of hair behind her ear again. “I broke up with my boyfriend, Bryce.” A few tears fall down her cheek and I immediately tense.

Unsettled, I go with my gut and grab her hand, giving it a little squeeze. “I’m sorry.”

She squeezes back. “Thanks.”

A few more tears streak down her cheeks before she clears her throat, pulling her hand from mine to wipe the trails from her face.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask. “It looks like this is more of a low than a mixed bag.”

“No, not really. I mean, I’m actually more angry than anything that it ended. Two years, poof, gone. But I think maybe we weren’t the perfect couple I thought we were, you know? I don’t know if I liked the person I was becoming with him.”

“What kind of person were you becoming?”

She tugs her shirt down and taps her thigh. Five quick taps, a pause, five more taps. “I was cautious. I was so afraid of doing anything wrong, anything risky, of having any emotion besides ‘pleasant company,’ which I know isn’t an emotion, but it’s what I was—nothing but pleasant company. I wasn’t me anymore because he didn’t like it when I was me.”

“Well, that sucks.”

She gives a pained chuckle. “It does.”

I try to imagine not having emotions—trying to keep myself steady on the rolling waves of joy, fear, ambition, and desire inside of me. It sounds painful, exhausting, and not at all like me. I can’t imagine choosing to live that way, especially for someone else. It would drown me. I gaze at Clara and see the exhaustion, but also a desire to hop on a boat and see where her emotions take her. “In that case, who do you want to be?” I ask.

Five more taps before she focuses on me. “I want to feel joy and anger. I want my heart to race. I want to scream and cry and laugh and dance. I want to be...more. Just, more.”

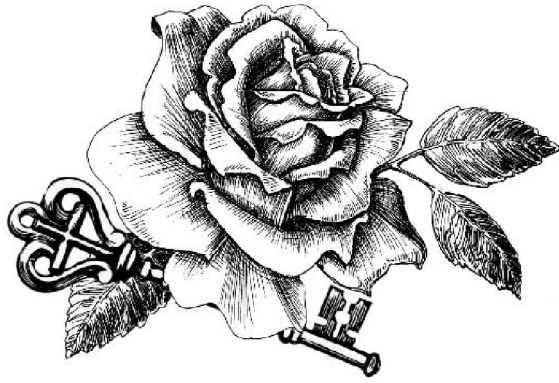
A grin inches across my face. “If that’s what you’re looking for, I think you accidentally ended up in the exact right place. There’s one thing that connects the guys and me, one through line with all of us, and it’s that we are all adrenaline junkies. Any of us will get testy if our hearts don’t race every once in a while. You’ll see. You really are in for an adventure.”

She smiles, fiddling with my phone. “Good. A little bit of adventure is exactly what I’m hoping for.” She shows me my

phone. "Pizza's done." She tosses the phone at me before she slips out of the car.

If what she said is true, if she really is looking to make a change, to take risks and have her heart race, well, maybe Clara won't be as big of a problem as we'd thought. The thought of her joining our little group is...appealing. I tuck my phone in my pocket, hope tight in my chest as I follow her in to pick up the pizza.

Chapter 11



Clara

I'm sitting cross-legged next to Walker on the couch, our knees almost touching and grabbing my third slice of pizza, when the doorbell rings. Walker glances at his watch. "Huh. A straggler. I'll be right back."

He strides into the front hallway. The door creaks open, and an unknown woman's voice drifts down the hall. "I'm here for the game."

"If you don't mind following me," Walker says, as a woman's heels disappear up the stairs behind Walker's sneakers. I take a few more bites, straining to hear what happens next. A painfully silent minute later, Walker strolls back into the living room.

I wait until Walker settles back next to me, his knee barely grazing mine. "What game was she talking about?" I ask.

"Trips has a poker game tonight."

I tilt my head, looking from the front door to Walker. "But I thought the other guys were at a party tonight. With catered

food, right? Or is that something else?”

Walker grabs another slice, focused on the pizza. “Eh, Trips is just bougie like that.”

I wait for him to explain. Instead, he takes a few bites, one hand rubbing up and down the outside of his thigh. “Say, once we’re done here, I’ll get your mattress out of my truck. Is there anything heavy in Jansen’s car that you need help with?”

I snort, thinking about my paper bags of clothes. “Nope, nothing heavy.”

“Cool.”

I guess that’s all I’m going to get about the poker game. It’s not like I even know these guys yet. I shouldn’t pry.

Walker finishes his slice in three more bites, squeezing my knee as he stands up. The casual touch shoots like lightning through me and starts my heart racing. “Do you want any more?” he asks.

I swallow back my jitters, pushing a smile onto my face. “I’m good.”

Walker takes the last of the pizza to the kitchen, and I force my mind to stop spiraling, to focus on what’s left to do. If I stop doing, I’m going to cry again.

Thoughts properly railroaded, I make a mental list for the rest of the night:

1. Unload Walker’s car
2. Unload Jansen’s car

3. Make my bed
4. Cry on freshly made bed
5. Stack boxes on their sides to double as cubbies for clothes
6. Drape dress clothes on top of the boxes
7. Think about hanging up curtains
8. Cry again
9. Hang up the curtains
10. Take a bath
11. Call Emma for girl-talk
12. Crash for the night

Yup. I've got a busy night ahead of me. Who knows how long all that crying is going to take?

I'm finishing the last of my crust when bumps and thuds echo from the back hallway. I hurry back to my room to help, kicking myself for not getting back there fast enough to hold the door. Walker's already in my room, leaning my mattress roll against the wall, looking at the handful of bags and the box I dropped off earlier. "Do you want to wait until you get your bedframe in here before we open this up?" he asks.

I kick my stuff off to the side. "We can just open it here."

"It's heavy. Are you sure?"

"Yup. I don't have a bedframe. The floor will be fine."

Walker's brows furrow. "You don't have one right now, or you don't plan on having one?"

I topple the mattress over, Walker catching it before it slams onto the floor. "Probably no frame unless I can find something cute at the thrift store," I say.

Walker stares, something between pity and curiosity warring in his gaze. "Okay then. I'll go grab some scissors."

I drag the mattress over as Walker leaves, but once it's situated, there's nothing left to do. Tapping my leg while I wait, all I can think is that at least my stupid nervous habit keeps me from wallowing, so it's got that going for it.

After what feels like forever, Walker returns, brandishing an orange-handled pair of scissors. As he gives them to me, he runs a hand through his thick black hair. A surprisingly impressive bicep stretches the sleeve of his T-shirt. Huh—a muscly, neat-freak artist—way to break the mold, dude.

I squat next to the mattress as I slide the scissors along the seam in the wrapping. When I'm three quarters of the way down, the mattress springs out of the plastic, unspooling and slamming into my shins. I tip forward toward the newly free mattress, but my toe catches on the edge, changing my momentum. Instead of falling onto a cushy mattress, I lurch backward, my hand slipping on the plastic when I try to catch myself. I bounce once on my ass before sprawling across the floor. "Well shit," I mutter.

A huff, then a full-bodied laugh bursts from Walker. I spin on my ass, slipping on the wrapping as I try to get back up,

and I end up glaring at him upside down. “It’s not that funny,” I grumble.

“I’m adding that to my list of highs for today.”

I flip him off before I think about it. Immediately, my heart pounds, my breath tight as I wait for a lecture about childish behavior.

Instead, Walker chuckles as he saunters to the door. “I’ll grab the rest of your stuff from my truck,” he says.

I lie there, taking deep breaths, waiting for my pounding heart to slow.

Now that’s something about Bryce that I definitely won’t miss—needing to maintain constant vigilance over my conduct. I take a few more breaths and a new mantra settles in my head, repeating over and over. A new truth: I’m free to be me.

A smile creeps across my face, a lightness filling my chest. By the time Walker returns with my curtains and curtain rods, I feel like I could fly.

If I only had wings.

He looks at me upside down, his dark eyes sparkling. “I think that’s it for my truck. Need help with the stuff in Jansen’s car? Or are you just going to lie there all night?”

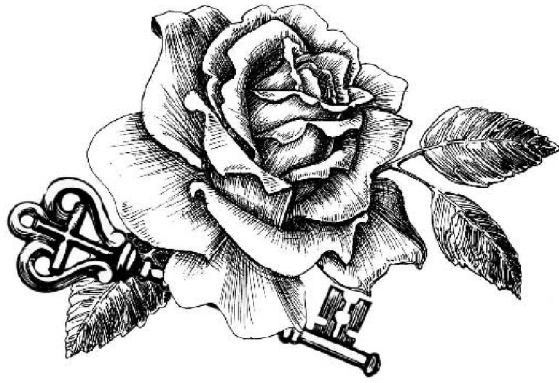
I raise a brow at him. “It’s nice down here. But I’ve got it. Thanks, Walker.”

He empties his arms except for one of the curtain rods, reaching across the bed to poke my nose. I wave it away, a giggle escaping.

“Well, let me know if anything changes. I’ll be in my room the rest of the night.” He drops the last rod, tucking his hands in his pockets as he leaves.

Lying there on my new mattress, hope flutters inside me. Once it roosts next to my heart, I roll over, hauling myself upright to survey my nearly empty room. This wasn’t the day I’d planned for. But maybe this fucked up awful day will be the start of something great. Because here, now, I’m free to be me. I’m free.

Chapter 12



Clara

After I get my stuff from Jansen's car, I crank up some music, dancing around as I jerry rig a temporary storage situation for all my clothes using my leftover boxes. Then I drape my hanging clothes over the top of the boxes and line up my shoes against the wall.

Making the bed with my floral sheets feels like ownership—my big bed. Mine.

Once everything is stashed as best as I can, I look around, tallying up all the things I need. Sighing, I pull my cash out of my backpack, count the bills, then look up my checking account balance on my phone. I only have \$897 to my name after tuition comes out.

With my coffee shop job, I should have rent covered every month, but if I add in books and food? I'm not sure how long I'm going to last. I throw my phone on my pillows, flopping back onto the bed.

I could take out more loans, but the prospect of paying back what I've already borrowed is terrifying. With a grumble, I half crawl to the curtains I chose from the bargain bin at IKEA. I cobbled together a combination of patterns that mostly match, but my room is going to have a funky, off-beat vibe once they're up. I lay them out on the floor in front of the windows: solid green, green leaf pattern on white, green and pink floral on white, solid pink. It's a little pattern-heavy in the corner, but it looks too uniform when I alternate the solid colors, so I decide I'm fine with it.

Emma should call in a little over an hour—I want to be ready to crawl into bed and not get out again by the time we talk. There isn't enough time to both finish this and take a bath, but maybe I'll be able to squeeze in a shower.

I unwrap the curtain rods and unfold the black-and-white diagram directions. Damn. I need a drill to install the curtain rods. These big windows were so gorgeous this afternoon. It turns out that at night my view is a chain-link fence containing the beginnings of a rager at the house next door. Curtains are going to have to go up, the sooner the better.

I grab Jansen's car keys and Walker's scissors before heading upstairs. Walker said he'd be home all night. Now I just have to figure out which room is his—hopefully he has a drill I can borrow.

At the top of the stairs is another staircase going up to the attic, with what is probably a bathroom tucked underneath it. To the right, there are four doors, all closed. From here, I can

hear the din from the poker game seeping out from the attic. Part of me wants to sneak up the stairs and find out what kind of poker game has catered food, but my curtains are more urgent, so I push my snooping aside for now. Knocking on the first three doors brings no answers, but the last door has music wafting out. This time, when I knock, Walker opens the door. “Hello,” I say.

“Hey. What’s up?” he asks, a piece of charcoal in his hand. He only opens the door a crack, but I can see a desk covered in papers and an easel-looking thing back by the window, a half-painted canvas of blues and greens behind him.

I hand him the scissors. “Thanks for these. Do you have a drill? I need to put up curtains, but the rods I bought weren’t the spring-loaded kind.”

“Give me a sec,” he says, closing the door in my face. After a second, he opens it back up and slips out, the charcoal replaced by a set of keys.

He strides to the second door from the top of the stairs and shoves a key into the handle. “Wait here,” he says, as he pushes open the door, flicking on the light. I glimpse a curved monitor and a space-age-looking computer chair before Walker once again closes the door in my face.

So weird. I mean, I guess privacy is important, but this borders on rude. I fiddle with Jansen’s car keys as I wait, trying to guess which of the two remaining rooms is his.

There’s a grunt, followed by a muffled crash. “Are you okay?” I call through the door.

“I’m fine. RJ’s a fucking slob. Almost got it,” Walker calls back.

More rustling follows, until Walker pops his head back out, handing me a top-of-the-line electric drill. “Here you go. I’m going to pick up in here. RJ will notice I made a mess, but he’ll never notice if I clean up after him.” Walker shakes his head, half of a grin on his face as he complains about his friend.

“Thanks. I also wanted to return Jansen’s car keys. Should I pop them into one of these rooms?”

Walker holds out his hand. “He probably locked his door. I’ll leave them on his desk.” He motions to the room between his and RJ’s with his head. I hand over the keys.

He starts closing the door again, but I shove the drill in the gap, stopping the swing. “Should I return this to you?”

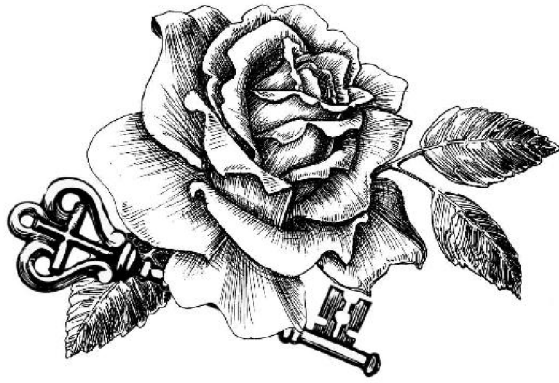
Walker shakes his head. “Nah. You can give it back tomorrow. Any of us can get in here. RJ won’t miss it yet. No worries. Have fun with the curtains. Oh, there’s a stepladder in the downstairs hall closet if you need one.” With that, he shuts the door, leaving me in the hall with the drill. Some more rustling and muted cursing comes from the other side of the door.

Out of curiosity, I try Jansen’s door. It’s locked. I try the door at the top of the stairs, which must be Trips’ room, and it’s locked too. I didn’t even know old off-campus houses came with locks on individual rooms.

So they all lock their doors, but Walker has a key to others' spaces. Are they locking me out? Or is it because of the poker game?

Curious, I hurry back down the stairs. Maybe my door has a lock. Either way, I need to get my curtains up before the house party next door is in full swing. No one wants a drunken audience while they're weeping.

Chapter 13



Clara

Showers are dangerous.

As soon as the water touches my face, tears stream down my cheeks. I cry as loudly as I dare, the water muffling my sobs—I don't want Walker to hear me.

The sobs escape, and the terrible thoughts I've been shoving away all day let loose as well. I mean, I had such a good thing with Bryce, so why did I just walk out like that? Did I let my anger destroy this? Leaving wasn't calm and rational. I left in anger, and now everything is broken. I broke it.

Bryce always pushed me to be better. Perfection can't be a bad thing, right? But if it is so great, why did being perfect make me so miserable? What's wrong with me?

The warm water washes the tears from my cheeks. I take one deep breath of the humid air, followed by another.

Once I can think past my shuddering sobs, I have to face the fact that I wasn't happy. I hadn't been happy for a long time.

I was stifled by Bryce's expectations. Every day, I worked so hard to be perfect for Bryce, for him to find no faults, desperately trying to avoid yet another lecture about how I wasn't good enough, how I failed, how my frustrations were childish.

Near daily lectures that I thought were normal.

Fuck that shit.

No more tearful apologies for being human. No more catering to what some random guy wants me to be. I'm my own woman, and I should act like it. Fuck him.

The tears slow as I revel in washing my hair and face, washing my body with a sense of ownership. This is mine, just mine. My heart, my mind, my emotions and ambitions, they are mine, and no one can force me to change unless *I* want to. I finish shaving and step out of the shower, grabbing one of the towels I purchased from the thrift store. I wrap it around myself, carefully tucking the corner into the top. The towel is blue with subtle flower patterns in the texture—it was as feminine as I figured I could buy without Bryce complaining about girly towels hanging in the bathroom.

I run my fingers over the ridges in the pattern, and I realize I don't have to be subtle. I won't have to choose the quiet option if I don't want to. I can have riots of color, floral patterns and stripes, curvy soft flotsam and jetsam in my life without issue. A spark of joy lights inside me as I finish up in the bathroom.

Back in my room, I find the comfiest pajamas I have, baggy sweats and a tank top with a few small holes from years of

washing. I can be comfortable; I don't need to be cute unless I want to be. Stretching out on the mattress and looking at my mismatched curtains, the spark of joy grows to a flame. Mine.

I lie there, spread-eagle, on a queen-sized mattress, the entire bed just for me, relaxing into the blankets, joy roaring in my chest.

My phone buzzes.

U there? Still want to talk?

I answer by calling. Emma picks up right away.

“Hey,” I say.

“Oh my gosh, how are you, Clara? Did you really break up with Bryce? You guys were like, perfect. I can't believe it. You have to tell me the whole thing. I'd come meet you, but I smell like wet fur and that is not going to help your situation.”

I let out a low chuckle. “You know I don't mind you smelling like wet fur, Emma.”

“Yes, but the problem is, I mind. Spill it. Are you okay? Are you totally devastated?”

I pause for a moment before answering. “Actually, I think I'm almost okay.”

“If you're not a weepy mess, I'm totally confused.”

I roll onto my side. “I was a weepy mess earlier. But really, I think this might be good for me. I'm more angry than sad, if

that makes any sense.”

“Do we need to go beat him up? My cousin taught me how to throw a punch last year, so I’m practically an expert.”

I chuckle. “No fisticuffs necessary. I just realized that I was trying to be who Bryce wanted me to be instead of being me. And I was tired of it. I wasn’t who he wanted, so why would I stay? He can go find someone more perfect than me, and maybe he’ll be happier too.”

“Clara, if you’re not perfect enough, then Bryce is an idiot.”

I giggle, surprised by the tear that escapes. “You’re a great friend, you know that, Emma?”

“I’m the bestest of friends.”

Laughing at her audacity, I rub the hem of the pillowcase between my fingers, calming into the silence on the other end. “I’ll be okay. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but I’ll be okay.”

“You’ll be better than okay. You’ll be a hot-as-shit FBI agent, kicking ass and taking names. And Bryce will fail out of med school and end up a middle manager at a shipping company with a potbelly, no hair, four snot-nosed kids, and a nagging wife. Just you see.”

My giggle bursts into a full-on belly laugh. “Remind me not to get on your bad side. That was both brutal and highly specific.”

Emma offers a prim sniff. “I’ve always been blessed with an excellent imagination.”

Emma is just so, well, Emma. I can see her grin in my mind, one perfectly sculpted eyebrow raised above blue eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Speaking of imagination,” she continues, “you moved in with a house full of boys you don’t know? Any good rebound fuck buddies there?”

I snort. “Zero to sixty much, Emma? I’m so not ready for a rebound yet. And even if I were, one, I don’t think I’m a rebound kind of girl, and two, casual sex with a roommate sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“Well, are any of them hot? Just because you can’t have casual sex with your roommates doesn’t mean I can’t.”

My groan makes her laugh.

“Seriously? Is this your plan? Make me worry about you preying on my roommates so I stop moping?”

“Just answer the question. I’m curious. Any cuties or hot stuff in that house of yours?”

I roll onto my back. “I mean, I guess they’re all pretty hot.”

“No way. Four hot guys?”

“Well, in different ways, but yeah. Jansen is standard All-American cute—you know, green eyes, blond hair, super nice and friendly. And Walker has this devil-may-care thing with him and is surprisingly built for an artist. I don’t know RJ at all, but he has these intense eyes and this soft-looking dandelion fluff hair that makes you want to run your fingers through his curls. And Trips, well, Trips is a jackass, arrogant,

and acts like he's God's gift to everyone, not just women, but the way he moves makes me think he might have reason for at least some of that arrogance." I blush, feeling foolish for having paid so much attention to all of them. They're my roommates, for goodness' sake, not guys I'm trying to pick up at a party or something.

Emma giggles. "I am so coming over tomorrow to meet your men. They sound delicious."

"They're not my men, Emma. They're just roommates."

"I'm still coming. Do you start back at the coffee shop tomorrow or Sunday?"

"I'm on tomorrow afternoon, and Sunday I'm opening."

"Maybe we can do a movie tomorrow night? I can come around seven, if you'll be home by then."

"I should be back by 6:30. I can probably snag an expired sandwich or two for dinner."

"Perfect. I'll bring some popcorn. I'm so excited to see your new place! And meet all these beautiful boys you've got." Her evil laugh filters down the line. "Bye, babe."

"Bye," I say, staring up at my white ceiling.

I sprawl there, listening to the sounds of the party next door before I get up and turn off my lights. Setting my alarm for seven a.m. is painful, but I need to fit in my long run and a trip to the thrift store before work at one. I tuck myself in and start the hard work of falling asleep next door to a kegger. To new beginnings.

Chapter 14



RJ

I'm always buzzed after one of Trips' games. Jansen tells me it's because of all the Mountain Dew I drink while I work, but I did a few jobs last year without any, and I'm still awake at the butt crack of dawn. Ergo, Jansen is full of shit.

The light in my room warms from red to dull gold before I give up on sleep. I roll out of bed, tripping on my shoes as I stumble out into the hallway to hit up the bathroom.

Bladder empty and teeth brushed, I head back into my room, switching on my main computer. The notes from my tablet have auto-synced, so I pull up the details about our two new players deemed worthy of a line of credit. Adding a handful of details I'd skipped last night, I move on to updating the info on our regular players. People's financial situations change, and Trips needs to know they're good for their loans. Not my favorite work, as it's basic social media scraping, but I get a cut of all the interest Trips collects on the loans, helping me finance more exciting projects.

I browse through an old player's social media profiles, looking at the brands of clothes he's wearing, what kind of car he drives, any jewelry, shoes, or watches of interest. Then I look up his sisters and parents on social media too, as well as people who seem to be close friends or significant others. This guy is still loaded, and his sisters, parents, and friends would all be able to spot him \$10,000 without Trips' having to resort to violence. It looks like he broke up with his girlfriend over the summer, though, so I indicate that on his dossier and take on the next player.

An hour later, I'm done, but still buzzed. Maybe a run will shake the jitters out—my leg is bouncing so much it keeps distracting me. I pull on my running stuff, grab my sweatband to hold my hair off my neck and face, and trot down the stairs, detouring to the kitchen for a granola bar and some water. Bar mostly devoured, half a glass of water left, and a door down the back hall opens. Clara walks into the kitchen, dressed in running tights and a tank, her hair in a tight ponytail.

I salute her with my cup. "Morning," I say. "Heading out for a run?"

Her brown eyes dilate when she sees me leaning against the sink. She must not have been awake enough to notice me at first. "Yeah. Eight miles today."

I whistle. "Long run. Any reason?"

She opens and closes a few cupboards until she finds a glass and fills it with water. "I'm training for a half marathon at the end of October. It'll be my second."

“Cool.” I watch her as she drinks her water, trying to imagine running that far for fun. I run, but it’s usually only when my body needs an outlet and the dojo isn’t open, like now. I’m much happier sparring with a practice sword than living through the monotony of trotting along the road under a beating sun for an hour or two.

Clara is shifting from foot to foot, glancing sideways at me. I must have zoned out. She probably thinks I was staring at her. Shoot. “Um, so how long does that take? The run today, not the half marathon.”

Clara fills up a water bottle and tucks it into a big foam belt that wraps around her hips. “With a warmup and cool down, about an hour and a half.”

“Huh.”

She finishes her glass of water and quickly washes it. “Are you heading out too?”

“Yeah, I thought I might go for a run. I couldn’t sleep.”

Clara rubs her eyes with a soapy hand. “That party next door kept me up way too late. If you don’t mind going at a slow, steady pace, you could run with me for the first mile or two, then turn back at your own pace. I was planning an out and back along the river, down on the West Bank and up on the East Bank.”

I nod. “Sure.” I finish my water and set the glass in the sink for later. “I’m ready when you are.”

We head out the front. The house is only four blocks from campus, but the cross streets are full of traffic, even this early on a Saturday. We keep having to start and stop. Clara trots through the closest campus gate and heads toward the river. We pass a big maintenance building before she darts down a stairway I'd never noticed before. The stairs dump us at the bottom of the hill and right next to the river walkway. She stops to stretch, and I join her.

“How do you know when you've gone far enough?” I ask.

Clara uses a bench to steady herself as she stretches her quad. “I mapped it first thing this morning, so I know when to cross over the Mississippi and head back.”

“How much do you have to run to train for a half marathon?”

She shifts to the other side. “I run four times a week. Two easy days, one tempo day, and one long run.”

“What do you do the other three days?”

“I don't run.”

I can't tell if she's joking or not. I must be staring again, though, because she gives me a little shove. “You ready?” she asks.

“Sure.”

We start south, the river on our right. “We'll cross at the Washington Avenue Bridge,” she says.

The morning is already warm and humid, and it's not even 7:30. The pace isn't punishing, so I feel like I should chat, but I don't know what to say. I glance at her, her cheeks already red from exertion. "So do you run track too?"

She shakes her head, her long ponytail swishing between her shoulder blades. "Nope. Not anymore. I just like running. I feel stronger and calmer after I run—happier. What about you? Do you run a lot?"

"No. I only run when I get antsy and my dojo isn't open for sparring."

"Dojo? What kind of dojo?"

"I used to compete in Kendo, a kind of Japanese sword martial art. I did a bunch of different martial arts before I found Kendo, but that one stuck."

A bicycle comes toward us, so Clara steps behind as they pass, moving back up to run beside me once it's clear. "You don't compete anymore?"

"I just spar for fun. Sometimes if they need me, I'll teach some kids' classes, but nothing too serious."

She smiles. "So you're like a sword master or something. Neat."

My cheeks heat, and I look away toward the river. "Nothing like that. I just like the forms, the structure and motion. It feels good and keeps me from feeling, I don't know, bad," I finish lamely. If I could turn the color of a tomato, I would right now. I need to practice talking. I'm so bad at this.

I hear the voice of my sister Trish in my head, her frustration obvious after I failed this summer, once again, at chatting with any of her girlfriends: *If you want to talk to a girl, then you just have to talk to them. You can't mumble, stare, and walk away. Seriously. How are we even related?*

She isn't wrong.

I debate turning around and running back, but Clara has already started up the stairs to the Washington Avenue Bridge. She looks over her shoulder at me with a smile, and I follow her without conscious thought.

Our footsteps echo on the pedestrian bridge as we stride toward the business school. Usually by now, some of my jitters would have eased, but they seem to have gotten worse. I wonder if it's because I'm running with Clara.

I sneak another look at her. My heart stutters. This run will not be the calm down I'd hoped for.

We make it down to the running path on the other side of the bridge, Clara on the river side this time. "Oh, I forgot. I have your drill. It was a godsend for hanging my curtains last night. I hope you don't mind."

Did I forget to lock my door last night? Trips will kill me if I forgot. "How did you find it?"

"Walker found it for me. I might keep it a bit longer. I don't know if I'll have to build anything after I buy furniture today." She wipes some sweat out of her eyes. "It sounded like Walker was going to clean your room for you, too. Did you notice?"

I think back to this morning. It *was* easier to get to my desk than it usually is. I'll have to thank him. "I was a little out of it this morning. And no worries about the drill. You can just leave it in the living room, and I'll grab it whenever."

"Can do."

We run in silence for a while. I think through all the different things I should ask. I mean, we're probably past asking about the weather. I could ask about her major, but I already know everything I can find about that from my research, and I've never been an actor. What don't I know about Clara? "So, how do you like your room?" I ask and immediately regret it. It feels like the lamest question—besides the weather, of course.

"I think I got pretty lucky in the last-minute room lottery."

Okay, I should just roll with it. "Is it a lot like the other place you were going to live?"

Clara's lips purse as she looks over the river. "Not at all."

"And that's a bad thing?" I guess.

She shakes her head, "No. I broke up with my boyfriend yesterday, that's all. We were going to live together in one of those new-build apartments. And now, well, I guess now I'm single and living with you guys. So not a bad thing or a good thing. More of a thing thing."

So, no boyfriend. I slow a step and watch her chestnut ponytail swish behind her again, the longest strands only inches above her ass. The jittery feeling I've had all morning spikes. Great. Now that I know she's single, I'm never going

to be able to talk to her again. *Come on, RJ. Get your shit together.* “Are you okay? Was it mutual?” I force out.

Her lips press together in thought before we power up an incline. “I’m okay. I guess I broke up with him, but he wasn’t sure about us living together, so in a way, it was mutual.” She shrugs.

We run in silence for a while longer. I can’t seem to force out anything else to say. A bridge appears up ahead and I decide it’s time for me to head back. I’m too nervous to keep up a conversation, and I keep catching myself staring at her, looking at the curve of her eyelashes, the slight bump on the bridge of her nose, the flare of her eyebrows. I’m going full-on creeper. Waving one arm at the bridge, that communicates what I’m planning, right?

“Heading back?” she asks.

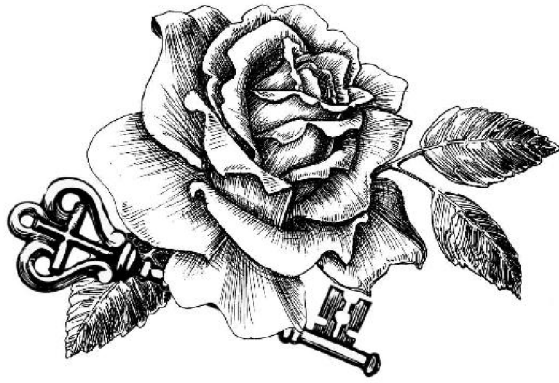
“Yup,” I croak. Thank God.

We both stop at the cross light. She takes a drink of water and then offers me one, too. I wave it off. Instead, I stare across the bridge, the river water tumbling over the rocks underneath. “Bye then. Have a nice run.”

“Thanks for joining me,” she says.

With half of a nod, I run away. I’m sprinting by the time I reach the middle of the bridge. Do I look crazy? Probably, but I don’t really care. I need to get away. Beautiful single girl living in the house? Yeah. This year is going to be a bitch.

Chapter 15



Trips

It's 9:02 when I roll out of bed. Jansen and I finished cleaning up at 3:30am and I can hear the lucky bastard snoring down the hallway as I head to the kitchen, cursing my internal clock.

I find half a pot of coffee and I immediately pour myself a cup and guzzle it down. I swear my brain is fucking sandpaper, and it's grinding down all the rough edges of my skull this morning, even though I only had one drink the whole night, nursing it so I could stay sober, going up to Jansen for "refills" that were just info drops about the various players. The first cup gone, I drip out what's left in the pot, hoping that will fix the fuzzy ache in my head.

At least I have some money to play with again. I'll bring the cash we got last night to a couple of different banks this morning so I can transfer the cash and e-payments to different holding companies over the next two weeks.

Analyzing what level of risk I'm willing to take on can wait for tonight—I thought I was up for anything, but the lovely

fucking combo of a failed gig and a market drop last week left me feeling like someone yanked my balls up through my fucking bellybutton. I fucking hate losing.

I'm debating between eating cold leftover Indian from last night and mangling some eggs when Walker waltzes in and shoves the empty coffee pot into my face. "Dude. That was my coffee." He punches me in the shoulder, and I take a step back, waving off another attack.

"I was up half the night. What's your excuse?" I ask, grabbing my coffee grounds from the pantry and making a new pot for both of us.

Walker leans against the island, a pencil tapping against the tile. I glance at it, annoyed at the sound, and Walker quirks a brow before tucking the pencil behind his ear. "I was working on my Rubens. It's so close, Trips. I've almost got it."

"When do we have to finish it by?"

Walker looks out the window. "NightAntiques says the buyer would like the original by the end of March, so we have some time. I just thought I'd be closer by now."

"I still think your fence has a dumbass name." I pour the water into the pot and flick the machine on.

"It's an internet handle, not a name. And I'm still waiting on your master plan to switch with the original."

I pull out some bread. Toast seems easy enough. "It's coming together. RJ is still working on the spearfishing campaign to gain access to their servers."

“It’s a museum, not a bank. Why is this taking so long? Are you sure RJ sent the emails to the right place?”

“Like I would mess up our first out-of-state job.” RJ passes me on the way to the fridge, still wet from the shower. “If we don’t want to be found out before we’re in and out, I have to go slow. Everyone notices a blown-out wall. It takes a long time to notice a loose floorboard. My access is the loose floorboard kind.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I just...I want it to go well,” Walker says.

“I hear you. Thanks for picking up my room a bit,” RJ adds.

“You noticed?”

RJ shakes his head. “Nah. Clara told me.”

Walker laughs. “Of course you didn’t notice.” He taps his pencil again. I glare. He stops. “When did you see Clara?” he asks.

“We went for a run this morning. She’ll be out for a bit yet. Apparently, she’s a long-distance runner.”

I don’t really listen to them. Woo-hoo, new hot roommate.

I jam two pieces of bread into the toaster. I’ll count myself lucky that they aren’t talking about the plan still, as I’m not positive what the plan is. It will come to me fully formed in a dream or something once I have more room on my metaphorical plate. Besides, it’s almost September. That means I have seven months before we make the hand-off with Walker’s fence.

It'll come to me soon. Losing that money tapped all my brain power. Once the numbers have stabilized, I should have ideas again, but until then, it's hard to think when I can't even breathe.

The coffee finishes sputtering, and Walker and I both get our mugs. Walker tosses in some oat milk and stirs it, leaning back against the island. "Clara was planning a trip to Goodwill today to get furniture."

"Goody for her," I say, taking time to enjoy my third mug of coffee.

"She doesn't have a car," he adds.

"Then I guess it also sucks to be her." I wait for my toast to pop.

RJ opens the fridge and pulls out his eggs. "What's your plan for the day?" he asks.

"I'm doing a cash run this morning, then timing transfers and planning investments for the next few weeks."

RJ and Walker exchange a look. "Which car did you bring to campus this semester?" RJ butters a pan for his eggs and waits for it to melt.

My toast pops. I consider buttering it, but instead I pull out some cold chicken rogan josh from the fridge and pile that on the toast. Indian food on toast is still breakfast, right? "I brought the pickup. I figured we might need to buy materials at some point. Why?"

Walker grins at me, the glint in his eye telling me that whatever is coming next, he's going to find it hilarious.

It takes a second, then it clicks. "No no no," I sputter, backing around the island away from Walker. "Don't you dare suggest what I think you're going to suggest. What's wrong with your SUV?"

"She needs a bed. And a desk. And chairs, and a wardrobe. That's not fitting in my little SUV."

"No way. I'm not taking her someplace. I have things to do, places to be, money to move."

RJ laughs. "Sorry, man. You've got shopping duty."

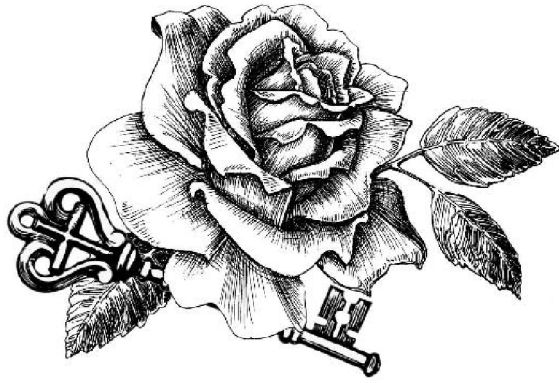
Walker waves as he leaves, the same damn smirk on his face. "Have fun. I'd tell you to try not to be a jackass, but I hate to waste my breath."

I flip him off as he heads out, but it doesn't faze him. Grumbling, I gobble up my hot toast/cold Indian combo breakfast. It tastes fine, but my day has gone to shit. I pound the rest of my coffee, wash my dishes, and retreat to my room.

Hopefully, organizing deposits will make me feel better.

I open the floor safe under my desk and count last night's cash, sorting it into four separate piles, none of them with the same amount of money, none of them with an even dollar amount, all of them with less than \$10,000. And even that doesn't make me feel better. This day is officially, totally and completely, bullshit.

Chapter 16



Clara

I find RJ at the kitchen island with an empty plate, his phone locked in his hand. “Hey,” I say as I pass through, sweat dribbling down my neck.

He stares at his plate and mumbles something that is more than a simple “hi”. I turn back. “What was that?”

He still won’t look at me, but I hear him more clearly this time. “Walker said you wanted to go to the thrift store today. Trips will drive you. He has a pickup truck.”

I think about being stuck with that grump and shake my head. “I can just borrow the keys. He doesn’t have to come with me.”

RJ shifts in his seat and glances at the window behind me. “Trips doesn’t let anyone else drive his cars.”

I huff, not surprised. “I need to shower,” I say, hoping that the guys will figure out another solution.

RJ nods and goes back to his phone. I pour a glass of water and down it as I duck into the bathroom. Yanking my brush

through my tangled ends, I hop into the shower, my runner's high fading as I think about RJ.

I thought we'd bonded this morning, but now? Did I say something wrong? Was I annoying? I replay the run in my head, and I can't figure it out. Should I apologize?

Maybe RJ is just hot and cold. I'll ask Walker or Jansen. I snort, thinking about how I'm not going to ask Trips—I'm sure he wouldn't tell me the house was on fire even if we were both being roasted in the flames. In fact, if I hadn't known he had poker last night, I wouldn't put it past the guy to have been actively avoiding me. And now I get to spend the rest of the morning with the jerk. Yippee.

I wash off the sweat and grime as quickly as possible, rushing through the rest of my process, and head back to my room. There's a loud, "Ahem," behind me. Turning quickly, I catch Trips as he drags his eyes from my ass to my face.

"Really?" I snap, wishing I had something in my hands to throw at his arrogant mug.

A smirk creases his cheek. "Are you ready to leave?"

I motion to my towel-covered self. "What do you think?"

He doesn't look away, not allowing me any modesty, but I don't break eye contact. After a long moment, his smirk stretching into a grin, he says, "Well, I'm leaving in five. If you're not in my truck, I'm not coming back."

I take in his casual stance, bright ink trailing up his biceps, disappearing under the sleeves of his T-shirt, the way his eyes

beg me for my worst behavior, and I desperately want to scream. Instead, I take a deep breath, a mixture of pique and logic spilling out of my mouth. “If that’s the case, we’ll need to pick up food. I just ran for almost an hour and a half. I don’t want to pass out in your car.”

He blinks twice, his smile faltering. “Whatever. Just get out there,” he says, marching past me, his arm brushing mine, making goosebumps shoot like a starburst from the contact. He slams the back door, the crunch of his shoes on the gravel echoing down the hallway.

A frustrated growl escapes as I hurry to my room, tossing on a T-shirt dress and sandals. I fill up my water bottle in the bathroom, snagging my sweaty clothes and tossing them into an empty corner in my room. After double-checking my cash and phone are in my purse, I jog out back. For a second, I consider making Trips wait, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t plan to give me the full five minutes. I need furniture and if this is the only way to get it, then I guess I’d better boogie.

A huge silver extended-cab pickup is already running. I yank open the door to a breath of AC. Climbing up the beast like a kid trying to get on the tall slide at the playground, I clamber into my seat with a sigh. The interior is leather, the speakers sound crisp, and the thing looks like it could drive itself. This truck is officially ridiculous.

Trips pulls out before I even get buckled and turns up some pop song so he won’t have to talk to me. I yell over the music, “I have to be back before one.”

He lifts his chin, a chunk of his auburn hair flopping over his eyes. It softens the steel blue of his gaze a little, but his clenched jaw ruins the effect.

We pull into a drive-thru and I give him my order. Not an ideal post-run meal, but eating is eating. We munch in silence. Watching out the window, the city vanishes behind us. “Where are we going?” I ask.

Trips glares at me, apparently ticked at being asked a reasonable question. “I have to stop by a few banks on the way. And I figured all the good stuff would be picked over closer to campus.”

He’s probably right. “Oh. Thanks.”

It’s a thoughtful move, which doesn’t seem to fit, so now I’m confused. I finish my food and take a sip of the drive-thru coffee. Not good, but drinkable. Ten minutes later, we pull off the freeway and park at a bank. “Stay here,” he says, removing an envelope from the center console before slamming the door, leaving the car running.

Annoyed by his command, I pull out my phone and make a list of what I need to live comfortably. I’m organizing it by needs vs wants when Trips jumps back in. We pull back onto the freeway for five more minutes before pulling off and going to a different bank. Once again, Trips grabs an envelope and hops out.

My to-buy list is done, so I log in to the student portal to see if my classes have syllabi posted. All except one are up, so I hunt for cheaper versions of the texts online. Trips returns and

drives another ten minutes, pulls off the interstate and meanders through a neighborhood to a third bank.

At this point, I'm wondering if he's ever heard of online transfers. I'm not saying anything, though, as he hasn't uttered a single word to me since the first bank. Once he hops back into the truck, he follows a local thoroughfare for another fifteen minutes before stopping at yet another bank.

"Seriously?" I ask as he picks up a fourth envelope.

He glares. "Not one word."

At this rate, I'll be lucky to even make it to a thrift store before work. I add up the total cost for all my books, subtract that from my checking balance, mentally set aside money for food and my bus pass, what's left I can use for furnishing my room. It's a disappointing number.

Trips gets back behind the wheel and pulls up directions to the closest thrift store. He parks at the back of the lot, taking up three full spaces across—I'm embarrassed to get out of the silver beast with him.

I head to the back corner of the thrift shop, where they always stock the furniture. I don't care if Trips follows or chills in the front. He can do whatever he pleases. He's made it obvious that he wants nothing to do with me, so I'll just get what I need and go back to the house.

This thrift store seems like an excellent one, with a full quarter of the warehouse dedicated to furniture, so I'm hopeful I can get everything I need with this one stop. And I'm buying

the most obnoxiously colorful, soft, girly things I can afford. Fuck you and your boring beige, Bryce. This is going to be my oasis. Or at least as close as I can get for less than \$100.

Number one on my list is something to hang my clothes on. There are a couple of big dressers, but the only wardrobe I can find is nearly \$100, which is so far out of my budget, it's laughable. I'm ready to give up when I spot a pile of metal tubes leaning against the wall. Taped to the pile is a handwritten note that says, "Foldable clothes rack, \$12." Score!

I go to lift it into the cart, but Trips snatches it out of my hands and puts it in for me. "Thanks," I say.

He grunts.

I sigh and look for the next thing on my list—a desk and chair.

There are a bunch of kitchen tables and side tables, and a few huge oak monstrosities with file cabinets and cubbies. Finally, I find a simple couch table someone tried to paint white. It's sad, but it's the right size, and for \$20, it's a winner. Without me saying anything, Trips grabs the table and hauls it to the front of the store, inked biceps straining against his sleeves. For a moment I'm surprised by his helpfulness, but I realize he probably just wants this done so he can get back to his day—which is likely fully booked with another six trips to the bank.

A green pleather office chair that isn't too cracked for \$7 catches my eye. Next to it is a set of the most gorgeous pink

velvet accent chairs. Curling up in one, it cradles me like a cloud. Chair heaven. I'm petting the arm when Trips kicks the back leg. "These next?" he asks.

I look at the price. \$40 per chair. A cozy nook was last on the list. At that price, I wouldn't be able to get a bed, or a dresser, or a rug. I sigh, rubbing the arm one last time. "Nope. This one is good though," I say, pointing at the cracked pleather chair. Trips cocks his head, watching my fingers trace the velvet. He grimaces, then pushes the cheap chair to the front.

Dragging myself out of my velvet oasis, I look around for something to hold my clothes. I find a six-cubby bookcase for \$15. I'll need two bins for my underwear and socks. Standing on my tiptoes, I scan the store for Trips, but he's vanished. Whatever. He'll figure it out.

In the housewares section, I grab two \$1 bins, one with green polka dots and one with blue triangles. I also find a sweet white wicker hamper and toss that into the cart as well.

Back at the cubbies, I make sure the bins will fit—perfect. Trips huffs up behind me, sweat dripping down his face. "I can carry this one if you'd like," I say, giving him a chance to catch his breath. I pluck the bins out of the cubbies and place them in the cart, then reach around the thing, giving it a big hug. Trips peels my hands loose, his touch sending tingles up my arm as he nudges me away, before hoisting the bookcase up and disappearing to the front of the store. Well, there goes that attempt to help.

I do some quick math and figure I can probably get a bed, but then I'm done for the day. Over in the bed section, though, I only find two queen headboards. Both are absolutely hideous. Trips stalks up behind me. "Got one?" he asks.

"They're both terrible."

"They probably have bed-bugs, anyway."

I roll my eyes. "Thanks for that. I guess I'll just do the mattress on the floor thing."

"Are we done?"

"Nope. One more thing to check." I pop over to the rugs, and by the magic of the thrift gods, I find a green, blue, and pink oriental rug. With this rug, my room will look planned instead of like a thrift store special. At \$25, it's a little pricey, but without an actual bed, I'll be fine. And it'll add a bit more of that fuck-you-Bryce color to my new nest. I tug the rug out and hoist it onto my shoulder. "Now we're done," I say.

Trips lifts the rug off my shoulder and leads the way to the checkout. At the front of the store, I spy my stuff lined up by the exit, the two pink chairs and a little black-and-white checkerboard side table a little farther along the wall. I'm glad someone is buying them—they deserve a good home.

The clerk rings in my items, and I hand over the cash. I push through the checkout and Trips steps up behind me, handing the clerk three more tags to ring in. "You found something?"

Trips shrugs. I stand by my stuff as I wait. He breezes past me and out the sliding door, humid air flooding the entryway.

“I’ll get the truck,” he says.

Once he’s out the door, I sneak over to the pink chairs again, just to feel the velvet one last time. If I were a cat, I’d be purring. Trips marches in and picks up the bookcase while I follow with the desk. “I can get it,” he says.

“So can I,” I reply.

Together we hoist first the bookcase, then the desk into the bed of the truck. I wheel out the green chair, and Trips grabs one of the pink chairs. “Wait. You bought the pink chairs?”

He nods. I don’t know if I should laugh or cry. He doesn’t strike me as a pink chair kind of guy, but I guess, maybe? Or he bought them just to spite me, in which case he’s a bigger jerk than I thought. “Do you have a place for them? They’re really comfy.”

He hoists his chair into the bed, following the office chair. “Yeah. They’re going in your room.”

He walks back toward the building. I chase him. “Wait, you bought me chairs?”

“You liked them,” he says, grabbing the other pink chair, leaving the small side table for me to carry.

“I’ll pay you back,” I say.

“Don’t worry about it.” He shoves the other chair into the bed of the truck, taking the table from me.

“Seriously. Give me a week or two and I’ll cover it,” I say.

From the back seat of the cab, he pulls out a tub of bungee cords and ties down the furniture. I go back for the cart, balancing the rug on the top, and wheel it all out, jamming the last of my stuff into the back seat. By the time I get the cart back inside, Trips is in the cab with the engine running. I climb up beside him, trying to catch his eye, but he's determined to stare at the road.

Why did he buy those chairs for me?

Pulling out of the parking lot, Trips clears his throat. "If it bugs you that much, you can give me the chairs back at the end of the year."

I stare out the window, not knowing what to say. Expansion bungalow after expansion bungalow drifts past my eyes, identical footprints mutated by time, years of additions, decks, porches, and landscaping making each one different from its neighbors.

"Thank you," I say, my hand clenched, fingers itching to move, to dance my anxiety across my skin.

Am I excited that I got my dream chairs, that I'll have a cozy corner in my room? Hell yes.

But who buys a stranger furniture? Because I am a stranger to these guys. I sneak a glance at Trips. His auburn waves are pushed back from his forehead, his blue eyes intense, but he's, I don't know, softer than he was this morning.

We're almost back to the freeway when he glances at me. "Do you like coffee? Like, better coffee than that crap we got

this morning?”

“I love coffee. All kinds.”

He pulls into a strip mall, once again parking across three spaces. “Come on,” he says.

I follow him into a tiny corner coffee shop. There are mismatched tables and chairs, couches and plants. It’s the sort of place you’d happily spend a snowy morning. The AC can’t seem to keep up with today’s humidity, the hum urgent. “I’ll take a depth charge,” Trips says. He turns to me.

“Umm... How’s your iced mocha?” I ask.

The barista grins. “Make it a hazelnut iced mocha and you’ll be glad.”

“That sounds perfect. Thanks.” I go to hand over some cash, but Trips waves me off.

“Trips, I can get my own coffee.”

“I promised you food while we were out. That shit from earlier doesn’t count. This is your replacement coffee.”

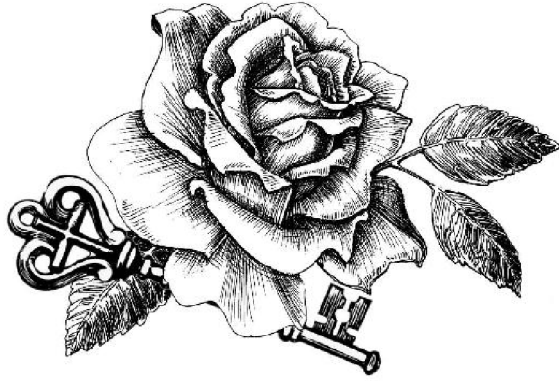
I sigh. “Can I pay you back?”

“No.”

Scowling, I stalk to the other end of the bar to wait for my mocha. I take a moment to observe Trips as he waits for his drink. His tennis shoes are new. His jeans are designer and seem to be cut to make his ass look perfect. I note the expensive smartwatch on his wrist as he snags his drink from the bar. Add to that a swank truck; the guy is loaded.

And now I feel extra gross about him buying me stuff— money works differently for rich people, and I don't know their rules. I don't play games I don't stand a chance of winning. And Trips just tossed me into a new one without instructions. The barista sets my coffee down on the bar. I snatch it up, following Trips to the car, the pink velvet visible from the ground, enticing me with dreams of studying curled up as the rain splashes on my windows. The question is, what does that fantasy cost? And can I afford it?

Chapter 17



Jansen

I wake up covered in sweat to the roar of the AC, the battle hymn of the war against the humidity of a Midwest summer. It's after two in the afternoon, but for once, the twists in my gut have stilled. A good night of spiked adrenaline is really the only medicine that works. And I had a good night—twenty-three wallets lifted, and twenty-one of them returned, no one the wiser. The two I couldn't get back, well, I told the drunk idiots they left their wallets at the bar, and I even got a tip from one of them. Wins all around.

If I meditate every day for the next week, I might even pass for normal. And with Clara here, looking normal is important. God, I wish I could pass for normal sometimes.

I'm glad she's here, even if it makes everything difficult. It's better than her living with her asshole ex, that's for sure.

I can't imagine what it would be like with that jerk. He just expected her to come running back, expected her to be, I don't know, something bland, just because he's bland. Who wants bland? I mean, if you're sick or something, bland is great. But

otherwise? Life should be full of salt, sweet, sour, spice, all the good and exciting flavors. Clara should have all the flavors, too. With that riveting thought, my stomach grumbles.

I roll out of bed and toss on some shorts and a T-shirt. Downstairs, I pull out some palak paneer and rice from the fridge and heat it up. It feels like a jasmine green kind of day. Not too much caffeine, my nerves don't need it, but enough to get moving. The microwave dings before the kettle whistles, but I decide to wait and eat in the living room. I'm pretty sure I saw Trips in there, and I want to see if there were any problems from last night that bled into today. Once my tea is steeping, I take my bowl, teapot, and cup on a tray to the living room.

Sure enough, Trips is in his favorite chair, glaring at his phone. I sink into the couch, pulling my bowl onto my lap. "Good morning," I say, digging into the cheesy spinach goodness in front of me.

"Hey."

I'm licking my bowl when I remember we're supposed to be chatting. "Any issues crop up this morning?"

"No, we're good. Thanks for all the ID verification. It's always helpful to know who actually is sitting at my tables, you know? And what kind of credit cards they have. Then RJ can find them later if needed."

I nod. "Glad to help. You been up long?"

Trips groans. "Way too long. What I would give to sleep in."

“It’s a beautiful skill.” I smirk. “What have you been doing this morning?”

“It’s afternoon, you fucker.”

I sip some tea.

He tosses his phone on the coffee table. “I got roped into taking Clara furniture shopping.”

Setting down my cup, I look over at my asshole roommate. He still looks like an aristocratic jackass, his jaw clenched, his eyes blazing. But it looks like he’s been running his hand through his hair all morning, which he only does when he’s thinking about something that isn’t making sense to him. I know that losing those funds has made him edgy, but this looks different. “What?” he grumbles.

“You look, I don’t know, off balance or something.”

He glares at the ceiling, trying not to roll his eyes at me. “I’m fine.”

I laugh. “Archibald Clarence Westerhouse the Third, you are never fine. Fine isn’t a continent you’ve ever visited. Uptight? Demanding? Furious? Pure asshole? Those I’d believe. But fine? You’re fucking kidding yourself.”

He snatches up a coaster and flings it at my head. I duck and it slams into the wall behind me before sliding down and under the couch. “You have to get that, asshole,” I laugh.

“Fine, you fucking gnat. I’m not fine. Did you know Clara is practically broke? I’m worried she won’t be able to pay rent.”

I feel a half-truth. “Worried she can’t pay rent? She gave you a month up front. What more do you want?”

Trips shakes his head. “She furnished that entire room for less than a hundred bucks.”

I whistle. “Impressive.”

“She paid in cash. To the dollar. Who the hell buys furniture with cash? From a thrift store? There were these two chairs she wanted, \$80 for them both, and she vetoed them outright. Who doesn’t have an extra \$80 lying around?”

It’s my turn to throw a coaster. “People who aren’t rich, asshole.”

Trips catches it. He turns it over in his hands. “I bought her the chairs,” he mumbles.

His face is all scrunched up, glaring at the coaster like it holds the answer to all his questions. I giggle. After a moment, it turns into a belly laugh. I’ve never seen Trips so confused. Angry is his default setting. Confused is one I’ve never seen in three years. Tears streak down my cheeks.

“Fuck you,” Trips growls, standing up and snatching his phone from the table.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” I gasp out. He doesn’t leave, but he doesn’t sit back down either. I calm enough to sip some tea, then wave for Trips to sit down again. He does with a huff.

“So you don’t hate our new roommate?”

“She’s not what I was expecting.”

“What were you expecting?”

He slides his phone back onto the table. “I guess, someone like my step mom, or an older version of Mattie or something.”

“You saw a pretty face and assumed she was either a gold-digging socialite or a sweet but spoiled kid?”

Trips shrugs.

“You’ve met my sister, right? She doesn’t fit one of those boxes, does she?” I push.

“Your sister’s fucking cool.”

“What about Trish? She’s been around, helping RJ with his hair. Do you think she’s rocking that debutante energy?”

Trips grabs his phone. “You know what? Fuck you. I’m going to go work through some market analysis.”

“You don’t have to run away,” I joke.

He flips me off as he storms out. I finish my tea, fish one coaster from under the couch and the other from the chair cushion before cleaning my dishes. When I stick my head out the back door, the humidity nearly suffocates me—no outside time for me today.

I opt for the “better” way of dealing with my fluttery guts. I clear up the floor of my meditation space and cycle through a series of tai chi forms, settling into a rhythm with my breath and steps. The trance takes me as I flow from one form to the next.

The sun has dropped enough to shine into my eyes through the side windows by the time the door opens behind me. I breathe into the last three forms of the series before turning around to see who came in.

Clara quickly looks down, digging through her purse. I have good enough ears, even deep in meditation, to know that she was watching me. I grin. She can watch. I don't mind one bit. "Hey," I say, wiping sweat from my face with my shoulder.

"Oh, hi," she says. She pulls her phone out of her purse, like that was her goal all along. "Um, what were you doing?" she asks.

I lead her back to the kitchen so I can get some water. I think I've been trancing for a while; I feel like I'm swimming back to the surface of consciousness still. "It's tai chi, a kind of moving meditation."

"Isn't that for old people?" She gets us both glasses.

I take them and fill them up. "It's technically a martial art, but yeah, mostly old people do it. My therapist in high school recommended I learn it. I have trouble focusing, and sitting meditation was not natural for me."

"That makes sense. Do you like it?" she asks, her head slightly tilted. Her hair is back in a messy bun today, and she smells faintly like coffee.

I finish my first glass of water, then fill up a second. "When I started it, I hated it. I would have to get up early every Saturday and go do this stupid arm wavy thing with a bunch of

senior citizens. But then I looked into the history of tai chi, and it's really interesting." I drink a bit more water, then add, "And my therapist was right. It helps me focus better."

She smiles, and I can't help but join her.

"Where were you all day?" I ask.

"I went for a run this morning with RJ. Say, do you know if it's normal for him to be all friendly and then stop talking to you? I don't know what I did wrong." She looks all sad again, and I want to shake RJ. Doesn't he know what a rotten few days the poor girl has had? And he has to get all weird about her being hot and single?

Trish told me she'd pushed girls at him all summer, and he still can only mumble while staring at his feet. She did say that he can speak like a normal human to girls that have boyfriends, so I guess that's an improvement, but he's twenty-one and has two little sisters. You'd think he'd have girl talk dialed in. I sigh and toss Clara a rueful grin. "He's just weird sometimes. Give him a bit. I'm sure it'll get better."

She nods, still looking a little down. "What else have you been up to?" I go sit on one of the bar stools and kick out another one for her to perch on. She leaves her purse on the counter and joins me. "I went shopping with Trips, then I had work."

I'm split—I want to hear what she thought about Trips buying her furniture, but the way she moved straight to work tells me she doesn't particularly want to talk about it. "Where do you work?"

“Over at the Prancing Goat Cafe.”

“I love that place! They have great pots of tea for when you’re sick of studying at home.”

“Yeah. I brought home a couple of paninis we were going to throw out. I haven’t gone grocery shopping yet.”

She pulls two paper bags out of her purse, but when she goes to open the fridge, I realize we put all the leftover Indian on what is supposed to be her shelf. “You can put them anywhere for now. And you can eat any of that Indian food you’d like to. We have a ton of leftovers.”

“Yum, thanks. As a heads-up, my friend Emma is going to be here soon. If you catch her, can you send her back?”

“Sure. What’s your plan? A big night of party hopping?”

She laughs hard enough to snort. It’s ridiculous, but also a little bit cute. “No. No party hopping tonight. We were planning a movie night.”

“Oh! You guys can use the living room if you don’t mind a few of us hanging around and watching with you. I’ll even make some popcorn.” I wink, hoping she’ll invite me to stay. I don’t really want to go out and be around random people right now, and I hate being alone. My chill is on from my two-hour tai chi jam session, and a movie with Clara sounds perfect.

“Sure. I’m just going to go put on something less dress-shaped,” she says before disappearing down the back hallway.

I run upstairs and knock on all the doors. RJ opens first. “Movie night!” I yell.

“Maybe,” he grumbles before closing the door.

Walker pops his head out, followed by Trips. “Movie night!”
I try again.

Walker shrugs. “Okay. What are we watching?”

“I have no idea. Clara invited her friend Emma over. I said she could use the big screen.”

“I’m out,” Trips says, slamming his door.

I flip him off. Walker laughs. “Sure, I’m game.”

He locks up and comes downstairs. “I’m going to make popcorn,” I say.

Walker pulls stuff out of the pantry. “I’ll make cookies.”

“Woot! Walker cookies!” I dance around him in the kitchen until he shoves me to the other side of the island. “Dude, I’ve wanted them all summer. I need you to come home with me over break or something. Or maybe you could mail me cookies? Would they still taste good?”

He shakes his head. “They’d be stale before you got them.”

Pulling out the biggest bowl we have, I start microwaving. Four bags should be good for the four of us, probably. I should eat dinner, but Walker’s cookies sound better, so I decide to wait.

After the third bag, there’s a knock at the front, so I trot up and pull open the door. A tall girl with pink hair stands on the porch, holding two flat bags of popcorn in her hands. “Hi! You must be Emma. I’m Jansen. Come on in.”

She shifts the popcorn bags under her elbow so she can reach out to shake my hand. It's awkward, but we manage. She follows me back to the kitchen. "Oh gosh, you already made popcorn," she says, a pout on her face.

"Eh. More popcorn is always better," I say, pulling the latest bag from the microwave and tossing hers in. Walker has finished up the dough and is doing row after row of dough balls. I snag one and pop it into my mouth—heaven.

"Idiot. Don't eat them before they're cooked," he scolds.

"They're just so good, I can't help myself," I say. "Walker, this is Clara's friend Emma."

"Hi Emma," Walker says, waving a dough-covered hand.

Clara comes back into the kitchen, wearing some purple cotton shorts and a black T-shirt, her hair down. "Emma! You found it," she says, squeezing the taller girl around the waist.

"I think I vomited in your neighbor's yard last spring. I know my way around," she laughs.

Clara laughs along. "Did you meet a few of the guys? Jansen and Walker." She motions to each of us before noticing the tray of dough on the island. "Walker, what are you making?"

I jump in before he can answer. "He's making the world's best cookies. Don't distract him."

Walker rolls his eyes. "I can make these things blindfolded, Jansen. They'll be good no matter what."

Emma shoots Clara some secret girl smile before answering. “I met them both. Are we all having a movie night together? Or are we just stealing cookies?”

“All together,” Clara clarifies. “Should we go make a shortlist and then we can vote once the cookies and popcorn are done?”

Emma tucks her arm through Clara’s. “That sounds like an excellent plan,” she says, both of them leaving the kitchen.

I grab the last bag of popcorn from the microwave but stay in the kitchen with Walker, waiting for the first batch of cookies to come out of the oven. “Emma seems happy to be here,” he says.

“We’re nice guys. You make cookies. What’s not to like?”

Walker chuckles. He loads up a second pan with more balls of dough. I take a spoon and scoop a bit more batter for myself from the mixing bowl. “You met Clara’s ex, right? What was he like?” he asks.

I think about it. “He was cold. Arrogant and cold.”

“She seems better today, doesn’t she?” he asks.

“Yeah. She’s calmer. I made her laugh just now—she snorts.”

He finishes the second batch with a chuckle. “Good.”

“To the snorting? Because while it was kind of cute, it was also, well, a snort.”

He pushes me away from the oven. “To her feeling better, you idiot.”

I scoop out the last of the dough from the bowl and do a quick wash. I figure it’s a good thank you for him letting me steal the dough. He pulls down the cooling racks, setting them up just in time for the timer. The first cookie he puts on the rack I snatch, before tossing it onto the island with an “Ow ow ow! Too hot!”

“Serves you right,” he says, settling the rest onto the rack. I snag the cookie from the counter, tossing it from hand to hand as I back through the door into the living room. Clara is curled in the couch’s corner, while Emma is in RJ’s chair. “Cookies are coming out of the oven,” I say, wafting the hot cookie in front of the ladies’ noses.

I pop the cookie in my mouth, and while it burns, it is still amazing. I’ve missed these cookies. My life isn’t complete without these cookies. “Delicious,” I mumble around the gooey goodness. Emma raises her eyebrows at me while Clara giggles. “I’ll go get a plate,” she says, pushing up from her corner.

“Oh! Can you bring the popcorn too? The cookies distracted me,” I call after her.

I hear the tinkling of her laughter as she leaves the room.

“Hi,” I say to Emma.

“Hey,” she says, pulling her pink hair over her shoulder and braiding it without looking. “You guys aren’t serial killers or

anything, right?”

“Last time I checked, I was good,” I say.

She tilts her head as she scrutinizes me. “You guys seem nice. I know you just met Clara, but this is tough for her. She literally had a five-year plan. And a ten-year plan. And now all her plans are just gone. I’m so ticked at Bryce right now I could fucking, I don’t know, kick him. Really hard. With steel-toed boots.” She finishes her braid, pulls it out and starts again. “You were the one who got her out of there, right?”

“Yup.”

“What did you think of Bryce? The two of them seemed so perfect, and now, well, I’m not sure if I was oblivious, or if it’s just that Clara is fabulous, and it somehow made Bryce look better when he was with her?” Emma asks.

Cackling and a snort filter out from the kitchen. Walker’s right, it is good that she’s feeling better. “I don’t know either of them, but Clara seems awesome, and Bryce seemed like an ice sculpture, so…” I shrug.

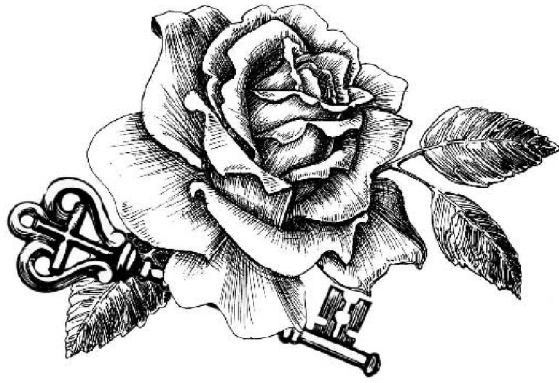
Emma chuckles. “I guess I just thought this would be a ‘cry with ice cream’ kind of night, not a ‘laugh with cookies’ kind of night.”

Clara comes back with a plate of cookies, Walker behind her with the popcorn. “These cookies are good enough to make you cry, trust me,” I say, grabbing another one before Clara sets down the plate.

I stole the corner of the couch so I could hear Emma, so I pat next to me, hoping. Clara tucks a bit of hair behind her ear, tugs on her shirt, then sits perfectly straight beside me. Walker sits on the other side of her, both of us not risking sitting in Trips' chair. He said he wouldn't join us, but just in case, well, it's not worth the fight.

The girls decide on *Ocean's Eleven*. Walker and I share a glance, challenging each other to hold our tongues. A few incredulous snickers sneak out, but otherwise, the only disruptions are the crunch of popcorn and little murmurs of appreciation whenever someone takes a bite of a cookie. Slowly, Clara relaxes back onto the couch, her hair falling across my shoulder. I take a chance, rolling the cool strands between my fingers as we watch, twisting small chunks and folding them in half, strange little cinnamon rolls collecting on one side of her head. It feels nice, soothing, like a different type of meditation, where the twists in my gut are helping me focus. It feels a lot like a successful lift, and the last dregs of my anxious energy leave me in a puff. I sit back and enjoy.

Chapter 18



Clara

About halfway through the movie, there's a soft tug on my hair. Jansen has spiraled a curl around one finger, twisting it tight before folding it over. I almost ask him to stop, but he doesn't seem to notice he's doing it. He's still watching the screen, focused on the story, with this small smile on his lips. It's like his hands just need to keep busy so his mind can relax. Something that feels like affection flutters in my chest as I turn back to the movie.

Not too long after that, Walker stretches, and his arm ends up behind me on the cushion. I sprawled a bit once I realized no one minds if I take up too much space on the couch. Now I'm slouched down like a comfy ogre—it's a nice break from watching a movie with Bryce. With Bryce, there were proper ways to sit on a couch. Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the couch is practically heaven.

I haven't told Emma yet, but Bryce started calling and texting today around four. I've ignored all his messages, but I don't think I'm ready to block him yet. I left my phone in my

room because I'm sick of seeing the flash and buzz of another missed message. Tonight is for friends and movies, and I plan on thoroughly enjoying it.

Sadly, my early morning and sleepless night is catching up to me. As I slump down on the couch, Walker's hand brushes against my shoulder. I freeze, giving him a chance to move it, but he must not notice, because it stays. Jansen moves more of my hair over to fiddle with, while Walker's thumb draws slow circles on my bicep, inching up toward Jansen's pile of twists. I peek at him, but just like Jansen, he's totally engrossed in the movie.

I need to move. This is too much, too soon, and I really don't think I'm ready for anything, even hair twists and an arm around the shoulder. I jump off the couch and hurry toward the kitchen. "I'm thirsty. Would anyone like anything?"

Emma looks up, startled. I don't know why, but I turn more toward the door so she can't see the twists Jansen put in my hair. "I'll take some water, unless you're drinking?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Not tonight. So, two waters. Guys?"

Jansen smiles in the half-light. "Water would be great." Walker stretches again, this time turning so his knees are encroaching on the seat I just left. "I'll take one of my kombuchas. They're in the fridge."

I rush into the kitchen, tugging out the twists as best as I can. I'm filling the second glass of water when RJ walks in. "Hey, we're watching *Ocean's Eleven*. We're about halfway done,

but it'd be fun if you join us," I say, hopeful that he'll talk to me again.

Instead, he nods with a smile, his curls bouncing, and leaves the kitchen without a word. This is getting uncomfortable.

The bottle of kombucha goes under my arm, and I pick up the three glasses of water in my best waitress hand-triangle to carry all the drinks back to the living room.

I give Emma her water, but when I turn back to the couch, the whole arrangement has changed. RJ is in Jansen's spot, Jansen is sprawled on the floor with some cushions from the meditation space, and Walker has his legs across the middle cushion. I move to the only open chair, leaving the waters and the kombucha on the coffee table, but Jansen wraps his fingers around my ankle to stop me. "Don't sit in Trips' chair. He's weird about it."

Walker turns so I can fit back on the middle seat while Jansen puts out coasters for everyone. I drink my water and set it back on the coffee table, but when I sit back, Walker drapes his legs across my lap.

"Get your own space," I grumble.

He laughs and pokes me with one of his toes.

"Ew!" I yelp.

Walker tickles me with his toes, and I try to leap away, bumping into RJ beside me. Without warning, RJ reaches across me and, grabbing both of Walker's ankles, twists his wrists. Walker flies onto the floor, half landing on Jansen.

“Gross, man,” RJ says.

An interminable second later, Walker, Jansen, and Emma all bust out laughing. I turn to my unexpected protector, and RJ snickers, a huff escaping as he tries not to join in. That sets me off, and soon we’re all laughing, the movie forgotten. Every time I think we’re winding down, my stupid snort escapes, and then we all start over again.

I miss the knock, but Jansen must have the ears of an owl and the reflexes of a mountain cat, because he’s halfway to the door before the rest of us hear anything. “I’ll get it,” he says, wiping a few tears as he leaves the room.

I down some water, trying to calm myself, but when Emma giggles again, I can’t quite swallow, and after a terrifying moment of almost choking, the water shoots out of my nose instead.

“Yuck!” Emma yells.

Walker is prone on the floor, laughing too hard to get up and help, but RJ sprints to the kitchen and comes back with some paper towels. I yank a few rectangles off and clean the mess up, my freaking sinuses stinging.

Yelling from the front of the house cuts through the last of my chuckles.

I look up, and Bryce is standing in the doorway, his face red and his hair standing up in chunks. “What the hell is going on here?” he roars.

I look down and realize that when I'd clambered off the couch to wipe the table, I'd straddled Walker's lap. RJ has his hand on my shoulder, kneeling next to me from handing me the towels. Emma has slid out of her chair and is half on the coffee table. I gape at Bryce, seeing fury when there is normally only ice, and I don't know how to answer. A loud bang sounds on the screen and we all jump. "It's movie night," I say.

This, for some reason, starts Jansen cackling again from the hallway. Walker and Emma glance at each other before they go off as well. RJ stands all the way up, one side of his mouth twitching. He offers me a hand, and I stagger to my feet.

"Are you all high?" Bryce bellows.

Jansen ducks around him and gets between Bryce and the rest of us. "Sober as a jaybird," he chuckles. He looks over his shoulder at me. "Did you invite him?"

I shake my head. That one question kills the last of my mirth. "No. Emma, did you share—" I start, but she's shaking her head as well, no longer laughing.

The room is silent except for the movie. "Bryce, how did you know where to find me?" I ask, my calm mask slipping on like an old pair of shoes.

"I put a tracking app on your phone years ago. How else would I be able to help if something terrible happened? I love you, Clara. I need to know that you're okay."

The calm is cold around me, my voice hollow. “Bryce, you need to leave.”

“Clara, baby, please. You’re not thinking straight. Come home with me and we’ll figure this out. Please, Clara.”

I shake my head, stepping around the table. “Bryce. We’re done. Please leave.”

He shifts from pleading to furious again. “Clara, you’re being ridiculous. Look at this place. Look at these, these... people. You don’t belong here. Come on. We’re going home.” He holds out a hand, as if he expects me to heel like some well-mannered dog.

“No.”

He takes one step into the room before he vanishes, pulled from the room by an invisible force. Everyone is on their feet, sprinting to the front, Walker and Jansen pressed close beside me as we barrel through the hallway.

Trips stalks across the top of the porch stairs, Bryce lying sprawled on the front lawn. Unthinking, I go down the stairs, but Trips snags my arm. I glare, and he lets go, but stays beside me as I skirt around Bryce, kneeling a good two feet from my ex, not wanting him within arm’s reach. “Bryce, we’re done. I never want to hear from you again. Do you understand?”

He pushes himself to sitting, eyes crystalline in the dark. “You’ll come around. I know how important perfection is for both you and me, Clara baby. And together, we’ll be so perfect

no one will ever give us a second glance, we can be untouchable. So come home, baby.”

Emotion boils, one I’ve never purposely directed at Bryce before: rage. My heart rate spikes, and I want to slam my fist into his face, to make him understand in a visceral, Cro-Magnon kind of way that we’re through. That I will never be his perfect little doll again.

My fists curl, my legs tense, ready to pounce, and just as I leap, someone snatches me from behind, arms braced against my sternum and stomach to halt my charge. “Shh…” Jansen whispers as he pulls me back.

Bryce rolls to his feet, brushing the dirt from his pants. “I’ll give you a week,” he says. “We can try again when you’re in a better frame of mind.”

A shriek tears from my throat as I try to break free from Jansen’s arms. Trips steps between us, RJ rushing down from the porch to stand beside him. Prowling toward Bryce, Trips forces my ex to take two steps back.

Trips’ fists clench and unclench, his feet sure. “When a girl fucking says you’re done, you’re done. And when I fucking tell you to get off my property, you fucking leave. Get.” He points at the street, his growl making me shiver, and his rage feeding my own fire.

Bryce goes to shoulder check Trips, but RJ reaches out, dragging Bryce back. A clear *pop* ricochets in the hush.

Bryce screams, clutching his hand to his chest, horror, pain, and anger warring on his face.

“This is your one warning. You touch him, I won’t stop him from doing whatever he damn well pleases.” RJ motions to Trips, as if a broken finger is a safer and wiser option than whatever the other man would do. I shiver again, Jansen still whispering calming nothings in my ear.

Bryce backs away from both guys, tears on his cheeks, his hand cradled close to his heart. “You’re fucking crazy. You’re all fucking crazy. Don’t worry, Clara. I’ll be back, I’ll help. I’ve got you, baby.”

A strangled yawl comes out of my mouth as I break free for a moment, not sure what I’m doing, just knowing that I’m going to explode and that Bryce deserves the brunt of it. I make it three steps before Jansen’s arms snake around my waist again, lifting my feet off the ground. RJ turns around and steps between Bryce and me, blocking my line of sight. “Deep breaths, sugar, deep breaths,” he murmurs.

Trips stands sentinel between Bryce and the rest of us.

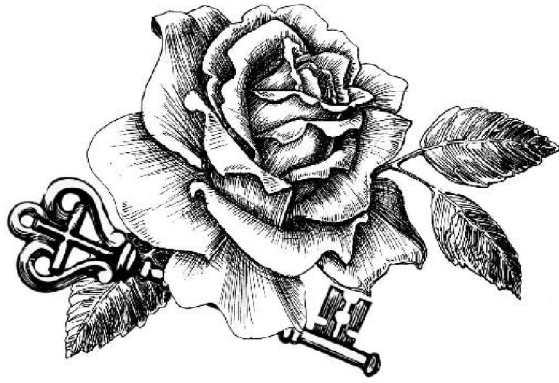
I hear Bryce’s shoes on the sidewalk, then the street, moving faster than a walk, but not quite a run. A car door slams. Lights pivot across the lawn—a U-turn—spotlighting first Trips, still unmoving, then Walker and Emma on the porch, Walker grim, Emma stunned, and lastly lighting up RJ’s curls from behind, a momentary halo. The engine purrs and he’s gone.

The fight leaves me, and I'm limp in Jansen's arms. RJ reaches out and wipes my cheek, tears I didn't know I was crying coming off on his fingers. He nods to Jansen behind me, who lets go. I try to catch myself, but I can't seem to stand on my own, so RJ pulls me to his chest and helps me to the house.

Glancing behind me as I go up the stairs, I catch sight of Jansen carefully skirting around Trips, soothing murmurs dropping from his lips, more of a lion tamer than a friend. Emma and Walker follow us inside, and Emma pushes through and cuts in, taking me from RJ. "I've got this," she says.

"Straight back, last door on the right," Walker says, and with that, my best friend and I are alone in my room. The sobs escape.

Chapter 19



Clara

I don't know how long we lie on my bed together, her stroking my hair while I cry, but at some point, I come back to myself. "I'm sorry," I say.

"For what? For crying, or for getting angry, or for having gotten away from that possessive delusional jackass? What in the world would you have to apologize for?" She turns me around so we're facing each other. "I'm serious."

I sniffle, wiping my face with the bottom of my shirt. "It was supposed to be a fun movie night."

She hugs me tight. "It was a very fun movie night. So don't you worry. The rest of that? That's not on you."

That starts a fresh wave of tears, Emma holding me through them. After I'm spent, I push my pillows up, propping myself up in the bed. Emma does the same with the other two pillows. "Can I ask you something?" she asks.

"Shoot."

“Was it always that bad? Was Bryce always like that and I just didn’t see it?”

Thinking about it, I gather my hair to one side of my neck. “He was always particular, he always wanted us to present a ‘perfect face’ to the world, but I don’t know, it felt more like an intense infatuation, like a crazy way to be in love.”

I pull my blanket up over us both, suddenly freezing. “It didn’t feel wrong or dangerous. But after a summer away, when I came back? I hated the way he talked to me, the way I couldn’t do anything right, how I always had to be perfect, and I couldn’t just be, well, me. So I left.”

Emma takes my hand, her palm warm in my bloodless fingers. I’m not ready to meet her eyes, so I look out my window. The neighbor’s house is dark tonight. “I never thought it was scary, if that makes sense. It was, I guess, all-consuming, but not dangerous. Not until tonight. That shit was scary. I mean, he put a tracker on my phone. And it’s been there for years, Emma.” I stare at my phone, suddenly afraid to touch it.

Fear is easy, though. It belongs to the old me. I won’t let Bryce scare me anymore. I roll off my mattress, snatch my phone up, and march out of my room.

“What are you doing?” Emma asks, following me down the hallway, through the kitchen and living room, then up the stairs. I knock on the second door at the top of the stairs. “RJ?” I call.

Walker and RJ poke their heads out of Walker's room. I hear muffled grunts coming from the first door, Trips' room, but I ignore them and move to the back of the house. "Can you fix it?" I ask, handing him my phone.

"Tracker app, right?"

I tug on the hem of my shirt. "Can you just check? Make sure it's all legit? Nothing else, nothing extra, no way he can, I don't know, watch or listen? Not just find me, but I don't know, I just, I need it to be Bryce-proof. Can you do that?"

"For sure." He takes my phone and heads back down the hall. I turn to follow him, but Walker gently brushes the back of my hand. "He'll work faster alone. Why don't you guys come in here?" He opens the door to his room for Emma and me.

He has a small couch right inside the door, so Emma and I settle in next to each other while he rolls a drafting chair to sit across from us. "How are you doing?" he asks.

I stare at my lap. "Honestly? I feel like an idiot."

"Clara," Emma scolds beside me.

Pressing my palms against my thighs, I look between the two of them. "I do, though. I should have known. Why didn't I know? He said that app's been on my phone for years. He's been watching me for years and I didn't notice? I must be a fool, or oblivious, or blind, or something." I sigh.

Walker and Emma share a glance, but I cut them off. I don't want a lecture. I want a distraction. "Can we talk about

something else? I feel like he's already taken too much from me," I plead with Walker. "Give me something else to think about?"

He scans his room for inspiration. "Want to talk about art?"

A sad chuckle slips out. "Sure. Wow me with art."

Emma laughs, and the tension softens. I'm grateful for the distraction, Walker explaining what's in his room, which artists he's been mimicking, what level of reproductions he's made, what's good or bad or right or needs fixing in the piles of papers and canvases throughout his room.

His eyes twinkle as he talks, his arms waving when he gets excited, lifting some of the dread from my shoulders. I may have fumbled my perfect life, but I somehow stumbled into this wonderful group of guys, and maybe, just maybe, I'll get to try for happiness instead of perfection. That possibility pushes some of the awfulness of the night away.

I'm done being perfect.

Bring on what comes next, world. I'm ready.

Chapter 20



Walker

By the time RJ comes back with Clara's phone, she's curled up on my couch, pretending to still be awake with poorly timed oh's and um-hmm's. Emma half scoops up her friend, helping her to the door. "I'll let myself out once she's in bed, guys. Thanks for...well, thanks for the cookies, I guess."

With that, RJ and I are alone. I flop onto my bed, rubbing my eyes.

RJ sprawls across my couch. "I got the spy software off. Fucker had location alerts, as well as listening capabilities. He even added one of those apps that can force a remote reinstall as part of a normal update, so I pulled that code out too before giving it back. I'd hate to have that mess show back up again next week because the crazy fuck is sick of waiting for her."

"Good." I roll onto my side and take a sip of water from the cup on my nightstand. "How's Trips?"

RJ shakes his head. “He’s still wound up, but it sounds better now that the heavy bag’s taken the brunt of it. It was mostly grunts coming through the wall, so an improvement over the yelling earlier.”

“Do you think Jansen needs a break?”

RJ smirks. “Jansen was made for this. He’s fine.”

I can’t argue with that. Jansen is the only person who can talk Trips down when he gets that mad. All RJ and I can do is keep other people from making it worse. Trips has a surprising amount of control considering his starting point. He’s a volcano of pure fury, but I’ve only seen him explode once in three years. It still makes me vomit if I think about it too long, though.

“What are we going to do?” I ask.

“About Trips? Nothing.”

“No, about the jackass ex? I don’t think he’s done, and honestly, I don’t know if Clara or Trips should be around that guy again. She looked like she was ready to tear his eyes out with her fingernails, and we both know what Trips will do if he finds that fucker on our lawn again.”

RJ sits up and cracks his neck. “We don’t know what Trips will do if he catches that bastard. We just both know it won’t be pretty.”

We share a look. “There’s not much I can do, and I hate it,” I mumble.

“We all have our things. You keep working on the Rubens—you’re our meal ticket, Walker. I’ll start a sweep on this Bryce guy, see what skeletons I can find. Maybe we can use blackmail or something to keep him from coming around.” He stretches and stands up. “Do you know his full name? I don’t want to bug Clara.”

“No, but Jansen knows where he lives.”

We both look toward the end of the hallway. “Not it!” RJ yelps a second before I do the same.

“Damn it. If I get a black eye, I’m giving you one to match,” I threaten.

He laughs, but we both get up and go to the top of the stairs. I knock on Trips’ door softly. A moment later, Jansen opens it a crack.

“Hey. We’re not there yet,” he says.

“I figured. Do you remember where Clara’s ex lived?”

I hear a low roar and then a series of smack sounds as Trips pummels his punching bag. “I’ll text you,” Jansen looks back at Trips and closes the door.

My phone pings a second later, an address complete with an apartment number flashing across the screen. “How does he remember that stuff?” I ask, trailing RJ into his room.

RJ shrugs. “I imagine you spend your childhood jacking cars and breaking into houses and you get pretty good remembering where you are and where you’ve been.”

I laugh. “You’re probably right.” I forward the address to RJ, then lie down on his bed, watching him work.

“What do you think made him do it?” I ask after a while.

“Who do what?”

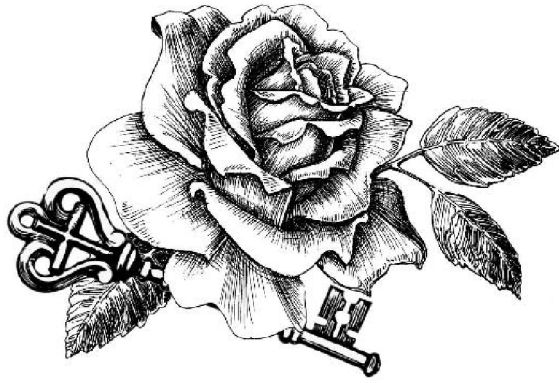
“The fucker? Why would he go all stalker on Clara like that? Why won’t he hear her say no?”

RJ works for a while longer, but I know him well enough to know he’ll say something when he’s ready. After a long while, he sighs. “Maybe he snapped. Maybe he was born wrong. Maybe this is a one-time psychosis and he’ll be a normal, fully functional human in a month. Who knows? I honestly don’t care. I just don’t want him around here again. There’s too much risk. Clara doesn’t need to see what happens when Trips loses it.”

A flash of blood on a sidewalk sears my mind, a bone jagged and freakishly exposed to the night air, screams turned to whimpers vibrating off a brick building. I gag once, twice, before I push the memory away. RJ looks as green as I feel, and I know he has the same image in his mind. “You’re right,” I agree.

I get up and squeeze RJ’s shoulder. “Happy hunting,” I say, closing the door behind me.

Chapter 21



Clara

By Monday, I'd hoped to be recovered from my long run plus newly psycho ex, but sadly, when my alarm goes off, that is not the case. So, seeing as it's a holiday, I turn off my alarm and go back to sleep.

When I finally get up, the sun is sweltering, my head is heavy, and my legs are both achy and jumpy. Of course. The only solution is tons of water and another run. I get dressed and wander to the kitchen, downing my first glass while deciding on a short three-mile loop—hopefully then I won't vibrate with unspent energy all day.

The guys stayed in their rooms yesterday, meaning the house was eerily quiet when I got back from work, but I was grateful for it. Grocery shopping filled in the afternoon, then I hid in my room and watched stupid TV that made me laugh. I also ate a whole pint of ice cream. It turns out that Jansen's sister might be onto something, because it definitely helped. And if I cried a bit, well, I'm only human, right?

I'm not sad about Bryce, but I am ticked about the two years I spent becoming his pet. Now I have to start all over again. It's like I'm a floundering freshman again instead of a woman who knows who she is and where she's heading. And it is not a pleasant feeling. At least I know I like to run—I've got that going for me.

My second glass of water is almost gone when RJ joins me in the kitchen, already wearing running shoes and shorts.

“Want to join me?” I ask, not sure I want him along.

“Sure,” he says, not really looking at me.

I'm totally confused by this guy. I keep replaying the way he looked at me Saturday, the sincerity in his eyes as he wiped the tears from my cheeks, how he sheltered me and helped me up the stairs.

And now he won't even spare me a glance. Jansen said to give him time, but I'm getting frustrated. Either he wants to be my friend or he doesn't, but the sometimes-a-friend-but-sometimes-a-brick-wall situation is bewildering.

We set off toward campus together, me not wanting to force awkward conversation, and RJ apparently content with the quiet. My normally easy stride is a little labored, but I'm blaming the dehydration from the crying, not the ice cream. Ice cream gets a free pass.

I follow my favorite campus loop—it's the best one for people watching. With over 50,000 students, the U is a city in its own right, and I usually like to catch snippets of

conversations from different groups as we pass. Today, it's hardly holding my attention.

About halfway through the run, I'm bored with eavesdropping. Stuck on an empty stretch behind a maintenance building, I work up my courage to break the silence. "I never said thanks, for, you know, helping with Bryce and fixing my phone and stuff," I start, wincing. Way to exude confidence, Clara.

He shakes his head. "No big."

"Kind of big, I'm just saying."

We run for another block before I soldier on. "What did you do to Bryce's hand?"

He looks away. "I dislocated his thumb. Hurts like hell, but it's easy to fix."

"Oh." I'm not sure where to go from here. I want to ask about Trips, but I feel like RJ isn't the one to ask. I want to know what RJ found on my phone, but I'm scared of the answer. So my stupid brain dumps out, "What classes are you taking this semester?"

His steps stutter, so I guess I'm not the only one surprised by my brain's banalities, but such is life, I guess.

He hurries to get his feet back under himself, likely both physically and metaphorically. "I have two upper-level computer science courses, and two gen ed requirements—French and some Anthropology class that's supposed to be easy."

“Why French?” I ask.

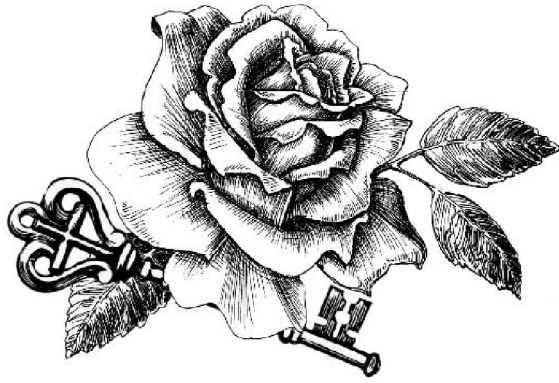
“It was my great-grandma’s first language, so it felt, I don’t know, right?”

I nod. “I took Spanish in high school so I could visit with my abuelita, my grandmother. After her stroke, English was hard for her, but she still could communicate a little with Spanish. If my dad couldn’t visit, she had no one to talk to. So I tried to learn. I’m okay, not fluent or anything, but even though she’s gone, I still want to keep it up, you know?”

RJ shoots me a small smile of understanding before we turn toward a busier section of campus. A glimpse of connection, and it resets the weirdness somehow. I’m not worried about this budding something anymore. Jansen is right—RJ will take time, but he’s not trying to be a jerk. He’s not Trips.

I listen to the soundbites of a new semester as we cut through the crowds, friends greeting each other, freshmen laughing too loud at unfamiliar jokes. A mower rumbles by, the overwhelming scent of green heavy in the humid air. It tastes like a fresh start, a new beginning, and a homecoming all in one. My feet step lightly the rest of the way home with RJ keeping stride beside me.

Chapter 22



Clara

Sunday at the coffee shop is slow. The first week of school flew by, a flurry of new faces, new topics, and the same old job. I had three lunch shifts at the coffee shop, ran once with RJ and twice by myself. I even managed to send in my application for the FBI summer internship program. And, to cap it off, the weather broke. Summer is, sadly, ending.

After the rush of the first week, this stop is killing me. Luckily, I brought my criminal psych book to work, so at least I'll get that reading done early.

I stare out the plate glass front of the coffee shop and realize with a start that I haven't gotten any messages or texts from Bryce in a week. Is that a good thing? He didn't sound like he was giving up, but maybe a dislocated thumb changed his mind?

Note to self: ask RJ if Bryce's number was automatically blocked once he removed whatever freaky-ass spyware Bryce put on my phone.

A grand total of three customers and two hours later, I finally escape out the door, the bite of the fall air fresh against my face. My phone buzzes, and Emma's name flashes on the screen. "Hey girl! Last-minute thing. Want to head out tonight?"

"Emma, I have a morning class tomorrow. Ten o'clock on West Bank, bright and early."

She sighs dramatically. "You are absolutely no fun. We're planning ahead, then. Next Friday, we are going to find a party and we are going to have fun. No 'oh, I'm tired,' or 'Emma, I have to run for like a bajillion miles tomorrow, can we go now?' None of that."

I laugh. "Make it Saturday night and we have a deal. I'm off next Sunday, so I can take the whole day to be a whiny, hungover grandmother."

"Hooray! I'll start looking for something amazing. I'll keep you in the loop."

"Sounds good, Emma. Later."

"Later, girl."

By the time I hang up, I'm almost back to the house—I love how close I am to everything. All my classes are either a fifteen-minute walk or a ten-minute bus ride away. The only exception is tomorrow's business law course. West Bank classes take forever to get to. There is even a bus transfer required, which will be super fun on a -20F degree January morning.

The door opens to silence. I haven't seen much of the guys, which, oddly, has me a little bummed. Finding a roof to put over my head had been the whole goal, but I found friends, too, and I want for us all to hang out again. I amend my thought as I head to my room—maybe all of us except Trips. He can stay in his room or something.

Glancing at the beautiful pink chairs in the corner of my room makes guilt well up in me. I probably shouldn't be excluding him, even if it's only in my head. I just don't know what to think about him. Is he even capable of smiling? Does he hate me? Either he distrusts me, or he's just a curmudgeon.

Home and cozy in my jammies, I curl up in one of the perfect pink chairs and dive into *The Great Gatsby* for my modern literature gen ed course, reading until I nod off. I make myself brush my teeth before I set my alarm and crawl into bed. Tomorrow is going to be early.

Everything hurts when my alarm goes off at eight. I'm always sore two days after my long run, so Mondays are extra terrible. I force myself up, pulling on one of my T-shirt dresses for the day. Business school kids are intimidating. The vibe on that side of campus is just so different.

There are people unironically wearing suits to class every day. I don't own a suit, and even if I did, I wouldn't be wearing it to class on a Monday morning. But social pressure is still a thing, so I fix myself up a little nicer than jeans and a tank top.

Shoving a long sleeve into my bag, I yank on some sandals, stop in the bathroom, then shuffle into the kitchen. Walker is leaning against the counter, his eyes half open, scooping grounds into the coffeepot. “Want some?” he asks.

“Please.” I open the fridge and pull out an English muffin, tossing it into the toaster, then dump some yogurt in a bowl with frozen fruit and granola and munch while I wait for the coffee and toast.

Walker grabs some sort of meal bar and sits next to me at the island.

“Last first day, you excited?” I ask.

Walker shakes his head, running his hands through his hair. “I don’t know why I’m taking a nine a.m. class. I must have been high when I registered.”

I bump my knee against his. “Is it a fun class at least?”

“Rock climbing. So not terrible as far as an elective, but why is it so goddamn early in the morning?”

“Maybe so they can open the gym up for the rest of the day and make the big bucks?”

Walker shoves me playfully. “I wasn’t looking for a real answer, smartass.”

I grin. My toast pops, so I go slather on the peanut butter before diving back into my yogurt. Walker has his head on the counter—I might hear snoring. When the coffee chimes, he doesn’t move, so I go grab both of us mugs. I waft the cup

under his nose. “Come on, Walker. Coffee fixes everything. Wake up, sleepyhead.”

“If you weren’t so cute, I’d push you off the stool,” he says, heading to the fridge to pull out some oat milk before downing the coffee as if it will suddenly turn morning into afternoon.

I take a sip as well, warmth and caffeine clicking on the gears in my brain. “You think I’m cute?” I ask, a second before my brain fully engages and starts screaming “Danger Danger, Abort Abort!” making me fully aware of what a terrible idea that question was.

Walker’s head rests on his forearms, but he turns to look up at me. “Adorable,” he says, that twinkle bright in his dark eyes.

“Oh.”

He drinks the rest of his coffee in one big chug. “I’ve got to scoot. Which way are you heading?” He gets up and grabs a travel mug, filling it with the rest of the pot of coffee.

“West Bank.”

“Damn. Well, have a lovely trip.”

I watch him across the island, not sure which way to take the conversation. “You too,” I say.

Without warning, he pushes up on the other side of the narrow island, leans across, and presses his lips to the top of my head. Dropping down, he tosses me a wink, then waltzes out the back, whistling.

Once the back door slams, I let out a breath. That was unexpected.

I sip more coffee, hoping caffeine will fix what's wrong with my brain so I can process whatever just happened, but it doesn't do anything besides taste delicious.

Does Walker like me? Do I like him?

I'm not ready for anything serious, not right now, but if I were, would I be interested in Walker? He is objectively hot—way more muscles than you'd expect an artist to have, thick black hair begging for me to run my fingers through it, leaving gullies and mountains. Oh, and that goddamn twinkle that says nothing is serious, that life is a game and Walker is the one who knows how to play it. Definitely hot.

So, would I be interested? Yes.

But should I pursue it? Hell no.

I really fucked up with Bryce, and I don't trust myself not to make shitty choices again.

With a sigh, I take the last few bites of my breakfast, annoyed that I'm thinking about dating a week after a legit terrifying breakup. I either need to run more or have a bit more “me time,” because my hormones must be going crazy.

Gah! If I really think about it, I probably have a crush on both Walker and Jansen, with RJ growing on me too.

Two major problems:

1. I like three guys at the same time

2. I live with these guys

Irritated, I make another pot of coffee with my own grounds, washing my breakfast dishes as it brews. I fill up my water bottle, pour the coffee in my travel mug, grab my bag, and walk to the bus stop.

The long journey lets me finish up my modern lit work for the week. I don't look around for friends as I stumble off the bus. Last week I texted the three people I know at the business school and none of them are in this class, so I'm flying solo.

Hyper competitive doesn't even begin to describe the top business school students; I don't want to draw a target on my back, so I take my time choosing my seat in the large auditorium. I end up in the middle section off to one side, close enough to see, but far enough from front or center to look like an overachiever.

The room fills as I pull out a new notebook and pencil. At exactly 10:30, Professor Gleim takes the floor. An older woman with deep smile lines and bright eyes, I instantly know this is going to be my favorite class this semester.

Sure enough, five minutes later it's confirmed: clear expectations, set rules for grading, consistent workload, a teacher willing to laugh—it's perfect. As a bonus, Professor Gleim is structuring the lecture like a law school class—we're supposed to read the assigned cases, have opinions, and be ready to answer any questions she might pose.

She passes out the syllabus, a seating chart, and a small, stapled case study. “You have twenty minutes to read and interpret. We’ll discuss it after the break. Be back by 11:00,” she says.

I dig into the article, highlighting important points with a pink highlighter and adding notes in my notebook as I go. It takes eleven minutes to finish reading the case, and another five to rewrite the salient points in my own words. Finished a few minutes before the break, I follow other students out of the room. There’s a coffee shop upstairs, but I still have my travel mug and no money, so I decide on a leisurely walk around the mini quad across the street.

The air is cooler and drier, reminding me that winter will be here sooner than any of us would like. Lying on the green for a few minutes, the sun warm on my face, I hear a derisive snort nearby. Paranoid, I make sure my skirt hasn’t ridden up or anything, but I’m decent. I look around, but no one is nearby. Weird.

All too soon, I abandon my sunbeam and head back to the classroom, ready to see how I’ll do in my first ever law school-style grilling. I’m planning on working for the FBI, but if they won’t take me, I would love to go to law school, only I’d never be able to afford it.

I slide into my seat moments before the interrogation begins, questions interspersed with short lecture components. Raising my hand, one question after another, trying to get my daily participation points, I finally get called on.

“Ms. McElroy? Based on what we’ve already determined the purpose of the law is, do you feel the defendant has a legal right to contest his treatment in this case?”

I swallow. Showtime. “No, I do not. The law is a way to codify social norms and expectations, while his actions are directly counter to those norms.” The professor smiles, and my heart does a little happy dance in my chest. There’s a familiar snort behind me and I’m turning toward the back to see who keeps scoffing at me today when the professor calls, “Mr. Westerhouse, you disagree?” and I’m looking right at Trips.

He scowls at me for a moment, his face unreadable, before turning to the professor. “Yeah. The law may have initially been meant to keep society running smoothly, to lock in social expectations, but the law is what is written, not what is intended. Unless there is a law saying the defendant can’t, then he has a right to argue his case in court.”

The professor is smiling, looking between the two of us like we’ve both brought her cake. “Ah. And isn’t that the question? Where does the line between social expectations and the law lie? This is the issue we will come back to again and again in this class, but for shorthand, we call it the ‘reasonable person test.’ Would a reasonable person, in a given circumstance, make the same assumptions about the intent behind an action? Would a jury of one’s peers understand where the law fails and social norms, otherwise known as common law, take over?”

The professor continues, and I hurry to copy down the important details, while Trips’ gaze sears into my back. I

glance over my shoulder, his eyes locking onto mine. I stare back, raising a brow in question, and a corner of his mouth turns up. He nods at the teacher, like I'm keeping him from his notes, and I roll my eyes as I turn back to my notebook.

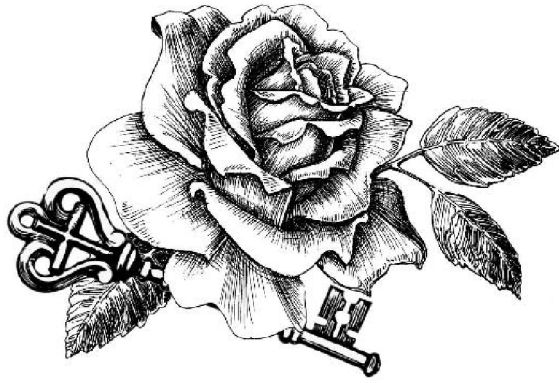
A full semester with Trips glowering behind me, jumping on my words, fighting with me in front of his business school friends? Lucky me.

I sneak another look back, inspecting his posse—the men in dress shirts casually unbuttoned at the neck, the women with razor-sharp parts in their hair and perfect manicures—and immediately peg him as one of the “finance bros.” The accounting students love to hate them, mainly because they are obsessed with two things: grades and money. And the only reason they're obsessed with grades is they can cash them in for the best internships, which will let them access all that yummy yummy hedge fund money. Trips as a finance bro is so logical it's almost laughable.

Class ends, but I don't rush out, taking a minute to organize my bag. Trips goes down the stairs before me, the rest of the finance bros trailing him. He must be a top dog. He catches my eye from the bottom of the auditorium, crossing his arms and lifting his chin. I huff and shake my head, avoiding him for now.

By the time I've packed my bag, he's gone. I sigh and trudge to the bus stop, the breeze suddenly cold on my back.

Chapter 23



Jansen

Two weeks into the semester, and I'm about ready to burst. I either need a distraction or to steal something. It's like every car on the street flashes with a "pick me, pick me!" sign. RJ has a thingamajig that lets me jump newer cars, but he can only hack certain makes and models. I invited him for a quick lift on Thursday, but he shot me down. Figures. At least there are a few junkers around campus—I haven't taken one yet, but my fingers twitch every time I walk past.

It's Saturday afternoon, and I've already gone climbing with Walker, done an hour of tai chi, completed a full flame meditation, and finished grocery shopping. There's a quiz on Monday afternoon I could study for, but otherwise, I don't have anything to do.

I knock on Walker's door, hopeful for something, really anything, to keep the twists in my gut in check. His music thumps through the door, so at least I know he's home. "Hey! I'm bored," I yell.

"I'm busy," he hollers back.

Well, then. I try RJ next. “What?” he asks, opening the door.

“I’m bored,” I say, walking in and flopping on his bed. “You got anything for me?”

RJ shakes his head, looking around his room before snagging a tennis ball from the floor and throwing it to me. I stretch out on my back and toss it up and catch it. “What are you up to?” I ask.

He spins back to his computer. “I finally got a nibble on my spearfishing this week. I’m mapping out the museum’s system to figure out where to find the security details we need.”

“Cool.” I throw the ball up a few more times. “Do you really think we can do this? Steal a Rubens and replace it with one of Walker’s forgeries?”

“I’m sure I can do my part. Are you sure you can do yours?”

I think about it. “If the plan is good enough, I’m sure I can get in and out without issue.”

“You’re the one taking the risk of being caught. If you think we can do it, then we can probably do it.”

I chew on my lip, throwing the ball a few more times. “I wish the heist were today.”

RJ laughs. “You got the itch?”

“So bad. I’m not safe outside—I’m bound to steal a car just because I can. Is there a home game today? Maybe I could go lift some old guys’ wallets?”

RJ shakes his head. “Nah, away game today.”

“Shoot.”

The last thing I stole...whoops. I jump up and sprint to my room, coming back a second later to hand RJ a small black leather book. “If Trips asks, you found this on the floor of the attic.”

RJ groans. “You took his ledger again? Seriously?”

“If he didn’t hide it all the time, it wouldn’t be a challenge,” I counter.

RJ rolls his eyes and sets it on the side of his desk. “He’s going to kill you one of these times.”

I throw the ball at him, hitting him right in the back of the head. “Ow!” he cries.

“We don’t joke about Trips killing people,” I say.

RJ blinks a few times before looking down at his hands, like he can see blood on them. “You’re right,” he whispers.

The smell of it sticks in my mind, the copper tang so thick in the air, like we were swimming in a pool of pennies rather than covered in splatters of blood. I drop to my knees, pulling socks from under RJ’s bed, just to do something, to move, to get the scent out of my mind. RJ gets down on his hands and knees and helps, both of us working in silence until the room is neat. “Sorry,” I say.

“No. My bad.”

I plaster on a smile. “So you don’t have anything fun to do?”

RJ shakes his head. “No such luck. If you find anything, though, I’d be game.”

“Mission accepted.” I give a quick salute. RJ grumbles, a hint of a smile creasing his cheek, things back to normal, or as close as they can be. I try Trips’ door next, but he doesn’t answer. He said something about a group project this morning, so he’s probably out.

I head down the stairs, and after a moment of hesitation, knock on Clara’s door. She doesn’t answer.

Bummer. I’ve only just turned away from her room when the bathroom door flies open and Clara barrels out, slamming into me. Unconsciously, my arms wrap around to steady her, pulling her flush against my chest. The floral smell of her conditioner fills my nose and God, she smells amazing. I press my nose into her wet hair, the start of a hard-on shocking me into realizing this is swiftly turning pervy.

I hurry a step back. “Sorry. I didn’t know—”

“—Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry.”

We both look at each other, her clutching her towel over her breasts, my T-shirt damp from where I pressed her against me, my mini-boner in dire need of an adjustment.

This is absolutely ridiculous.

I burst out laughing, and she giggles until she snorts. This sets me off more, and we’re both laughing so hard we’re crying, Clara half slumped against the wall, trying to keep her towel on while she loses control of her legs. She’s like some

joy-filled pig with Bambi legs, and I can't help myself. I lean forward and plop a kiss on her forehead. Her eyes fly open in shock.

Fuck. I shouldn't have done that.

Play it cool, Jansen. "Um, maybe you should go get dressed," I say, trying to keep some of that laughter in my voice. I escape to the kitchen before she even turns to her door.

A few minutes later, Clara joins me, dressed in dark jeans and a lacy tank, her wet hair folded up on her head like a lumpy cinnamon roll. "You're all dolled up," I say.

Part of the cinnamon roll flops over her forehead as she slides onto a stool. "Not yet." She tucks the chunk back up and motions at her hair. "I've still got some more dolling to do."

"You're heading out?" I ask, grabbing some crackers and cutting slices of cheese. Food fixes things, right? I pull a beer out of the fridge and offer her one, letting her pick which of the two she'd like. The brown ale is the winner, so I slide that across to her. Grabbing my beer, the cheese, and crackers, I sit beside her at the island.

She's pushing back her cuticles, another nervous gesture, peeking up at me through her lashes. I probably shouldn't have kissed her like that. She's just so damn perfect, laughing with that ungodly snort—add still damp from the shower and smelling like a sultry garden, and a kiss really was the only reasonable action.

As she nods, another chunk of hair falls out. “Yeah. Emma found a house party that’s supposed to be pretty good, so we’re heading out later. This, however,” she points at her head, “takes hours to dry right. So I have to start now.” She goes to grab the loose bit, but I beat her to it, pulling the loop through her scrunchie.

The cool wet strands wrap around my fingers, and I want to sniff them, see if the scent of the shampoo transferred to my skin. “Well, I have snacks. I’ll trade them for an invite.” I hold my plate of cheese above my head, daring her to snatch it away.

She chuckles instead. “I’ll take that trade. Now give me the cheese, or else.”

Leaning forward, her fingers curl into claws. She dives at my stomach, and I yelp as she tickles me.

I slide the plate across the counter as I dash away, Clara chasing me around the island, both of us shrieking. I rush into the living room, but she tackles me, both of us crashing onto the couch. We wrestle, but I’m bigger and stronger, so it’s not long before I have her pinned under me. “Admit defeat,” I yell.

She’s laughing so hard she can hardly keep her claw hands up as she shouts, “Never! I will never surrender!”

“What the fuck?” Trips asks from the doorway.

I look at him over my shoulder. “Tickle war?” I ask.

He rolls his eyes. “You’re fucking children.”

I lean down and whisper in Clara's ear, the flowers smell strong there, "On the count of three, we get him."

Her eyes go wide, but she nods. "One...two...three!" I leap off Clara and aim for Trips' knees. A second too late, he figures out what we're up to and tries to dodge, but Clara grabs the back of his shirt, and together we get him down, half in and half out of the front hallway. "Tickle!" I scream, and we both go to town.

Trips is cursing and bucking, but with both of us sitting on him he's having trouble getting the leverage to kick us off. "The back of the knees!" I instruct, and Clara crawls across me, while I work on ignoring the stretch of her over me as she moves down his body to his legs. She must have gotten a knee to her shoulder, because she grunts and rolls, but is back in an instant, and Trips, wiggling like a landed fish, busts out a guffaw worthy of a crotchety old man.

"Yes!" I cackle in victory, which sets off Clara, and when the snort comes, I lose it, collapsing on Trips, not able to hold him down anymore. He scrambles out from under me, slumping against the wall, trying to catch his breath but failing miserably.

I catch sight of Clara, and she's lying on her back in the doorway to the living room, tears streaming down her cheeks, another snort escaping. "Can't...breathe," she chokes out before snorting once again. Some chuckles echo from the front of the house, where RJ and Walker are looking at us like we've lost our minds. "She started it!" I say, pointing at Clara.

This causes another snort, and then the room's echoing everyone's laughter. It feels like a tumbler has dropped just right, a click of a lock settling, and something stretches and eases in my chest—it feels like family.

Eventually, RJ recovers enough to help Trips up. Now on his feet, Trips offers his hand to Clara. She hesitates before taking it. I roll to my feet, stretching my shoulders as I pop up. “So, who wants to go to a party tonight?” I ask.

“It's supposed to be good.” Clara offers a half shrug, wiping some tears from her cheeks with her free hand. Trips still holds her other hand, and I grin. She's wearing him down. Perfection.

“I'll order something for dinner, then we can all go,” I announce. No one objects.

Chapter 24



Clara

I t's been way too long since I last went to a house party. Bryce didn't like them much, so we usually stayed in on weekends. From what I remember, though, they're a big deal, so after dinner I fix my curls, put on going-out makeup, add some low-heeled boots, then wait for the guys on the front porch. Walker is the first one out, and he whistles when he sees me. "Don't do that," I say.

Jansen joins us next. His eyes light up, and he grabs one of my loose curls. "That weird cinnamon roll thing makes your hair do this?" he asks.

I bat him away. "That and a ton of product, so hands off, mister."

RJ and Trips bring up the rear, RJ's intense brown eyes taking me in, while Trips just grunts. "Where are we going?" he asks.

I give him an address that is only a few blocks away. Trips takes off without seeing if the rest of us are following him, RJ

and Walker trailing after him. Jansen grabs my hand and drags me along, his palm warm in mine, his grin contagious.

Halfway down the block, Walker spins back and winks, and I feel my face flush. What is going on with me? *No crushing on the roommates, Clara! It can only end in disaster.*

Showing up to a raging party with four hot guys doesn't help my inner voice chill out—this is totally new territory for me, and I have to admit, I like it. They fold close as we walk through the yard, their joint scent of clean clothes, cologne, and soap both electric and soothing. The music thrums, and I bounce to the beat. We all had a beer with dinner, but that's not what's getting to me—it's the bass beat begging me to move.

I miss going out on the weekends. Dancing is my native tongue, and I haven't spoken it in way too long. I peek between Trips and RJ to size up the house, swaying as I glance at the peeling paint and sagging front porch. All the windows are open, letting the cool night air in and the pulse of the party out.

A big guy stands on the stairs, collecting cash from people as they enter. Someone yells, "Ten bucks to cover drinks? Hell yeah!"

I stop in my tracks. I totally forgot to bring any money with me on my way out. Walker's hand is warm through my tank top as he urges me forward, a gentle press against my lower back.

"No, no, I forgot my cash."

He grins down at me. “No worries, we’ve got you,” he says.

I push back against him, not wanting to take their money, but Trips spins around and grabs my chin. “None of this bullshit, ‘I’ve got this, I’ll pay you back, oh no you shouldn’t have,’ none of that shit, you hear me? You will go to this damn party, and you will have a good time, do you understand?” he growls.

I swallow and slowly nod.

“Good,” he says, turning around and handing the bouncer \$100 and waiting for change. Once he pockets it, he turns back. “Now, let’s get some drinks and find you a place to dance.” I nod again, and we all troop in.

It’s louder inside than out, bodies pressed together, the smell of beer, perfume, and body odor mixing as we weave through the crowd. Trips gets us to a makeshift bar in the kitchen, handing out drinks to the guys, then raising an eyebrow at me. “Um, rum and Coke,” I half yell at him. He nods and turns away. Walker still has his hand on my back, a little lower than before, and Jansen takes a sip of his drink before weaving his fingers between mine. I rock side to side, the beat making my hips twitch.

Trips steps in front of me, passing me my drink. “Never set it down. You don’t want to hold it, you give it to one of us.” I start to roll my eyes, and he pulls my drink from my hands.

I snatch it back. “I know how not to get roofied,” I say. “This isn’t my first adventure in the wild, asshole.” Taking a big swig, I push past him.

I catch a hint of a grin from him, while Jansen and Walker laugh. RJ steps up beside me, keeping pace as I try to find the dance floor. After a full lap of the main floor, I figure out the DJ must be in the basement, so I shoot Emma a message letting her know where I'll be and head down the stairs.

There are holes in the walls on the way down, open mouths in the darkness, broken by a bunch of colored lights spinning from the room below. The bass pounds through me, and I hurry down, excited to get lost in the beat. The crowd is tightly packed, sardines caught in a net, but I find a small space near the back to claim. I close my eyes, lift my arms, and let loose.

Time breaks and I'm a creature of movement, of lines and waves, of pulse and passion. Typically, I dance alone—no one can keep up, meet me where I am, this creature standing in a swirling ocean, each wave both the same and different from the last. I feel delicate touches sweeping across my lower back, brushing along my arms, darting across my stomach and up the side of my neck.

Most nights, this would break the trance, I would have to stop and glare, but tonight, I know these hands will keep me safe. They aren't a precursor to sex or an invitation. They're there to protect, to enjoy, to move with me. I trust these guys. I don't know when that happened, but I do. I trust all of them to keep me safe while I lose myself blindly to the music.

Flashes of lights from snap images for people's socials jitter around me, but they can't touch my dance. I vaguely notice when Emma joins me, and we both twist and twirl in the safety

of the four guys surrounding us, blocking others from disturbing our groove. At some point I give up my drink—it's holding me back. The caresses are still there, still comforting, but softer, subtle, a light brush against the small of my back, a whisper of a finger up the back of my spine.

The beat slows, the trance breaks, and I come to, sweaty and thirsty. “Water?” I yell at Emma, and she nods, grateful. I wrap my arms around Jansen's neck, and he tips his ear toward me.

“Outside and water!”

He grins as I snake my arms off of him before turning to the other guys. Some invisible communication takes place and we all head to the stairs, Trips leading, pushing dancers out of the way if they get too close. I go straight out the back door with Emma, RJ, and Walker. Trips and Jansen peel off into the kitchen. The night air chills my skin, and I'm grateful for the break in the heat this last week. I turn to Emma, sharing a grin. “God, I've missed this,” I say.

She pulls me into a hug. “Me too. It's been too long. This is your element, lady, and you've freaking abandoned it! The queen has returned to claim her throne!” We both laugh, giddy from endorphins, the beat still begging me to move.

“Is this like, your thing? You dance like no one's watching every weekend?” Walker teases.

My smile drops a bit. Emma chimes in before I can figure out how to answer. “This was us as freshmen. We ruled the dance floor. Clara even met Bryce at one of these things. But it

turns out he wasn't into house parties or anything fun. When was the last time we went dancing, Clara?"

I think back. "That end of the year bash freshman year."

RJ's brows drop and his nostrils flare. "You obviously love to dance, and you haven't done it in over a year?"

I shrink back. "I didn't realize it'd been that long." I meet his eyes, and for once, I don't look away first. My heart sputters, and I need to scream, or run, or cry, or something, because I feel too much. I feel too much for too many people and it's good and bad and wonderful all at once. After an eternal second, RJ takes a big breath, a soft smile replacing his anger. "I'm glad you're dancing now," he says.

Trips and Jansen find us out back and pass water bottles around. I guzzle mine, grateful for the cooling slosh in my belly. I look around at this group of people, teasing, joking, sweaty, and a little exhausted. Belonging is a cozy blanket, and mine is fresh soft fleece. I go to take another drink of water before remembering mine is gone. Jansen notices and gives me what's left of his. "I've got you," he says.

I'm just taking a drink when the bottle flies out of my hand. Time slows as I watch it hit the grass and roll, the last of the water dribbling into the grass.

A hand grasps my bicep, dragging me away from everyone. Bryce's voice whispers in my ear, "Don't trust them. Don't touch a thing they give you, Clara. You don't know what they've done. They're sneaky, but I've got you. I'll fix you, don't worry, baby. Everything will be perfect again."

I whip around, struggling against his hold. “What the hell, Bryce? How are you even here?” I try to tug myself from his grip, but it tightens, his fingers digging in, sending pain spiking up my arm.

“They’re trying to keep you from me. They’re changing you. But don’t worry, it’ll be okay.”

“What are you even talking about?”

“Jim sent me the pictures, Clara.” Bryce’s face is stern, like he’s disciplining a puppy. “You were all over them. You know you can’t handle your liquor. When we get home and you sober up, you’ll see how embarrassing it was. But I’m here, Clara. I love you, baby.”

I can feel a crowd forming, and the guys are a protective semi-circle between onlookers and my fight, but tension ripples behind me. I don’t know how long I have before they jump in to help. “Bryce. We broke up. I can touch whoever I want. Now let go.”

I yank my arm away, but his fingernails dig in, his other hand clasping lower as he drags me toward the fence. A sting follows his nails cutting into my skin, his hand clamped so tightly I’ll have finger-shaped bruises up and down my arm tomorrow. I yelp and stumble as my low heel catches on a tree root, and the shift in my center of gravity causes Bryce to twist my arm up behind my back as he continues to plow forward.

“Wait, stop,” I gasp, but he keeps moving, and I fall to my knees, wrenching my shoulder, my arm still locked in his

grasp. A startled scream escapes as a terrible *pop* sounds from my shoulder, followed by a bright burst of excruciating pain.

The sound of someone cracking their knuckles, but louder, comes from behind me and I'm free, face-first on the ground. I scramble backwards, my good arm supporting me as my left arm tucks protectively against my chest.

A strangled groan distracts me from my escape, and I turn. Trips has Bryce's splinted wrist in his grasp, but my ex's fingers dangle like grotesque noodles from his palm. Icy calm claims Trips' face as he gazes at the mangled hand, at Bryce's tear-covered face. His head cocks before his fists sweep out, pummeling Bryce from all sides. All I can think is how each strike sounds like a textbook dropped perfectly flat on a smooth stone floor, but the blood and fists and screaming and Trips' soft growl mix like a surrealist painting with the parallel I have in my head.

Someone pulls me to my feet, and I stumble forward. There's movement to stop me, but I push past, and the barrier lets me go. People call my name, but it doesn't register. Some part of me knows that I have to stop this.

I don't want Bryce dead, and I don't want Trips to kill him. And right now, it looks like that is a real possibility.

Inching around Trips, I try to catch his eye. Bryce is on the ground, curled up, trying to protect his organs as Trips destroys with the ferocity of a sudden summer storm, all black clouds and rolling thunder.

"Trips," I say, my good hand out. "Trips, you can stop now."

He pauses, glancing my way, his eyes hollow, his fire missing, an emptiness echoing in a hearth that should roar with flames. “Trips, it’s time to stop. I’m safe. You can stop.” I circle around him until I’m between the two of them. He doesn’t move, his breath coming in fast pants, sweat trickling down his face. “Come on, Trips. Let’s go home. I want you to take me home.” I turn up my palm, waiting for him to take it.

“He fucking hurt you,” he rumbles, the storm still inside his chest.

I nod. “But I’m okay now. Please, Trips. It’s time to stop. Take me home.” His breath evens out, and I creep closer, careful not to step on Bryce. “Let’s go.”

I slowly twine my fingers with his. He scowls at our hands wrapped together, but he lets me tug him away from Bryce’s weeping, huddled mass. I want to apologize, but now that I have Trips’ attention, I don’t want him to notice Bryce again. Striding toward the gate, Trips trails after me. One last glance back shows me Jansen is right behind me with Emma. Cell phones glint high over Walker and RJ’s heads—clearly the fight was caught on tape. I shudder.

Walker yells at the crowd as we push into the alleyway. “Phones. You give ’em up, we wipe the video and backups, and you get them back. You don’t hand them over, we *will* make you. And before you feel pity for that whining puddle over there, he just fucked up his ex-girlfriend for hanging out with friends. So phones first, ambulance second. And in case you’re curious, you didn’t see a goddamn thing.” The easy

charm I expect is absent; this Walker demands compliance, and I shiver, glad I can't see his face.

The walk back to the house is silent, but each step brings Trips back.

After a few blocks, Emma shares a look with Jansen, slips over to me and kisses my cheek, before turning down a different street. I worry for a second, but Jansen nods and I know they decided together, and that comforts me.

Jansen watches Trips the whole walk, a snake charmer guarding an angry viper, wary of an attack. A block away from home, Trips pulls away from me, his face haunted. At the front door, he stops me. He won't meet my eyes, but he steps in front of me so I can't just walk in. "How's your arm?"

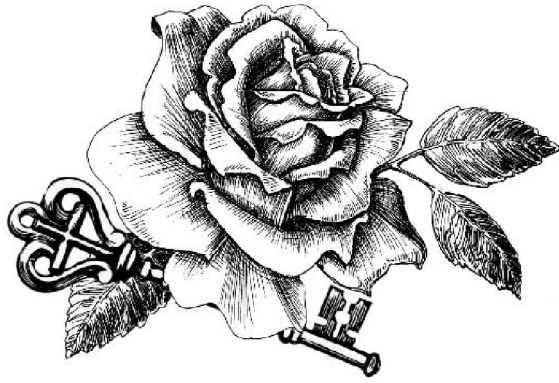
I go to lift it and gasp. Trips' lips press together. "Jansen? Her shoulder's dislocated. Fix it," he says, then spins and marches up the stairs. His door slams, echoing down the stairwell.

The sound makes me jump. The sudden movement seems to kick-start my system, and there on the front porch, uncontrollable shivers cascade into me. I'm freezing from the inside out. The shaking jars my arm, and I gasp out a sob, tears rolling down my cheeks in the hazy dark.

Catching sight of the blood on my right hand, the hand I used to pull Trips back, I know, just know, that it's Bryce's blood mixed with Trips' from his broken knuckles, and I gag, the pain and disgust mixing.

Jansen hauls me to the edge of the porch, and I heave, the pain spiking. I whimper as I vomit again, water and bile and the sweetness of rum and Coke coating my tongue. Jansen gently wraps my hair around his fist, holding it back, as I gag again and again. My stomach is empty, but the pain and disgust are fresh each moment. I flop onto my good side, too exhausted to keep myself up, too tired to keep doing what my body demands.

Chapter 25



Clara

Jansen rubs my back, and I open my eyes a sliver, though shivers still ripple through me. I force myself to take a deep breath. Jansen leans over me, and seeing that I've opened my eyes, he clears his throat. "Clara. I need to fix your shoulder. It might hurt, but then it'll feel better. Will you let me help you?"

I give a tiny nod. I am barely controlling the shivers, and I don't want them to escape while I'm in this much pain. My eyes squeeze shut as Jansen helps me lie on my back. He wraps his hands around my arm, hissing when he sees the bloody crescents left by Bryce's nails. Starting with a steady tug, he moves my arm from my hip out to T, wiggling and shaking it as he goes, before twisting it as he jimmies it up into a Y position. He pulls it across my body, carefully palpating the joint, making sure it's back where it should be. No pop, no zing, but it just feels sore, not vomit-inducing, so it must be back where it should be.

Jansen coaxes my arm gently in different directions, checking my range of motion, then folds it against me so my left hand is holding onto my right shoulder, stabilizing the adjustment. He takes my right arm and wraps it around my body so I'm holding my elbow to my ribs, the pretzel shape making everything safe and secure. Stumbling to my feet with his help, I see Walker and RJ rushing down the sidewalk.

“What happened?” Walker asks, sprinting up the stairs, RJ steps behind him.

Jansen curls his hands into fists, his green eyes flashing. “That crazy fucker dislocated her shoulder. RJ, could you go get her a sling? I would, but—” He glances up at the house, and I know he's worried about Trips.

RJ nods and jogs down the street, probably heading to the 24/7 Walgreens. Jansen wraps his arm around my back, gently tugging me to the house. “She's in shock, I think,” he says to Walker. “She just vomited a bunch. I don't know if it was from what happened or pain, but I imagine she needs a hot shower.”

Walker takes over, bundling me into the house while Jansen starts up the stairs.

“I've got her. You help Trips,” Walker says.

I find myself in the bathroom, the shower warming the room and helping my shivers to slow.

“Clara, do you think you can get in by yourself?”

I look into his dark eyes, and I shake my head. I don't think I could have even made it to the bathroom without help right

now.

He closes his eyes for a second, a quiet “Well, fuck me,” breaking through the steam, before he carefully helps me undress. First each boot, then my jeans. The steam is calming my shivers, but another shudder ripples through me as the cool air hits my legs. He clears his throat, my good hand on his shoulder as he sets my jeans aside. “Do you just want to go in with your underwear?”

I think about how awkward this must be for him. “Sure,” I mumble.

He helps me to the shower, holding my waist as I step over the edge of the tub, closing the curtain as soon as I’m steady on my feet. The hot water runs down my nose, and I watch the stream fall into the tub, swirling around my bare feet.

A forever moment later, a quaking breath clears my mind, the shivers gone. “You still here?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Walker answers. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t fall. Are you back with us?”

I turn around in the shower so the water hits my front, rinsing out my mouth. “I think so. Do you think I could have something hot to drink? I don’t want to be sick again, but hot cocoa sounds good.”

Walker laughs. “I’ll make you some cocoa. RJ should be back any minute with your sling, so that should be good.”

“Okay. I’ll get out and change or something.”

“Can you do that by yourself?”

I lift my elbow a bit. My shoulder is sore as fuck, but I think maybe I can do it myself. “I’ll try. If I can’t, I’ll yell.”

“Got it.”

The door clicks shut. I drag my underwear down to my knees with my good hand, jiggling my knees until they are low enough that I can step out of them. My tank top is harder. When I yank the back of it over my head, it gets stuck, and for a second, I think I’m going to drown standing up in the shower. I stumble forward out of the stream and drop my head, the shirt a tunnel that lets me see my feet. Once I get my good arm out, my head follows, then my bad arm with a hiss.

At least my bra is an easy maneuver, but by the time I’m done, I’m dizzy and panting. I warm back up under the hot water, then with a sigh, I shut it off, step out, and drape a towel over one shoulder.

I glance at myself in the mirror, and I’m basically half naked with the towel like this. I groan and stick my head into the hall to see if any of the guys are there—I’ve already had two towel encounters in the hallway. It’s getting to be a weird habit.

Seeing no one, I dart to my room. I pull on some pajama shorts and a loose tank top, but leave the towel over my shoulders to keep my wet hair from soaking me through again. No way I’ll be able to wrap it up right now. Settling into one of my pink chairs, I try to figure out what the hell happened.

1. Jim, one of Bryce’s friends, must have been at the party

2. He must have texted Bryce some picture of me dancing
3. Bryce decided I needed to be rescued from the guys
4. So he came, grabbed me, dislocated my fucking shoulder, and was summarily pummeled into the mud

Yup. It doesn't make any more sense the second time. Apparently, Bryce has lost his mind. That's new.

I sigh and decide to make a different list, one filled with questions I stand the chance of answering:

1. Why did Bryce think the guys were dangerous? He's delusional, but I heard a hint of truth, and after watching Trips, I have a feeling there is a reason Bryce thinks that. What rumors have I missed about these guys?
2. As we were leaving, the guys wiped the spectators' phones. It's like they planned for this eventuality. That's not normal. It's just not.
3. Jansen knows how to fix a dislocated shoulder. He's a philosophy major. This also doesn't add up.

There's a knock on my door. "It's open," I call.

RJ slips in, a sling tucked under one arm, and crosses the room to perch on the other pink chair. "How's the arm?"

"It hurts."

He grimaces at the sling in his hands, his nostrils flaring again. He looks up, meeting my eyes, the intensity steel between us. "You know this isn't the end. He'll be back."

The urge to look away is strong, but the steel rivets me, locking me in place. I swallow. “I want to argue, but you’re probably right.”

“Will you let us help you?”

I shrug. “How? You dislocated his thumb. Trips probably just sent him to the hospital. I could get a restraining order, but I don’t really see how that would help.”

RJ tilts his head, his curls tipping from one side to the other, exaggerating the movement. “We can do more. We can end this, but I don’t want to do any more without your permission. This could kill his chances of becoming a doctor. We can ruin his reputation, his friendships, his grades. If you let us, we will grind him into the ground. He’ll be alive, but he’ll wish he wasn’t. It will be vicious, and it will be invisible. It won’t come back on you or us. But I won’t do it unless you tell me to. None of us will.”

And there is question number four—who the fuck are these guys?

I break my eyes from RJ to look at my rumpled bed across the room. My pulse beats in my shoulder—I’ll probably have to go to the doctor for an x-ray. I won’t be able to run for at least a week because of the pain. Is it worth ruining Bryce’s whole life, though?

I imagine heading out at night by myself, walking home from a party, or closing the coffee shop. He’ll come and find me, I know it. He’ll show up as soon as he’s well enough to

get to me. My heart rate spikes. Sweat blooms on my brow. I don't think I want to walk around by myself anymore.

I blink tears out of my eyes—Bryce stole my freedom. All because I pulled away from the stifling rules and expectations of a life with him. My adventure's barely started, and it's already over.

I'm not ready for it to be over. I don't want to watch over my shoulder, waiting for Bryce to grab me, to haul me off. I want the space, the time for this tender, new, joyful me to bloom.

Shifting toward RJ, I run my fingers along the hem of my shorts. He's been letting me think, waiting for my decision. "How badly will this screw him over? I don't want to hurt him. I just don't want him to hurt me."

RJ's lips press together before he speaks. "I don't know if we can stop him without some pain, Clara. He took two years from you, stole your joy, and now he wants more. He's willing to hurt you, to snatch you from a public place while you're surrounded by friends. I don't want to halfway stop him, Clara. I want him gone. And I think deep down, that's what you want too."

I look down, my one good hand tapping on my thigh, *one two three four five, one two three four five*, over and over. My heart sinks a bit before I glance at RJ. "He won't know it's you guys? I don't want you all caught in the middle."

"He won't even know he's being targeted. He's just going to have a shit ton of bad luck over the next month."

I nod slowly. “Okay. Do it.”

RJ lets out a huge breath, a sad smile crossing his face. “Let’s get you bandaged up.” He helps me into the sling, his long fingers gentle as he adjusts the buckles and neck pad. He lifts my hair over my shoulder to settle the cushion in the right spot, his fingers warm on my neck.

I let out a sigh, even that small touch loosening some of the knots in my chest. There’s a knock, Walker leaning against the doorframe with a tray in one hand. RJ jolts and scrambles back, leaving me to finish getting the sling settled by myself.

RJ clears his throat, nodding at Walker in greeting. “Clara and I talked. Do you think it’s safe to get Jansen? We’re going hunting.”

Walker’s smile disappears. “Go check. Jansen looked worried, not terrified. Just don’t let Trips help. He’ll need another day at least.” The commanding voice he used when they grabbed people’s phones makes me squirm.

“Got it. I’ve got to—” RJ glances at me, regret tracing across his face. “—well, I...m-mean...” he stammers.

Walker bobs his chin toward the door. “Go. I’ve got this. I’m useless at this kind of hunt and you know it.”

RJ claps Walker on the shoulder as he passes. Walker still hovers with the tray. The twinkles in his eyes are dimmed as he sets the cocoa on the black-and-white art deco side table. “I should have made coffee,” he whispers to himself, handing me a cookie fresh from the oven. The chocolate melts on my

tongue and I melt with it. Once I've finished the cookie, Walker hands me some ibuprofen, followed by a glass of water. Last, he hands me a mug of cocoa and takes one himself.

“The guys and I talked, and I'm sure you have questions,” he says.

“Can you answer them?”

He takes a sip. “I can answer anything about myself, and anything about the others' lives since freshman year. Anything before that is their own story to share.”

I take a sip, the warmth comforting. “That's fair.” I look around my room, not sure where to start. “Why can't you help RJ? He said he and Jansen were going hunting. Why can't you, I don't know, hunt? And what did he mean by that?”

Walker blinks down at his mug before meeting my eyes, a half shrug matching his half smile. “It's not my specialty. I'm not the best either in the field or at gathering intel.”

“Are you guys spies or something?”

Walker chuckles. My face flushes, and I can't decide if I want to yell or cry—I'm just trying to figure this out, and he's laughing at me. He must have seen something in my face, because he takes my mug from my good hand, sets it down, and reaches for my fingers, holding them gently, both of our hands warm from the cocoa. “Clara, we're crooks, not spies.”

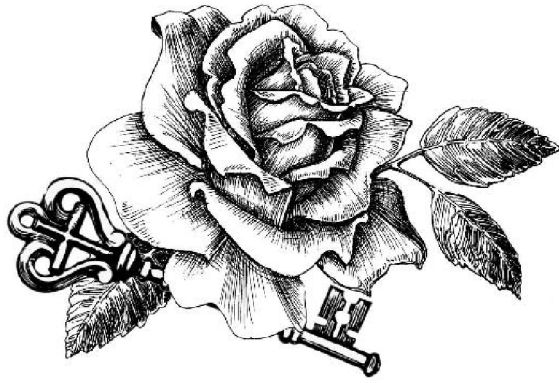
I look down at our fingers interwoven on my lap, and I really don't know what to say. I'm living in a house full of

criminals?

Jansen's joy, Walker's mischief, RJ's intensity—these guys don't seem like criminals. Trips, maybe, but he's also a top finance student at a nationally ranked business school. I stare at Walker, and while he looks relaxed, leaning against the side of the chair, an ankle crossed over his knee, my fingers held loosely in his hand, there's a tightness around his eyes. He doesn't know how I'll react.

I don't know how I'll react either.

Chapter 26



Walker

C lara stares at her lap like it holds all the answers, instead of cute little shorts and those damn beautiful legs. I wait, wishing I could have dropped that bomb any other way than the way I just did.

What was I thinking? “Oh, yeah, we’re all criminals, ha ha ha?” What the fuck, Walker? I’m lucky she’s still sitting here, and she hasn’t called the cops yet. Dammit. Why the fuck am I doing this and not Jansen?

“What kind of crooks?” she squeaks out, and I let out the breath I’ve been holding.

If she’s asking for more information, then I haven’t totally fucked up, right? God, if she records this and goes to the cops, we’re fucked. I look her over. One of her brows is arched, curious, but her eyes are watery, like she might cry. The look on her face makes no sense to me, and I’m the idiot who put it there.

I decide to go for honesty. I can't make her decide this is okay, but lying about it will blow up on us if she ever finds out. "I'm a forger," I say. "Mostly charcoal and oil pastels, and I'm working on my watercolor skills as well. But what pays the rent are fake IDs." I rub my hands on my pants, watching her.

The truth seems to help. Her eyes are less watery. "And Jansen?" she asks.

That's a tough one. "He's a thief. You name it, he's probably stolen it. It's a compulsion with him. He steals from us just for fun, but he'll always give the stuff back if we ask."

Her eyes flash. "Has he stolen from me?"

Well, isn't that a good question. "No idea. I know he's been trying to be on his best behavior with you, so probably not. But I can't guarantee that he doesn't have one of your pens or hair ties or something."

"And RJ? He's a hacker or something, isn't he?" Clara taps on her thigh with her good hand.

I nod. "He's exactly a hacker. He specializes in social media manipulation and planting worms for later access to secure systems."

We sit in silence, Clara tapping her thigh, staring at her messy bed. She picks up her hot cocoa, brings it to her lips, but puts it back down without taking a sip. "What about Trips?"

I want to reach out and touch her, soothe her, but she's closed up, turned inward, so I hold back. "He does a couple of things. He runs an illegal high-stakes poker ring, he's a bookie, he's muscle if we need it, but he's working toward taking on money laundering."

Clara nods, chewing on her bottom lip, her good hand tapping her thigh, over and over again as she stares across the room, not looking at me. She hasn't cried, she hasn't yelled, she hasn't called the police, but things aren't good yet.

A big huff bursts from her before she grabs one of my cookies and eats it in three bites. She finishes her water, tucks a leg up onto the chair and turns toward me. "Why?" she asks.

I take the last sip of my cocoa, trying to put it into words. "It's different for each of us. For me, it started as a game. I wasn't a very good artist yet, so I felt like whoever bought my stuff should have known better. I mean, it was really obvious that my work wasn't legit. But then I got better, and it became a way to prove that I was good enough, that I could be something special. The money was good, school's paid for, and best of all, it's fun—I get to compare myself to the top artists in the world and see how I measure up."

Clara's brows furrow over those big brown eyes, confused. I decide to answer for the other guys as well. "RJ is a lot like me. He has a knack for finding errors and holes in code. It's a challenge for him to figure out how to get it, how to manipulate both people and computers. He loves the feeling of solving the puzzle and getting it just right."

Her fingers are still tapping, but they are tapping slower, so I can tell she's listening. I consider a cookie, but I didn't bring in water for myself, and I know exactly how thirsty they make me. "Trips does this as basically a big 'fuck you' to his family." I let out half a chuckle. "Having grown up rich, he says all CEOs are secret criminals, so he's going to be honest about being a crook." Clara matches my half a grin, as if she can hear Trips telling me just that.

"As for Jansen, he doesn't have a choice. He's tried to stop, and he gets really weird really quickly. Angry and antsy and vicious. It's an addiction, and no one wants to deal with Jansen during withdrawal. He meditates to hold off as long as possible, but when that doesn't help anymore, he steals something." I shrug, not knowing what else to say about Jansen's unique impulse control issues.

Clara looks down at her arm tucked into the black sling, the wrinkles from the bag fresh across it. "What exactly are RJ and Jansen going to do tonight?"

Another good question that I don't know the answer to. "Jansen is probably going to break into Bryce's place and look for anything we can use against him. He'll also probably put a key tracker on his computer so RJ can get usernames and passwords. After that, they'll have to figure out the best way to manipulate his life, how to pull it apart. That part will take all of us. You too, if you'd like." I peek at her to see what she thinks of the offer. She's pulled her other leg up onto the chair, tucking it against her chest, her good arm wrapped around it.

I rest my elbows on my knees and run my hands through my hair. I should not be the one explaining this. But she's still here. I maybe didn't totally mess this up.

And I don't know why, but I really want to keep Clara here. Somehow, she fits with us. She's a grounding stone, a magnet, a piece of sandpaper, something that pulls us together and smooths out our rough edges, makes us softer and focused. I'm shit at words, but I want her here, and I know I'm not the only one. If I scare her off, I don't know what the other guys will do. They won't be happy with me, that's for sure.

There's a soft touch on my arm. I glance up, Clara's head ducked down so she's looking me in the eye. "Thank you. For telling me the truth."

I nod. "You deserve to know it."

She looks back across the room. "Why trust me? You're risking jail, and I'm applying to the FBI."

"I just do. And I'm not the only one."

She lets out a sad laugh. "You trust me with your lives? Bryce didn't even trust me to set the table right when I visited his parents' house." And she bursts into tears.

Damn it.

I get up and go around to her good side, giving her a gentle, one-sided hug. She burrows her face into my shoulder, the smell of her floral shampoo tickling my nose. "I said I wouldn't cry about him again." My chest muffles her voice. "Why didn't I see it sooner? Did I make him crazy?"

I pull away, catching her wet gaze in my own. “You did nothing wrong, and you know that. He’s gone off the deep end, and that’s not your problem, not anymore. You said you were done. He didn’t listen. He hurt you, Clara—you’re seriously hurt. If Jansen weren’t here, you’d be at the ER right now. Mourn the lost time, but never weep for that bastard. He doesn’t deserve your tears.”

She sniffs, wipes her cheeks and huffs, tears still streaming down her face. “Damn right.”

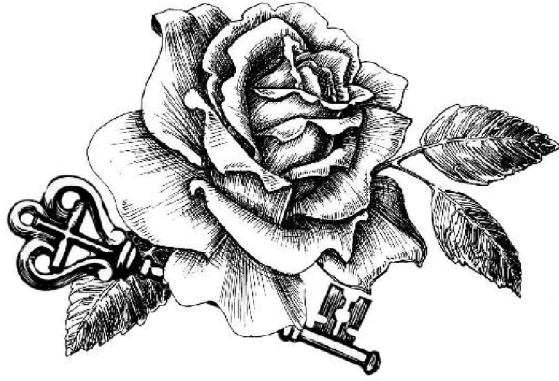
Incredulous mirth ripples up from my gut, and we’re both cackling, the last of the tension broken. Watching her laugh, I’m hooked on the light in her dark eyes, mesmerized by the delicate twist of her lips, captured by her resilience. Damn. She’s absolutely amazing.

“So what’s next?” I ask, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“No way I’m sleeping yet. Movie?”

“Perfect.” My hands sweaty, my breaths shallow, we curl up on her mattress, her laptop propped up at the foot of the bed, and together, we hide from reality for just a few more hours.

Chapter 27



Clara

Light from the hallway cuts across my face, making me blink into the darkness. A heavy arm drapes around me, holding me tight against a body too broad to be Bryce.

I shake my head, trying to wake up enough to figure out why I'm not surprised to feel Walker tight against my back. Oh. Movies. Right. And I'm living in a house full of criminals. Cool.

I blink into the light and find Jansen crouched down next to my bed, his blond hair pulled back tight, dark jeans and a black T-shirt barely visible in the half-light. "Cozy," he says with a grin.

"What is it, dude?" Walker mumbles behind me, not moving his arm from my stomach. It's nice, and he's keeping me from accidentally rolling onto my bad shoulder, so I decide to not worry about it.

"We got something," Jansen says.

“Something that needs to happen right now? Or something that we can fucking deal with when the sun is up?”

Jansen looks toward the windows. “It’ll be up soon. But yeah, I guess it can wait.” He stays squatting next to my bed, bouncing a bit on his toes, energy rolling off him.

“Hey,” I say.

His eyes whip to mine, a grin lighting up his face. “Hey. Are you okay? How’s the shoulder?”

“Hurts. Can you get me some more ibuprofen?”

“Of course, beautiful.” He disappears out the door. Walker rubs his nose against the back of my head and sighs.

I should feel weird about this, shouldn’t I? I’m cuddling with one of my roommates. My roommate who is also a forger. And super hot and nice and an excellent cuddler. Sleep deprivation explains this, right?

Jansen hurries back with a glass of water and a handful of pills. I scoot to mostly upright and take the meds, the throbbing more noticeable when I move. I whine as I slump back down to my pillow. Jansen sets down the glass by the wall but stays squatting next to me, bouncing on his toes, one of my curls twirling around his fingers.

“If you’re staying, can you at least pretend you’re tired?” Walker gripes.

Jansen laughs. “Move over, you lump, and I’ll get cozy, too.”

Walker grumbles but scoots across the bed, taking me with him. Jansen pulls off his belt and pants, then tucks himself into my bed in just his T-shirt and boxers. I catch some nice leg muscles before he's under the sheet and rolling onto his back in front of me. He looks across the bed, smiling. I find a mirrored grin stretching across my own face. "Why are we smiling?" I ask.

"Because I don't have to lie to you anymore."

"Oh."

He twists onto his side to face me while Walker mumbles something about wiggle-worms and hooks. Jansen runs a finger down my cheek. "I had so much fun tonight. I've needed to do something like that for a while now. Thanks for giving us the go-ahead."

I don't know what to say about that. Walker said that for Jansen, stealing is a compulsion, that he doesn't feel like himself when he isn't taking things. But he also just broke into my ex-boyfriend's apartment—what could have been my apartment. So, not knowing what to say, I nuzzle the finger on my cheek, and he flops back onto the pillow, curling his hand into my hair and brushing the ends with his fingertips.

Somehow, I fall asleep, Walker warm against my back, Jansen flopped at my front.

The doorbell sounds long before I feel like waking up. Jansen's snoring, most of his hair out of his ponytail and brushing along his jawline. Walker groans behind me, and I

feel him stretching. I carefully turn onto my back so I can see him. “Good morning,” I say.

“Hi.” He smiles at me, the twinkle back in his eyes. When voices drift back from the front of the house, I figure RJ or Trips must have gotten the door.

“I have a huge favor to ask,” I start. Walker looks a little concerned, his twinkle dimming in his night-dark eyes. “I mean, it’s really big, but I hope you can do it.” His smile drops as I try to keep my own from blooming. “I really, really, really would be grateful...if you got me some ibuprofen.”

Walker laughs, the rich sound making my smile flare, even as I feel my heartbeat pounding in my shoulder. Jansen snorts, rolls, and starts snoring again, causing Walker and me both to laugh harder. “You’ve got it, princess.”

“I’m not a princess.”

“Why not? Someday you’ll be queen, but not quite yet.” He winks as he rolls out of bed to get the drugs, and I flip him off, his chuckles trailing him into the hall.

I listen to the house, realizing whoever rang the bell is still there, the conversation muted by the door between my hallway and the front entryway. Curious, I sit up, straightening my tank top as best as I can with one hand. Walker comes back and hands me the pills, catching my face. “What?” he asks.

I down the pills. “The door. Whoever rang the bell is still here.”

Walker’s brows pull together. “I’ll go check.”

I ease my way off the mattress to follow him, waiting half in my room as he inches toward the door separating the front and back of the house. He presses an ear to the wood before motioning me over. “It’s the cops,” he whispers. “Back up Trips, don’t give more than the bare minimum of information, and if they offer to put a restraining order on Bryce, say yes.”

Before I can process any of that, Walker opens the door and drags me into the living room. Sure enough, two cops are sitting on the couch, Trips in his favorite chair. If I were just meeting him, I would think he was totally at ease. He’s leaning back, one ankle tucked over his knee, his face impassive. But I’ve spent enough time with him to see the tightness around his eyes, the way he’s keeping his knuckles turned toward himself, so the cuts and scabs are more difficult to see. It’s the black circles under his eyes that make tears spring to my own. He hasn’t slept since last night.

The cops turn to Walker and me. Walker nudges me to the other chair before perching on the arm next to me, supporting me without touching me. “Hello,” I say.

One cop clears his throat. “Hello.” He looks at Trips, then back at me. “Are you Clara? Clara McElroy?”

I nod. The cop turns toward me. “I was just talking with Mr. Westerhouse over here. I would love to chat with you about what happened last night, if that’s okay. Maybe we can grab a glass of water?”

I want to look at Walker to see if this is what he was expecting, but I can feel Trips’ eyes searing into me, and I

know I have to get at least one cop out of here before Trips loses it. “Sure,” I say, leading the officer into the kitchen.

I go to pull down a glass, but he reaches around me and gets two down himself. “Why don’t you sit down and relax? I’ll get it. I’m Officer Reed, but you can call me Tom if you’d like. I see you’ve got a bit of a busted wing there,” he says, motioning at my sling.

Sliding onto the barstool on the other side of the island, I watch as the cop gets us both glasses of water. “What happened to your arm?” he asks, sipping his water, pretending not to care about my answer.

I may not be done with my major yet, but I know he’s just separated me so he can tell if my answers are influenced by the guys, and he’s trying to put me at ease so I’m more likely to open up to him if I’m afraid or under duress. I’m none of those things, though, so I shrug with my good shoulder, take a sip of water too, and then tell the bare bones truth. “My crazy ex-boyfriend dislocated my shoulder last night.”

He pulls out a notepad. “Who is this crazy ex-boyfriend?”

“Bryce. Bryce Mason.”

The cop makes a note of that. “Now, I spoke with Bryce early this morning. He was in a bad spot and expressed concern for your well-being.”

“I’m sure he did. We broke up a few weeks ago, and for some stupid reason, he thinks I’ve been brainwashed or something. He keeps showing up, stalking me.” I look out the

kitchen window, wishing I had coffee instead of this glass of water. “He’s lost it, and I honestly don’t ever want to see him again. He yanked my arm from its socket, and it hurts like hell. The worst thing? I’m supposed to run a half marathon in four weeks. Now I don’t know when I’ll be able to train again.” I feel tears threaten, but I don’t let them fall.

“What about after he hurt you? What happened next?”

“Trips stopped him.”

“Trips?”

I motion toward the living room, the cop confused, and I realize Trips is not his real name—I’m officially an idiot for not realizing it was a nickname until right now. “Mr. Westerhouse,” I stammer out, trying not to sound like a bitch. I’m going to murder someone for not telling me, I really am.

The cop nods, taking down a few more notes. “Now, I need some more details. These two young men have very different recollections of what happened last night. What really happened at that party, Clara?”

My right hand fists before tapping on my leg. “I told you. Bryce showed up, crazy, telling me he was going to *save* me. He dragged me away from my friends, and when I tried to get free, he dislocated my shoulder but didn’t let go. Trips broke in, got me free, and stopped Bryce. I got out of there fast. I was scared and in pain.” I shrug with my good shoulder again, wondering how many times the cop will ask me the same questions before he decides I’m not lying.

His lips press together. “Ms. McElroy. I don’t want to make this whole situation worse, but your ex-boyfriend was admitted to the emergency room with five dislocated fingers, a fractured zygomatic, two missing teeth, a broken nose, three cracked ribs, and a concussion. I wouldn’t call that ‘stopping him.’ I would call that aggravated assault by an unstable young man.”

I flash back to last night, Bryce’s gurgling screams and whimpers as I calmed Trips and got him out of there. I shake, swallowing back a flood of bile. I grab my shorts in my good hand, forcing my outside to be calmer than the swirling emotion inside of me. I meet Officer Tom’s eyes. Flashing him a sad smile, I struggle to keep my cool. “I honestly didn’t see much of anything. It was dark, and I was hurt. I just got away as fast as I could.”

His serious eyes look me over, not quite believing me. “I also find it odd that no one saw anything. There must have been hundreds of people at that party, and not one person saw a single thing. No one caught a minute of that fight on their phones. Strange, right?”

“Weird.” I smooth out my shorts, tapping my fingers, *one two three four five*. “I wish I could be more help.” I stand up, forcing Officer Reed to end the conversation. “I need to go to the doctor myself and have an x-ray of my arm taken. I want to make sure Bryce didn’t cause permanent damage.”

“Of course,” he says.

I stop him before we enter the living room, letting a bit of my fear leak out. “In your professional opinion, do you think Bryce will be back?”

My fear causes the officer’s sympathy to show. He looks down at his knuckles, like he wishes he had a different answer. “In most cases, stalkers only escalate. If what you said is true, this is going to get worse before it gets better.”

“What can I do?”

“I can set you up with a restraining order. Come to the precinct on Monday and we’ll get the paperwork started. But honestly, you’re already about as safe as you can be, as long as your roommates are looking out for you.”

I nod. “That’s what I thought. Thanks.” I lead him back to the living room.

The other cop is in a staring contest with Trips, and Trips is obviously winning, his arrogance incomparable. He looks away from the other cop with a dismissive huff. “Do you have what you need? Or should I call my lawyer?” Trips asks.

Officer Reed’s jaw clenches, but he nods at his partner. They both head toward the door. “I have what I need, but I wouldn’t leave town anytime soon,” Officer Reed says.

The two cops let Walker usher them out the door.

I take a few wobbly steps and flop down on the couch. “Oh God,” I whisper.

Trips snaps his fingers at me, and I shoot him a glare. He holds a finger over his lips. My anger flares. In what world

does he have the right to shush me? I just walked a careful line with the truth and the cops for the man!

I'm about to get up and do something violent when Walker drags in an exhausted RJ. RJ paces around the room with a handheld beeping tablet computer. He does a lap around the outside of the room, circling in, before motioning for me to get off the couch and for Trips to get off the chair. After a moment, he looks at the machine. "Clean. Where else?"

"The kitchen and the front hall. Unless you brought the friendly officer farther into the house?" Trips glares at me.

"Just the kitchen. What the hell did I do wrong?" I shoot back.

Walker and RJ go into the kitchen, while Trips just grunts and glares at the front of the house. After an awkward moment, I sit up. "Can we talk yet?"

Trips ignores me. I don't want to get anyone in trouble, so I wait until RJ and Walker have cleared the kitchen and the hallway. The reality is sobering. They're checking for listening devices, for bugs.

I am so out of my comfort zone here.

There might be bugs in my house. And my roommates have a way, ready and waiting, to search for them. I thought I was okay after last night, that I just needed time for the truth to sink in. But this is a lot of truth all at once.

The urge to go for a run to deal with all this excess truth burns, but my arm is aching, so that's obviously impossible. I

tuck my legs under me as I curl up on the side of the couch closest to Trips. I might not know what I think about all of this, but I still want to be close, as weird as it is.

Walker and RJ come back in, faces grim. RJ takes the other chair, while Walker plops down in the middle of the couch and pulls my legs over so they're draped across his lap, a warm hand resting on my calf. "There was a bug in the kitchen. We moved it to your bathroom, Clara, until we know how we want to play this," Walker says. RJ leans back in his chair, his eyes mostly closed, exhaustion radiating off him.

"Should we get Jansen?" I ask.

Trips leans forward, his head in his hands. His knuckles are cracked, some places taped together.

"Better idea," I say. "Everyone goes to bed. We'll meet at one p.m. once we all can think again."

"We need to have a plan, Clara. We can't just waltz around pretending the cops aren't suspicious. There's a fucking bug in your bathroom," Trips growls.

I stand up, anger flashing through me. "You're right. There is a problem. But I don't see a damn one of us making a good plan on no sleep. So get your ass to bed. We'll figure it out later."

Trips pushes himself to his feet, glowering over me. He's gulping down air, but before he can yell, RJ stands up and stumbles out of the living room. "Good call, Clara," he says, scratching his head as he weaves through the door.

Trips switches his glare to RJ as his shoulders slump. His hands ball into fists, but he leaves the living room too, not looking back at Walker or me. I slide back down onto the couch, covering my face with my hands, pushing the tears away. Damn adrenaline, making me weepy. I take a few deep breaths, then look up at Walker. “Do you think I’m good to take a bath?”

He rubs his hand up and down my calf, staring at one of the pictures on the wall. “Yeah. It’ll probably sound a lot like washing dishes. You should be good.”

“Okay. I’m going to take a bath, and then hopefully I’ll be able to go back to sleep. Are you sleepy?”

Walker lets a half smile onto his face, his eyes a little sad. “Honestly, you and I are the best rested here. Unless you want some company in the bath?” He grins at me.

“Nope.” *Not yet*, my stupid libido adds, just for kicks.

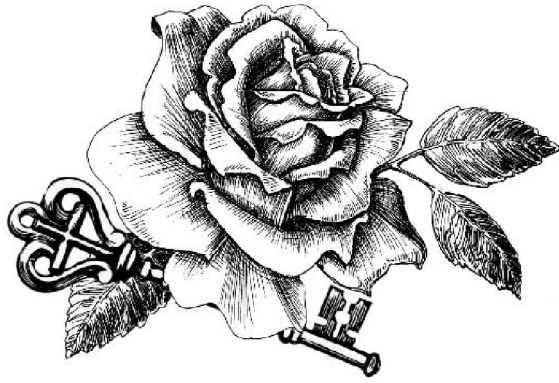
Walker slides his hands higher on my leg, his fingertips circling my knee. “Well, I don’t particularly want to snuggle with Jansen, so I’ll make some food for later. If you *do* go back to bed, let me know. I don’t know the last time I slept so well.”

Heat creeps up my cheeks as I scoff, scurrying away, the warm bathwater calling my name.

It takes a while to get myself situated with my newly shitty left arm, but eventually I get into the tub, the heat helping me to pull oxygen in my lungs. I flop my hair out of the tub, as

putting it up one-handed seemed a little too tough, and let my mind and body relax. I'm just going to have to roll with the punches. That's the only way this works.

Chapter 28



RJ

Sleep helps. Even four hours of it helps. Looking for bugs this morning feels more like a snorkeling dream than something I did a few hours ago. Stretching, I look for my phone, pulling open the keystroke app Jansen installed on the monster ex's computer. Nothing yet. He's probably still sleeping, recovering from whatever Trips did to him.

As much as I despise the guy, Walker and I called an ambulance for him as we left the party. He might have veered into dangerous stalker territory, but last I checked, that wasn't a death sentence, just a beat-to-all-hell-and-deserving-it sentence. I hope Clara feels the same way.

Clara, what a mess. I gave Walker the go-ahead to tell her the truth after running it by Jansen and Trips. Honestly, I think I'd rather light all my technology on fire and lose all my passwords before going downstairs and seeing the aftermath of that bomb we just dropped on her lap. But I smell bacon and coffee—Walker's cooking for us. Not one of us turns down a

Walker meal. They're rare flashes of pure culinary joy. So I brush my teeth and stumble down the stairs.

I bypass the coffee and pull a Mountain Dew out of the fridge—it's almost one anyway. "Disgusting," Walker says when I open the can. I shrug, snag a piece of bacon, and head back out to the living room. Trips is already there, a mug of coffee on a coaster in front of him. I grab a second coaster and settle into the other chair.

Thank God the circles under Trips' eyes are a little lighter—he must have gotten a few hours of sleep. His music was blaring when Jansen and I got back from the monster ex's, which probably encouraged Jansen to go find Walker and see how Clara was taking the news. Since he didn't come back upstairs, she must either be taking it great or terribly. I'm not sure which would be worse.

I've only told one IRL friend about what I do, besides the guys, that is. This dude thought it was so cool he kept following me around, asking me inane questions, and wanting me to turn on the webcam of some girl he had a crush on. It was creepy, so I cut that weirdo out of my life. Clara wouldn't be like that, but she did just okay a major smear campaign against her ex, so I'm still not sure what the results of this will be.

Voices are coming from the kitchen, so I figure the rest of the house is awake and coming this way with food. I take another sip of my Mountain Dew, pulling out my phone to

make sure things haven't changed since I checked the key tracker upstairs. Nothing.

Jansen throws open the door, a plate full of French toast, a cup of tea, and a carafe of maple syrup all balanced on a tray. Clara is next with a bowl of fruit salad and a plate of bacon. Walker is last, with a couple of cups full of utensils and a carafe of coffee. They're all laughing, and Jansen has that dufus look on his face where he just made a joke and everyone got it.

Watching them, a small smile creeps across my face as well. I share a look with Trips, and I know he feels it too—this is our team. These are the people I trust most in the world, even more than my family. And Clara is part of it now. It feels right. Terrifying, but right. They set the food down, pull extra plates from under the French toast and bacon, and we all dig in.

We don't talk while we eat, but it's not a weird silence. Everyone is hungry, and we'll all make more sense if we're fully awake. Clara and Trips face off over the last piece of bacon, and surprisingly, Trips lets Clara have it. She cackles, her eyes glowing in victory.

Suddenly, I realize I'm not anxious and worried about what to say to Clara. Apparently, being furious and terrified can cure my "oh I like you so I can't talk to you" problem. Good to know, I guess?

Clara gulps down the rest of the bacon, taking control of the room like a natural. "So I'm starting at square one, guys." She wheels on Trips. "Trips—what the fuck is your real name?"

Because that cop made me feel like an idiot when I kept calling you Trips. I had to resort to ‘Mr. Westerhouse,’ which was...weird.”

Trips grimaces, while the rest of us laugh. I can almost imagine the cop’s face, and I wonder if he thought she was being uncooperative or disrespectful. That knocks the smile off my face. I’m glad I wasn’t awake for that part of the morning. I’m sure my black face would make us look extra suspicious to the cops.

“I have the worst name ever,” Trips says, cutting off the laughter. “I’m named after my grandfather. And my father. And somehow my lucky-ass brother got to skip it, leaving me to be cursed. My name is Archibald. Archibald Clarence Westerhouse the Third.”

“Archibald? Archibald Clarence?” Clara snickers, and after a second, she snorts. This sends Jansen into a giggle fit, Walker joining them. Trips tries to get mad, but I catch the hint of a grin as he watches them laugh. It takes a minute, but eventually Clara wipes her eyes, and after taking a few deep breaths says, “Well, that was unexpected, Archie.” She winks at Trips, and his grin wars with his frustration.

“Don’t you dare, Clara. I’m Trips here.”

“Okay, I’ll call you Trips, but that’s weird too, you know.”

“It’s Trips, like, I’m the third, triple, Trips,” he explains, before quickly shutting his mouth, realizing that explaining your own nickname is pathetic.

Clara grins, but as I watch, her smile fades. “I guess we need to get to the real stuff now, right?” She looks down at her lap.

“Where should we start?” I ask her. She looks at me, those chestnut-brown eyes locking with mine, and my heart skips a beat. It always seems to stop when she looks at me. I clear my throat, and she looks back at the coffee table.

Tugging on the bottom of her shirt with her good hand, she swallows, not looking at any of us. “I guess we should start with the cops. I assumed that with Bryce assaulting me, we’d be okay. Yeah, Trips lost it a bit.” She glances at him, but he’s glaring across the room, not wanting to make eye contact with any of us. Trips hates it when he loses control, and he’ll be a mess for a while after last night.

Clara realizes Trips isn’t going to look at her, so she braves on. “But even so, Bryce started it, and Trips was defending me. I thought the cops would be happy to have an easy case. Instead, they seem super suspicious, and Bryce was too, so I’m thinking that I’m missing part of the story.”

At this, all of us look away. Because she’s right. She is missing part of the story, and none of us want to give it to her. Jansen clears his throat but stays quiet. I’m working up my own courage, but Trips cuts in, saving the rest of us.

He swallows, still staring at the wall. “Sophomore year, we were at a party, we got a little hammered, and were coming back to the house. There was this guy, he was beating up his girlfriend.” He runs his hands through his hair, and I know

he's seeing the blood on the sidewalk, hearing the screams, living through what happened next.

He shakes his head a bit, loosening the memories. "I jumped in. I didn't think. And the guy, well, I hear he's never gone back to normal. Like constant migraines from the concussion I gave him. He didn't walk for months."

He pauses, running his fingers over the broken backs of his knuckles. "We all freaked out when I realized what I'd done. The girl was weeping, terrified. We ran. The two of them gave statements, but there are so many people on campus, the cops couldn't figure it out. But they have sketches. Officer Reed must have been on that case, because he took one look at me and played hardball."

I breathe deep, trying to keep my hands from shaking. That night was the worst night of my life. I've never been that scared. We all holed up here, only leaving to go to class. We watched the front of the house, waiting for the cops to knock.

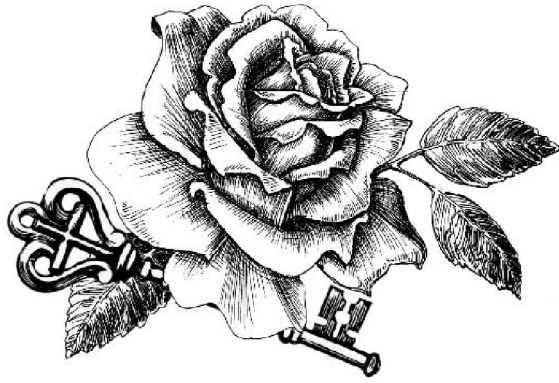
They didn't and eventually, we believed we were safe. And if I'm being honest, that was the point we all became a team, not just a bunch of guys with gray morals and sketchy ways of making money living together. We started watching out for each other, tapping each other's skills as we covered our tracks as best we could. But I don't think I'll ever be able to remember that night and not feel sick.

Clara has been watching Trips, only I can't read her face. I wish to God I could, because while she stayed last night, this will be the real test. Trips almost killed a guy, and instead of

turning him in, we hid him. We continue to hide him, to try our best to make sure he's never in a situation where that could happen again.

We failed. Last night he lost it. But, I think we *all* would have stood by and let Trips kill Bryce. I'm not sure any of us would have stopped him. Bryce hurt Clara, and my own rage had flamed. If Trips hadn't gotten there first, I would be the one with bloody knuckles right now. Even Jansen didn't try to cut in, to pull Trips off, to calm him down. Clara did what we didn't want to do. She'd protected Trips, gotten him away, calm and home, all with a totally useless left arm. Does she think helping us was a mistake?

Chapter 29



Clara

Not one of the guys will look at me after Trips explains what he did, what they all did two years ago. I'm sick to my stomach. Trips almost killed someone, and they all just covered it up, while keeping him leashed so he can't do it again.

I think back to that first confrontation with Bryce, how RJ cut in and dislocated Bryce's thumb, how he'd said that was the better option than having Trips lose his temper. I just thought they were being intimidating, but RJ was telling the truth. I remember how Jansen followed Trips to his room that night, how Walker made sure Emma didn't get in Trips' way.

This is crazy. Trips isn't just a jerk. He's dangerous—possibly lethal.

I'm living with a man who can kill with his bare hands.

I stare at the rug, the fear rolling over me. Risking a glance at Trips, it's obvious how upset he is, his jaw clenched, his hands clasped together so tightly his fingers are turning white.

I can't imagine what it must feel like to live with that. To know you can lose yourself in a fight and not know if you'll come out of it in time. What must it be like to know that you ruined someone's life, that because of you, someone will never walk again without pain?

It would ache every minute of every day if you had a heart. And looking over at Trips, I see that heart in the tightness around his eyes, the shallowness of his breathing. He's trying not to cry.

He fought last night to protect me, just like he fought to protect some random girl he didn't even know two years ago.

He's a protector, not a killer. He just doesn't know how to find his way out of the haze that takes over.

Does Trips belong in jail?

The part of me that wants to be in the FBI screams he does. He broke the law. Justice has not been served.

But this other voice, an unfamiliar voice, quiet but sincere, asks me what Trips going to jail would fix. The guy would still be hurt. Trips can't fix that. Trips' life would be over. And who would be there to jump in the next time a boyfriend smacked his girlfriend around? No one. How would that be justice?

"How do you know about his leg? His migraines?" I ask.

"RJ hacked his medical records." Trips unfolds his hands and pushes them through his hair. "I paid his medical bills anonymously through the portal. I'm pretty sure everyone

decided it was a computer glitch, but the money was real, so no one worried about it.”

Walker shifts next to me. “We keep an eye on the guy, though. Both to make sure he’s okay and—”

Trips picks up from Walker. “And to make sure any women in his life are safe.”

And that, the unfamiliar voice whispers, is real justice.

I feel myself shutting down, too much to process all at once, but I’m stubborn. I made a list in my head before this meeting, and I deserve the answers, so I force myself to keep moving forward.

1. Find out Trips’ real name—check
2. Find out why cops were weird—check
3. Fix Bryce situation
4. Debate the merits of a restraining order

Here we go.

I sigh, forcing out more words, more questions, seeking more answers that will probably toss me on my ass. “Okay. Thanks for telling me the truth,” I say, and four sets of eyes lock onto me.

This must not be what they were expecting. But I’ll take the time I need to process later. Now is for questions. “What do we do about Bryce? I agree he’s gone too far, and I will admit that I don’t want to see him ever again. He’s scaring me. But the thing is, I only want to be safe. I’m not sure I’m up for

ruining his life, despite what I said last night, RJ. I just don't know if I can."

RJ leans forward, eyes locking with mine. "He hurt you, Clara."

I nod. "He did. But my goal is safety, not revenge."

RJ's nostrils flare, and both Jansen and Walker tense beside me on the couch. Jansen puts a hand on my knee, and I turn toward him.

"Have you ever had a stalker before, Clara?" he asks.

I shake my head.

Jansen rubs circles on my kneecap while he gathers his thoughts. "My sister did once. We did everything we were supposed to: we filed a restraining order, she stopped all contact, deleted every email and text, ignored every call. He'd stand in front of the house, watching, and we'd call the cops. They'd come and get him to leave. Evie didn't get to go anywhere alone. We drove to school together; we came home together. If a friend wanted to hang out, they had to come pick her up. One night, her best friend was having some meltdown about a test and her parents and expectations, so Evie went to help her friend."

Jansen chews on his lips, like he doesn't want the words to escape his mouth. "He followed her, and when she parked at her friend's house and got out, he grabbed her, threw her against her car, said terrible things to her. I don't know what all happened, she wouldn't tell me, but she screamed loud

enough for her friend's mom to come out and scare the guy away. Evie was a mess.”

Jansen pulls his hair into a ponytail, taking a moment to settle out of his memory. “The cops picked him up, but he was only in jail for a few months. And every day Evie would get a letter in the mail from the guy. I read one of them, and they were all kinds of fucked up. It only stopped when Evie went to college. She couldn't tell anyone where she was accepted, couldn't let anyone post anything on their socials about it. She's been safe, but she had to disappear. And the letters still show up at our mom's house once or twice a year.”

Jansen grabs my good hand and waits until he has my attention. “The thing is, Clara, even now, Evie isn't safe. If I'd been able to do then what I can do now, maybe I could have helped her. Maybe she wouldn't have had to have her whole senior year ruined. Maybe I could have kept her safe. I couldn't then, but I can now, for you.” He squeezes my fingers, and my heart squeezes with it. “Let us help you, Clara. The only way to stop a guy like this is to remove him from the game. Because when it comes down to it, one of you has to disappear, and I'd much rather it be Bryce than you.”

A few tears leak out, and I pull my hand from Jansen's, angry at myself for crying again. I rub them from my face as Walker gives me a half hug from the other side. Jansen told me exactly what I was afraid to hear. It was Bryce, or it was me. And for once, there was no way in hell I was putting Bryce first. “Okay.” I swallow back more tears. “Okay, so we ruin Bryce. How?”

Walker shifts so he's leaning back into the corner of the couch. "This part you have to help us with, because we don't know the guy, and you do. Let's start at the bottom and work our way out of it toward a plan. What does Bryce really want?"

Trips scoffs. "He fucking wants Clara back, and that's not fucking happening."

As much as I wish I were that high on Bryce's list of priorities, I know I'm not even close to the top. "The thing he wants the most is to be a doctor."

RJ's eyes light up and he pulls out his phone, immediately diving into research mode.

Walker taps the arm of the couch. "We could sabotage his grades."

RJ doesn't look up. "I do have access to the medical school grading system too."

Too, as in, everyone already knows he has access to the regular grading system. This is crazy. "I think he'd notice. He's too neurotic to get bad grades."

Jansen sits up suddenly and yelps, "I forgot!"

I twist to look at him, but he's on his feet, unable to sit still. "Last night I found something, and I was going to tell you guys, but I totally forgot. While RJ's worm did its thing, I did a once-over on the apartment. Bryce has been stealing other people's exams. Or maybe he's been selling exams? Either

way, he has a big pile of papers with different names on them all for the same classes.”

Jansen’s smile is back full force, and I hate that I’m going to have to burst his bubble. “He’s not stealing them—he’s studying them,” I say.

“What?” Jansen asks.

I shrug, forgetting about my crappy shoulder, and hiss at the pain. I shake my head, gasp for breath, and try again. “Bryce wants to be the best in every class. If he finds out someone got a better grade than he did, he’ll ask for a copy of their work to figure out what they did better. If they won’t give him the work, he’ll buy it off them.”

Four sets of eyes stare at me like I’ve sprouted a hand from of my forehead. “What?” I ask.

“You dated that guy?” Trips asks, one eyebrow almost reaching his hairline.

“Well, yeah. He worked hard for what he wanted.”

Trips looks like he wants to knock me upside the head.

“It seemed like a good thing at the time,” I grumble.

“But he didn’t just want to get an A, like a normal overachiever. He wanted to be the best. He wanted perfection,” Walker says.

“Yeah, he did.” He demanded perfection in everything, demanded perfection from me. I don’t say that, though. The guys are already looking at me like I was an idiot for not

realizing that Bryce was obsessive before now. They don't need any extra ammunition. "Either way, those papers aren't a sign of cheating. It's just Bryce being Bryce."

Jansen flops back down on the couch. "Well damn. I thought I had it. Cheating would have booted him from med school, right?" he asks RJ.

RJ's nodding. "Cheating would be a red flag, but if it was a one-time thing and he addressed it head-on and showed remorse, he'd still have a chance. What we really need is a felony." RJ looks up from his phone, the answers on the screen in front of him.

We sit in silence.

"RJ, what exactly counts as a felony?" Walker asks.

"Well, the things you expect, like murder and manslaughter. Four DUIs in ten years is a felony, criminal sexual assault, some drug crimes, burglary, aggravated assault, theft of more than \$1000—so I guess we're all felons. I mean, except you, Clara. And maybe you, Walker. But I can't imagine art forgery is a misdemeanor."

RJ taps on his phone, apparently taking a minute to verify that all the guys are felons. Because I live in a house full of felons. And I just applied to the FBI internship program. Yikes. I sure hope they don't ask about my roommates on a polygraph during the interview. I'd not only fail to get the job but would probably be arrested on the spot.

I shake my head, trying to think clearly about it.

Jansen paces around the room, unable to sit any longer. “Let’s start with the easier ones. Drinking and drugs. Would either be a good vice for Bryce?” He glances at me.

“No. He drinks a little every once in a while, but never in excess, and he will Uber if he’s had more than one drink. I don’t think he’s ever even smoked weed, so no drugs, either.”

Trips whispers a quiet “fucking false paragon,” but doesn’t join the conversation.

“Next up, would he ever steal anything? Preferably with a gun?” Jansen tries.

“He’s very focused on rules, so stealing would be a no-go. He *is* from a hunting family, so he has some rifles, but no handguns.”

“So that leaves assault,” Jansen looks awkwardly at the floor, all the nervous energy draining out from him. “Um, did he ever, you know, hurt you before last night?” he asks, not looking me in the eye.

My shoulder throbs, reminding me exactly what he did. At least the nail marks have scabbed over. Before, he’d been curt, demanding, keeping me all to himself, but he’d never hurt me like last night. If he had, I’d like to think I’d have gotten out of there sooner. I don’t know that I would have, but illusions are helpful sometimes. “No—this is the first time he’s hurt me physically.”

Jansen’s cheeks flush red. “And um...the other assault... um,” he stammers. Walker jumps in and saves him. “Sexual

assault,” he says, keeping his hands to himself like I’m an antique teapot in a rich-person store.

I shake my head, trying to act like this hasn’t gotten super awkward. I’m chatting about whether I’ve been sexually assaulted to not one, not two, but three guys I’m crushing on, in a room with four hot guys, and if that isn’t awkward, I’m not sure what is. “Nope. None of that,” I choke out.

We sit in silence again. “So where does that leave us, RJ?” Walker asks.

RJ sighs. “Fucked.”

I stare at the table. “We can’t get Bryce kicked out of med school.” I clear my throat, then get up off the couch. “Last question—should I file a restraining order?”

Trips locks eyes with me. “Fuck yeah. At least then the cops will have you on record as a victim if all this goes to shit.”

I break eye contact with him, glancing at the rest of the guys to see if they all agree. Everyone is nodding. “Okay then.” I clear my throat, not wanting to feel like I’m telling these guys what to do. This is their world, after all. I’m just visiting. “I’m pretty sure I need time to think about all this before I can help you guys come up with a plan. I know Bryce well, but I haven’t ever thought about how to make him fail at things, so this is pretty new.”

As I go to leave the living room, my shoulder pulses. I bite my lip to redirect the pain, and RJ sees me as I pass him. “We

need to get her to campus medical. She needs an x-ray or CT scan, in case there's soft tissue damage or something."

"I've got her," Trips says, pulling himself out of his chair. "I'll meet you at the truck in five minutes," he adds, before disappearing up the stairs.

I let out a huff, but Walker gently takes my good hand, forcing me to look down at him, still lounging on the couch. "Let him do this. He needs to know you're okay."

I'm not sure why I'm worried about what Trips needs, but a small part of me is, probably the same part that likes to tell me how beautifully built he is, even if he *is* a jackass. I now have a tiny insight into this guy, hearing this big secret. He brutally beat someone. But he did it to save a girl he didn't know. He lost it on Bryce, but he did it for me.

I'm not exactly sure I owe him anything, but taking me to be checked out seems like a small ask for whatever additional trauma last night caused him. I block out the thought of Bryce's trauma. I'm done with him. I can't worry about him anymore—he's gone off the deep end and I have no intention of joining him there. I don't even want to be at the same pool party anymore.

My head fuzzy with weird analogies, I duck into my room to shimmy out of my pajama shorts and into some loose sweats. I'll probably be sweaty by the time I get to the clinic, but at least whichever nurse practitioner gets stuck with the Sunday morning drunks won't have to see my ass hanging out of my shorts. Why I didn't worry about my ass hanging out with the

guys is another thing I'm going to worry about later. I probably need a list of things that I don't want to think about right now, but will have to figure out at some undetermined point in the future.

I sling my purse over my shoulder, slip on sandals, and head out the back door. As expected, Trips is already in the truck. When I get to the door and open it, I realize that climbing into the beast is going to be a nightmare with only one arm. Trips turns to me, his blue eyes steely, and I decide to just make it happen.

I half hop onto the runner, snatching onto the "oh-shit" handle right before I lose my balance, my bad arm trying to steady me but stuck in the sling. I topple, my good hand holding on, but one of my sandals flies off, and as I dangle half in and half out of the vehicle, I realize I'm going to have to start over again.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Trips grumbles, flinging open his door.

I hop back down on one foot, the bounce making me yelp in pain. Trips' hands grip my waist, and I turn just in time to see him glare as he hoists me into the truck. He's almost slammed the door when I cry out, "Wait! My shoe!"

"Good God," he says.

It takes a minute, but he finds my shoe halfway under the truck, and after crawling back out, instead of flinging the shoe at me like I expect, he ducks his head into the footwell and carefully slides the sandal back onto my naked foot. The soft

grip he has on my heel makes me forget how to breathe, but he ruins it by talking. “Anything else, Crash?”

His lips are drawn, and his eyes are just as unyielding as ever. “Nope. I’m good,” I say, wanting to yell about my new nickname, but not wanting to push Trips any further. I don’t know at what point he breaks.

Without another word, he slams the door in my face.

Chapter 30



Trips

I sit in the truck like a fucking idiot, driving Clara to the campus health center without saying a damn thing. What the fuck am I supposed to say? Oh, damn, I'm sorry I fucking lost it and put your ex in the hospital? Oh yeah, sorry about crippling a guy a few years ago and dropping that shit on you when you're already down? Whoops, the cops are everywhere now, and you're guilty by association? Fuck.

I sneak a glance at her, and she's staring out the window, her good hand idly rubbing her bad shoulder. Shit.

Glaring at the road, I try not to let my anger spike again. When that douche grabbed her last night, I fucking lost it. I hardly remember what happened. All I know is my hands are bruised and my knuckles are busted, and Clara was dumb enough to get between me and that stalker, and the other guys were dumb enough to let her. I can't even decide who I'm still mad at, her or the guys. And me. Always me.

She couldn't even get in my truck. I wish I'd seen him reach for her a second sooner. I wish I could have tossed him down

before anyone got seriously hurt. But wishes don't get you fuck-all. I've had nearly two years of borrowed time, I felt like I was gaining some damn control over myself. And one fucking night ruined it. Wishes are just hopes waiting to be dashed.

I must have let out a sigh, because I feel Clara looking at me. "Are you okay?" she asks.

I work at not grinding my teeth. The girl is asking me if *I'm* okay? Seriously? "I'll be fine," I croak.

Instead of turning back to the window like I expect, she keeps watching me. "How about your hands?"

I flex one, the ache welcome. "They'll heal."

She lets out a small hum and turns back to the window.

We pull up to the health center. I find an open spot and go to pay for the meter when Clara stops me, her good hand on my arm. "Free meters on Sundays," she says.

The sign under the meter says she's right. I turn to ask her how she knew that, as she doesn't have a car, but she's already up the steps and at the door of the center. So I jog to catch up, pulling open the second door, as she's already through the first.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"Getting the door."

"Yeah, but why are you coming with me? I can call when I'm done."

“No.” I feel the urge to shake her. Of course I’m coming with her—she’s not safe until we figure out how to get rid of Douche-boy.

She rolls her eyes and marches past me, apparently deciding I’m not worth the fight. I miss the fight, and I hope her shoulder gets better soon. She seems smaller or duller or something when she gives up on a fight.

Fuck. Why do I care if she fights with me or not? This is ridiculous.

She checks in at the front desk while I pick two chairs off to one side, farthest from a guy and his buddy that both look a little green. I am not getting puke on my shoes.

Clara absently tucks her hair behind her ear, then drums her fingers on her thigh while talking to the receptionist. She took off those damn short shorts and put on some sweatpants. It doesn’t change the fact that she has a great ass.

And now I’m thinking about her ass. What the fuck is wrong with me? I go all caveman on her ex and suddenly I’m into her? I’m calling bullshit on myself.

Besides, I’m sure Walker has a thing for her. And maybe Jansen. And come to think of it, until last night, RJ hasn’t said more than a few words to her at a time, so he’s into her too. Or at least he was. What the fuck is wrong with us? She’s planning on joining the fucking FBI, and we’re what, so addicted to risk that she’s the perfect forbidden fruit? Shit.

She turns around and finds me sitting in the corner, a small smile tugging up one side of her face, and I can't seem to catch my breath. I swear I can feel her waist between my hands, the soft curve of the arch of her foot, the softness of her hand on my arm—all the tiny touches we've had today flare up in me, and I don't know if I should punch something, laugh, or run away like the fucking coward I am.

She leans against the wall next to me, her floral scent following her. "It looks like we'll be here for a while. Apparently, we didn't hit up the only party last night. So, I'm going to head out and call Emma. She's not going to believe I'm okay until she hears my voice. Come and find me if they call my name?"

I nod before she disappears outside. And now I'm chilling in the campus health center by myself. The flowery smell lingers. Shit.

Pulling out my phone, I message RJ to see if the ex has logged into his computer yet. We'd better find something to nail this asshole with soon. Because if I get close enough to see any mock concern on his smug face again—he won't have one anymore.

The guy across the room starts to hurl, and his friend shoves a fucking hockey helmet in front of his face. Do these hungover fools not have a normal ass garbage can, like everyone else?

My calendar pops up an alert distracting me from the disgusting event on the other side of the room. It's time to

schedule the next poker game. How long will it take to destroy one med student's life? One week? Two?

I push the notification out another week. This thing will probably get worse before it gets better.

RJ lets me know that there still isn't any activity, and the flames in my chest flare. Maybe I should push the notification two weeks? Damn it. This fucking girl. All I asked for was no drama. And what did she bring? So much fucking drama.

Only, it's not her fault. This pile of shit lands squarely on her stalker ex's fucking pillow.

The guy across the room gets called back, and his buddy leaves with the helmet. Hopefully he's heading straight to the dumpster around back. Idiots.

At least those idiots are harmless. The one fucking up our lives? Less so.

Lost in my thoughts of different ways I could make the idiot ex pay for messing up my plans, I don't notice Clara until she folds herself into the chair next to me.

"Emma says thanks for bringing me to the doctor."

That damn flower smell attacks my nose, and I grunt in response, trying to think about anything but lithe body of the girl sitting next to me.

Fuck. I don't need this shit. None of us do. The cops were literally at our damn door this morning. I've got big problems that need fixing. *No distractions, Trips. Not even hot ones.*

“Have you done Monday’s reading yet?” I ask, scrambling for something grossly unsexy to talk about.

I feel her eyes searching my face, so I lean forward and rest my elbows on my knees, my chin in my hands, actively avoiding making eye contact. She leans back again, and I don’t know why, but I feel like she can read minds or something when she looks at me. She rubs her shoulder again and says, “I did all the readings except the last one. I was planning on finishing that up today.”

“Do you think verbal contracts should be binding?” I ask. Why the fuck am I quizzing her on business law? Fuck if I know. I guess it’s the safest topic right now, and I can’t sit here silently and let my mind wander. It’s fucking wandering right into a briar patch chock full of poison berries right now.

“I think verbal contracts should be binding, but I also understand that they are nearly impossible to enforce. Think about the standard school lunch line. First, they offer you food. Second, you accept the food. Third, both parties intend to exchange the food for lunch money. And fourth, the kid pays—the consideration. If the kid just eats the food and doesn’t pay, the kid has broken an unwritten contract.” She pauses for a second, her lips tucking over to one side, her brows lowering. “Now, I think school lunch should be a public expense, but the analogy holds. There was no written contract, and you shouldn’t need one for something like a school lunch. But the essence of a contract still holds.”

I chew on my lip for a moment. “That works for things like school lunch. But for business...” I shrug.

She nods. “Of course. Businesses have a lot more at stake than some overcooked mac and cheese.”

I feel myself smiling. We just agreed on something. I’m about to point it out when her name is called.

She vanishes into the depths of the building, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Needing to get the image of her, the feel of her, her damn flowery shampoo scent out of my mind, I snatch a magazine off the table. But after flipping through it without seeing a thing, I know I need something more complicated for my brain to work on.

I try going through some stuff for my finance quiz on Tuesday, but I learned most of the ideas behind the Black-Scholes model last year. Instead of getting caught up in manipulating variables, I’m thinking about Clara again, and why she chose accounting instead of finance for a minor.

I try to trick myself, focusing on her crazy stalker ex instead of the girl herself. Only, my thoughts twist themselves back around and I realize that I don’t want Clara rambling around campus by herself. I have a feeling she’ll fight if she thinks we’re coddling her, though. She’s scared, but not scared enough to let us become her literal shadows.

Damn it. Focus. Back to the bad doc in the making. What do we know about Bryce Mason?

He's fucking crazy and wants Clara back. He wants to be a doctor. And he's suspicious of us.

Not that his suspicions are misplaced, but we keep a low profile on purpose—very little social media presence, just enough to not be mistaken as bots—and RJ manages all that for us.

We're all good students, except for Jansen, who has trouble remembering to get to class and turning in assignments on time, which always ends up dinging his grades.

The only other things I know about the guy are that he stalks both his academic competition and his ex-girlfriend. It's not enough.

I know RJ is doing a deep social media dive this afternoon, so hopefully he can pull something up, but really, our best resource is Clara. And she has no experience in taking the things someone loves the most and twisting them until they snap, breaking the person in the process. How could she? She's practically a walking billboard for "good girl."

I'm honestly surprised how she let loose at the party, the way she moved, the pure sensuality of those fucking hips, the confidence of her stance. She was something else, some other version of herself, and the fucking magic of it made us all reach out, wanting a moment to join her in the trance. And her skin, which should have been gross and sweaty, instead it felt electric. Not one of us wanted to let go.

My dick gets hard remembering, and I stand up to walk it off, dropping the magazine on a table on the other side of the

room. I pace, the receptionist glaring at me every second pass. Each time, the urge to flip her off swells, but that's juvenile and dumb. I *am* being annoying.

I pace until I'm certain the receptionist is going to kick me out. But I just can't get this girl out of my fucking mind.

Slumping against the wall, I run my hands through my hair, staring at my shoes as the silence stretches. What if something happened back there?

What if her shoulder is totally fucked?

Why didn't I get to her sooner?

The door to the back clicks open. I whip around just in time to see Clara stepping through. I walk *purposefully* toward her. Not running. Walking. "Hey," she says.

"You good to go?" I ask.

"Yeah. I'll need to get an ice pack and a heating pad, but there's no permanent damage. I should heal enough to run again in two weeks, so hopefully, I can still catch my race."

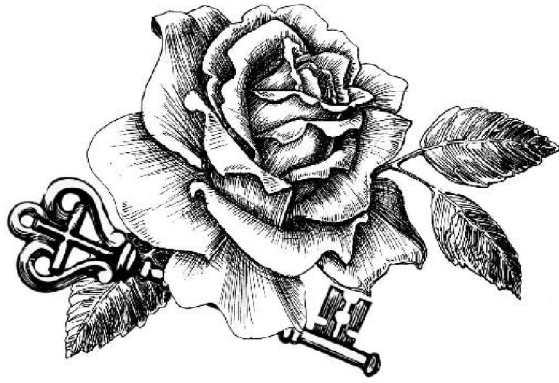
I nod, holding the first door open for her, then rushing ahead and getting the second. She shoots me a look, but I ignore it. I know I'm being weird. I clear my throat. "That's good. We have ice packs at the house, but no heating pads. We'll stop at the drugstore on the way back."

She sneaks me a grin. "I'm buying my own heating pad," she says.

I raise an eyebrow at her but say nothing. I'm buying the damn thing, and she can't stop me. I couldn't keep her from getting hurt, but I'll at least help her fucking get better. That decided, I bound down to the truck so I can be ready to lift Clara in this time. No way I'm crawling around on the blacktop to retrieve another fucking shoe.

And if I get another chance to cradle her curves in my palms? I can decide how I feel about that later.

Chapter 31



Clara

I spend the rest of Sunday alternating ice and heat on my shoulder while finishing my homework for the week. The guys keep popping in and checking on me, one at a time, as the day goes on. It's both sweet and smothering. To add to the mothering vibes, Walker makes us a huge family dinner and won't let me reimburse him for any of it, even though it's yummiier than anything I've had at a restaurant.

After dinner, Walker and Jansen talk me into more movies and somehow—I really don't want to over-think it—we end up in my bed again, Walker on my left and Jansen on my right. For a split second, I consider moving to the living room, but they're both so cozy, and as much as I hate to admit it to myself, I like having them in my bed.

I feel weird and selfish when I think about it, seeing as I have a crush on pretty much all my roommates, including Trips. I mean, Trips is still at the bottom of the list, but he made it onto the crush list with all the grumpy caretaking he did today.

Ugh. I really shouldn't think about it. It makes me feel like a shitty person. A throbbing shoulder is enough of a punishment for inappropriate crushes.

I remind myself that I won't be dating any of them. First off, with this whole Bryce mess, I think being single for a good long while is a solid plan. Second, they're all criminals. As nice and kind and wonderful as they (mostly) all are, I still don't know what to think about that. And last, it's not like I can date all four of them.

If I'm being totally honest with myself, that would be exactly what I want. So my wants are impossible. Time to avoid the whole situation.

That decided, instead of kicking us out to the couch, I revel in some selfish cuddles in bed with two wonderful guys.

I'm not surprised when I wake up sandwiched between the two of them, Walker's arm once again draped around my middle, Jansen's leg flopped across mine. What does surprise me is Trips hovering over us.

"Wake up," he says.

"I'm sleeping, go away."

"Get your ass out of your fucking puppy pile. I'm driving you to West Bank. You have ten minutes." He strides out of the room, but I can't help but notice he does so quietly, not waking up the other guys. Weird.

I stretch carefully, making a plan that lets me get ready and out the door with coffee and food in less than ten minutes.

Walker tugs me closer, his nose in my hair, while Jansen tucks his head and nuzzles me sleepily, dangerously close to my boobs. I drag myself to the head of the bed, shimmying out from their arms. Walker groans, annoyed, but Jansen doesn't seem to notice, instead moving toward Walker, looking for a warm body to nuzzle. I allow myself a grin, watching these two sleepy, beautiful men in my bed. What are the chances?

“Seven minutes,” Trips calls from the hallway.

I step over Jansen, grab some clothes, shove my phone and computer into my backpack, and exit the room, leaving the door half open. On my way down the hall, I drop my clothes in the bathroom, before rushing into the kitchen to start the coffee maker and plopping my bag down next to the sink. Priorities are key, and coffee is always a priority.

Trips is sitting at the kitchen island eating the last couple of bites of toast, but he doesn't look up as I rush through. I can already tell that moving this fast is going to make my shoulder hurt, so that sucks, but I dash to the bathroom to wiggle into my clothes, yank a comb through my hair, clean my teeth, and swipe on some deodorant. Once I'm dressed, I tuck my arm back into its sling, shoving a bottle of painkillers into my bag as I dash back to my room for sandals. Of course I forgot shoes.

Trips is in the hallway when I come back out, swinging his keys as he passes the door. “One minute.”

I dash back to the kitchen, fill my travel mug with coffee, stick my water bottle under the faucet while grabbing a

granola bar, some string cheese, and an apple and shoving them into my backpack, turn off the water, twist on the lid, jam that into the backpack too, snatch up the coffee and rush out the back door just as Trips is pulling into the alley. He stops, idling in the path of anyone else who might want to come through. A second later, he hops down and meets me at the passenger side, once again lifting me into the big truck. I'm pretty sure I could get in by myself today, but I also don't want to flop around like that again. Plus, I don't think Trips is nice very often, so I'll take what I can get. "Thanks," I say as Trips slams the door in my face.

So kind and helpful. Sigh.

I drop my poorly packed bag into the footwell and buckle up before Trips slides in, and we're roaring down the alley. "I'm not trying to be suspicious of a free ride, but why are you driving me across campus?" I ask as I rearrange my backpack.

"We're heading to the same place."

Once all my stuff is situated, I pull out the granola bar. "Yeah, but I don't have to be at West Bank for another two hours."

Trips takes a hard right, and I bang my elbow into the center console. I gasp as the jostling bolts up through my arm. I need to get food in my stomach so I can take some pills. Today is going to be rotten. I even have to work this afternoon—here's hoping it will be a slow day. Trips curses under his breath, glancing at me rubbing my arm. "Sorry," he mutters.

I take three deep breaths. "I'll be fine."

“So.” Trips clears his throat, and I just know he’s going to say something about finding Walker and Jansen in my room. I need to think of something snappy to say. My pre-coffee brain is totally blank, though. Shoot. Trips continues, “I hate to do this, but I need your help.”

That is definitely not what I thought he was going to say. Grateful, I finish chewing the first bite of my granola bar before responding. “Help with what? I’m not writing papers for you.”

Trips laughs, the sound loud in the small space, brighter than I’d expect from such a bitter guy. “I can write my own fucking papers. God,” he chokes out. After he catches his breath, he continues. “No, that’s not at all what I need. We need to deal with Bryce, and the problem is, we don’t know him. You do. I was wondering if you could, I don’t know, write a Bryce essay. We need to know everything if we’re going to get rid of him.”

“You want me to write an essay on my ex-boyfriend?” This is so weird.

“Yup.”

I shake my head, looking out the window as we cross the Mississippi to West Bank. “How will this help?”

Trips clears his throat again, and I realize he isn’t happy to say whatever he’s going to say. “If we want to keep you safe, we need to know what makes Bryce tick. What he loves, what he hates, where he goes, who he’s friends with. We have to find the right fucking screw to twist so he’ll leave you alone.”

It makes sense. But it also feels like a betrayal. I finish my granola bar and take some ibuprofen with my coffee. “I’m going to file my restraining order after class,” I say.

“Good.”

Trips pulls into one of the parking ramps—of course he paid for a parking pass. Surprisingly, he’s able to fit his beast of a truck into one spot, not cutting across multiple spots. He’d probably get the pass revoked if he parked like an asshole though, and come winter, any covered spot in the city is a hot commodity. He turns off the car and faces me. I tap my leg again, stupidly nervous that he’s staring at me, *one two three four five, one two three four five*. “I’ll see what I can do,” I say.

He pulls twenty dollars from his wallet. “Payment for your time. You can get a real breakfast while you work.”

I shake my head, but he gently tucks the bill into my sling. “Please. This won’t feel good.”

I meet his steely gaze and reluctantly nod. His eyes flick down to my lips. I hold my breath, worried he’s going to kiss me. He just got off my asshole list yesterday. We are so not at kissing yet. Luckily, he grunts, grabs his bag from the backseat and throws himself out of the cab. I let out a shaky giggle as I slide out of the truck. We trudge toward Hansen Hall, together but apart.

The line at the Starbucks upstairs is long, so I take my time choosing an egg sandwich and an iced mocha while building my “Bryce paper” in my mind. I hand over the cash with my

order, grab my sandwich, tuck it into my backpack, and head to the outdoor patio, a coffee in each hand.

Finding a nice sunny spot, I settle in, pulling out my laptop and the sandwich I stashed. This one arm thing is already annoying, and it's only been a day. I finish the egg biscuit in four bites while my computer boots up, slurping down the mocha.

I'm forced into self-reflection while I eat. Why in the world am I worrying about how to format a paper about my ex-boyfriend's strengths and weaknesses? Answer? Because I hate to do things wrong. Can I mess this up? Probably not. But that doesn't mean I don't want to get it right the first time.

My brain takes the lead while I berate my own perfectionistic tendencies and decides on a SWOT analysis—strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Business classes for the win!

Over the next hour, I detail Bryce's life in broken shards of business lingo. Strengths and weaknesses are easy to navigate, but opportunities and threats are harder to define. People in his life seem to be the best corollary—the people he likes and trusts, and the people he's rubbed the wrong way.

By the time I'm done, I'm wondering why I ever stayed with the guy. The list of people who like him is a quarter the length of the people who can't stand him, including all the friends I made freshman year besides Emma. Huh. Maybe I should have done a SWOT analysis before this—I might have saved myself a year at least.

Only a year ago, I wouldn't have had the guys. These hot crooks somehow gave me a safe place to regroup and see things clearly. I double-check my paper for spelling and grammar mistakes before texting Trips, letting him know it's done. Two seconds later, he's gotten back to me with his email address. Just the email address, no need to waste words, I guess.

The sun is getting hot, so I finish my mocha and pack up. It's almost time for class anyway.

Business law is a fun ride, and I'm sure this is my favorite class for the semester. Trips and I once again end up in an adversarial position, but it doesn't feel as angry this time, more like a challenge than a fight.

Class ends, and when I go to pick up my bag, Trips is there, his finance friends standing behind him as if they can't leave without Trips leading them to the door.

He grabs my backpack and tosses it over his shoulder. "This is my roommate, Clara. Clara, this is everyone."

I smile at the future high rollers, getting a few smiles back. "Hey," I say.

Trips moves down the stairs, his flock following behind. Because he has my bag, now I'm stuck following too.

"What happened to your arm?" one guy asks.

Trips turns back and scowls, but the guy doesn't see. "Rough weekend is all," I say. This guy doesn't need to know my whole situation.

“It sure looks like it. I’m Jonah, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Jonah.”

Trips stops walking once we’re in the hallway, his entourage parting ways around us. “I’m driving you to the police station,” he says.

“Don’t you have class?”

“Not for another hour.”

I shake my head. “Trips, I’ve got this. I’m sure it’s going to take forever. I’ll just head over there myself and go back to the house.”

He crosses his arms and glowers at me.

I try again. “I have work later anyway. You don’t have to be my chauffeur.”

He’s still glaring. I decide to glare back. Finally, he sighs. “Please,” he says, surprising me. “I won’t even stay. I’ll just get you over there safely.”

“You promise you won’t be a burr stuck to my back?”

A hint of a smile creases his face. “I will be as slippery as I know how to be.”

“Then I would love a ride, thank you.”

Trips rolls his eyes as he hikes both bags over his shoulders, leading the way to the parking lot.

The drive to the closest station is quiet. Each time I ride with Trips, the awkwardness lessens. He drops me at the front of the building, ducking around to help me out before slinging

my backpack onto my good shoulder. “You sure you don’t want me in there?” he asks.

I shake my head. “I’ve got this. Thanks for the ride.”

We stare at each other, me waiting for him to move, him waiting for who knows what. Eventually, he clears his throat and strides back around the truck, the V-8 roaring as he pulls away from the curb.

Chapter 32



Clara

I turn toward the police station, suddenly wondering if I really should be here. I mean, it's not like Bryce was violent before this. Is it worth it to call him out publicly? He's hurt much worse than I am. I turn to leave, not wanting to cause a fuss, but a female officer approaches the front and stops me before I take two steps. "Can I help you?" she asks.

I tug on my shirt before I even think about it. "Umm..."

"Is it about your arm? Are you here to press charges?"

"Oh, no, not that. Well, kind of that, but not charges. No, I guess I'm here for a restraining order, but I'm starting to think that I might be overreacting."

The cop ushers me toward the precinct, and I follow along, knowing she's manipulating me into coming in, simultaneously annoyed that I noticed and glad that she's taking this decision out of my hands. "Honey, if the person you're worried about put your arm in a sling, it's probably

going to get worse, not better. You're very brave to come here."

I scoff, not meaning to be rude, but I'm not brave. Smart, capable, hardworking, those I'll claim. Brave isn't really on my resume. She gets me inside, nods at the person at the front desk, and we're buzzed back to the precinct floor. "So who did this to you?" she asks as she has me sit on a plastic chair next to what must be her desk.

I look down at my lap, my good hand tapping on my thigh. I really need to find some other way to deal with stress. This would probably be the most obvious tell out there—it's a good thing I don't gamble. "My ex-boyfriend," I say.

She sighs and types some things into her computer, and I can tell we're doing the paperwork portion of the interview. I could get up and run away right now, which is feeling like the better option every minute, but I don't know which buses will get me back to the house, and I have a feeling that if any of the guys found out I chickened out, they would bring me right back here and make me file this damn thing. I tuck my backpack between my feet and wait for the long slog of questions.

We start with my name and address and all that good stuff. The cop introduces herself as Officer Josie Morgan, and she spends the next hour asking invasive questions about my relationship with Bryce. Laying it all out there, the subtle control he'd built up over the past two years, the extent of my anxiety about doing anything wrong for him, the constant

belittling and berating, well, it makes me feel like an idiot. Why didn't I notice? I thought I was smart. I thought I could read people. My heart races, and I wipe the tears away quickly, not wanting anyone to see them. They're the tears of a fool.

Officer Morgan is patient. She tells me that there will be a trial the following week, and we put in a request for advance notice so I can navigate the absence with my professors and boss. She's just finishing up when I feel a shadow behind me.

I glance back and blink a few times, surprised to see Officer Reed from yesterday morning. "Clara," he says, "you came by. I thought you might ask for me?"

I look down at my lap, not sure what to say. Luckily, Officer Morgan answers for me. "She took a bit of coaxing. Is she connected to one of your cases, Tom? I can link them."

He nods, writing something down on a piece of scratch paper. "Did you decide on the restraining order?" he asks me.

I rub my shoulder. "Consensus is, this isn't going to get better. I figure it might help, you know?"

Reed pulls a chair from another desk and joins us, sitting a little closer than I'm comfortable with. "Do you want to hear how Bryce is doing?"

There's a hiss from Officer Morgan, who has just gotten a glimpse of my last two years, and I know she doesn't like this question any better than I do.

"I know I'm supposed to say yes, but honestly? I don't really want to know." I get up, but Officer Morgan stops me from

leaving.

“I have to print out the form so you can sign it. I’ll be right back,” she says.

Officer Morgan glares at Officer Reed, and he scoots his chair a little farther away from me. Once he’s settled, Officer Morgan leaves to get the documents, giving me room to plop back onto the hard plastic seat.

Officer Reed leans back, looking casual. “What do your roommates think about you being here? I don’t think they’re super comfortable around police, you know?”

My eyes snap to him. “Trips, I mean Archibald Westerhouse the Third, dropped me off. If I’d gone back without filing this thing, I’m pretty sure any of them would have hauled me right back here. They want me safe, and they’ll do it however they can.”

Officer Reed sighs, and I hear him mutter, “That’s the problem,” to himself as Officer Morgan comes back with the paperwork and a notary. We go through the motions of making the document official, my shitty judgment now part of the public record, and I debate running again. It’s only Officer Reed watching me that forces me to sign the thing. I shake as I sign, quickly tucking my good hand between my legs as soon as I’m done, worried that everyone will interpret this anxiety spike as guilt.

“Thank you,” I say to Officer Morgan as I grab my backpack and head to the front of the building.

“Of course,” she says.

Officer Reed catches up to me at the door to the lobby. “Clara, you know you can come to me about anything. If you’re scared, if someone is threatening you, if something just doesn’t feel right, I will gladly be there for you. Take my card, in case anything comes up.” He holds the card out to me, one hand on the door that leads to freedom. I snatch it, wanting to get out of there.

“I’ll answer whenever,” he says.

I barely keep from rolling my eyes before I’m out the door into the lobby, gasping for breath as I stumble through another set of doors, the air suddenly oxygenless and terrifying. My eyes water, unfounded terror spiking.

“Clara, Clara, wait up,” I hear from behind me. Jansen comes sprinting out the door, carefully pulling me into his arms. I push him away. There isn’t enough air tucked in close to him. He gently grabs my good hand, letting me know he’s still there as I try to remember what it feels like to have oxygen, to inhale and exhale in that order.

When I finally gasp out a breath and pull a new one in, the stupid stupid stupid tears come again, but I know this time I’m crying for myself. For the foolish doormat I was, for the hopeful romantic who believed that if I could just be better, then everything would come up daisies.

But daisies are a child’s flowers, only a step up from dandelions. They both get mowed over. And I’m not going to be chopped down again. Fool me once, I’m a naïve ingenue.

Fool me twice and I'll fucking chop you down. I'm going to become a fucking scythe, so I don't ever have to feel like this again.

Jansen squats in front of me, holding my hand and waiting, his eyes wide. When my breath evens out, he squeezes my hand, and I squeeze his back. He stands up, wipes some tears from my cheek and leads me to his car, opening the door so I can get in. Then he tosses my backpack in the back and gets into the driver's seat. He doesn't turn on the engine. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Besides being a blind idiot for two years, yeah, I'm peachy," I croak.

He turns to me, one hand on the steering wheel. "I'm sorry you had to do that alone."

I shake my head. "It was better alone. I don't know that I could have said all that with an audience."

Jansen looks out the front windshield. "What else do you have going on today?" he asks.

"What do you mean?" I ask, wiping my cheeks with the backs of my hands. I'm a mess.

"Like, do you have any other classes? Or work?"

"I have work at three."

"Do you have to change, or can you work in that?" I look down at the comfy cotton skirt and T-shirt I pulled on this morning. "I can go in this."

Jansen flashes me a grin, turns on the car, and pulls into traffic. Instead of heading back to Dinkytown, he gets on the freeway. “Where are we going?” I ask.

“Someplace that will hopefully make you feel a little better. Crap days need to be balanced, you know?”

I sputter out a laugh. “I seem to be making a habit of having crap days in your car.”

He laughs too. “I’m calling it luck, because then I get to make you happy again.”

I glance over at him, his grin wide, his green eyes sparkling, and I don’t have any option but to grin. “You’re pretty good at it,” I whisper.

“That’s exactly what I want to be good at, Clara,” he says. “I want to be the reason you smile.”

His hand comes off the steering wheel, reaching like he wants to hold my hand, but my good side is all the way on the other side of the car. Instead, his fingers nestle on the back of my neck, sliding through my hair, warm and comforting. He pulls off the interstate and twists through a few neighborhood streets, finally pulling up at a sign that says, “Prospect Park.” He stops the car and reaches across the steering wheel to put it in park, never moving his hand from my neck. “Hey,” he says, his fingers urging me to look at him.

When I do, there’s a flash of joy as he tugs my head to his until our foreheads and noses touch, our breaths mingling. My heart stutters—is he going to kiss me?

His hand slides around my head to cradle my cheek. “Do you want to tell me what made you so upset?”

“Not particularly.”

He nuzzles his nose to mine. “I’ll tell you a secret if you tell me what’s going on in your head.”

“What kind of secret?”

“One that will make you laugh. And as a bonus, I’ll show you a secret, too.”

I’m going cross-eyed, sitting like this, but when I try to pull back, Jansen’s hand is right there, so I stay put. “Deal.”

He rubs his thumb along my jaw, pulling his head back so he can look at my lips, and I’m reminded again that I’m a terrible human who has crushes on all my roommates. And that I am totally not in a place where I can trust my judgment of other humans apparently, myself included.

“You first,” he whispers, still looking at my lips, and I lick them nervously. He sucks in a breath, so I lick them again, watching him squirm, loving it and hating it at the same time.

My fear of fucking shit up spikes, so I twist my head away, forcing myself to look out at the park instead of Jansen. His hand slides from my face, and he opens the windows while I figure out what to say.

I count my taps on my leg twice before I ball up my fist to stop. I don’t need to be nervous, not with Jansen. *Just dive in, Clara. You’re safe here.* “I realized I’ve been naïve. Bryce has been manipulating me, isolating me, doing all the standard

things that abusers do, and I didn't even notice. I'm just so mad at myself. I thought he was a good guy. Like, a really good guy. The kind of guy you marry and have tons of babies with. And now," I shrug, "now I don't know if I can trust my judgment, if I can trust myself. I don't want to be that person anymore, but how do you become someone else? Aren't we all just who we are? Does that mean I'm just screwed?"

Jansen turns and tucks one of his feet under him, facing me. "Do you want my opinion?"

"Do I?"

"My opinions are always groundbreaking," he says, winking.

I laugh a little, more of a weird gasp than a laugh, but Jansen grins at me. Nodding him on, I pull a flyaway chunk of hair behind my ear.

"I think we all focus so much on getting things right the first time that we forget that we're always supposed to be learning, to be changing. And I don't mean learning dumb shit, like 'Oh, did you know that Maine Coon cats can be up to forty-eight inches long?' Not that kind of learning." Jansen runs his hands through his hair, pulling it back into a ponytail, unable to sit still for more than a moment. "We're incomplete creatures, all of us. And we learn best from mistakes, either our own or others'."

He ties off the ponytail, glancing out the windshield for a minute. "So no, Clara, I don't think you're dumb for not seeing the signs. I think you're brave, because once you realized things weren't quite right, before you'd even figured

out what was wrong, you left. You got out of there, you kept yourself safe. And that's the smart thing to do."

He reaches for my hand, and I find that I've turned sideways in the seat while I listened to him, my good hand just within his reach. He gives it a squeeze as he continues. "You realized there was danger, and you reacted appropriately. And once you realized exactly how dangerous the situation had become, you got help, which is also a super intelligent move. So, Clara, you're not dumb. You're brave, and you're smart, and you're still learning, just like we all are."

Tears are streaming down my face yet again. "Damn it, Jansen. I just finished crying," I choke out.

He laughs, yanking my water bottle from my bag and handing it to me, somehow knowing that I'd cried enough in the last hour for a headache. I take a swig while he comes around to open my door and help me out. He leaves the windows open, moving my bag to the trunk. "My turn," he says, starting up a hill.

"So what's your big secret?"

He grins at me, snatching my water bottle and taking a sip himself. "I was totally spooning with Walker when I woke up this morning."

I snort, imagining them cozy together in my bed. "Little spoon?" I ask, giggling.

"Of course! Walker is a big-spoon-only kind of guy."

"It's really cozy!" I say.

Jansen nods, mock serious. “Super cozy. Ten out of ten recommend.”

I laugh, following him up the hill. We come around a bend, and ahead, on the top of the hill, is a huge tower. White stone climbs up to arched windows, topped with a green roof, shaped exactly like a witch’s hat. I gasp. “We’re at the Witch’s Hat? I didn’t realize you could come up here.” I run the last few steps to the base of the tower, ignoring the jostling in my shoulder.

Brushing my hand along the white stones, the rough cut is like sandpaper skidding against my palm. “I mean, you can see it from the freeway, but I guess I never thought that it was an actual destination, if that makes any sense?”

Jansen grabs my hand and pulls me around to a door tucked into one side of the tower.

“Wait, you can go in?” I ask.

Jansen flashes me a grin, his green eyes twinkling as he pulls something out of his back pocket. “Clara, can you keep an eye out? Let me know if anyone is coming?”

“Sure,” I say, glancing around the park before what he said sinks in. I turn back in time to see Jansen jam a strange key into the top lock and slam it with the bottom of my water bottle. “You’re breaking in,” I panic whisper, suddenly taking my lookout duties seriously.

“Of course,” Jansen says. “They’re only open once a year for an ice cream social, so how else are we supposed to get in

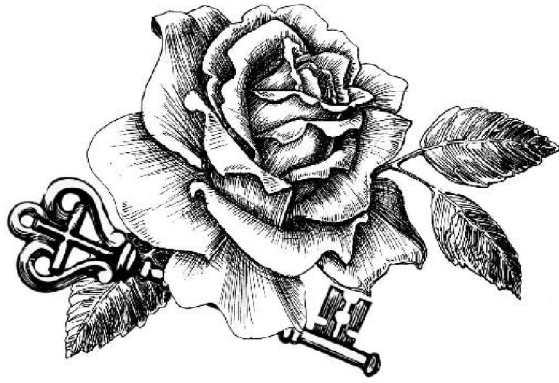
here?”

I see two red “Fire” stickers by the top lock, and no handles.
“It says this is a fire door. What if an alarm goes off?”

Jansen pulls the key out of the top lock, picks out a different key and repeats the maneuver with the bottom lock. They really must not want people breaking into this place, double locking it and all. I check the park again, listening to the hum of the cars on the highway below.

“It won’t, Clara. This isn’t my first visit. Relax. It’ll be fun.”

Chapter 33



Jansen

The door swings out after I bump the second lock. I hold it open with my foot as I shimmy the keys on the ring back to the right order before tucking them into my back pocket. Clara is pacing in front of the door, her good arm drumming as fast as it can on her thigh.

Maybe I shouldn't have done this, maybe it's too soon.

But she was just so sad, and it always cheers me up to be somewhere I'm not supposed to be, seeing the world from above, a hawk in an aviary.

"We're in," I say, holding the door open for her. I decide that if she hesitates, we'll go back to the car. I don't want to make her bad day worse. I hold my breath, hoping. She does one last look around the park and ducks into the tower, almost sprinting. I grin as I close the door behind us.

We use our phones as flashlights, climbing the winding steps inside the tower. I imagine this must be what it's like to visit a castle, the air cooler and slightly damp. "This is actually an old

water tower,” I say, tapping the central cylinder we’re circling around.

“Is it active?” she asks from the step above me.

“No idea,” I say, allowing myself to watch her as she goes up the stairs. She’s wearing some T-shirt skirt thing that goes down past her knees, but the curve of her ass is nice from this angle, and I tuck my hands into my pockets to keep them to myself. I watch her calves instead, but I find the flex and release of those muscles intriguing too. Talking, talking will help. What should I say?

Clara saves me. “I take it Trips told you to come pick me up?”

“Yeah. He sent out a group SOS, and I was the first response.”

“You don’t have class?”

“Not until tonight. I don’t do well with morning classes. I sleep through them.”

We make it to the second door and then up the last stretch of stairs to the top. Clara gasps once she’s on the platform, wandering up to the stone banister in a daze, looking across the highway to the Mississippi, the small rapids glinting in the midday light. From here we can see both downtowns, twelve miles apart, just by walking from one side of the tower to the other.

“What do you think?” I whisper, not wanting to wipe the wonderment from Clara’s face. My heart races like it always

does up here, alive and buoyant. If she feels even half of that, I don't want to ruin it for her.

Her smile is bright when she turns toward me, and a few new tears gather in her eyes. She reaches up and strokes the side of my jaw. "It's beautiful," she says.

Her dark eyes shine with those unshed tears, finally happy ones this time. I run my finger down her cheek, the softness soothing, and the flutter in my chest settles into a steady beat. Touching her always seems to slow time.

Her good arm wraps behind my back, and I pull her close, her body warm against mine. I run my nose down hers, waiting, needing to know that this is what she wants.

She shifts closer, and without pausing, she presses her lips against mine. Time stops, the sound of the freeway fades, and I dive into her. I lick the crease of her lips and she opens for me, our tongues touching, dancing, getting to know each other's rhythms. Her hand slides up my back to my neck, holding me close, as I dig my fingers into the cool strands of her dark hair, wanting more of her, all of her.

A soft moan slips from her and I double my efforts, wishing I'd planned ahead, brought a condom or something—just to have the option. This kiss is unlike any I've had before, and I don't know how I'm going to keep from kissing Clara every moment of every day, from chasing the chance to feel this light, this clear, this focused.

Slowly, she pulls back, kissing me lightly with closed lips and tucking her head into the crook of my neck.

“Are you okay?” I ask, terrified I’ve done something wrong, that I pushed her too fast, that I’ll never get to feel this magic again. I hold my breath.

Her head bobs against me, but she doesn’t answer right away, turning her face so she can see the river again. We both practice breathing, my heart still steady in her touch. “I don’t think this is a good idea,” she says after a long pause.

“Why?” I whisper, afraid of the answer.

A little huff escapes her nose. “I’m just really confused right now. And I don’t want to be confused about you. I want to be sure.”

Looking out across this city, the blue of skyscrapers glinting in the late summer sun, and I know I don’t want to stop, to wait, to go slow. But it’s not just about me. Not really. “I really like you, Clara. And while part of me says ‘screw it, it’ll work out,’ I get needing to be sure. I can wait.”

Her hand reaches up to my face again, forcing me to look down at her. “Are you sure?”

Brown eyes, scared, meet mine. “Do I want to wait? No. I’m not exactly the picture of patience, Clara. But for you? I’ll do the best I can.” I shrug, knowing that it’s a half-assed promise, but also knowing that if a situation presented itself and Clara needed a kiss, I’d happily give one, and then kick myself over it later. A small smile creases her cheek.

“This really is beautiful. Thank you for bringing me here.” She clears her throat, turning so her back is against my front

while she looks out over the water.

The flowery smell of her hair is overwhelming, and I slowly brush my chin against it, hoping some of the smell will rub off on me so I can carry her with me for the rest of the day.

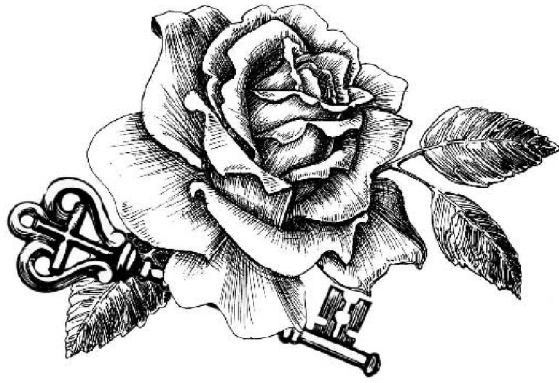
She clears her throat again. “We should go before a park cop gets curious about a half-open fire door,” she says, not moving away from me, both of us still twined together.

“For sure.”

We stay like that for a good long while.

Eventually, we head down the stairs, hand in hand, going home.

Chapter 34



Clara

Friday is a blessing when it arrives. All week people have been asking me about my arm. They're worried and all that, but I feel like I'm the car accident and everyone else is a gawker slowing down to see if I died. To add to the aggravation, by Tuesday, I could hardly sit still. I hadn't realized how much of my focus was predicated on running. No running apparently translates to crazy Clara.

I've taken to doing wall sits and marching up and down the stairs every morning. Trips is ready to kill me, but RJ has joined me for the wall sits. He hasn't said a ton, but it's more than he'd been saying when we'd go running, so I feel like we're building something together.

Jansen and I have been avoiding each other. I figure he's just trying to give me time, but I'm not sure time is going to fix anything. Every day, I seem to care a little more about all of them. There must be something horrifyingly wrong with me. This is not normal. I mean, little crushes, those I might have a couple of at a time, but full-on, this guy is amazing and I want

to spend all my time with him? Yeah, splitting that three, almost four ways? I must be nuts.

To top off the week from hell, working with one arm is a bitch. I can do most things well enough one-handed, but when it's busy, I can't keep up. My manager cut me from the next few busy shifts, so now I won't have enough money for rent or day-old bakery treats to subsidize my food budget. Where at the beginning of the week, I felt kind of bad getting a restraining order against Bryce, today, I'm just pissed that he's messed up yet another thing for me.

I finish up my last class around noon, and with no work, I take the long way home. Walking doesn't jostle much in my shoulder, thank God. This morning I pushed my mobility a bit and I can already lift my arm high enough to get my shirt on without too much pain, so that's the main win for the week.

Because I'm broke, I watch for change on the sidewalk as I walk, just in case. Not that thirty-five cents is going to help me with rent, but I like to think that every bit counts.

My phone buzzes—my mom.

Should I tell her about my shoulder?

Eh—I'm almost better anyway, and she's easily flustered. The last thing she needs is something else to worry about. I mean, she'd worry about it if she decides it's worth worrying about. Confusing, but that's my mom in a nutshell.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Clara, sweetie, how are you?”

“Just going for a walk. It’s beautiful today,” I dodge.

“How lovely! Say, your father and I were just trying to remember, you’re racing soon, right?”

Of course she forgot. “Yup. I have a half marathon three Saturdays from now.”

“Oh gosh! So soon! And where is it at? And what time will you be done?”

I take a few deep breaths, then fill in the details for my mom. This isn’t the first time I’ve given her this information, or even the second time, but considering she only listens to a tenth of what I tell her, I’m pretty sure this won’t be the last time either.

“Perfect, perfect, sweetheart. And do you think you and Bryce would like to go out for brunch with us afterward?”

“Mom, Bryce and I broke up, remember?” I force out, trying not to yell on the phone. If I yell, she’ll hang up on me, and then I’ll have to call back three or four times until she deigns to pick up and allow me to apologize.

“Sweetie, I thought you two were just taking a break. He’s such a nice young man, and he’s going to be a doctor. I can’t think of a better guy for you.” I look down at my phone clenched in my fist, some part of my brain worried I’m going to crush it.

My mom, oblivious to my anger, continues, her voice tinny from a foot away from my ear. “You really should consider an apology. I’m sure if you’re sincere, he’ll take you back in an

instant. I've seen how he looks at you—he is absolutely obsessed.”

I take more fucking deep breaths, trying to sound like I'm not planning matricide. “Mom, he's the one who needs to apologize. But either way, we're done.”

“Men are terrible at apologies. The woman always waves the white flag. You should know this by now, sweetie.”

I've stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at my phone like it's a portal to the 1950s. “My God, Mom. That's absurd. And not at all how you and dad operate. But that's not the point. Bryce and I are done. I don't want to talk about it.”

“Well, if you're going to be snippy about it, I'll just go.” She hangs up on me.

A strange, daring part of me urges me to throw my phone as far as I can, just to get rid of the anger coursing through me. But I can't even afford next week's groceries, let alone a new phone, so I jam the thing into my purse and walk faster, wishing I could sprint without pain.

I burst into the house, storming back to my room, but it's too small to contain me right now. I'm not calling her back. She's going to be pissed. She probably will “forget” about my race and be a no-show just to get back at me.

Throwing my pillow across the room doesn't help, even with the scream that accompanies the toss. I yank open the bathroom door, thinking a shower might help, but the thought of standing still makes me nauseous. I pace into the kitchen,

opening up the fridge only to remember that I ate my last yogurt this morning. Slamming the fridge door, a chorus of jingles from the beers in the door calms me, so I open the door and slam it again.

“You’re right. The fridge is a total asshole.”

I spin around and glare at Walker on the other side of the kitchen, his half smile sparking more anger. I open the fridge a third time, slamming it while staring at him, daring him to say anything. He raises his hands in surrender. “I’m agreeing with you, don’t look at me like that.”

I move over by the stove, pulling out pots and pans and putting them back, the crashing noises singing to my anger, but I don’t have anything to cook, so I don’t know what I’m trying to do. Walker nudges me out of the way. “Do you want to punch something?” he asks, pulling out tubs of flour and sugar.

“Desperately.”

“Good.”

I watch, shifting my weight from foot to foot as Walker scoops something into a little bowl with water and sugar, stirring wet ingredients in one bowl, dry in another. When he mixes the two together, making a sticky mess, I decide I’m going to leave. Before I make it two steps, though, he says, “Pull out the big cutting board and cover it in flour.”

I set the cutting board on the counter across from him, wash my hands, and spoon some flour onto the board, spreading it

around. He promised punching, not sprinkling, and I'm running out of patience.

He flops the blobby mess in front of me, the flour bowl not quite empty. "What am I supposed to do?" I ask.

"Punch it."

I do, and the springy dough takes the punch easily. Walker turns the lump and I punch it again. We keep doing this, Walker slowly adding the rest of the flour mixture. By the end of the bowl, my arm is getting tired. I don't think I've ever punched anything except my pillow before, and even that was only once or twice.

Walker takes the dough from me, does a few twisty flops with the mass, then splits it into two even lumps. "Can you grab two large bowls and toss some vegetable oil in them? Enough to cover the bottom."

I follow his directions, focusing on the task, allowing the last of my anger to dissipate. I hand him the bowls one at a time, suddenly chilly after my outburst. He puts a lump in each bowl, spinning them until each is covered in oil. Finally, he gets some damp kitchen towels and covers the bowls, setting them on top of the fridge.

He washes his hands, and I join him, neither of us speaking.

I'm just calm enough to worry about my overreaction, about how awful I acted. I want to apologize, but I don't know how Walker likes his apologies.

Everyone has their own flavor of apology. My mother needs to hear that she was right and I was wrong. Bryce needed me to apologize over and over until I was in tears before he'd forgive me.

“Do you feel any better?” Walker asks, and I still don't know what to say.

I go for basic, my eyes on the ground. “I'm so sorry I lost it like that.”

Walker bumps up against my shoulder, forcing me to look up at him. “Don't worry about it. How are you feeling?”

I open my mouth, and I realize I don't have a script for this. Walker must see some of the panic in my eyes, because he pulls me into a tight hug just before a weird wheezy yell-cry escapes me. I don't think I've ever made a noise like that before, and it makes me both laugh and sob.

It's official. I've lost it.

I'm snorting and sobbing and shaking and Walker just holds me, one warm arm around my shoulders, the other hand rubbing my back in slow circles.

“What is wrong with me?” I gasp, trying to take enough slow breaths to stop this crazy wash of every emotion I've ever had slamming into me, relentless waves of overwhelm.

Walker just keeps rubbing, and sooner than I thought possible, a huge sigh escapes me. A few more breaths, and I feel mostly normal. “What the fuck just happened?” I ask,

gently pushing away from Walker to wash my face in the kitchen sink.

His hand is on my lower back, supporting me still, as I get myself clean.

Urging me to the living room, he pulls me onto his lap on the couch, his arms around my waist. “I think you just had a totally reasonable reaction to a really shitty week.”

I settle against him, my body relaxing in his arms, just like it did those two nights we cuddled in my bed. “I don’t think reasonable people take out their anger on a fridge. I really am sorry, Walker.”

He tucks his chin over my shoulder, our cheeks touching. “No worries, Clara. Out of curiosity, what was the metaphorical straw that broke the metaphorical camel’s back?”

“My mom thought I should grovel for Bryce and ask him to take me back.”

Walker’s arms tense around me. “She what?”

“She doesn’t know the whole story,” I say, defending her. “I try not to tell my mom too much. She, well, she means well, but when she gets mad, anything I’ve said to her, she uses against me. So I don’t tell her anything. If I don’t give her ammo, she can’t shoot me when she has one of her hissy fits.”

“Damn. If that were my mom, we wouldn’t have a kitchen, let alone a fully functional fridge. Aggressively closing the fridge a few times? I’d call that restraint.”

I curl up a little so I can press my cheek against his chest. His arms tighten around me, and another sigh escapes.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“No more sorrys, Clara. You’re good.”

We sit curled on the couch together, the house quiet around us. The strange burst of emotions left me empty and tired, but this feels safe, cozy, and right.

I don’t know what changes, but something does. My heart rate spikes, this comforting moment suddenly something more. I need to get closer. I twist around, straddling Walker’s lap, and let my good hand slink across his chest. His arms tighten around me, pulling my pelvis flush with his, his eyes searching mine, a question in his gaze. I slide my hand around the back of his neck and up into his hair, the thick cool strands sharp at the ends, an answer in itself. His lips part, and we pause, both of us savoring the anticipation.

I lean forward, and he meets me halfway. We touch with a soft whisper of a kiss, a shared breath, followed by a second kiss.

My tongue flicks out on the third kiss, and his meets mine, a gentle nudge, a soft caress.

One of his hands snakes up my spine, pulling me against him, while the other goes lower, grasping my ass and pressing me tight against his stiffening cock. My pelvis tilts, rubbing against him, lust taking over, the soft kisses and the hard promise making all thought vanish.

His kisses change, suddenly desperate, and I can't stop rocking, a soft hum of pleasure escaping as the layers of cotton slide over my clit.

In a burst, I'm on my back on the couch, Walker over me, kissing and nibbling down the side of my neck, one of his hands pushing up my shirt, both of our hips rocking, looking for contact through our clothes. He unhooks my bra, sliding it up. My nipples are hard peaks in the cold air and my sling is in the way.

Walker does a slow circle around one of my nipples with his finger, and when I gasp and arch, he follows his finger with his tongue. I go to reach for him, to hold on with both hands, and my shoulder screams at the sudden movement.

Reality crashes into me. What am I doing? I just kissed Jansen on Monday, now I'm going to have sex with Walker on the couch on Friday?

I'm the worst. Literally the worst. I scramble away from Walker, grabbing my bad arm, using it as an excuse for me pulling away.

Walker notes me holding my shoulder. "Did I hurt you?" he asks, running a hand through his hair, his chest still heaving, eyes flickering between my wet nipple and my injured shoulder.

I scoot a little farther away, not trusting myself not to dive back into Walker's kisses. "No, I hurt myself." I can't catch my breath, but I know I shouldn't do this. As much as I want to, I can't. My hand shakes as I pull down my bra, fastening it,

then carefully lower my shirt. I'm looking everywhere but at Walker.

“Hey.” Walker still straddles my legs, his knees squeezing me to get my attention. “Are we okay?”

I smooth my shirt across my belly and pull back to the corner of the couch, folding my knees up under my chin. I glance at Walker. He still hasn't moved, waiting for my answer. “Yeah. We're good. I just...” I don't know how to finish that sentence, so I shrug, hoping that he can somehow figure out what I'm going for.

Walker settles back into the middle of the couch, one hand resting on my foot, the part of me closest to him. I love that he always needs to touch me, that skin on skin is both electric and comforting. He closes his eyes, adjusting himself in his pants, not hiding the fact, just trying to get comfortable, and this too feels right. A flutter of misplaced pride spikes through me as I watch.

Finally, he opens his eyes, his thumb stroking the arch of my foot, just barely hard enough to avoid tickling me. “Clara, is this going to happen?” he asks, not looking at me.

I gaze at the same wall he is. “I wish I knew,” I say.

“You know you don't owe me anything. I just, I really like you, Clara. I'm not making demands, but, I don't know, I just need to know if I need to get over you. It'd be easier to know now rather than later, you know?”

I pull his hand from my foot, threading my fingers through his, clinging to him. He squeezes my hand back. “I like you too, Walker.”

“Is it anything I can fix?”

I shake my head, not knowing if he’s looking at me or not. “No. It’s me. I’ve got a lot to think about—a lot of change and a lot to figure out.”

Walker tugs my hand, and I turn, watching as he brings it to his lips, a long soft kiss left on my knuckles. My heart rate spikes again.

“If it helps,” he says, “I’m serious about you, Clara.”

I swallow. How do I tell him he’s not the only one? How did this happen? I’m going to hurt someone, and I hate hurting people I care about. And I care about every damn one of them.

I close my eyes, reaching for anything less dangerous than this conversation. “What are we making?” I ask.

“Making?”

“The dough?”

Walker sighs, letting go of my hand, but a second later he’s cradling my foot again. He runs his other hand through his hair before he answers. “Bread, we’re making bread.”

“Oh. I’ve never made bread before. Why is it sitting in bowls on top of the fridge?”

“It needs to rise. We’ll knead it again, let it rise again, and then bake it.”

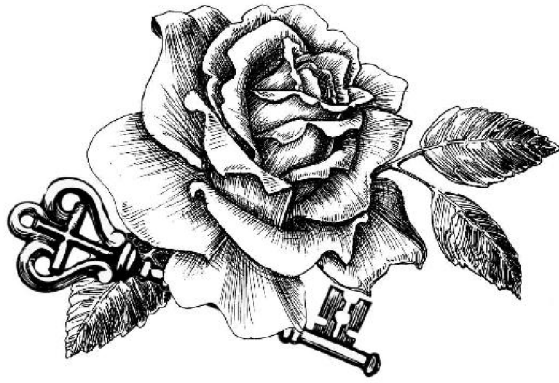
“Is it a family dinner night? I can help chop or something,” I try.

Walker shakes his head, sneaking a glance at me. “It was a ‘Clara’s going to break the fridge, so I need to figure something out’ night, but I guess family dinner would work too.”

I punch him gently in the shoulder, and a hint of a grin sneaks back onto his face. “You said the fridge had it coming.”

He laughs. “Come on, let’s go figure out what we can make without shopping.” He holds out a hand, and we go to the kitchen, nothing resolved, but hopefully, nothing broken.

Chapter 35



Clara

Emma decides Saturday brunch is a life goal, so we meet on a patio, the last burst of summer humidity making the air thick, the sun sliding higher in the sky. Emma orders a full breakfast, a fancy vegetarian Benedict with a side of bacon. I get the cheapest omelet on the menu and cut it in half so I can save the rest for later. Emma's pink hair frizzes in the humidity, a mane surrounding her head.

"So when are we going out again?" she says, shoveling a forkful of the fully loaded English muffin into her mouth.

"You want a repeat of last weekend?" I ask, lifting my bad arm. It's feeling better, so hopefully soon I can forgo the sling.

Emma smirks. "Well, it was definitely a new experience."

I shake my head. "How are you not freaked out right now? I'm totally freaked out—I keep crying for practically no reason. This shit is crazy, Emma."

Emma shrugs. "Maybe because it's not really my problem? Or maybe I'm broken? I don't know. But I *do* have to say,

your big, mean roommate taking Bryce down like that—damn, girl. That was hot.”

I kick her under the table, but she laughs it off.

“I mean, if it weren’t so real, yeah, it would be, I don’t know, a good story or something. But this is my life, Emma. Bryce is suddenly a violent stalker. I have four hot-as-hell guys trying to protect me, and well, I just feel totally confused by how I ended up in this situation. I filed a fucking restraining order this week. There’s a court date next week. It’s like I walked out of my life and into someone else’s, and I keep waiting to stumble back into normal again.” I take a sip of my black coffee, the cheapest drink besides water, trying to gather myself so I don’t burst into tears. No more tears.

Emma’s smile falls a bit, and she takes another bite. “You’re right. Things are different.”

I nod. “I just need to have some sort of plan, Emma, some path that makes sense. I feel like I’m drowning, and I hate it.”

“You always need a plan, Clara. Don’t you ever just want to jump on a train and see where it goes? Get on a bus and get off at the end of the line? Walk until you’re exhausted and then find the closest cool thing to do?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “You know that’s not fun for me, Emma. That freaks me out.”

“Maybe life is trying to show you that even when there is no plan, you’ll still be okay? I don’t know. I’m all about flying by the seat of my pants.”

“That’s why we’re friends, Emma. You make me try things, and I keep you alive. It’s a good deal, I think.”

Emma reaches out and clutches my hand, giving it a squeeze. “The best of deals.”

We keep eating, talking about classes, work, things that don’t really matter but feel good to share.

While Emma finishes half of her hash browns, my phone buzzes like crazy. First one text, then another, from an unknown number. The texts, though, are obviously from Bryce.

Why did you block my number? It must be a mistake.

Baby, I don’t understand. Please, can we just talk?

Clara, baby, come home. I love you.

You owe me an explanation. Why did you do this to me?

No restraining order will keep us apart. I know you don’t mean it.

You’re mine, and I keep what is mine.

I'm on my way. I'll keep you safe.

The texts keep flooding in, and I panic, turning off my phone. "What is it?" Emma asks.

"Bryce." My hands are shaking as I wipe them on my pants, and I look up and down the street, no longer feeling safe out on the sidewalk.

Emma flags down the waiter to get our checks. "How bad?"

"I want to go home," I whisper, my vision blurry with held-back tears.

"Do you want to call one of the guys?"

I shake my head. "I don't want to turn on the phone. What if he somehow got another tracking app on there? I don't know. I'm freaking out."

She pulls out her phone and quickly sends a text. The waiter brings the check, happy to get a table turn during peak brunch hours. I toss down the necessary cash, but realize too late that we forgot to ask for a box for my omelet. God-damn it. Bryce just stole my fucking lunch.

I remind myself to be the scythe, not the fucking daisies, and I stand up straight, pretending to have courage that I'm sure I'll never have. I feed the embers of my anger as Emma and I hold hands, weaving between tables and out around the corner. Her phone buzzes and she drags me down an alley.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

“I sent out the bat signal. One of your guys will meet us at the other end of this alley.”

I hug Emma, practically knocking her over. “Thank you.”

“I’m just glad I have Walker’s number,” she says, squeezing me back. “I don’t think he’s the one picking you up, though. Someone was closer, I guess.” She pulls out of the hug and drags me farther down the alley, our hands still locked together. I glance behind me, and I swear I see someone rushing down the alley behind us, deep in the shadows cast by the building, but my eyes are blind from sitting in the sun on the patio.

I pick up the pace, jogging. Emma matches me step for step as I check over my shoulder. The shadow moves faster too, its gait wonky. It moves like it recently had some ribs broken, and I’m certain Bryce has somehow found me. I run faster, my shoulder sore but not agonizing, Emma panting beside me.

We burst out of the alley on the other side, and I search desperately for a familiar car. Emma pulls me left so we’re running against oncoming traffic on one of the few one-way streets in Dinkytown. I still don’t see any of the guys’ cars, when a motorcycle roars across three lanes of traffic and screeches to a stop next to us. I try to run past it, scared Bryce suddenly has backup, when I hear RJ yell, “Clara, hop on!”

I turn back as the rider tosses back his visor, and RJ’s gold-brown eyes catch mine, more intense than I’ve ever seen them. He holds out a hand, and I twist back to Emma.

“Go on,” she says, “my car’s just down the next block. I’ll text Walker when I’m home. It’s not me he wants. Go!” She gives my good shoulder a shove, sprinting away, her pink hair an afterburn trailing behind her.

I slide onto the motorcycle just as Bryce stumbles out of the half-light of the alleyway. “Clara!” he yells.

RJ clutches my good arm to his waist as the bike jumps onto the street, swerving through cars and zipping through a yellow light, the sound of Bryce’s shouts drowned by the roar of the engine.

I press my cheek against RJ’s back, catching my breath. All of me holding on tight.

I’ve never been on a motorcycle before, and the rumble of the machine reminds me of a cat’s purr, but amped up to eleven. The hum works its way through my bones, and I relax into RJ. My front is plastered to his back, my thighs against his, the hum from the engine both calm and enticing. I suddenly understand the appeal of riding bitch.

We pull into the alley behind our house sooner than I’d like, but the relief I feel as we park next to Trips’ truck reminds me that now is not the time for a joy ride. RJ switches off the bike, pulling off his helmet, his hair springing free. I’m still grasping him, not quite ready to let go. He holds my hand against his stomach, a quiet moment of comfort. “Are you okay?” he asks.

“I’m scared,” I whisper.

I don't think I'd tell any of the other guys that. Jansen would make a joke, Walker would distract me, Trips would try to kill the problem—but RJ, he listens.

He slips out from my arm, but instead of getting up, he sits back down facing me, pulling me in for a hug. I've never been this close to RJ, and it feels strange, our knees touching, both of us leaning forward but no longer pressed together like during the ride. I hear a small sigh against my ear, and a barely audible "Me too."

He holds me for a moment longer, just long enough for the hug to feel nice instead of new, then lets go. "We should get inside. Everyone's worried about you."

I nod, tucking my hair behind my ear. It's a tangled mess from the short ride, but oddly, I don't care right now. Right now, I need to get into the house. I need to be surrounded by the guys. I need to fix this somehow.

Jansen is waiting at the back door, and he throws it wide, scanning the yard once before snapping it shut behind us, the lock clicking into place. It's like we're entering a military compound instead of our home.

Once the door is secured, he tugs me into his arms, kissing the top of my head before dragging me to the living room. Trips and Walker meet us there—they must have been guarding the front of the house. Walker pulls me in for a hug too, urging me to sit in the middle of the couch. He settles on my left, Jansen on my right, Trips in his chair, and RJ in the last chair. They all look at me—except for Trips, who is barely

holding it together, his fists clenching and unclenching, his jaw tight, his eyes glued to the rug.

“What happened?” RJ asks.

Walker rubs one of my knees, and Jansen grabs my good hand, squeezing it for strength.

The anxiety in me spikes, and without my hand, I don't know where to direct the extra energy. My foot bounces as I stare at the coffee table. “Emma and I were out for brunch. My phone buzzed, and there was a number I didn't know. But it was Bryce. He said I was his, that he was coming to get me, to keep me safe.”

Trips growls something that sounds like “Asshole,” but it's hard to understand with his jaw clenched.

I clear my throat. “I freaked. Emma texted Walker, we paid and took off.” I turn to Jansen. “I had to leave my leftovers. He fucking stole my lunch.”

Jansen flashes me a small smile, while Walker squeezes my leg. “I'll make you lunch, Princess,” Walker states.

They all wait for me to continue. I go back to staring at the coffee table. There's a little nick on the corner, a gouge I hadn't noticed before. “Emma must have been getting directions because we took off down the alley. Bryce was following us, but I didn't see him until we were halfway down the block. We ran, RJ met us at the other end of the alley, Emma took off for her car, and I went with RJ.”

I turn to Walker. “Did she get home safe?”

He pulls out his phone and checks, nodding as he sends a quick message back. “She’s home safe and sound. Bryce didn’t follow her.”

I pull my phone out and toss it to RJ. “You probably want to look at this, right?”

Trips clears his throat. “You should get printouts of all the texts for court tomorrow.” He stands up and starts out of the room. “I’m going to make a phone call,” he announces, the sound of heavy footsteps echoing from the stairwell.

“Shit,” Jansen mutters.

“What?” I ask.

Walker lets go of my leg to run both of his hands down his thighs. “He’s calling his dad.”

“I take it they don’t get along?”

RJ looks over his shoulder, back in the direction Trips just went. “Trips hates his dad. He thinks he’s a hypocrite and maybe a murderer. I don’t really know the details. But Trips only talks to his dad when he has to—his dad never does anything without an exchange. Trips will have to make a deal.”

“Why is he calling his dad if he hates him so much?” I ask.

“For you,” Walker says.

I look down at the table again—what in the world does Trips’ dad have to do with me?

“His dad is super connected. If I were to guess, he’s getting you a lawyer for court tomorrow,” RJ says, answering my unvoiced question.

That makes sense. I don’t like that Trips is accruing a debt with his dad for me, but something tells me this is like the pink chairs. I can try to stop this from happening, but even if I protest, some hotshot lawyer is going to be at my trial tomorrow. Now I have to worry about how to pay for a lawyer, as well as rent. Cool.

“What now?” I ask, deciding to worry about the money issue later.

“We figure out how Bryce found you,” Jansen says.

We all look at RJ. “I’ll go grab my laptop,” he says.

I stand up to pace, the anxiety trying to burst from my skin. Jansen and Walker exchange a look, and Jansen disappears into the kitchen, coming back with glasses of water for the three of us. I down the whole thing, still pacing. Walker walks over to a chest by the wall and pulls out a blanket.

“What’s that for?” I ask.

“It’s for when you crash.”

I roll my eyes. RJ comes back with his computer, and I pace behind his chair as he attaches my phone and does computer guy stuff. I really have no idea what he’s doing, but I feel better watching than sitting.

“It’s clean,” he says, after a moment.

“What do you mean, it’s clean?” Trips growls from behind me. I jump, not having heard him come in.

RJ shrugs. “There isn’t a tracking app on there. I saved the texts, both from this new number and the old one. Should I pull voicemail too?”

Trips nods and hands RJ a scrap piece of paper. “Send it all there.”

I get close behind, curious to see what is going to happen. “Do you really want to see what Bryce said?” RJ asks me, looking over his shoulder.

“No. But I hate feeling useless.”

Trips heads back to his chair. “Then let’s fix this.”

“Is stalking a felony?” Jansen asks, yanking his hair back into a ponytail.

Trips drops into his seat. “Not unless there’s a weapon involved.”

“Does Bryce keep his hunting rifles with him here?” Jansen asks.

I can’t stop pacing in front of the TV. “No, they keep them up at their hunting cabin.”

“So we still have nothing,” Walker says, slumping back on the couch.

Trips leans forward. “Clara did a SWOT analysis of Bryce for me, and I think there is something we can work with.”

“What’s a SWOT analysis—like an FBI thing?” Jansen asks.

I stop walking for a second. “Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It’s a business school thing.”

Walker snorts. “Really? That’s how you decided to do this?”

I flip him off and go back to pacing. The jitters are turning into static, and I can’t tell if that is better or worse.

Trips cuts in. “It was quite thorough. Key point would be that Bryce only has a handful of people he trusts. If we get them to turn on him, and we make sure he knows we did it, we can become new targets. I think he’d be a lot more likely to come out swinging at one of us.”

“No,” I say, “that’s stupid. No one needs to be hurt in this situation.”

“He might take up drinking instead,” RJ adds, as if that helps the situation.

“You want to turn my ex-boyfriend into an alcoholic, then get him to drive drunk a bunch of times so that he can’t become a doctor?”

RJ shrugs and goes back to his computer.

I turn to Trips. “One—you don’t get to choose to be the target, and two—I don’t see you actually letting yourself be hurt.”

Trips glares back but breaks eye contact first, directing his anger to the floor.

The room is silent. I stop pacing, my temperature suddenly dropping, and all the flight leaves my legs as I struggle to

stand. Damn adrenaline.

I tap my leg, *one two three four five*, before risking what I'm thinking.

"This only looks believable if I'm the target," I say.

A chorus of "No's" greets my suggestion.

I force myself to stay on my feet—I'm not sure they'll hear me out if I'm not actually holding the floor. "You guys know it's true. If he goes after one of you, you're going to fight back. I don't think any of you would just let him wail on you. And I'm pretty sure all of you could destroy him physically if you tried. It has to be me."

I wait, holding back the shivers that threaten to take over. I really need a worse adrenal gland—a nice lazy one that just lets me be terrified without the shivers and exhaustion hitting later.

Trips stands up, towering over me. "No fucking way. The goal is to keep you safe, not put you in more danger." He turns to RJ. "We'll start with his college friends—they've known him for a shorter time and will be easier to sway. I'll send you the list."

I reach out to stop Trips from walking past me, from deciding this conversation is over, but I halt an inch from his chest. My heart jumps into my throat imagining touching him, but I can't without knowing what his reaction will be—I can't read him yet.

Instead, I say, “You know I’m right. But if you won’t use me, just, please, try to do this without painting targets on your own backs.”

No one answers, but the silence agrees with me.

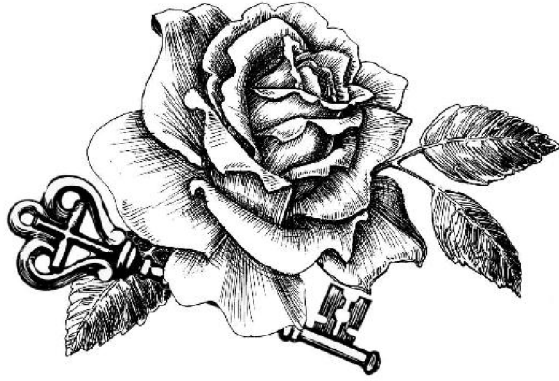
Trips barks orders. Jansen disappears to go break into Bryce’s friends’ houses. I should probably feel weirder about that, but the exhaustion flares and I barely make it to the couch before my legs give out.

Walker tucks me under the blanket, rotating me so I’m leaning back against his chest, his arm wrapped around my middle. “It’s you and me for now,” he says, a strange growl to his voice.

I turn toward him, but he’s glaring at one of the paintings on the living room wall, W. Lee scrawled in the corner of the canvas. “What is it?” I ask.

He holds me tighter but doesn’t stop scowling. “I hate being useless too.”

Chapter 36



Clara

My boss deemed the Sunday morning shift slow enough for me to work—hungover college kids rarely get up before noon. It's slow enough that I have no choice but to think about everything.

Now that I'm away from the guys, I can see how crazy my life has become.

RJ spent all day figuring out which strings to pull to get Bryce's friends to leave him. Two of his friends were relatively decent, so the guys told the truth—kind of.

They hacked their phones and figured out the friends' girlfriends were going out that night. Jansen and Walker went into the bar after them, claiming the table behind the girls, then gossiped with each other about what Bryce was doing to me. The plan seemed convoluted to me, but if it keeps my guys safe, I guess I'm okay with it. Apparently, the two friends were already texting back and forth, and had decided to ghost Bryce for the time being.

Another friend apparently has a gambling problem, so Trips offered him a seat at his next high-stakes poker game in exchange for leaving Bryce in the dust. Turns out he liked losing money more than he liked Bryce.

I guess this is what I get for counting on legit criminals to play my white knights. My fucked-up little heart is so confused.

To add to my confusion, Jansen broke into the rooms of one of the friends RJ was having trouble getting a read on. Once there, Jansen found a lot of kinky toys, as well as a well-read Bible. Now, I have no problem with using whatever it takes to get you off, but with this info, the guys are pretty sure this friend isn't on board with his kinks. They're leaning toward blackmail. Which makes me sick to my stomach to think about —poor guy.

The last guy they're still trying to find a trigger to pull.

And that's it. Bryce has five friends. And they've already started removing four of them from the board.

As glad as I am to be kept in the loop, I also wish they were keeping secrets. I don't know how I'll react if Officer Reed asks about any of this. I'm an okay liar, I can admit that to myself. Having looked at my relationship with Bryce, and now even the one with my mom, I've always defaulted to saying what others wanted to hear. If I believe I'm giving the answer the other person wants, I'm convincing. And that's a depressing realization all in itself.

But with a cop?

I still want to get into the FBI, but with each day, I'm less certain they'd have me. Even if we aren't caught ruining Bryce's life, even if he totally deserves it, can I really pledge to uphold the law, no matter what I think about it?

My manager, Carrie, shows up for the last hour of my shift, in case things get faster than I can move. I'm glad she's the one to cover the gap—I don't have to share tips with her.

There is a small rush around eleven, and when things calm back down, I run to the bathroom, leaving Carrie at the front alone.

When I return, a massive vase full of lilies and roses sits on the counter.

“Ooo!” I tease. “You have an admirer.”

Carrie raises a brow. “Not me, you. Your boyfriend just dropped these off for you.”

“My boyfriend?”

“Yeah, nice guy, red-brown hair, big smile?”

Time stops as I look at the flowers. Bryce was here.

I scan the inside of the store. Not seeing him, I rush to the door and stick my head out. At the end of the block, I catch sight of Bryce, his hand in a brace as he raises it to me, not moving closer, but not leaving.

I back into the store, shaking.

“Clara, what's wrong?” Carrie asks.

“Is there a card?” I ask, my voice sounding hollow to my ears.

“Yeah, here,” Carrie says, handing me a small card.

Baby—I love you and I forgive you.
Come home. You know we’re perfect
together. I want you by my side,
taking the world by storm. Together,
we’re unstoppable. Don’t make me
come get you. -B

He tucks on a winky face with its tongue sticking out, like that last bit is a joke.

I grasp the card in my hands, ready to tear it into tiny bits, but remember the trial tomorrow, and tuck it into my pocket instead, my hands shaking.

“Did he say anything?” I ask.

Carrie comes around the counter—I’m too afraid to turn away from the windows. I don’t want Bryce to sneak up on me.

“Yeah. He said you guys had a fight, that he wanted to surprise you. Clara, they’re just flowers.”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. “No, they’re a threat.”

“Explain it to me, Clara.”

I lift my arm in the sling, and as long as I move it slowly, it only hurts a bit. “He did this.”

“He looked beat up too, Clara. What kind of fight did you guys have?”

I huff. “A friend stepped in after Bryce hurt me. We’re broken up, we’ve been broken up for almost a month, and he’s not getting it. He’s started stalking me. I’m going to court tomorrow to officially post a restraining order.”

“Well shit.”

We stand there in front of the counter, neither of us moving.

Luckily, we were quiet, so the lurkers in the coffee shop haven’t noticed anything out of the ordinary. Carrie clears her throat. “If you want to leave early, I get it. I’ll toss the flowers.”

“I need the money,” I say, my hunger beating my pride. “I’ll need a picture of the flowers for court. Can you see if he’s still out there? He was at the end of the street.”

I head over to the counter, forcing myself to pull out my phone and snap a picture of the bouquet. I’m not letting him ruin flowers for me. I won’t allow it. Unfortunately, red roses and white lilies are now my least favorite combo.

Carrie comes back in. “He took off when I went out,” she says, picking up a rag and wiping down the counter. “I’m sorry, Clara. This is bullshit.”

I nod, walking to the espresso maker and idly playing with the steam wand. The fear and anger war in my chest, and I don’t know which one will win. I’m sick of being sad, and I’m

getting sick of being scared, too. What happens when I run out of patience with my anger?

“Why don’t you go to the back and pull things for today’s order? Jen always forgets to move the old stuff to the front.”

“Got it.”

Safe in the back room, I send a group text asking for a pickup from work. I’m too afraid to walk five fucking blocks by myself. Fuck you, Bryce.

I spend the rest of the hour moving boxes of milk in the fridge and jugs of syrup around the storage room, glad I don’t have to interact with customers right now.

When I come out at the end of my shift, Carrie hands me the tip jar, a crumpled twenty tucked under a pile of change that definitely wasn’t there when I went into the back. I’m about to say something, but Carrie hands me a paper bag for the money and a cinnamon roll in a box. “Your ride is here,” she says, practically shoving me out from behind the counter.

I dump the change into the bag, not taking the time to open the till and turn the coins into actual money as a familiar hand slips onto the small of my back, Walker reaching around me to pick up the cinnamon roll.

“Hello,” I say, turning toward Walker.

“Hey.” The sparkle is back in his dark eyes. He was so down yesterday, but today he’s his usual glittery self.

“You drew the short straw?” I ask as we leave, both of us looking up and down the street, just in case.

He tugs me against his side, his lips pressing into my hair. “You’re never the short straw, Clara. I was closest. I just finished up having some real fun for once.”

We hop into his truck, buckling up before he pulls into the sparse traffic. “What kind of fun?” I ask.

“You are looking at the smiling snake. I love being the smiling snake,” he says, his eyes bright.

“You know I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He laughs. “Of course.” He turns away from our house, and before I can ask where we’re going, he asks, “Grocery shopping?”

I look into my bag of change and the twenty. I pull the twenty out and put it in my wallet. “Sure,” I say, wondering what I can get for less than \$10 in change that will last the week. “So, snake?”

Walker is practically vibrating with energy as he takes another turn. “You know we’re blackmailing that one guy, right?”

I feel sick thinking about it. This is all so easy for them, so natural. Don’t they get that I’m normal?

I take a breath and pretend I don’t feel ill. “Yeah?” I say.

“So one of us had to do the actual blackmailing. And here’s the thing. We want to scare him, but not so much that he’ll go to the police. We also have to make sure that he knows we’re serious.” Walker reaches over and squeezes my thigh, but his hand doesn’t linger. “Anyway, Trips can’t do it because he’s

terrifying. Jansen giggles when forced to be serious. RJ really doesn't like talking to new people. That leaves me."

"That makes sense," I say, not really knowing what this all has to do with snakes.

"So I go, and I'm super nice and friendly, smiling the whole time while I lay out how exactly we're going to ruin this guy's life, how we'll tell his parents about his kinks, his pastor, his girlfriend who is 'saving herself' for marriage. I lay this all out, sweet as can be. And he is sweating, shaking, it's great. Then, when he's all like 'What do I do? Why are you doing this to me?' I tell him I won't turn him in if he cuts all ties with Bryce."

Walker laughs, a musical accompaniment to a terrible act. "He was so grateful that was all I wanted that he cried. Turns out he never really liked Bryce much anyway, so it was a win-win all around." He grins at me, and I shiver, realizing how calmly he just threatened to ruin a guy's life, a guy whose only mistake was being friends with my ex.

I force a smile on my face. It's easy to forget what these guys are, what they do, the choices they've made. "I'm glad it went so well," I force out.

We make it to the grocery store, and I rush in to grab a basket. "Let's get our stuff and meet at the front," I suggest.

Walker's brows scrunch up, but he nods, grabbing his own basket.

Once I'm sure Walker is out of sight, I find a quiet corner to process. Walker threatened a guy. He was so scary he made the dude cry. But he did it to keep me safe, to isolate Bryce, and as it turns out, the guy didn't even like Bryce. The dude wasn't hurt, his secret is safe, and Bryce has lost another friend. Am I okay with this?

I think I might be.

With that uncomfortable realization, I count out my change. It's a little more than \$11, so that's nice. I'm saving the twenty for rent. I only need twenty more by Tuesday to pay Trips. I don't know where I'm getting that twenty in the next day and a half, but I also need to eat, so there we go.

A bunch of bananas, some carrots, and a bag of dried beans all go in the basket. I have rice back at the house, so I skip that. Last is a half a dozen eggs, and I know that's it. I stare at the yogurt, but there's no way I can afford it. I'm ready to buy my pathetic rations, but Walker comes around the corner, stopping in front of the dairy section. "Are they out of your favorites?" he asks, motioning at the yogurt.

"Nah, this is good," I say, hoisting up my basket.

Walker glances in the basket, then gently touches my arm. "Clara, you need to eat."

I roll my eyes. "I love to eat, Walker. No worries."

I walk past him, but he runs his hand up my arm, grasping my good shoulder, pausing my dash for the registers. "Unless you have food stashed in your room, this isn't going to cut it."

My anger flares. I know this isn't enough food—I'm not an idiot. I'm poor. There's a difference.

“Walker, leave me some pride,” I hiss, marching past him and to the front, quickly buying my food at the self-checkout. I feed in the change, ending up with a handful of pennies, my math spot-on.

Walker reaches the checkout not long after, his basket switched out for a cart full of fruits and veggies, ice cream and yogurt. I help him bag, noticing he got the same yogurt I usually do—very suspicious. Once I have four paper bags packed, I know this is way more food than he could eat on his own in a week.

“Walker, what's with all the food?”

“I want to do more family dinners. Maybe some continental breakfasts. I think we need to touch base more often, with the Bryce thing and all.”

“Walker,” I start.

He grabs all four bags and leaves the grocery store, not letting me finish.

Sliding his groceries into the backend, he tucks my small bag next to his feast in paper bags, then shoos me toward my door.

I climb in, waiting for Walker to join me. His phone is out, and I know he's messaging the guys. Once he's in the car, I turn to him. “You can't just buy me food,” I say.

He shrugs. “I didn't buy you food. I bought the house food.”

“Walker, that’s a lie.”

He turns on the car, heading home. “Everyone needs to eat, Clara, you included.”

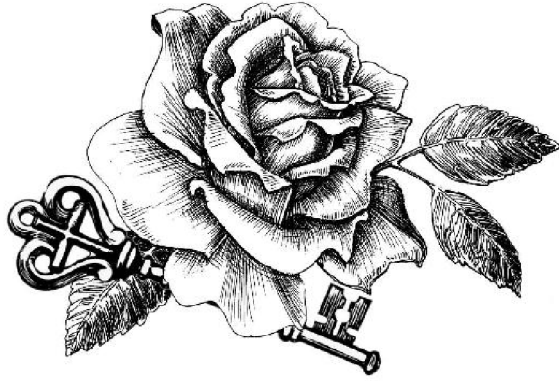
I catch sight of myself in the side mirror, glaring like a petulant teenager. I force my face to neutral and try to figure out how to explain why this isn’t okay. “I can take care of myself. I know it doesn’t look like it right now, but really, I can. If I hadn’t lost those shifts, I’d be on track for the month.”

“But you did lose those shifts, through no fault of your own. Friends help.” Walker shoots me a look, his usual half grin missing. “Will you let us chip in?”

I sigh, looking down at my lap. “Only if I get to help you guys in return,” I say. For some reason, it sounds like I volunteered to break the law with them, not to clean the kitchen or fluff the pillows.

Walker must have heard it that way too because he doesn’t answer, but a half smile creases his cheek. We drive back to the house in total silence.

Chapter 37



Trips

I brace myself for heading into Clara's room to wake her up. Walker and Jansen were practically glued to her last week, and it took all my self-control not to yank them out of her bed and toss their asses into the yard.

But it's her fucking bed, and her fucking choice, so even if it kills me, I've got to respect it. I push the door open and find she's perfectly, angelically, by herself. Her curls splay across her face, and her bad arm is tucked up against her chest. She wasn't wearing the sling last night, and while I'm glad she's getting better, I hope she knows she needs to keep the damn thing on for today's trial.

I pause before shaking her awake. I don't need to drive her to class this morning—she and RJ decided it was smart to have a proximity alert on her phone for Bryce. She'll know if the fucker gets too close to her.

I'm surprised she opted in—I thought we'd have to do it on the sly. Which would've felt like shit after Bryce pulled the same damn thing, but we all need Clara safe.

She shifts in the bed, and a moan slips out of those pink lips, and the sound goes straight to my dick. I sprint out of there. I don't need this shit first thing in the morning.

Pacing in the hallway for thirty seconds, I call myself a fucking dumbass, then go back in and give her a shake.

“Hey, wake up.”

Clara rolls away from me, onto her bad shoulder, whimpering as she rolls back toward me, her eyes popping open. “Ow.”

“Get up. I'll drive you to West Bank. I have another favor to ask.”

She looks at me, her brain taking a second to catch up with her ears. “Will you make me coffee?”

“Better. I'll buy you coffee. But we have to get out of here soon if you want breakfast, too.”

She moans, and I debate storming out into the hallway again, but I keep my shit together. It's nice having her all to myself, still half awake, not yet pissed at me for some fuck-up or another.

“Fine,” she says, rolling off the mattress and onto the floor. It kills me I didn't get her a fucking bed at the thrift store. No one should have to sleep on the floor.

Grabbing her water bottle from her bag, I head to the kitchen to fill it up for her. I snag an apple Walker got and a packet of nuts, shoving them into her backpack while she's in the bathroom. Goddamn girl was going to starve rather than ask

for some fucking food. I'll have to thank Walker for buying some of Clara's favorites.

After a second, I pull out her wallet, tucking an extra twenty into the wad she has in there—I have a feeling she'll know she didn't earn it, but I don't think she'll figure out it's from me.

I zip up the bag as she comes back into the room, her hair up in a knot at the top of her head, ass-hugging jeans and a clean shirt covering her up. She eyes the sling, twisting her lips before she pulls it on.

I pick up her backpack. "I've got your stuff. Water, snacks, computer—am I missing anything?"

Clara puts her good hand on her hip, tilting her head as she looks me up and down. I shift from foot to foot—it makes me feel like I fucking left my fly down or something. I check covertly as I hoist her bag over my shoulder—I'm good, it's up.

"Why are you being so nice?" she asks.

"Because I fucking want to," I say, walking past her to the hallway. Damn woman makes me want to help, when I know I'm as good as a death sentence for anyone close to me.

Fuck. I need to get her out of my system—somehow. All the fuckers I live with have a thing for her. There's no need for me to join them. I've got an empire to build. Then I won't need any more of my father's "favours."

Leaving without checking to see if Clara is coming, I start up the engine of my truck just as she climbs in. My fingers itch,

wanting to help her up, but she's healing and doesn't need me. This is a good thing. I shouldn't be touching her.

I head out of the alley faster than I need to, barreling toward West Bank. Clara digs through her bag, and apparently finds nothing wrong with what I packed, because instead of snipping at me, she just watches me drive.

"What?" I ask, trying not to shift around in my seat. I haven't had a tell in six years—why the hell am I fidgety when she looks at me?

"You said you had a favor to ask."

I clench the steering wheel. "We'll talk over breakfast."

She sighs, digging through her bag. She pulls out the wallet and counts the cash there. A small gasp escapes, then she counts again. She shakes her head. "You said you wanted rent before the end of the month, right?"

Did I say that? It sounds like some dumb shit I said. "Sure."

She holds out the stack of cash, my twenty included. It's literally everything in her wallet except for some change. Shit.

Slamming my hand against the steering wheel once, I make Clara jump, but she doesn't back down, holding out the money, waiting.

I sigh, grab the bundle, and tuck it into my pocket. I hate her pride right now. She could do with a little less, for sure.

We make it into the garage, and I find a mostly empty floor, hoping no one will park too close. I get out before Clara,

running my hand through my hair, wondering how I'm going to make it through the three classes I have today when I'm this wound up already. Add this afternoon's trial, and I'm going to need a heavy bag in the fucking finance lab to make it through.

Leading us to a cool little twenty-four-hour cafe on this side of campus, I jam my hands into my pockets just to keep them from doing something dumb. Like grabbing her hand. "I'm buying," I say, after ordering a full breakfast, hoping it comes fast. There are only thirty minutes before my first class, and I hate being late.

She orders pancakes and bacon with a fruit cup, and some fancy frou-frou coffee that the barista recommends. We hover at the end of the bar. I probably should say something, but really, why bother? We both need food more than we need conversation.

The food shows up at the end of the counter with our drinks, and I lead us to a booth in the back corner. My eggs are gone before I feel human enough to talk. "You'll have a lawyer this afternoon," I start.

"I guessed as much," she says, nibbling on the end of one of her slices of bacon. "What do I owe you?"

I huff, annoyed. "Nothing." She doesn't owe me a damn thing—I owe my father a "favor," but it's not like those things pass forward. I pull a slip of paper out of my back pocket and slide it to her. "Call this when we're done with breakfast. She wants to talk now that she has the texts and voicemails and

stuff. Her name is Veronica, and she's supposed to be one of the best."

Clara nods, a chunk of hair falling out of her bun. It's on the side with her bad arm, and as she goes to tuck it behind her ear, she winces. Before I can think about it, I lean forward and tuck it back for her.

The air hums this close to her, our eyes locked, and I want to lean closer. Fuck. I'm not going to blame Walker and Jansen for their not-so-subtle advances—she's like a fucking magnet. I catch a flower scent from her hair, the salt of the bacon on her breath, and damn, I want to lean in, to figure out what the fuss is about.

Clara swallows, her eyes breaking from mine, and I slump back down into my seat. Bad idea, jackass. She's not one of us. And even if she were, there's no fucking way—my mess is my own, and no one else needs to bathe in it.

I finish up my toast and start on my hash browns. Clara stops eating, staring out at the restaurant. "What?" I ask.

She looks down at her plate, and I just know her fingers are drumming her damn thigh again. "I want to help."

"Help with what?"

She looks up, forcing me to meet her gaze. "With Bryce. I'm not ungrateful for what you guys are doing, but I need to help. I can't just sit here while you guys take all the risk."

I take a breath, remembering we're in a fucking diner. "You want to help?" I ask, trying to stay quiet.

Clara nods, waiting.

“When was the last time you started a rumor?”

“I’ve never started a rumor.”

“What about blackmail? When was the last time you blackmailed someone?”

She chews on her lip, no longer meeting my eyes.

“What about break into someone’s house? Hack their computer? What about the last time you put a target on your back, hoping that some creep will take a swing?”

Her eyes flash at mine. “I’ve been doing that every day since I broke up with Bryce.”

I roll my eyes, polishing off the last of my food. “We’ll do what we do best. You do school and running and, I don’t know, being a goody-two-shoes so you can get into the fucking FBI.”

I bus my dishes, not looking at Clara. She’s got to be steaming, but there’s a time for fire and a time for caution. I’m not the best at knowing which is which, but I’m learning, and this isn’t the time for fire. Not by a long shot.

I grab a second frou-frou coffee and bring it back to the table. “Call the lawyer,” I say, setting down the drink. Glancing at the time, I figure if I jaywalk, I might be punctual. I sprint across the street as my phone buzzes.

An unlisted number.

When's the next game? I'm getting antsy.

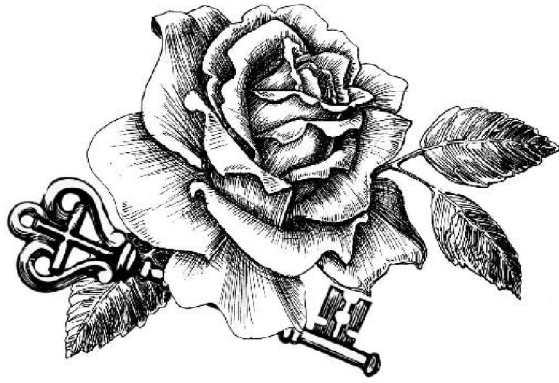
I stop just inside the door to the building.

I'll message like always. Don't contact me this
way again.

I quickly delete the message stream and send a new one to RJ, asking him to make sure that the records are as clean as possible. Fucking amateur.

And now I'm two minutes late. Today is officially even worse than I imagined. Great.

Chapter 38



RJ

The collar of my dress shirt is too tight. I should have tried it on before coming to the courthouse, but it fit the last time I wore it. Now that I think about it, though, that was probably two years ago.

Trish said the pink looked classy. I have no way of knowing if she's right, but it was clean, and I *thought* it fit, so I figured it was fine.

Placing my laptop bag on the conveyor belt to go through the x-ray machine, I feel the eyes of multiple cops on me. I'm here to support a friend, but I can tell they are firmly convinced I'm guilty. Of what? I guess to them, it doesn't matter.

After a very thorough search, I get my bag back from the security guard. I'm about to head up the elevator when my name's called from the security line. Emma's waving from just past the metal detector, her pink hair in some fancy wreath around her head. I wait for her, anxious to be upstairs with Clara, not wanting to do small talk with Emma, but knowing it would be rude to leave.

She rushes up to me, a nervous smile on her face. “Hey, we match,” she says, motioning from my shirt to her hair.

I smile and nod, then hit the up arrow for the elevator.

“Do you think we’ll have to talk? Give testimony or anything?” she asks once we’re on the elevator, tugging a bit on the blouse she’s wearing, making sure the buttons go straight down the middle.

“I think we only have to if Bryce is a sympathetic guy,” I say, leading us toward the courtroom Trips texted us.

“What do you think will happen to Trips?” Emma asks.

That is not something I want to think about it. “No charges yet.”

Emma steps in front of me, stopping me from going any farther. “I need to know one thing before I go in there.”

I wait for her to get to her point. When I don’t say anything, she sighs.

“I just need to know that Clara is safe with you guys. With *all* of you guys.”

I nod. “She’s safe.”

She goes to play with her hair, but finds it braided back, and ends up rubbing the back of her neck instead. “Trips too?” she asks.

Why am I out here defending Trips? Why did Emma decide that I’m the one to ask? You’d think she’d go to Jansen or Walker long before she’d come to me.

I force myself to say what needs to be said. “Trips has some stuff in his past, but Clara’s safe with him. She’s safe with all of us.”

She looks at me for longer than I would like before she nods and gestures to the mostly empty hallway. “Okay then. Off we go to tell Bryce ‘Fuck you!’” she practically sings, falling into step beside me. I wonder how she and Clara became friends—they seem like an odd pair. But then again, the four of us look odd from the outside, too.

Sometimes caring sneaks up on you. For me, adding three brothers to my two little sisters came out of left field. A hint of a smile creases my cheek as we open the door to the courtroom.

Clara is already there, talking to a tall woman with curly red hair. Clara looks professional, a black business dress on, her hair doing a half-up half-down thing that makes her look innocent but not childlike, if that makes any sense.

Honestly, it’s not fair that girls can switch up personas just by changing how they dress for the day and switching up their hair and makeup. She’s wearing her sling, even though her arm is getting better, her good hand fiddling with the strap. She looks sympathetic, which I have to assume is the goal.

Trips is faking relaxed, sprawled on a chair behind the two women, but his tension is tangible by the set of his shoulders. He’d better keep his shit together today.

Walker comes in with Jansen as Emma and I take the seats next to Trips. None of us say much to each other besides “Hi.”

It feels like it's against the rules to talk. A cop is sitting in the back, staring at us, and I wonder if this is the problematic officer, the one who might have connected us to the last girl Trips tried to protect.

The doors open a bit later, and Clara's monster ex comes in with his own lawyer. I don't know how he found out about Clara's—lawyers are optional at this kind of thing.

He gives a start when he looks over at our group, and I realize he didn't expect us to have a lawyer, and I find I hate the bastard even more. He'd planned on steamrolling her.

He tries to get Clara's attention, but she and her lawyer seem to have anticipated this, and neither of them acknowledge his antics. He also looks sympathetic, his fingers splinted, his wrist in a brace, a bruise fading on his cheek. He looks worse off than Clara.

No friends are waiting on the other side of the aisle to support him.

We got to all his friends except one—the last guy is hard to pin down. I can hardly find anything about him online. Add to that the fact he lives with his disabled mom who is always home, and Jansen was a no-go. We haven't found an in yet, but he isn't here, so I'm calling it a win.

The judge shows up soon afterward, and the ceremony of court begins. I'm itching to pull out my laptop and end the monotony, but that would look disrespectful, so I zone out, staring at the flags on the wall.

For the storytelling part of the trial, I half listen, knowing it will come down to who tells the most compelling narrative, which falls to the lawyers, not us. Facts only get you so far—it's how they get woven together that makes someone guilty or innocent.

Bryce's lawyer is going for the accident-misunderstanding defense. He's also emphasizing that Trips is a violent and dangerous entity, even though this trial has nothing to do with Trips.

Our lawyer, meanwhile, is painting a picture of long-term mental and emotional abuse with a recent turn toward physical violence. Having pulled the texts and voicemails, including the ones Bryce sent long before Clara moved in with us, I think our lawyer has the better argument.

How Clara came out of that relationship half as confident as she is, well, it's a miracle after what the monster did to her. He tore her down every third word, and she'd just apologize, promise to be "better," prostrate herself before the bastard until he gave her small nibblets of praise to reel her back in.

The monster deserves so much more than a restraining order. He needs to never have an opportunity to hurt a woman again. Everyone else thinks taking away his chance at being a doctor will be enough—I want something that will hobble him forever.

The judge takes a cursory glance at the transcripts from the texts and voicemails, then rules in Clara's favor. The restraining order is granted.

Trips' tension eases next to me, a breath leaking out as he leans forward, running one hand through his hair. I feel everyone else relax too—none of us were called to testify about what happened at the party.

I don't know why, but this makes me nervous—it feels too easy.

Glancing over at the monster ex, I stifle a chuckle. He's so red he's turning purple. He and his lawyer have their heads together, but Bryce keeps getting more agitated. Clara's looking over some papers with her lawyer, but I feel the tension squeal and snap, electricity flooding the room, and I leap to my feet, knowing shit is about to get dangerous.

Jansen is on his feet next to me, picking up on the same thrumming energy as I am.

Bryce pushes his lawyer out of the way before lunging at Clara. My heart stops beating as I leap over the chairs between the two of us, grabbing the back of the monster's shirt as he clasps onto Clara's good wrist with our lawyer sandwiched between the former couple.

I wrap myself around the monster's middle, not wanting to pull him back until he lets go of Clara, but keeping him from getting any closer. The court cop is yelling something, the other cop from the back of the room has sprinted over, and he's also yelling.

I don't hear them, though. The ex is shouting at Clara, telling her we're dangerous, that she's made the wrong choice, that he loves her and wants her back. Jansen is trying to peel the

bastard's hand from Clara, but Bryce is locked onto her, not willing to let go.

For once, Trips is one step back from the violence, with Walker and Emma blocking him from joining the melee, but his jaw and fists are clenched.

The cop from the back of the room shoulders me out of the way, forcing my hands off the asshole and kicking out at the back of the monster's knees. The bastard goes down, but he's still clutching Clara's arm, and she yelps as she's pulled down with him. Jansen half catches her, still trying to pry her loose.

I duck under flailing arms, stepping around to help Jansen. Somehow, we get Clara free.

The second we do, the cop from the back yells at the other cop, and they get the monster in cuffs.

I ignore the rest of the room, instead helping Jansen set Clara back on her feet. Red finger marks are already stark on her good forearm, another fault to lay at the feet of the bastard. A few tears trail down her cheeks, but she's furious instead of scared, which lets the fire in my blood cool.

Her rage I can deal with—her fear breaks my heart.

I pull her in for a hug, and Jansen places a hand on both of us.

“When will this end?” she murmurs.

The judge gains control of the court once again, Bryce is removed, the chaos forgotten, order restored.

“Thank you for jumping in,” our lawyer says, her eyes bitter glass as she straightens her blazer.

I bob my chin, not knowing what to say. I wasn’t doing it for her.

The other lawyer looks relieved to be done with the monster ex as he and our lawyer chat on their way out of the courtroom. They’re obviously old friends.

The cop from the back of the courtroom stares at our little crew. I can see him ticking off boxes in his head, matching our faces to the sketches and descriptions from that long-ago night. Big guy with red hair—check. Smaller blond guy with a ponytail—check. Asian dude always a half a step back—check. Medium-sized Black man able to fight if needed—check.

Not good.

I cling to Clara, holding her close as my mind whirs. Another problem. What would I give for a real solution?

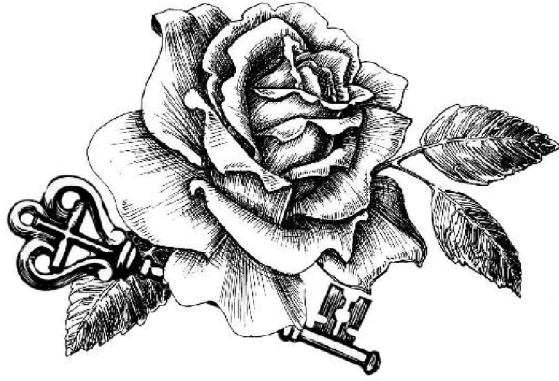
The rest of the guys fold around her, needing touch to make sure she’s okay, even Trips clasping her shoulder.

I watch the cop watching us. He gives me a grim nod, then leaves the courtroom.

I stand surrounded by the people I trust most in the world—a family built on honesty in a world of lies. I need a way to keep them safe.

We’re running out of time.

Chapter 39



Clara

I keep a copy of the restraining order in my backpack and in my purse. My boss at the coffee shop has a copy, as do each of the guys and Emma. I only wish the paper came with a bulletproof vest.

Three times this week my phone buzzed with the proximity alert—my heart speeding up as I looked for Bryce. I only saw him once, watching me leave my criminal psych course, heading home. He didn't follow me, but my skin crawled the rest of the day.

By Friday, my arm's feeling well enough for a long run, and I can't tell if my jitters are from excitement or fear. I only have this weekend and next to finish my training. Then it's time to taper, to do nothing yet again, so I'm buzzed and ready to go for the race. I have no illusions about winning—I'm not that fast. I only need to be fast enough to look like an excellent candidate for the FBI. My time will be a marker of my physical prowess and work ethic.

I'm raking my hair back into a ponytail when RJ meets me at the front door, his workout shirt stretched over his muscled core and a headband holding his hair off his forehead and neck.

"Hey. I'm going for a long run today," I say, tucking my water bottle into my belt next to a copy of the restraining order, folded so it fits into the zippered money pouch.

"How long?" RJ asks.

"I'm planning on a ten miler today and an eleven miler next Thursday. I need to get caught back up."

He nods. "Would it be okay if I track you once I have to turn back?"

I should probably feel weird about that request, but instead, a sense of safety blossoms in my chest. "I'd like that," I say, shaking out my arms to test my shoulder. It still feels weird, but it's close enough to normal for me to pretend.

We head to the river again. I enjoy imagining I'm in the woods even when I'm in the city—it feels oddly magical to dash through the woods. The air is crisp, most of the trees shifting to red and gold, a few already dropping their leaves. The old oaks on campus are grasping onto their waxy green, but fall is definitely here.

"How are you feeling?" RJ asks, and I jump, not used to him initiating conversations.

I toss up my good shoulder as we start north on the river path. "I've been better."

“Do you work tomorrow morning?”

Shooting him a grin, I say, “I do. Were you planning something fun to take my mind off it all?”

RJ looks away, tucking his head down—maybe I shouldn’t tease him.

“Hey, that was a joke,” I say. “I’m holding my own. All I can do is try to go back to normal, right?”

RJ glances back at me again. “Do you think it’s done?”

I run another block—taking time to think won’t bother RJ.

Do I think it’s done? No fucking way. But am I going to live my life waiting for the other shoe to drop? Fuck no. I asked both Trips and Walker if I could help, and both of them shut me down. So I’m left wallowing at the crossroads between powerlessness and pending disaster.

I sigh. “No, it’s not.”

“I don’t think so either.”

We run in silence for a while, the afternoon sun slanting gold through the trees as we pace side by side.

“What do you think about that cop, Officer Tom Reed?” RJ’s change in subject is odd, but it makes sense that he’s worried about Trips going to jail for assault, and the rest of them being at risk of obstruction charges.

“I think he’s a genuinely good cop.”

“That’s what I’m finding too.”

We stride under the golden trees, the cool air brushing over my skin, the sound of our breaths mingling. It feels so good to be out—my legs are practically singing after nearly two weeks cooped up in the house. Wall-sits with RJ are not the same as a run.

“Thanks, by the way,” I say.

“For what?” he asks.

I take a risk and bump him, bouncing us off our parallel paths. “For hanging out with me these last few weeks.”

I’m surprised when he bumps me back. “I’ll hang out with you whenever, sugar.”

A stupid grin slips onto my face, ecstatic that RJ likes me, too. Then reality crashes in. Three serious crushes? I am the literal worst.

We reach a crossroads and RJ turns to me, one hand on my good shoulder. “You have your phone?” he asks.

I nod. He squeezes my shoulder, pauses, then pulls me into a sweaty hug. “Stay safe.”

“I will.”

He presses me against his chest, then turns around, heading home. The light changes and I’m off in the opposite direction.

What am I going to do about all these crushes?

I text Emma, needing some girl-time tonight, asking her to pick me up at seven. She responds with a collection of random emoticons that more or less says she’s thrilled and that there

will be drinking involved. And maybe kittens. I don't really know. I laugh as I slip my phone back into my pouch, my step light as I pound through mile after mile.



After a shower and gobbling up leftovers from Walker's last family dinner, I settle onto a pile of pillows in Jansen's meditation space to wait for Emma.

Moments later, Jansen bounds down the stairs, bouncing into the parlor and flopping down next to me. "Hey," he says, his side flush with mine.

"Hey," I say, wanting to tangle my fingers with his but resisting. Where I get all this self-control is a mystery to me.

He's decked out in maroon and gold, which is odd. These guys aren't exactly "rah-rah go team" people. "What's up with the gopher pride?" I ask, poking him in the shoulder.

He laughs, grabbing my finger and pressing a less-than-chaste kiss to the tip, his tongue flicking out for a taste. Tingles race down to my toes, and I want to cancel on Emma. Fuck being good.

He props himself on his elbow, lacing his fingers through mine, just like I'd wanted to do earlier, yet somehow retaining the ability to speak. I for sure can't.

"I wanted to make sure it still fits. There's a home game tomorrow, and this is perfect camouflage," he says, rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb.

I swallow, forcing words out through lips that would rather be busy with something else entirely. “Camouflage for what?”

He brushes a kiss against my cheek. “For relieving the horrible burden of wealth from men old enough to be my grandfather, one wallet at a time.” He glances around the hallway before pulling me flush with him, his lips closing over mine. I forget to breathe as his tongue darts in. My hands grip his shirt, trying to pull him even closer.

I’d forgotten how good his kisses feel. He pulls back, nibbling my ear, and I gasp, the feeling traveling straight to my now throbbing clit. Well, fuck.

“You look delicious,” he whispers in my ear.

“You kiss like sin,” I say.

He laughs, kissing me again, his hand sliding down to my waist, his thumb stroking the bare skin there.

“Jansen,” I croak, my thoughts scattered.

“Mmm, this is nice,” he says, tapping his nose to mine, his hand sliding up to cradle my breast.

“Very,” I say, as he gives it a squeeze. I push myself into him, our lips meeting again, moaning as his thumb brushes across my nipple. I run my hands under his shirt, tracing the lean muscles of his stomach and chest, warm and vibrating with energy.

The front door opens, and I blink at the light, Emma’s Cheshire grin flashing from above us. “I can come back,” she says, stepping out onto the porch to give us a minute.

“No, no, I’m coming,” I call, my face heating. God, this is ridiculous.

I work on straightening my clothes without Jansen helping at all. He’s just smirking at me, his arms still braced around me.

“Dude, move,” I say, giving him a gentle shove. He laughs, kissing me on the nose before popping up and helping me to my feet.

“Later,” he whispers into my ear.

“What if I need more time?” I ask.

Jansen sighs, a shot of guilt that mirrors my own flashing across his face.

I shouldn’t have done that, not before I figure out who I like best. He shrugs, not answering. My hand stays locked in his as we both go out to the porch, neither one of us wanting to let go.

I start down the steps, trying to untangle our hands, but at the last second, he pulls me back, touching his nose to mine. “I’m sorry. I forgot. I’ll try harder next time.”

Tears flood my eyes unbidden, making it hard to see anything besides the sincerity in his green eyes. “Thank you, I’ll try to be better too,” I manage, knowing how confusing this all is. I press my lips to his cheek anyway, before turning and following Emma out to her car.

Once we’re in the car, Emma turns to me and squeals, “Jansen! Oh my God, spill, girl!”

I touch my lips as we pull onto the street, ignoring Emma dancing in her seat as she waits for me to gather my thoughts.

“It’s a mess,” I say.

“It looked more like fun to me,” she chortles.

I shake my head, trying to figure out how to explain. Emma is firmly in the camp of you love who you love, and that’s that. If anyone in my life won’t judge me for liking all these guys at once, it’s Emma. I sigh. “It’s not just Jansen,” I say, watching the streets pass by.

“Oh my God, Clara, I need to know everything.”

“I like them all,” I mumble, not quite knowing how to start.

Emma whistles. “This requires alcohol. Remind me again why we don’t have fake IDs?”

“FBI,” I say, pointing at myself.

“My place then. I think the girls are going out tonight, so we should have it all to ourselves.”

I laugh, a manic sort of emotional escape, as we wind through the back streets to Emma’s apartment on the other side of town.

She’s pre-vet, and the barns are on the St. Paul campus. Why are there farm animals on a college campus? I’m operating under the assumption it’s because our state used to be known for farming, but I’ve never really asked anyone.

Emma blasts the music, both of us singing and dancing. She seems to magically know I need a moment to collect my

thoughts, to untangle the knot I've made of my love life.

As we pull into her apartment complex, she wrinkles her nose. "They're still here," she says, motioning to an SUV at the back of the lot.

The lot lights flash on in the half dark. "We'll be fine," I say, crawling out of the car.

Hip-hop is blaring from her apartment, pounding through the whole building. She rolls her eyes as she unlocks the door, the sound painful as we walk into the apartment. Emma's sister Sophie twirls between her girlfriends, a bottle of alcohol passed from one to the next.

"Clara!" Sophie yells over the music, shimmying up to me and handing me the bottle. "It's been forever! Are you coming out with us?" She forces the bottle into my hand, and I take a small sip.

"Not tonight," I yell. "Next time?"

Sophie grins, yanking the bottle back. "Got it."

She sways back to her friends as Emma and I skirt around them, heading to her room. The door between Sophie's music and us doesn't dampen the sound nearly enough, so we both flop down on Emma's bed, tucking our heads under her pillows, like we always used to do, giggling about how dumb this whole situation is.

Two songs later, the music stops, followed by some laughter and the front door slamming. Emma and I both let out a sigh,

pulling our heads out from under our pillows. “I can’t believe she still parties like that,” I say.

“Every day she doesn’t work. My sister must have a liver made of steel.”

“Do you think she’ll graduate on time?”

Emma shrugs. “She somehow keeps passing her classes. That girl is magic in all the wrong ways.”

I laugh. We roll out of bed and head out to the kitchen. I grab two cups and fill them with ice while Emma pulls out the rum and Coke. Drinks in hand, we settle into the corners of the couch, Emma poking me with her toes. “You ready to spill? Or do you need more liquid courage?”

I shake my head at her. “I don’t know that more alcohol will make this better.”

She raises a brow at me, waiting.

“Ahh, fine,” I gripe. “I like all my roommates. Like, I really like three of them, have kissed two of them, and I’m pretty sure there is something majorly wrong with me.”

“Oh my God, this is amazing! Who else have you kissed?”

“Walker.”

Emma squeals and I roll my eyes, taking another sip of my drink.

Emma bounces on the couch. “I need to know everything! Like, who did you kiss first, how far did it go, is there like a

rank or something? Do the others know? This is so amazing, Clara!”

“This is not amazing. This is terrible,” I mock-yell, setting down my drink to rub my hands over my eyes.

Emma crawls up next to me, pulling me into a hug. “Why?” she asks.

“Because I don’t think I can choose. And I don’t think I’m ready for anything serious, not really, not so soon after Bryce.”

She holds me close, and my thudding heart slows down.

“Do you want my opinion?” she asks.

I pull back, looking into her blue eyes, serious for once. I nod.

“Love doesn’t always make sense.”

“I’m not in love with them,” I say.

She pushes my words away, not letting me finish. “I’m just saying, I think everything you said can be true at the same time. You can want something casual. You can have feelings for more than one person. The only part of this that isn’t true is that it’s terrible.”

“But I’m cheating, or almost cheating.”

Emma chews on her lip, taking a minute to get her thoughts together. “You know the pattern, right? You date someone, *and then* you talk about if you want to be exclusive. People default to monogamy, but that talk wouldn’t be part of a relationship check-in if dating more than one person at a time wasn’t a

thing, right? I think you can just tell them you don't want anything serious, but that you want to date them all. See what happens after that."

I groan and flop back on the couch. "I can't date the four guys I live with. That's just looking for trouble. Also, I'm like sixty percent sure Trips hates me, and that announcement would shove him one hundred percent into the 'I hate Clara' camp."

"He is a bitchy one, isn't he?" Emma says.

"Bitchy?" Has anyone ever called Trips bitchy before?

The thought makes me giggle, and when I snort, Emma crumples onto the floor, laughing so hard she has to slide her drink across the coffee table to keep from spilling it. That maneuver amps up my own giggle fit, turning it from cackles to full-on hysteria.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I'm laughing too hard to wiggle it out. Gasping, I try to get some air into my lungs, but it takes a couple of attempts to get enough oxygen to start to wind down. Finally, I gain enough control to sit up straight-ish and pull my phone out.

The alert immediately kills my laughter—Bryce is here.

Emma sees my face and snatches my phone out of my hands. "Shit," she says, handing it back to me.

"Call the cops," I say, sending out an SOS in the group chat to my guys. I look around the living room, but there's nothing

helpful, so I sprint to the kitchen, pulling a small saucepan out of the cabinet just as the pounding starts on the front door.

“Clara! Clara, please, I just want to talk!” Bryce’s voice cuts through the thin wood door.

“Bryce, you’re not allowed to be here,” I yell back, my hands shaking so badly the saucepan is waving around like I’m swatting flies.

“Please, Clara, I don’t have anybody left.” He sounds so broken that a piece of me shatters, too. I don’t know what to say. I did this to him—I asked the guys to help, and now Bryce is all alone.

“Go away,” Emma screams, her phone still up to her ear.

Bryce pounds on the door, each fist against the wood making me jump. A loud bang thunders through the room, and I know he’s trying to kick his way in. “I swear to God, Clara, you and those damn criminals are going to pay for this!” Another kick reverberates in the room, followed by silence.

I’m still bracing myself against the counter, the sauce pot clenched in my fist, while the sirens squeal in the parking lot. Emma lets an officer in before prying the pot from my hand, then pulls me into a hug. Before the officer can sit me down to take my statement, Trips is in the room, somehow slipping past the other officer and rushing up to me. My officer goes to block him, but I squeak out, “It’s okay, he’s a friend.”

Trips stops in front of me, reaching out like he’s going to hug me, but stops halfway, jamming his hands into his

pockets. “Did he hurt you?” he asks.

“He didn’t get in.”

Darkness flashes across his face, and he curses, storming out of the apartment. Emma shoots me a “what the fuck?” look and I shrug. Trips probably just needs to walk it off, but I fucking wish he could keep his shit together for longer than three seconds at a time—I need him, here, with me, even if it doesn’t make sense.

The officer takes my statement. His partner takes Emma’s. I consider skimming over Bryce calling the guys criminals, but don’t, only wishing Emma knew what I do, that she was keeping this secret with me.

I want Trips here—he can let me know if I’m making the right choice telling the full truth.

The officers file out as the rest of my guys rush in, Trips at the back, avoiding eye contact. I get hugs from Jansen and Walker, and RJ gives my shoulder a squeeze. Trips glares at the corner of the door, cracked by the force of Bryce’s kicks.

Panic warring with relief, I grab my rum and Coke, choking down the room temperature watery slop, the sweetness cloying without the ice. I cough, setting the cup down on the coffee table, not wanting to see a room full of concerned faces.

“What now?” I ask.

“Now we do better,” RJ says, glancing at Emma, not wanting to say more in front of her.

Trips slams the door, stalking around the room. “How the fuck did he know you were here?”

RJ shakes his head. “Her phone is clean. Could he have followed them?”

I go to grab my drink and find it empty. Walker takes it, disappearing into the kitchen. Thinking about the last two Bryce run-ins, I figure out the common denominator. “It’s Emma,” I say.

“Wait now, what? I didn’t call him,” Emma squawks.

I look at her, an apology in my eyes. “No, not like that. I mean, your phone.” I look at RJ. “Can you check it?”

He nods and holds his hand out to Emma.

Emma shakes her head. “What are you talking about?”

“Remember, he put a tracker on my phone? I bet he put one on yours, too. RJ can check and get it off.”

“Shit,” she mutters, handing her phone to RJ.

Walker comes back with a bottle of rum and a bottle of vodka in one arm, glasses in another. Emma gets up and grabs Coke and orange juice. We all make drinks in silence.

“Is there anything else we need to know?” Trips growls, still pacing.

Emma clears her throat. “He said he was going to make you guys pay.”

I cut in before the guys answer her. “He said he would make you criminals pay, specifically.”

“Fuck,” Jansen mutters, pulling his hair back into a ponytail. I finally sit down, my legs functioning just well enough to get me to the couch. Jansen perches on the arm of the couch and Walker slips down beside me.

“Got it,” RJ says, looking up at me. “You were right. He has the same programs on Emma’s phone as yours.” He glances over at Emma. “He could see all your texts and had live GPS updates.”

“What the fuck?” Emma says, her eyes wide.

“He’s a fucking scary bastard,” I mutter, surprising myself.

Trips huffs, staring out the window. “I mean, this is almost what we wanted.” He looks across the room to me, eyes locking. I know he wanted to have the target on his back, but Bryce is no idiot—he’s going to go after the weakest links: me, and apparently Emma.

“You guys wanted this?” Emma asks, braiding and unbraiding her hair to keep her hands busy.

Walker jumps in. “No, we just figured things would get worse after the restraining order.”

Emma catches my eye, and I can see she’s getting suspicious. I give her a small smile and shrug, trying to communicate that these half-truths have to be enough for now. “I think I want to go home. Someone should stay with Emma, though.”

Jansen pulls me into a half hug. “I’ll stay.” He turns to Emma. “You have a roommate, right? Do you know when

they'll be back?"

Emma slumps down in her chair. "My sister. She'll be back sometime before noon." She throws her head back and stares at the ceiling. "I'll make you up a place on the couch."

I'm downing my second rum and Coke when there's a knock. I freeze—all the guys are on their feet, Trips next to the door, Jansen peeking out the peephole, and RJ and Walker standing between us and danger.

Jansen's shoulders relax a bit. "Look chill," he says, pushing Trips toward the couch.

I'm surprised when all the guys sprawl out around me, Trips included, while Emma and I do our best to not look confused.

Jansen opens the door and Officer Reed hovers in the doorway. "Good evening. Is Clara McElroy here?" he asks. Jansen opens the door further, motioning across the room to me. Emma and I share a glance, the liquor bottles obvious on our underage coffee table. I know the guys are twenty-one plus—hopefully this won't come back to bite Emma and me in the ass.

"Oh, hello," he says, taking in the guys in the room. Officer Reed takes a few steps into the apartment. "How are you all doing? I heard there was a bit of a disturbance this evening and I wanted to make sure you're okay, Clara."

I force a smile across my face. "It wasn't great there for a minute, but things have calmed down for now."

Officer Reed strides farther into the room, doing a full scan of the space, noting the liquor on the table with a raised brow. He paces, picking up pictures of Sophie and Emma from the side tables, straightening a painting on the wall. Trips studies him, tension tight across his shoulders while he pretends he's indifferent to the cop in our midst.

Reed clears his throat. "I'm not sure I know everyone here," he says, making eye contact with Jansen, RJ, and Emma.

"You're right, you don't," Trips says, standing up and striding to the window, turning his back to the cop in the room, clearly working to get a rise from the man. RJ tenses next to me, his nostrils flaring as he glares at Trips. At least one of these guys doesn't feel the urge to challenge the police officer.

No one offers up their name, though, not even Emma.

Officer Reed grimaces at Trips' back, turning toward me with a soft smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Clara, I'd like to work with you on your stalker situation. I have some ideas. Come by the precinct tomorrow, how about one p.m.?"

An involuntary shiver runs through me, and Walker wraps his arm around my waist while RJ touches the inside of my wrist, his fingers warm against my skin. I don't know why I'm scared to meet with this cop—he seems like a nice guy. But it feels like the ground is shifting under my feet, that lines are being drawn, and I don't know which side I want to end up on.

I nod instead of answering. Officer Reed glances around the room one last time before strolling back to the door. "If you need anything, you still have my card, right?" he asks, and I

nod yet again like some puppet on a string. He exits Emma's apartment with a half wave and Jansen closes the door behind him.

“Well, wasn't that something?” Emma says before we all hold up a hand to quiet her. Trips turns back from the window with a nod. RJ disappears from the apartment, returning with the tablet he used to check for bugs a few weeks ago.

He sweeps the room. “Clear.” We all let out a sigh, the silence broken by that one announcement.

“What was all that?” Emma asks.

“Looking for bugs,” RJ says with a shrug.

Emma jumps up, glaring at all of us. “Seriously, what the fuck? Bugs? Like listening devices?”

I nod, not even trying for damage control after RJ threw that bomb into Emma's lap.

Trips is tense again, staring at RJ like he would love to kick him in the face.

“Why in fuck would the police bug my apartment?” Emma asks.

RJ sets his tablet on the coffee table. “They didn't.”

I cut in, trying to fix this. “And honestly, they probably wouldn't have been able to get a warrant—the guys don't live here and have never been here before tonight.”

“Better safe than in jail,” Jansen quips, curling up on the ground and resting his head on my knees. I run the end of his

ponytail between my fingers, the motion soothing.

“I don’t understand,” Emma says, slumping back down onto the loveseat.

Trips gives me a small nod, his jaw clenched.

Emma’s pink hair is standing out from her head, and her hands shake as she picks up and sets down her drink, her fingers tracing the lip of the glass. I swallow, trying to find the right line to walk. “The cops think the guys did a bad thing.”

“Did they do this bad thing?” she asks, skeptical.

I stare at the top of Jansen’s head as I figure out how to tell a truth that isn’t mine. “They tried to do a good thing, and it turned to shit. Then they tried to make it better.” I shrug, not knowing how much else I can say without giving up secrets that aren’t mine to give.

I want Emma to be gentle, to take this in stride. These guys, well, I wouldn’t say they’re good guys exactly, but they aren’t bad guys either. They’re some combination of kind and safe stirred together with selfish and a blatant disrespect for the law—but I don’t know how to explain that either. Instead, I offer my best friend a sad smile. A hacker on my left, a forger on my right, and a thief curled up at my feet.

Emma drops her head in her arms. “Fuck fuck fuck,” she mumbles to herself. We all wait for Emma to come around, no one breaking the silence. Even Trips stops pacing and leans against the wall, tension vibrating from him. I catch his eye,

and something that looks like gratitude shines in his gaze. I didn't fuck up.

Walker's hand rests on my back, Jansen's fingers draw idle circles on my calf and RJ's warmth radiates across the space between our bodies—I'm surrounded by peace and protection, my heart stilling, reveling in the change. I don't know the last time I was simply at peace. I let out a long sigh—it feels good.

Emma echoes my sigh, pulling her head back up. I'm surprised when she looks at RJ instead of me. "You said you guys were safe. Is that still true?"

RJ locks his stare on Emma. "Every word."

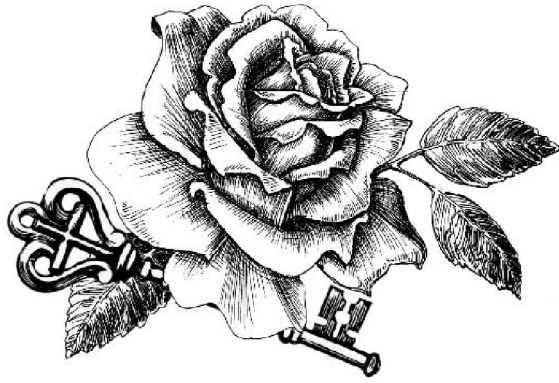
She lets out a groan and stands up. "I'll go get you a blanket and a pillow," she says to Jansen, heading back to her room. The mood shifts, Jansen kissing the inside of my knee before hopping up to clear all the glasses. Walker pulls me into a hug, then goes to help him, carrying back the liquor and empty cans.

RJ tucks his phone into his pocket, his tablet under one arm, and offers me a hand up with a hint of a smile on his face. I take it, letting him tug me to my feet. Only Trips doesn't move.

I hover in front of him. "Hey, are you okay?"

He shakes his head and starts out the door. "For now, Clara, for now."

Chapter 40



Clara

Pacing in front of the police precinct, I debate not going in. Dark clouds rolled in this morning, the temperature dipping solidly into fall territory, the bite of impending rain threatening. The cooler weather brought extra people into the coffee shop, meaning the bonus cash from their tips sits thick in my wallet. A cruiser peels out of the garage, sirens blaring, startling me, forcing me to buck up and head in.

I check in at the front desk this time, but Officer Reed doesn't immediately come out to get me—this is definitely some sort of cop power move.

I'm trying not to get nervous, so I putz around on my phone while I wait, to keep my hands still. Having finally gotten in a run yesterday, I'm not as anxious, but damn. Chilling in a police waiting room is not for the faint of heart. I'll have to thank Jansen for waiting for me while I filed the restraining order.

Emma texted me this morning, letting me know she wants to talk later, and I can't say I blame her. I haven't seen Jansen yet

today, so hopefully things weren't too weird last night. When did my life get to be such a mess?

I make a list in my head for today:

1. Officer Reed
2. Emma
3. Groceries
4. Criminal psych paper
5. Business law reading

I feel bad that I've been eating everyone else's food this whole week, so I'm going to make something special for everyone, even though I'm a terrible cook. Maybe chili? It's hard to mess up chili, right?

I'm bookmarking a highly reviewed recipe when Officer Reed finally comes to get me, his shoes click-clicking on the linoleum as he strides into the waiting room.

"Clara, I'm so glad you could make it," he says, as if this were fully voluntary. Walker, RJ, and I spent half the night trying to figure out his angle, but when it comes down to it, we don't know what Reed knows if we don't talk to him. And I'm the best one to go fishing, because he seems to want something from me.

I feel like I'm a spy, which is actually terrifying, so I focus instead on being the good girl I always am, channeling the picture of perfection the world has always wanted from me.

Valedictorian? Check. All-state athlete? Check. Full ride to college? Eh, a quarter check. Punctual? Check. Neat and tidy? Check. Driven? Check. Willing to wear makeup and heels if called for? Check.

Let her ex-boyfriend crush her spirit while trying to reach perfection? Sadly, check.

I follow Officer Reed to the back. He brings me to a small room with a couch and a few chairs, the venue choice spiking my anxiety. This room has a door that locks and a mirror on one wall. I'm not a moron—he's getting serious. He motions me over to the couch, and I sit down, curling up in the corner, not able to pretend I'm not nervous. But, if I think about it, perfect me would be nervous too, so I guess it's all part of the character I'm playing—Clara from last June.

“Can I get you anything? Water? Coffee?”

I almost say coffee, but I'm probably already at max caffeine for the day, so I manage a soft, “Water would be great,” a tentative smile on my face.

Officer Reed disappears from the room, but I can feel eyes on me from the mirror across the way. I rub the arm of the couch, trying to look inoffensive.

Why am I so nervous? *Because there's a chance you're going to obstruct justice today, all for a few pretty faces,* a snarky voice proclaims in my head. I have the urge to argue with the voice in my head, but I'm pretty sure that's the point where you've leapt off the deep end, so I refrain from pointing out to the voice that I like the guys for more than just their

looks...but is thinking that the same as arguing with myself? Fuck. The stress is breaking me.

Reed returns with a glass of water, and I take a sip, knowing whatever is going to happen, my fingerprints or DNA on file won't raise any red flags. Good-girl-Clara has never been in trouble. Am I still good-girl-Clara?

"I wanted to check in. How are you holding up?" He settles into the chair across from me, the picture of concern, one brow slightly raised, his eyes a little sad, his elbows on his knees so he's leaning forward, showing he's paying attention to only me. If only I could believe him.

I pull my purse into my lap. "I'm okay. I mean, I don't enjoy having a stalker, but I can't do much about that."

Officer Reed rubs his chin, still giving me his empathetic face. "I'm glad you got the restraining order and have been calling in disturbances. That's a smart thing to do, Clara."

I'm waiting to see where he's taking this, so I nod along. There is no way he called me in to chat just because he's concerned about me. Cops have huge caseloads, and one college girl with a stalker ex-boyfriend is hardly worth the man hours he's putting in with me.

"I have some bad news, however." He leans back, and I can tell he wants to see my face when I hear what he's going to say next. "Bryce has decided to press assault charges against Archibald."

Fuck, poor Trips. I reach for the glass of water, taking a sip while I figure out how Clara from last June would act, especially if she thought Trips was innocent. “Why now? Trips was just trying to keep me safe.”

“Well, it looks like that roommate of yours has a history of violence, and Bryce thinks that removing him from the picture will help keep you safe.”

The anger flares up, and I set my glass down with more force than I normally would. “Bryce has no right to be concerned with my wellbeing when he’s the dangerous one.”

Officer Reed throws up his hands. “I’m just letting you know what he said when he came in to file the report. I’m not saying I agree with it.” He sits back and watches me. I take another sip of water, waiting for the rest of this “friendly chat” to get started. This isn’t all of it. There’s more.

He rubs his chin again, leaning forward, trying for the concerned father look. “Do you know about your Trips’ history? He has quite the juvie record. It was, of course, expunged—with his father’s team of lawyers, I’m sure it was a breeze, but just because he doesn’t have to claim those actions, doesn’t mean they never happened. Bryce isn’t the first man Archibald has put in the hospital, and he won’t be the last.” He watches me, waiting for a reaction.

A juvie record? Could that be true? I fiddle with my purse. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Clara, your safety is my job. I want to keep you safe, and as crazy as your ex may be, he’s not wrong about your roommate.

Archibald Westerhouse is a dangerous man. He needs to be put away. But I need your help to do it.”

Reed slides the chair closer to me, the eyes of whoever is behind that mirror tickling my skin as I stare down at my purse. I knew there was more. I knew I was going to have to choose a side. I can guess what Trips probably did to that other guy—I saw what he did to Bryce.

Officer Reed isn't wrong. Trips is dangerous.

But Trips also works so hard to keep it together. And while I don't know what happened when he was a teenager, according to the guys (who I trust in this), he's had two outbursts since he came to college, and both had a strong trigger: a woman being assaulted by a man.

The image of him, his clenched jaw and fists, the anger that simmers, the lid barely keeping it from boiling over, idles in my mind. But it competes with his actions, the gift of my pink chairs, the snacks carefully packed in my bag, the fancy coffee refills, they all prove he cares even when he acts like he hates me.

I flash back to his face when he hurt Bryce, blank, devoid of emotion. But then, once the emotions returned, I remember the disgust he had for himself for acting out, how he locked himself away from everyone, keeping us safe. He asked about my arm, even though he was already mostly lost in his own self-recriminations.

Even last night, through his panic, he needed to make sure I was okay, but was too scared of himself to touch me, to offer

me the hug I needed, the hug he wanted to give.

Trips is a mess.

He's a work in progress.

And I honestly don't believe he belongs in jail.

I look up at Officer Reed, watching me from the other side of the fake sitting room. "I'm sorry. I may not have known Archibald Clarence Westerhouse the Third for long, but he's a good man. Maybe he's made mistakes—I wouldn't know. But from my personal experience, any mistake he's ever made, he's worked to fix it. To make amends. No matter the price."

Something clicks in the cop's eyes, and my anxiety spikes. I don't know what I just said, but the cop looks happy—that's not good.

"You say he always makes amends?"

Shit. He paid for that other guy's hospital bills. My guys better have worked together and made that donation anonymous enough.

I try to keep my calm, sad Clara from last June facade on, but I'm seriously panicking. Struggling to buy time, my mind reels trying to figure out how to get out of here without looking suspicious. They were already going to book Trips for beating up Bryce. Now I've given them a lead that may connect him to that other guy. Fuck fuckity fuck.

Officer Reed pulls his chair closer. He's not as close as he was when I was filing the restraining order, but he's getting close to that uncomfortable distance, and it takes all I have not

to scramble to the other side of the couch. “Can you give me an example of how he’s made amends?” he asks, watching my reactions like a hawk.

I should have taken some acting classes.

“You know, small stuff. He’ll wake me up super early to drive across campus and be a little rude about it, but he’ll still pack my favorite snacks and take me out for breakfast. Silly things,” I say, knowing that selective honesty is my only chance to get out of here. I just hope to God it will get Trips out of here too.

Officer Reed nods along, but his mind is already jumping further than I would like. Shit shit fuck fuck fuck.

The questions continue, and I realize that we’re biding our time. They don’t want me to leave yet. I try to stay calm, to stay sad and vague, to not mess up again, but I need to get out of here. I have to warn Trips.

After what feels like an eternity, Officer Reed’s partner opens the door and walks in, dipping his chin at Tom, ignoring me completely. Reed stands up with an avuncular grin. “Well, I think that’s it, Ms. McElroy. I’ll give you a call if I have any additional questions.” He opens the door and leads me into the bullpen.

We’re almost to the exit when the door flies open. Trips is dragged through it, arms in cuffs, shoulders back, face relaxed, looking like it’s another day of class instead of the start of a long stint in prison.

Although if what Officer Reed said is true, this isn't Trips' first visit to jail. "Trips," I call, knowing this is what the cops were waiting for, this manufactured meeting in the hall, but not really caring. I fucked up, and I need to find a way to fix this.

"Clara," he grumbles. I glance back at Officer Reed, and he makes no movement to stop me, so I run up to my roommate, my hands shaking. Once I get close, Trips' lets a lazy grin cross his face, his eyes staying hard. "Give me a hug, sweetheart," he says, motioning me closer with a tilt of his chin.

My jaw drops. Sweetheart? Since when am I his sweetheart? He glares at me while his smile gets bigger. "I know we were keeping it quiet, but if your man ever needed a hug, now's the time."

Something clicks and I scurry in, wrapping my arms around Trips' broad chest. "God, took you long enough," Trips hisses in my ear. "Get my phone out of my back right pocket and get it out of here. Call my dad."

I move my right arm down, like this hug just got steamy, my face hot against Trips' chest.

"Seriously? No. Your other right," Trips whispers, nuzzling my ear like he's professing his undying love. I quickly switch hands, and Trips stumbles back, taking me with him as he slumps against the wall, giving me a chance to snag the phone and pull my arm to his front without anyone, hopefully, seeing.

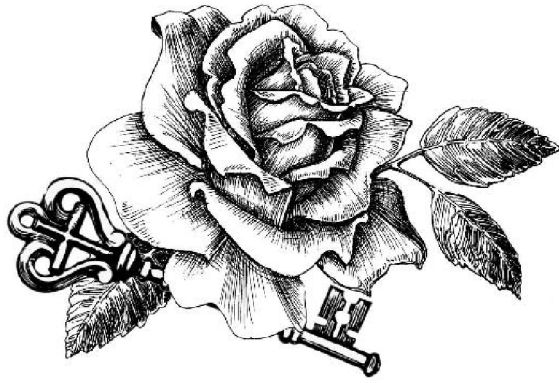
I drop the phone in my purse, my now empty left hand pressed against Trips' pounding heart. He flashes me that same hard smile before letting the cops drag him farther into the building.

I watch him go. Officer Reed steps closer, reading my face. "I didn't realize you two were involved," he says.

I shake my head, still in a daze. "It's really new," I say, which is true. It's so new it started ten seconds ago, by my count. Fuck. I didn't have time to tell Trips about my mistake—I was too caught up in lifting his damn phone.

I guess all I can do is hope that Trips knows how to deal with the cops. It seems like he's had a lot of practice.

Chapter 41



Clara

The bus ride back to the house flies by. The clouds hang dark and low—it's going to rain any minute. I hurry down the street, a checklist built in my head:

1. Find the guys
2. Get RJ to unlock Trips' phone
3. Get someone else to call Trips' dad—preferably someone who actually knows the guy
4. Bake cookies with Walker so Trips has something yummy to look forward to when his dad gets him out of jail

I'm pulling out my phone to see if I have any messages when I catch a movement out of the corner of my eye. Not breathing, I wait for my phone to either let me know Bryce is here or for one of the guys to pop up from the porch. Neither happens.

I sneak forward, wary, when a red heart balloon darts up and dives back down in the gathering wind. My heart is racing, my

ears ringing. I inch toward the stairs, every muscle primed to run.

Dozens of heart-shaped balloons of different sizes, vases overflowing with red roses, white teddy bears holding tiny pink hearts, piles and piles of misplaced love fill the entire front porch, vibrant and terrible.

I scan the street, gripping my phone, waiting for the warning buzz. I don't see his car anywhere, just a large van down the street. When my phone stays silent, I inch closer. From the bottom of the stairs, I can see the tags on the vases, the little signs wrapped around the teddy bears' necks, all proclaiming "I'm sorry" and "I love you." Bile rises in the back of my throat, but I swallow it down.

Why is Bryce doing this?

I kick a path to the front door, shoving the bric-a-brac aside with my shoe, and clear a space to stick my head into the house. In the distance, a grumble of thunder echoes.

"Hey! I'm home! Could someone come help with this?" I yell up the stairs.

No one answers.

I wiggle the rest of the way in, the house dark even though it's only midafternoon.

The first floor is empty. Shivering, I want to check where Bryce is right now, but I don't. There are more important things to worry about than my stalker, mainly, getting Trips

out of jail. I can't believe I was dumb enough to let slip a hint about the money. I need to fix it.

Upstairs, the hallway is dark and uninviting. I don't turn on the light—the tickle on the back of my neck urges me to be cautious. I'm acting paranoid, but I don't want anyone to know where I am in the house.

Knowing the way my day's been going, it's probably the cops and I've somehow just incriminated all my roommates purely by coming home.

A shiver of fear grips my heart. What if the guys saw Trips hauled in and ran?

Nope. Not going there. They wouldn't leave without telling me, without inviting me. *But*, the voice in my head whispers, *you've only known these guys for a month. Who are you to them? You're nothing but their goody-two-shoes roommate, not a member of their team.*

Shaking the voice out of my head, I knock on each of their doors, trying each knob. None of the doors open. I call their names, my mouth next to the handles, fearful of making too much noise, pressing my ear against each of their doors in turn. Silence.

I check the bathroom, and with a mixture of dread and curiosity, I climb the stairs to the attic. Cracking the door open, I find a finished space, solid oak tables and a bar set up to one side. It smells classy, like money and expensive stale cologne, but despite the ambiance, the hollowness of the space tells me no one is here.

Frustrated with myself, I yank my phone out of my purse. I just need to call one of the guys. I'm being ridiculous.

Who should I call? Walker? RJ? Jansen?

An electric snap of lightning rips through the sky outside the tiny attic window, close enough to make my skin tingle. The whole house shakes, thunder rattling through the old wood building.

My heart stops completely.

Forever passes before my heartbeat returns, thumping once to tell me I'm still alive. I sigh, the relief causing my phone to slip from my hand, a white-blue flash of lightning glinting off the screen as it cartwheels down the steps—one, two, three—hitting the second floor and sliding down the hall out of sight.

I sprint down the stairs with the thunder growling, chasing me through the hallway as I dive for my phone.

It's broken.

I try to power it on, but I can see green electrical plates and shiny globs of metal through the shattered glass. Nothing happens—it's completely busted.

It's full dark in the hallway now, the storm having stolen the last of the afternoon sun. I glance out the window, but I'm unable to see anything through the rain hissing against the panes. I cradle my broken phone against my chest, suddenly, excruciatingly, alone.

Trips' phone is still in my purse, and though I can't log in, I feel marginally better with the rectangle of light in my hand. I

head back down the stairs, my phone pressed against my pounding heart while Trips' phone lights my way.

I should turn on a light, but something is stopping me, and I can't tell if it's a reasonable fear or an absurd one.

When I reach the kitchen, I set my broken phone on the counter, tapping a beat on the tile as I try to calm down. Another roar of thunder shudders through the house, the storm well and truly broken.

I rub my hands against my thighs, anxious and unsure.

Bang, bang, bang.

The sound of a fist at the front door is barely audible over the roar of the storm. I step into the hallway, uncertain if I should open the door or not.

Bang, bang, bang.

I take two steps closer, only to hear, "Clara! Clara, open up!"

With the storm, it's hard to tell who it is, but I can tell that it's not one of my guys. They'd never pound on the door like that, not now, not like Bryce. I back away, terrified of opening the door. What if it's Bryce? What if this time he grabs me? What if this time he drags me away?

I'm here alone. No one would see me if I disappeared in this storm.

The next three knocks are vicious, brutal, like someone is trying to kick the door in.

Without thinking, I sprint to the back of the house and out into the rain, the back door slamming behind me. I dash down the alleyway, too terrified to check behind me, my legs powering forward as I splash through newly formed puddles. I cut around the corner, heading to the closest, busiest bus stop. The rain soaks through my clothes, my shoes, my hair, but still I run.

A bus pulls up just as I reach the stop, and I dart onto it, my purse still across my body, never having taken it off. Trips' phone is clutched in my hand, but my own broken phone is sitting on the counter at the house. I swipe my bus pass and hurry to the back, my shoes squelching on the floor.

I sneak a glance out the window—I don't see anyone, but I still feel like I'm being watched, the tiny hairs on the back of my neck at attention.

The bus takes me past the shuttle between the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses. Still focused on getting away, I switch to the shuttle to Emma's—it's as safe a place as any, and at least she has both a phone and the guys' phone numbers.

I huddle in the back corner of the bus, curled tight to keep from shivering in my soaked clothes. The bus is mostly empty—no one wants to be out in this weather.

A few blocks from Emma's I climb off, the rainstorm chasing the bus, keeping pace with me the whole way. By the time I get to Emma's apartment, I'm as wet as if I dove into a lake with all my clothes on. The rumble of thunder is a

constant hum around me as I sprint into her lobby and onto the elevator, desperate to be somewhere dry and safe.

The sound of music thumping on the other side of Emma's door, loud but not painful, is a sure sign Sophie's home but not partying yet.

When she doesn't come to the door at my first knock, I knock again, louder, pounding my fist against the wood. The music quiets before the door inches open, Sophie poking her head out.

"Oh my God, Clara, you're sopping wet. Come in, I'll get you a towel." She throws open the door, but I stop in the entryway, worried about how much water I'm bringing in with me. She disappears to the back of the apartment, coming back with a fluffy yellow towel. She wraps it around my shoulders then steps back, turning down her music even more.

"What happened to you?" she asks.

I shrug. Sophie doesn't need details right now. "Is Emma in her room?" I ask.

"Nah, she went out about an hour ago. She said something about having to deal with a 'controlling, tight-ass idiot who doesn't know what the fuck he's up against,' her words, not mine."

My heart drops and I shiver, not only from the cold. "Did she say who this guy was?"

Sophie flops down on the couch, not picking up on my rising anxiety. "Nope. She just got a text and flew out of here, all

righteous fury. You know how she is.”

I wring out my hair into the towel. “Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“I’m not my sister’s keeper.”

I press the water out of my shirt. “Could you text her and see?”

Sophie rolls her eyes and grabs her phone. I work on drying myself as I wait, periodic thunder crackling through the quiet as Sophie sprawls on the couch with a textbook and a highlighter. I take off my shoes to dry my feet, trying my hardest to get my shoes dry too. “Any answer?”

“Nope.”

“How long before she answers you, normally?” I ask, my heart rate ramping up again. If Bryce got to Emma, it’s my fault. There is no way it isn’t.

“What’s your deal?” Sophie says, tucking her hair behind one ear. “She usually texts right back, but not always. It’s only been a couple of minutes.”

Emma always texts me back immediately. She can’t seem to keep her hands off her phone for more than a few seconds without needing to check in again. If she’s the same way with Sophie, I need to find her, now.

I wipe down my purse and double check Trips’ phone, making sure it’s dry. It’s been two hours since I saw him in the station—I was supposed to call his dad, so he would have used

his one call for something else. Did he call the guys? Did they run?

Trips can hardly keep his cool in normal situations—he's going to go crazy locked up.

I fold up the towel and toss it onto their kitchen table. “If you get a hold of Emma, can you have her call one of my roommates and let them know that I'm looking for them?” I ask as I head out the door, hoping desperately that Emma's just busy, that she's not in danger.

Since when do I have to worry that my best friend is in danger? This is surreal.

Sophie gives me a salute with the highlighter, no longer paying me any attention as I leave. There is only one stop left.



Standing on the sidewalk outside of my old apartment complex, the floor-to-ceiling windows glinting in the rain, I shiver. Warm yellow light glows from every third apartment, so Bryce could be up there right now. Emma could be with him.

Bryce could be right behind me, waiting to grab me, and without my phone, I'd never know. The rain pours over me, the thunder fading in the east. What should I do?

I can't fight Bryce—I'm fifty pounds lighter, shorter, and I don't know how to throw a punch.

I can't hack Bryce, steal from him, manipulate him, or blackmail him.

I can't do any of those things.

I can't do anything.

Scurrying across the street, I duck under an awning, still eyeing the building, fear, uncertainty, and despair all spiraling inside of me.

Why did I think I could fix this?

I can't even call Trips' dad and get him out of jail. He trusted me to help him, and I can't even fucking make it off the unlock screen.

What skills do I have?

Not a damn thing that matters. I can't cook, I never learned how to iron.

I have no criminal skills. I've always followed the rules. I've never even skipped class.

God, the only things I can do are run moderately long distances and color-code my notes. Oh, and apologize. I'm great at begging for forgiveness.

Fucking useless skills. I can't use them for a damn thing. Not a damn fucking thing. I can do nothing.

I'm nothing.

I drop my head, my hair a tangled mess over my shoulder, my clothes clinging to me, uncomfortable and rubbery against my skin.

And I hear it, a voice I'd hoped had left, the one I'd run from. But it's there, buzzing in my ears, its words and my words melding into a mess of recrimination. *Clara, baby, you know you're not good at this stuff. I know you try, but it's just not good enough.* Bryce's voice hums inside my head.

I know, I know, I'll try harder next time, I promise, my own voice answers, always pleading, always agreeing, always begging to be forgiven.

Forgiven for what? For not cleaning the dishes immediately after dinner when I had a paper due the next morning? For washing and drying the laundry, but not folding it while it was still warm? For a batch of cookies with burned bottoms meant as a gift for Bryce's mom?

Those damn cookies. Bryce insisted I do some super complicated patterned cookie that required refrigeration and rolling pins and shortening—I didn't even know what shortening was until I went to the grocery store looking for it.

I bought all the ingredients, hauled them home, made the dough. Up until that batch, I'd only ever made cookies that came in a tub, ready to be spooned onto the pan.

I'd warned Bryce that I didn't know what I was doing, but he insisted I'd be fine. I knew I was messing up as I made them—I asked twice if we could just go buy some fancy treat for his mom, but he insisted I make the damn cookies. He said that if I didn't make them, he would know exactly how much I respected his mom.

So I tried my hardest. I rolled the dough, I cut the pieces, I watched a YouTube video.

I cried.

Bryce sat in the living room playing a video game, relaxing after a week of work.

I made it to the last step, but as the first batch cooled, I realized they were underdone. The second batch I overcompensated. They burned.

The cookies weren't inedible—just brown at the bottom.

Bryce lost it. He stormed around the living room, furious at my disrespect for his mom, livid that I'd failed at such a simple task.

You can't even make cookies, Clara. I know some things are hard for you, but cookies? How are you a failure at making cookies?

And what did I say?

I'm so sorry, Bryce. I'll do better next time, I promise. We can find something else to give your mom. Please, I'm sorry, please, can you forgive me? Please, Bryce, please.

I gaze up at the building, watching his shadow pass in front of the sixth-floor window. I shiver, cold, wet, remembering.

He never hit me, but that doesn't mean he didn't break me.

I tap my thigh—*one two three four five*.

If he were here, in front of me, right now, what would I say? What would I do?

Would I still cower, cry, beg for him to forgive me, to love me, to tell me, just once, that I hadn't fucked everything up?

Are burned cookies really so bad?

I stare at his back, willing him to look down, to meet my eyes.

Instead, he pulls out his phone and strolls out of sight, farther into the apartment.

Would I still cower?

The rain fades to a drizzle, a puddle from my clothes collecting around me under the protection of the awning, and I stare up at his window, me stalking him for once.

I can see him. I can watch him. There's no sign of Emma, and I'll know when he leaves.

I'm in control.

Like a flywheel catching, a crack and tug yanks something inside of me, rearranging my insides.

I know one thing: I wouldn't cower. Not anymore.

I can't be everything for everyone else. I can't be perfect. And I can't expect everyone else to push me and prod me into whatever mold I might fit into.

It's time for me to choose who I want me to be.

I could be the perfect girl—straight A's, pretty, punctual.

Is that who I want to be? The girl no one remembers, covered in small mirrors, reflecting back whatever she thinks everyone else wants from her? Who is that girl? Is she me?

A blossom of color flares within me—the joyful terror of breaking into the Witch’s Hat with Jansen, the confused pride over Walker’s blackmailing skills, the blind trust in RJ with my phone, with keeping me safe. And the shared rage with Trips at Bryce for hurting me, for scaring me.

These feelings are new, but they’re real. They’re gold and purple, blue and blood-red; my old feelings were nothing but faded gray tinged with regret and shame.

Am I gray? Or is there more hiding inside me, a tapestry of brilliant colors on one side with a sloppy rainbow of knots on the other?

The last of the rain fades to a mist, the sky lightening to where I can’t see into the building across the street anymore, Bryce’s apartment fading as the light rushes back into the world.

I shiver one last time.

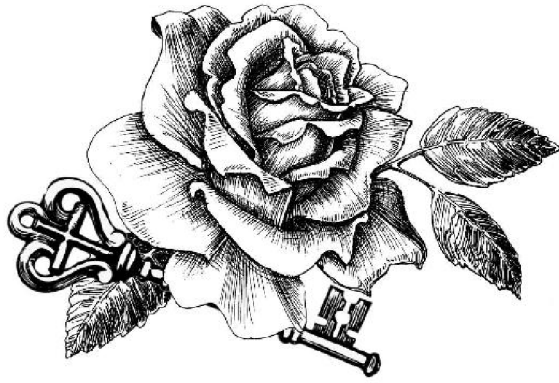
I’m done waiting and worrying. I might not be perfect, but I don’t need to be. Not to fix this.

No, first I need to gather my team. I know what needs to happen, and together, we’re going to bring the color back.

Fuck perfection.

It’s going to take a couple of criminals to stitch this fucking tapestry into a blood-red masterpiece. And I’m using my scythe for a needle.

Chapter 42



Jansen

The thunderstorm cut into the tailgating for today's game, but it worked in my favor, as most of the fans stayed away as long as possible, flooding the gates the second the rain stopped. I keep my eyes peeled, looking for targets that can afford a lift, men with graying hair and younger women on their arms, talking too loudly to their mirror-image friends.

Every time I lift a wallet and find tickets to suites or one of the luxury clubs in the stadium, I mentally high-five myself.

These old guys like their paper, and it's nice to know I still have an eye for rich marks. I only take the cash, tossing the wallets with credit cards into trash cans—RJ can deal with stolen credit cards if he wants, but it's a risky lift out here in the open.

Each bump and lift is a step in my dance, my body and mind in sync for once, one not fighting the other, both working together to fill my pockets with cash. I'm lifting a wallet from inside yet another burgundy jacket, a jovial drunk man patting my back while roaring about college kids not being able to

hold their liquor like they used to, fake stumbling away, when I plow straight into Clara.

She's absolutely drenched—her hair plastered to her face. “Clara, why were you out in the storm?” I ask.

Her jaw is tight, and her eyes shine with something I realize I haven't seen in her before. It's the face Walker makes when he's in the zone on a reproduction, when RJ has almost found a bit of code that he can manipulate, when Trips holds piles of cash. She has a purpose.

She's not afraid or uncertain, waiting for me to pull her along on some adventure.

“Jansen, you got a minute?” she asks, her head tilted as she eyes the crowd.

I nod.

“Great. I need you to get RJ and Walker back to the house.”

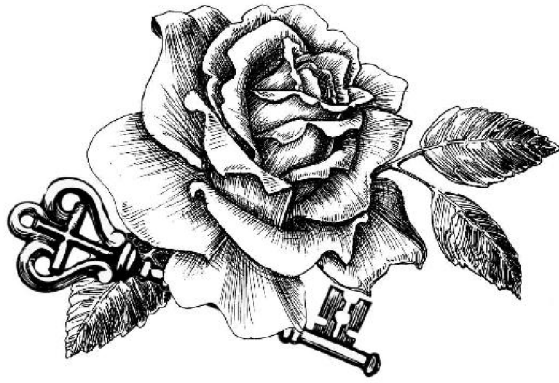
“Sure. What about Trips?”

She looks back from the crowd swarming around us, two pebbles in a river. “He's in jail. But I think I can get him out. I just need everyone's help.”

My heart stops. If the cops figure out that Trips was behind that old assault, we all could be in jail by the end of the week.

“I'll call the guys,” I say, already rushing to my car with Clara striding beside me, never a step behind. I hope to God her plan is good. Otherwise, we're all fucked.

Chapter 43



RJ

The streets are still slick from the rain, so I take it slow back to the house. Jansen sent out our SOS signal—blueberry muffins at the house. Blueberry muffins means we are having a meeting, and at the house is where it's going down.

While I'm glad it wasn't a "leftover scrambled eggs" text (because who wants to run?), I'm still sweating by the time I pull up to the front—coded messages are never a good sign.

Because I have a motorcycle, my job is to secure the front of the house. Pulling my bike into the yard is annoying, but it's not like parking an SUV on the front lawn. I do a cursory scan and flag a possible police setup half a block down. Grimacing, I tuck my helmet under my arm and march toward the house.

The front porch makes me gag. Sopping wet teddy bears litter the floor, strung up in tangled balloon ribbons, and shattered vases of red roses add to the horror show. If a creepy Valentine's Day card could vomit, it spewed all over our front porch.

The two vases closest to the door are both knocked over, petals already limp, glued to the wood. Sprawled between them, I find a soggy patrol officer's dropped business card. That van is definitely the cops.

I cut a narrow path between the destroyed bouquets and throw open the door, yelling, "Hello?," the bite of panic winning over my desire to observe, to measure, to verify the shape of everything and force it into a form that makes sense.

A chorus of voices come from the kitchen, one of them a little higher pitched than the others, and I let out a relieved sigh, yanking the door shut behind me.

Walker meets me in the hallway, handing me the frequency scanner, so I trade my helmet for the device. I do a full sweep of the main floor, closing curtains as I go, trying to block any way for the cops to get sound. This is obviously supposed to be a private conversation.

Nothing pings, so I signal we're clean, setting the scanner on the end table. I open my damp bag, pulling out the rest of my gear, not looking forward to sharing what I found this afternoon.

I sneak a glance at Clara, expecting to see a nervous, anxious mess, especially after the "gifts" her monster ex obviously left on the porch for her.

Instead, she's perched on the arm of the couch, her eyes focused on nothing in particular, her hands and legs still. For the first time, she looks in control of herself and her surroundings.

What changed?

My heart thumps, caught by the steel in her posture, the serenity of her purpose. This is new, and I'm pretty sure this is good.

"The house is clear. What's actually going on?" Walker asks, tossing a kombucha from one hand to the other, not opening it.

Clara grimaces. "Trips is in jail. Bryce pressed charges. And I think friendly Officer Tom is close to linking Trips to the prior assault as well."

"Shit," Walker mutters.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. Clara doesn't look worried. She looks sad. And Jansen is gazing at her like she's the solution to every problem he's ever had.

"Before we get into it, I have to share two things," I say, watching Clara, wishing that she didn't need to hear the second thing I have to tell her.

Clara nods, offering me the floor. That one motion is the start of something big. I don't know what's changing, but it's huge, important, it slots in like a keystone in an arch—immovable and necessary for the whole contraption to stay upright.

I clear my throat, wary and energized. "Number one, there's a good chance we have surveillance. There's a dark van three doors down I haven't seen before, and I saw more than one silhouette in the cab. The cops have to have something to rally

this volume of resources against us. Officer Reed must have political clout, so be careful.”

Clara cringes for a second before her face falls back to neutral.

I rub my knees, push back, then reach for my laptop. “Number two, I have more news on Bryce and that friend of his we couldn’t pin down.” I glance at Clara, not wanting to embarrass her. “If now isn’t a good time, I can hold it for later.”

Clara meets my gaze, forcing me to look at her, the same way I usually make other people look at me.

I liked Clara before, I was intrigued, but this is something new, like she’s gone from a reed to a willow in one afternoon. Or maybe she always was a willow, and somehow, we all mistook her for a grass, easily crushed underfoot.

She crosses one leg over the other, her feet bare. “Actually, I was going to ask you for a full rundown on Bryce. I need to know everything so I can fit it into the plan. No secrets, and no leaving things out to protect me.”

I open my laptop, hoping she won’t want to see what I found, that a simple a description will be enough. God, I hope a description is enough. “Today I drove out to the suburbs to track down that last friend. I didn’t have more than a few messages between the two of them, and money via Venmo for pizza. I planted a few sniffers, but I wasn’t getting enough, so I physically accessed the guy’s network.”

My nostrils flare, a flash of rage trying to break free, but right now, I need to convey information, not react. I can react later.

Trips is in jail, Clara is in danger, and if things don't change fast, we're all going to be locked up before midterms, so my wrath will have to wait.

"It took some work, but I was able to cut into his network. This guy," I clear my throat, forcing myself to continue, "he brokers porn. Not just regular porn, but he has a niche of 'barely legal' porn. The thing is, not all the movies he distributes are of adults. There are definitely fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds in the mix. He buys them from disgruntled boyfriends, or even happy ones, most of them filmed by secret camera. I don't think any of the girls know they're being recorded."

"How do you know?" Walker asks.

This is the part I didn't want to have to say. My palms are damp as I look up at Clara. "I don't know how to ask this, well, delicately. Did you and Bryce make sex tapes?"

Clara's brown eyes blink quickly while her brain pieces together what I'd rather not say. She shakes her head, wet strands of hair flopping over her shoulder as she does. "No. Never."

"That's what I thought. You, uh, didn't look like you knew." I shake my head, knowing I started at the wrong end of that sentence. "I didn't watch, though. Not once I realized what I was watching, you know?" My face is hot as I stammer.

Seeing Clara like that, with her fucking monster ex—it had been a special kind of hell.

Walker and Jansen are motionless, waiting to see how Clara reacts, and both look ready to jump in and comfort her. She taps once, only once, on her thigh, then meets my gaze. “It was that fucking picture frame. Why else would he care that much about a photo of a fucking lake?” She swallows. “How many videos?”

“I stopped counting at six.”

“And Bryce has been buying too?”

“Yeah. A few times a week, it looks like, for the past four years.”

She closes her eyes and lets out a long breath. When she opens them again, the steel is back in her gaze. “Thank you. I needed to know.”

Chapter 44



Walker

Clara taps her thigh once, when that bomb landed at her feet with no warning. Fuck, RJ needs to learn some tact—a little would go a long way.

But honestly, how do you tell someone that you saw their sex tape? Especially when you're pretty sure they had no idea they even had a sex tape? Let alone six sex tapes?

What must she be thinking?

My brain would probably stutter to a stop if I found out an ex had been selling videos of me.

Clara shifts on the arm of the couch. I want to reach out and hold her, to comfort her, but it feels like she sat there so I couldn't reach her. She wanted the upper hand, perched above us all, untouchable, and I don't understand why.

She and Jansen were cagey when I came in—they told me Trips was in jail and that Clara had a plan. I didn't have time to clarify what that meant before RJ got back, as the two of them were furiously texting Emma. There had been some

concern that Emma was in danger, but I guess she was struggling with a group project. Dealing with a messy group project is honestly the max difficulty of plan I expected from Clara.

But something has shifted. She's...in control? I don't know exactly what it is, but it's new. If I'd drawn her yesterday, (which I did, not that she needs to know) the drawing would have been of a beautiful girl, with broken, fearful eyes and a stubborn jaw. Today, though, I'd be drawing a woman staring into the unknown, daring the darkness to do its damndest, because she could fucking take it. No way I'm blocking her plan unless I have to.

She tucks a wet curl behind her ear, clearing her throat. "What can you guys tell me about Trips' dad? You said something about needing to do a trade?"

Jansen pulls his legs under himself, knowing he'll be fielding any questions about Archibald the Second. "It's a game he plays with Trips. He'll do whatever Trips wants, as long as he thinks the price is fair. The price is always tied to dragging Trips deeper into the family business, tying him down so he can't leave."

"And what's the family business?" Clara asks.

"Politics," I say.

"Not just politics," Jansen clarifies. "His dad and grandfather were both hot-shot lawyers. According to Trips, they know the deep, dark secrets of every Fortune 500 company in the Midwest. They've used those secrets to pivot into politics.

Trips' half-brother is already in the state house, and they want Trips to be his fix-it guy.”

“How bad would it be if their fix-it guy goes to jail?” she asks.

Jansen, RJ, and I exchange a look. I swallow, taking on this question. “Honestly, it would be a dent, but they don't trust Trips enough to be a face for the family, so it wouldn't be a huge deal. They're all masters of spinning a good story. They could even use this arrest to make Trips' brother look like a savior or something. Maybe a redemption arc? I don't know, that kind of spin isn't really my specialty,” I say, trying and failing to explain the convoluted web Trips has to crawl through with every call home.

“So if I were to call his dad right now and tell him Trips needs help, there'd be a price to pay? Trips would owe something big to make this all go away?” Clara is chewing her lip, thinking.

Jansen shifts in his seat, having trouble staying still for long. “It would be big. At least his whole summer, maybe even the year after he graduates dedicated to the family law firm.”

“He'd hate that.” Clara stares down at the rug, swallowing before she looks up, meeting each of our eyes in turn. “We have to negotiate the trade for him, but I don't want to trade away a year of his life. We need to create reasonable doubt, make it easy for Trips' dad's lawyers to get him out. Then hopefully, the price won't be as high.” She throws her

shoulders back, steel in her gaze. “I want us to pin the old assault on Bryce.”

The silence in the room crackles with energy. This is more than blackmail. This is framing an innocent guy.

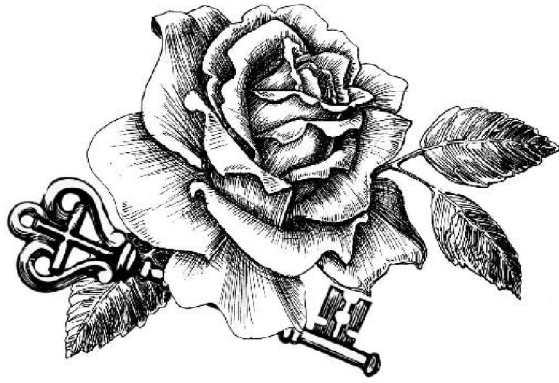
Not innocent, I remind myself. He sold fucking sex tapes of Clara. He watches kiddie porn. He’s an unhinged stalker. We just need the cops to look at him—they’ll find all his dirt on their own if we point them in his direction.

This is a level-up request. The three of us know exactly how big a frame job is.

Will we do this?

Fuck yeah. For Clara, we’re all in.

Chapter 45



Clara

I scoop up Walker's sketchpad from the coffee table. He flinches when I go to open it. "Can I use the cover for a list?" I ask.

He lets out a breath and hands me a chunk of charcoal.

I sketch out the plan I've been putting together since I watched Bryce's apartment, for once the hunter rather than the prey.

RJ

1. Find police sketch from first assault and give to Walker
2. Make money trail for medical bills look like they're from Bryce
3. Upload Walker's new sketch to police systems

Walker

1. Get copy of police sketch from first assault
2. Turn it into something that could look like Bryce

Jansen

1. Break into the police station to switch sketches so the original matches our new sketch

Me

1. Call Trips' dad

The guys crowd around behind me, watching as my plan scratches across on paper.

I'm not sure I'm doing this right, but all I want is a way to get us out of this mess without anyone going to jail. I care for each of these guys, and I'm not going to let a single one of them get hurt.

They're mine, my guys, even if I haven't told any of them yet. At least in my mind, I claim them all.

Right now, we're down one, and my heart is not taking it well. It's achy and anxious, even as I feel my plan clicking into place around me.

This had better work. It needs to work. I can break down when everyone is home and safe.

None of them are touching me, and I'm torn—I think if one of them reached out right now, I'd lose my confidence. I'd second-guess myself. But I miss the unspoken support of their quiet caresses.

“Okay, does that all make sense?” I ask, passing my list around the group.

RJ says nothing but snatches up his computer and disappears upstairs, presumably to get to better equipment. Not that I have any idea what he has stashed in his room. Walker gives my hand a quick squeeze and follows RJ up the stairs.

Jansen flops down on Trips' chair, and I catch myself before I gasp at his audacity. Trips isn't here. The hollowness in my chest grows.

"RJ?" Jansen yells at the retreating backs of the other two, "Do you think you can get a floor plan of the precinct? Figure out which room they'd keep old records in?"

"On it," he calls back.

Jansen takes the notebook out of my hand. "You got this down in your head?"

I nod. He swipes his hand across the page, my carefully formed letters smeared beyond recognition. Then he snatches the charcoal and doodles on the cover over the smears, adding hearts and penises across the page.

"Really?" I ask.

Jansen tosses me a wink. "We don't want cops to take a second glance. Last thing we need is a list of all the laws we're going to break."

"Shit," I mutter. I really should have thought of that.

"No worries. I've got you." Jansen finishes his "art" then swipes his hand across it once, smearing the charcoal again. It now looks like Walker was pranked and he tried to wipe it off and gave up.

Jansen sets down the sketchbook and moseys toward the kitchen. I follow him, knowing I have to wait, hating the inaction. I should call Trips' dad, but I need more information. I've got to have the upper hand so I can make the best trade possible to get Trips out.

Jansen washes his hands, then hops up onto the counter, sitting cross-legged in the middle. "Okay, Miss Clara, I need you to tell me everything you can remember about the precinct behind the locked doors."

"Me? Isn't RJ getting you floor plans?"

Jansen pulls his hair back into a high bobble, his green eyes clear and focused. "The floor plans just tell you about the floor. I need to know about desks, doors, glass walls, chairs, small rooms that weren't on the original plans but added later. I need to know how busy it is, what kind of lights they use, if there are any dark corners. Did you see any cameras? If so, where?" Jansen taps my nose, and I jump. "You're the closest thing we have to an inside man, Clara. I need your big brain to help me find a way in and out without getting arrested."

And with that, we get to planning.

Chapter 46



Jansen

Clara is brilliant. Well, I knew she was smart—Trips wouldn't keep picking fights with her if he didn't think she could fight back. But her plan to get me in and out, it's just real enough to work.

The prescription bottle was the toughest part, but Walker donated and altered one of his, and now I am the proud delivery boy of one Archibald Clarence Westerhouse the Second, ordered to bring his son his medicine and do a wellness check.

This is going to be the hardest part. We're timing my entrance to match the shift change, and I'm hopeful it will be busy enough that I won't be stopped. It is a Saturday night, and there's a Gopher's game, so I imagine the police station will be hopping, but I really don't know.

I've stolen a bunch of stuff—so much stuff—but I've never had to have a conversation with a mark before. I've either stolen things when no one was looking, like cars, or lifted wallets, where the most I have to say is “Oh! Sorry!” as I tuck

the mark's money into my pocket. I love the buzz of no one seeing me, of no one remembering me. The idea of being invisible while in plain sight, of taking what I want and no one even noticing it's gone until I've escaped their memory, that's the buzz I live for, the only real tool I have to burn off all the extra energy I have vibrating inside me.

This is going to be different. A new buzz builds as I walk into the lobby, my hair pulled into a low ponytail, my green dress shirt pressed and tucked into nice slacks. I feel like a low-level office jockey. As that's who I'm pretending to be, I guess it makes sense.

The lobby is just as busy as we'd hoped. Cops are joking as they hand off cases, the waiting room full of people trying to bail out drunk friends and family. I march up to the front desk, a manila envelope in one hand.

"Yes?" The front desk clerk is tucking a pack of gum into her purse, obviously getting ready to head out. Her name plate says Carol, and I have a good feeling that this just might work.

"I have some prescription medication for someone in lockup."

She holds out her hand. "Name? I can get it to the officer handling the case."

I take a deep breath, putting on my best smile. Now, I'm shit at blackmail—my smile does not communicate "deadly serious" in any meaningful way. What it does do, however, is make nearly any woman over thirty giddy, happy to help me. I must look like the charming version of their firstborn or

something. It's ridiculous, but it's been true for the last five or so years, so I'll use it when I can.

I flash my smile at her, trying to look apologetic. "Oh gosh, I don't know if I can do that? It's seizure meds, you know? And my boss said I had to make sure his son got them. Like, I had to watch the kid take them." I pull on my ear, looking sheepishly at the floor. "I don't think I can go back to the office without doing what he says. I really need this job."

"Oh honey, I'm sorry, but that's not the way things work around here. Maybe I can page the case officer and he can bring you down there?"

I'm so close to getting what I need. I hope I can make this happen. Out of the corner of my eye, I see some cops starting toward the locked door that'll get me all the way in. My heart rate spikes, and I force my glee down, still trying to look like some poor put-upon intern. "That would be great," I stammer, glancing around. "Oh! I see the case officer over there. I'll just grab him, save you a call. Thank you so much!" I jog up to the random officer I picked out.

"Hey," I say to the cop.

He glares down at me. "Can I help you?"

I motion back to the front desk. "Carol said you could buzz me in. She's just finishing up a few things."

He glances at Carol. I give her a wave, and she waves back. This seems to be enough for the cop, so he escorts me through the locked door.

Oh my God. It worked.

My heart is racing. I've never done anything this public. There are cameras everywhere. I just broke into a police precinct. The urge to sing and dance right now is unbearable, but I tamp it down.

"Thanks, I know where I'm headed," I say to the cop, glad for my ambiguous intern disguise. My manila envelope could be any number of things: a case brief, a CSI report, or, as it happens to be, fake prescription meds and a fake police sketch.

I pull up the floor plan in my head, heading toward the door to the basement. I stroll between the desks like I know where I'm going, like I belong here. If I don't stand out, no one will remember me or think to check the security tape.

This next part is going to be harder. I don't really know how I'm going to get access to the evidence locker. I told Clara that I'd think of something, and I always do my best thinking on my feet, but so far, nothing has come to me.

Passing two officers on the way down, inspiration strikes. I pinch the badge off a guy about my age, obviously a new recruit. Hopefully, no one in the evidence locker knows who the guy is yet. I wish I had time to change into a beat cop uniform. I'm way too young to be mistaken for a detective.

I find the evidence locker, glance around the hallway, shake out my arms and sprint in, panting. "Oh my gosh, can you help me?" I ask the old guy sitting at the desk.

The guy looks up from the magazine he's skimming, one eyebrow raised, as though a lowly young guy isn't worth a verbal response.

I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand. This ponytail is so not regulation. I've got to get in and out before he decides to remember me. "I'm a transfer from the 5th—I was just getting ready for a night out, you know, and I looked at my desk, and I forgot to return this damn file. I'll run it back. I'm so sorry to bother you."

I hold out my badge like that is something you're supposed to do to gain access to the locker. Is that what you do? No fucking clue.

The guy rolls his eyes and buzzes the lock, turning back to his magazine without another glance.

I rush into the locker, quickly overlaying the info RJ dug up about where I would find the right case box with what I see before me. RJ's already uploaded the new sketch. This is just to cover our asses if they decide to check the original. Officer Reed is a pit bull, and we don't want anything left in evidence to pin on Trips. The new "Bryce-inspired" sketch is perfect. It's close enough to the original that Officer Reed will think he just remembered the face wrong, but it looks enough like Bryce that, with a nudge, Bryce will be his next chew toy.

I find the correct box and switch the two sketches, then hurry back out of the locker. "Thanks," I say as I rush into the hallway, the geriatric cop throwing up a half wave as I go.

I should leave. I finished what I set out to do.

But Trips is still here, and he has no idea what the plan is. I know he isn't going to talk—this isn't his first time in police custody. But it might be helpful if he could push them toward Bryce, too.

Split-second decision made, I head to the holding area.

I buzz around the corner, freezing as I take in the crowd in front of the holding cells. The cops at the door are all laughing and clapping shoulders like best buddies, like they drink beers and shoot the shit together after every shift. There is not nearly enough chaos for me to bluff my way in. No way.

I throw open a random door, flee into an empty meeting room, and slam the door behind me. I can feel time slipping away, my internal clock counting down the seconds until disaster strikes. The shift change is going to be over at any moment. I shouldn't have come this way.

Deep breaths. Reaching for my center, I search for the calm so I can walk out of here without drawing attention to myself. If I'm jumpy or excited, especially with the chaos slowing down, I'll be caught for sure.

I visualize the flicker of a flame at the center of my consciousness, falling into the twisted calm in my gut. Seventy percent centered. Close enough. I open the door, nod at the cops working the holding cells, then rush back upstairs.

The stairwells are empty; I'm exposed.

There's no way I can take it with me, so I drop the badge I lifted in the stairwell, then throw open the door to the main

floor. The door slams against the wall as my feet try to move faster than they should, the flame in my mind threatening to flicker out. I grip the envelope to my side, keeping my eyes on the exit. The calm half smile is plastered to my face, but I can feel it warring with the manic grin of an adrenaline junkie.

I flee the secure area, nod at the new front desk attendant, and push out into the cool night.

I've nearly made it. I scramble for my car, tearing around the corner before the yelp I've been holding escapes.

I did it!

We're doing it.

I inch back at a painful 3 mph over the speed limit, glancing at my rear-view mirror every half mile, just in case.

I cackle the entire way home.

Chapter 47



Clara

RJ helped me unlock Trips' phone. Now my finger is hovering over the call button for "Asshole Progenitor," which Jansen promises is Trips' dad's cell phone number, and I don't want to make the call.

Jansen just got back; the plan is in place.

The breadcrumbs for the medical payments point to a trust fund Bryce's grandma set up to pay for his college. How RJ knew about that account? No idea.

The new police sketch is live in the police computers; the new original is in the evidence locker. I just have to hope that Officer Reed has an average level of visual acumen and can't tell the difference.

The only step remaining is to convince Trips' dad to help us get Trips out of jail. Then we can start the ball rolling at Bryce. I'm aiming for a cannonball to take out his legs, metaphorically, of course. Although, I wouldn't mind it literally either, at this point.

Alone in the backyard, I stare at the phone. I don't want the guys to distract me—I know I'm going to need my A game. Trips has enough trouble dealing with the man, and he grew up with the guy. I shake out my arms, do a few burpees, and hit the call button before I can psych myself out.

It rings twice. "Archie, why are you calling so late? Don't tell me you're in trouble again." Mr. Westerhouse the Second has more of a purr than a growl to his voice, a velvet tone that I'm certain helped in the courtroom.

"Hello, Mr. Westerhouse. This is Trips, er, Archie's roommate, Clara."

A sigh and some rustling come across the line. "Why are you calling me from Archie's phone?" A ping of anger underlies his tone.

"He's in jail, and he asked me to call you."

"Let me stop you there, young lady. I'm done bailing out my son. A brief stay in jail will hammer home the benefits being my son affords him. I won't help this time, no matter the terms of the negotiation."

My hands shake. I was ready to counter almost anything, but I never expected Mr. Westerhouse wouldn't even offer a trade. "What if he didn't do it?" I croak, scrambling.

The laughter that crackles across the line sounds exactly like Trips, and it throws me. "I don't know if I should be impressed by my son or disheartened by you, roommate Clara. My son is not a good man. He is in no way innocent. I don't even need to

know what he did—if the police picked him up for it, I’m certain he’s guilty, and stupid to boot. You think he ‘didn’t do it?’ Prove it to the cops. I’m done. If he doesn’t want the privileges I’ve given him, well, I’ll stop offering them.”

“B-but...Mr. Westerhouse,” I stammer.

“I wish you luck, Archie’s roommate Clara.” And he’s gone.

I stand there, staring at the phone. Really? The man won’t help his son?

My cheeks burn. I was so certain this would work. But why would I be sure? What experience do I have in manipulating justice?

I walk a lap around the yard. He said I had to prove to the cops that Trips is innocent.

Which means I have to prove to the cops that Bryce, not Trips, assaulted that guy.

I do another lap. I think best when I’m moving. Like Jansen, I wasn’t built to sit still.

So what do I know about how to build a criminal case? I know that the weakest form of evidence is circumstantial. What have we done so far? We’ve created circumstantial evidence that points away from Trips and toward Bryce.

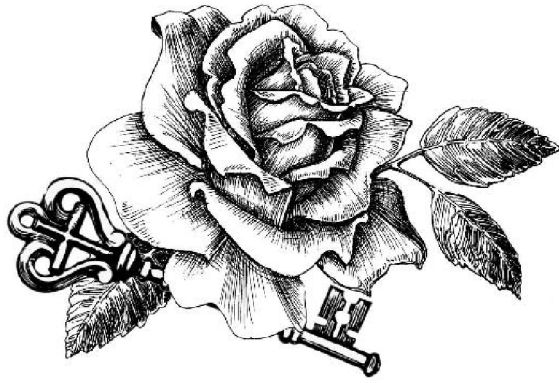
If I want to prove Trips is innocent, I’ll need a stronger case to bring to the cops.

What is the strongest form of evidence? A confession.

I need Bryce to confess to a crime he didn’t commit.

The guys are not going to like the change of plans.

Chapter 48



RJ

Clara plops down on the couch, and I can tell that whatever Trips' dad offered in trade, she wasn't happy to give it. Walker rubs her knee while Jansen disappears into the kitchen to get us all drinks.

“So,” she says, glaring at the coffee table, “good news and bad news.”

“Okay, bad news first,” Walker says.

She locks eyes with me as Jansen sets down water for Clara and himself, a kombucha for Walker, and a Mountain Dew for me. She bites her lip and stands up to pace. “Trips' dad isn't going to help.”

“Wait, what?” Jansen asks.

Clara keeps pacing, the movement seems to help her keep her nervous tics under control. “He's not going to help. He thinks that Trips needs to understand exactly what he's giving up by not joining the family, and that navigating the criminal justice system solo is the best way for Trips to learn that

lesson. We're on our own." Clara looks up. "But I think I have a solution. You guys aren't going to like it."

"Why aren't we going to like it?" Walker asks.

Clara gives a half shrug. "Trips' dad said something that rings true—unless we prove that Trips is innocent, not only won't Papa raise a hand to help, but Trips won't be safe. We need to prove Trips' innocence."

This sounds ridiculous, but Clara seems to think there's a workaround. I try to piece together where Clara is going with this plan, but I've got nothing.

She continues. "We have circumstantial evidence linking Bryce to Trips' assault of that guy. What we need, though, is a confession."

Walker slumps back into the couch. "How do we get someone to confess to a crime he didn't commit?"

"Bryce knows something. He wouldn't keep harping on about how dangerous you all are if he didn't. I'll get him to tell me what he knows. Hopefully, there's enough detail for it to sound like a confession."

I shake my head. "Clara, the cops have ways of figuring out if a confession is faked."

She nods. "They do, but if we make the confession believable, along with the other evidence, they probably won't splurge on the audio experts. And RJ, I'm sure you can make it good enough to pass the first inspection, right?"

“You want me to learn how to do a deep fake audio confession overnight?”

“I want you to learn how to *fake* a deep fake audio confession overnight.”

We all just stare at this woman who stumbled into our lives.

We’ve already done more advanced criminal activities today than ever. I created a money trail through a series of banks that was exactly three steps deep. Just enough to look suspicious, but not enough for them to assume a criminal mastermind, which the monster ex is not. I even matched the middle stop to the same account as the kiddie porn payments—it now looks like the monster ex has a standard way of moving illegal funds.

Walker created a fake police sketch without having studied the artist’s work, and to be honest, I don’t think Kirk Smythe will notice our picture isn’t his.

And Jansen, he’s fully giddy from breaking into a fucking police station, a goofy smile glued to his face. I’m scared about how this is going to affect his usual coping mechanisms. I don’t think stealing Trips’ black book is going to cut it anymore.

And now Clara’s asking us to do even harder, even riskier tasks.

She’s crazy. She doesn’t understand the magnitude of what she’s asking.

But she's also right. It's Trips. We can't just leave him rotting in jail.

A full frame job of the monster ex. That's what she's asking for. She's right, it's the only way to get us out from under the police. We can't build a criminal empire with a surveillance van parked outside our front door.

What she's suggesting though, locked in a room, chatting with the monster ex? No. That's the last thing I want right now. I need her safe. And there is no way she's safe with her ex sharing the same fucking air she breathes, chilling next to her on our couch. No. Just no.

She clears her throat. "One last thing—what did you guys do with the bug you found? Is it still in my bathroom?"

My eyebrows shoot up. How the fuck did I forget about the bug? "It must be. I didn't move it."

Her head tilts as she gazes at me. "Do you think you could tap into the police frequency? Then you could feed our edited version of the conversation to them, and they'll be more likely to believe it, right?"

"Holy mother-fucking shitballs." Walker storms out of the room.

I understand exactly what he's feeling. Where did this Clara come from? Now that she's taken a flying leap to our side of the law, how the fuck do we keep her from crash-landing when she gets here?

We've all been at this since we were in high school, Jansen, since he was just a kid. We've had years to stumble and clean up after ourselves on small things that would never put us in jail. But this is the fucking deep end, and Clara is diving in headfirst.

I sigh. "I think I can make that work, but Clara, this is really dangerous. If you can't give me enough to work with, it's going to sound like dyslexic robots, not a confession. And that also means that you're bringing him here, with you. Alone. And the cops have to see it happen. I'm just...I don't know, Clara."

Jansen looks both sick to his stomach and thrilled by this plan. Not a surprising reaction. He loves any risk, the bigger the better. But it's Clara taking the risk, and that shit is hard.

"I can help with the sound," he says, pulling out his hair tie. "I mixed my sister's demo. The rest," he shrugs, "it's not much, but if you think about it, RJ, having him here is probably the safest. He doesn't have to know we're here, too. We'll be able to jump in if we need to, we can keep her safe. And as a backup, there are cops just down the street."

God, I don't want to do this. But no matter how I look at it, this is the best way to fix this giant fucking morass we're kicking around in.

"Give me until tomorrow to figure out what I need to make this work," I say.

She nods. "Tomorrow then." She disappears through the kitchen door.

Moments later, the shower clicks on.

Walker slips back in—of course he listened from the hallway. The guy hates having as many emotions as he does, and when they get big, he runs.

But he wouldn't run from this. He knows we need him.

“What can I do?” he asks, running his hands back and forth on his head.

I nod toward the back of the house. “Help her keep it together. She's going to break, but it has to be after we're done.”

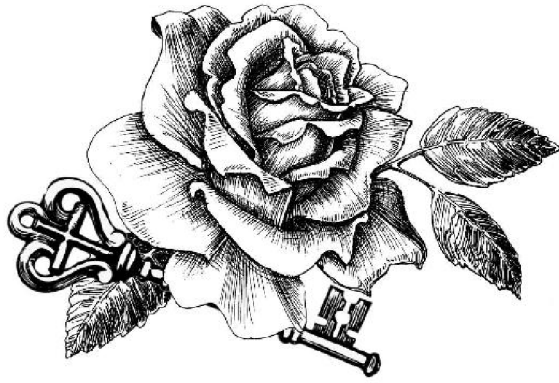
He nods. “Fuck. This is so not what I expected to be doing tonight.”

Jansen laughs. “Me neither, but I'm here for it.” He finger-combs his hair before hopping up from the couch. “Come on,” he says to Walker. “Let's go distract our girl.”

They both head to the back of the house as I gather up my stuff and trudge upstairs, planning on a quick rinse myself.

Our girl. Huh.

Chapter 49



Trips

There should be a fucking limit on the number of drunks allowed in a cage at once. The reek from the toilet corner maxes out at about three drunks. Disgusting.

I've been locked in here for hours. No one has come to talk to me. Of course, they're going to run out the seventy-two hours, looking for something to pin on me. The asshole progenitor better hurry and bail me out. I hate this feeling, like I'm a fucking butterfly tacked to the wall.

Clara must have called my dad by now. He'd better not have been too much of an ass during the trade negotiations.

I don't know what else I have to trade after my last deal. I promised to go to all the pre-wedding festivities for Mr. Representative Trevor. A minimum of six days over the next few months, pretending I can stand to be in the same room as my weaselly family, faking my joy for my brother and his politically connected fiancée. I did it so Clara could get her restraining order, and I'd do it again, but I'm banking up too many favors too fast.

God, it's just such bullshit. Lives destroyed under the cover of a legitimate business are a-okay, but you just try to snatch up some pennies without that patina of respectability? Then you're a disgrace to the family. Only, I refuse to buy a \$10,000 suit to hide my bloody heart. I've known for years that the Westerhouse family is no place for an honest criminal. It's only safe for the sneaky fucks.

And it's not like I plan on being a bookie forever.

No, I have a plan. I'm going to take the conceited assholes like my father and bleed them dry. Find their vices, offer them up on a gold-plated platter. Then I'll siphon off every sin-filled dollar, launder it, hide it from their ex-wives, skimming a sizeable cut off every god-damn penny at every fucking turn.

It's all the jackasses care about anyway—money, money, money. And I'm going to have my dirty mitts on every fucking dime.

Some joker in a Gophers hoodie heaves into the toilet in the corner again. The other dude in here is passed out, slumped on the floor next to the toilet. I think he's getting sprayed. Repulsive.

I pace the front of the cage again, back and forth, wishing I had a heavy bag in here.

I've got to keep it together. The echoes bouncing off the naked concrete are giving me a headache. The smell is making my stomach turn. And the three strides from one side of the cell to the other? Not enough movement.

But I will not lose it. I will keep my shit together. I'm a fucking adult.

Clara *did* call my dad, right?

It shouldn't be taking this long.

Chapter 50



Clara

I wake up tucked between Walker and Jansen again.

We watched heist movies last night. I wasn't sure if I was supposed to laugh at them or take notes, to be honest. Based on the way Walker and Jansen kept telling me all the things the movies got wrong, I'm thinking notes should have been mandatory.

Walker's breath is warm on the back of my head, his arm tight around my middle as always.

Jansen is my little spoon, my arms wrapped around him, holding him close.

I smile, happy, calm, and cozy. We're just a perfect pile of spoons.

This? This is right. Curled up between these two guys, preparing to frame Bryce for Trips' crimes, I should be freaking out. I should be lamenting the loss of my morals or some shit.

But I've known Bryce for years. With time and distance, I can see how toxic it all was. I literally only have one friend left from before I met him—Emma. I lived in constant fear of his disapproval, of his sighs of disappointment. He made me believe I wasn't good enough, then he'd forgive me, but only after I'd wept prostate on the floor in front of him. Talk about a power move.

And to find out he'd been selling sex tapes? Me, naked, on the fucking internet? Without consent?

I rub my nose against Jansen's hair, the earthy scent of his shampoo the only thing preventing a tearful rage.

Even worse, I find out he watches kiddie porn. Those poor girls.

I was barely eighteen when we started dating. Did he pick me because I look young? Running as much as I do means I don't have much in the way of hips or boobs.

Fuck.

I can't think about this—I'll drive myself crazy.

My anxiety must have drifted into my body because Walker nuzzles the back of my head, his arm tightening around me. "Go back to sleep," he grumbles.

"I'm awake."

"Then pretend to go back to sleep."

I twist in his arms. He lets me flip over, my nose nearly touching his chin. Jansen sighs and flops over, his leg covering

mine, nesting against my back, but still out like a light.

“Walker?” I whisper.

“Yeah?”

“Am I doing the right thing?”

He forces one eye open, peering down at me. “Clara, I’m still mostly asleep. I need some context.”

I tuck my head under his chin, not wanting to look at him as I talk. I’m not sure what emotions are going to flash across his face, and if I see any type of judgment, I’m going to lose my momentum. I don’t want to let Trips down.

“Is it wrong to pin this on Bryce?”

Walker’s hand strokes up and down my side as I wait for him to answer. He presses a gentle kiss on the top of my head. “Do you think Bryce is a good guy?”

“Not really. Not anymore.”

“Do you think he deserves to go to jail?”

I shrug, not wanting to reveal the beast clawing its way between my ribs, this creature that wants to snack on Bryce’s liver. A creature, unknown and terrifying, scrabbling around my chest, hungry for blood. I’m fairly certain it’s always been there; I just never had a reason to let it out before now.

Walker stills his hand at my shrug, gripping gently at my waist. “Clara, he fucking sold sex tapes to some internet broker. Sex tapes you didn’t even know existed. And he’s into

young girls. What kind of doctor was he going to be? What was his planned specialty?"

"Sports medicine," I say, and shiver. I've had my share of sports injuries. As a teen athlete, I had a lot of time alone with doctors. If one of them had been sweet and good-looking like Bryce—God. I can see it.

I nod against his chest, ceding the point.

"Here's the thing I've figured out, Clara. The police only go after the people who are dropped in their laps. Bryce could go his whole life and never get caught. No one would ever even look at him if he was careful. We're doing the world a favor."

Walker makes me look up at him, his hands moving from my waist to cradle my face. "And to make it even better, we're getting something for ourselves out of it too. We're getting back Trips and a measure of our anonymity." Walker's face stretches into his half grin, and I press against him, Jansen still warm against my back.

I want to kiss him. I could totally kiss him. But what about Jansen?

What about RJ?

And who the fuck knows what to do about Trips?

I brush my nose against his lips, wondering if he has the same thoughts I do. His half smile morphs, his lips pressing against my nose, then my mouth. I sigh into the kiss, melt into the warmth, the trust, the safety here in this moment.

We just kiss, his hands holding my face like I'm something precious, my own hands locked between our bodies, my fingers flat against his chest, the soft *da-dum da-dum* of his heart playing under my fingertips.

Jansen stirs behind me, and I stiffen. Shit.

Walker pulls back just enough that our lips aren't quite touching, his eyes barely open as he brushes his thumb across my cheek.

Jansen catches my waist, a soft kiss touching the side of my neck. "Morning," he murmurs.

I freeze.

What do I do? What do I say? What happens if they fight? If they decide they don't want me? If they storm out of here and never talk to me again? How in the world did I get to this point with both of them at basically the same time?

Shit.

Walker doesn't move his hands from my cheeks, so I can't turn to see if Jansen is really awake or not. Maybe he's still asleep and this won't be a big deal.

There's a second kiss, followed by a nibble on my ear. A gasp escapes, entirely unintentionally. Shit shit shit.

I risk looking up into Walker's eyes, and what I see doesn't make any sense. He's staring at me, but his gaze is full of curiosity rather than rage. One eyebrow is slightly raised as Jansen pulls my earlobe into his mouth with a gentle tug,

making my pelvis tilt forward into Walker, pressing against his hardening erection. He grins.

“I think she likes that,” he says, glancing over my shoulder at Jansen. I wish I could see him too. This is suddenly so much more, and honestly better, than I’d imagined—God, I hope I didn’t just fuck shit up.

Jansen’s hand slips under my shirt, a finger tracing around my belly button. “I’d hoped she would,” he says behind me, another nuzzled kiss against my neck, followed by a swipe of his tongue around the lobe of my ear, and I’m pretty sure I’ve turned into a puddle. All of me tingles.

Walker takes my mouth, his tongue dancing with mine, while Jansen licks and nibbles down my neck, the two of them working together to tug my shirt off. Once I’m topless, Jansen continues soft kisses over my shoulder, across my back, and I’m panting, trying to keep my head above water while all these sensations try to pull me under. My fingers trace over Walker’s chest, a delicious expanse of ridges and valleys.

Walker lets go of my face, a hand trailing down my neck to my breast, his fingers teasing one nipple, around and around, and the combination of kisses, touches, and nibbles down my back swamps me. My eyes flutter closed. Walker sucks my lip into his mouth, nipping at it, and I arch into him. Jansen’s hand drifts across my stomach to the top of my sleep shorts, slowly sliding under the waistband, nudging them down until I kick them off myself, eager to see where this will lead.

Jansen's fingers trace the lines of my panties, and my skin is electric. Walker pulls back from my mouth, shifting away from me, lower in the bed, his mouth latching onto the nipple he was just teasing, and my moan drowns out all other sounds.

The brush of Walker's lips against me, both his hands playing with my breasts, has pleasure flooding my brain, and I forget how to breathe. I dig my hands into his hair, urging him to stay, to keep doing exactly what he's doing. Jansen chuckles behind me before slipping his hand into my panties, inching down until his fingers brush along my slit one, two, three times before two fingers plunge in. My moan is ragged, my body overwhelmed by too many hands, too much sensation. Perfection.

Jansen curls his fingers just right before pulling them out and thrusting them back in, setting a driving rhythm while pressing the heel of his hand down on my clit and rocking against it. Walker laps around my nipple before biting down, teasing, and I shudder. Jansen laughs, his voice hoarse. "Whatever you just did, do it again. She's fucking drenched," he says.

Walker does. A cry escapes me, garbled, words no longer possible. Walker huffs against my wet nipple as he pulls away. Wasting no time, he switches to the other nipple, right as Jansen adds a third finger into me, pressing more urgently against my clit.

All of me vibrates, the tension ratcheting up to a point where I feel like if I don't come, I'll burst into flame.

Walker clamps down on my other nipple and I shatter, moaning and shaking, unmoored in a sea of pleasure.

I blink my eyes open to Walker watching me, waiting for me to return, a half grin plastered on his face. I drag him to my mouth, kissing him deeply, before turning and snagging Jansen, gripping his hair as I dive into his mouth, my damp breasts pressed against his bare chest. His boxers barely contain his erection. Walker fists my hair, his other hand trailing over my ass.

A muffled cough sounds from the doorway, but my mind is fog, the noise foreign and purposeless.

Jansen pulls back first, giving me just enough space to breathe, my thoughts birds scattered from a bush. Walker lingers with his lips pressed against my neck, like the interruption never happened, like I'm all that matters in the world.

I force myself out of Walker's spell, dragging up the blanket to cover us all.

RJ hovers a half step into my room, staring right at me, before dropping his gaze to the floor, rubbing the back of his neck.

Shit. We've embarrassed him.

Jansen, who has no shame, sits cross-legged in my bed. "What's up?" he asks.

RJ talks to the floor. "I have a list of stuff we need to buy if we're going to do this," he says.

“Cool. Can I take a look?” Jansen asks.

RJ taps something on his phone. “Sent.” He turns toward the door. “Umm, I’m going to go catch a few minutes of sleep. Wake me up when you guys are ready to set up.”

Jansen hops up, yanking on his pants, his erection tenting his boxers.

Some selfish part of me takes over my mouth. “You could sleep here, RJ,” I say, immediately regretting it.

He hesitates, rubbing the back of his neck, before he clears his throat. “I’m good. I’ll just, ah, be in my room.”

He’s gone before Jansen pulls on his shoes.

I flop back on the pillow. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Walker pushes some hair off my face, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “Probably not. But he’ll be fine.”

“Ugh.”

I watch Jansen tie his shoes, the twists of his fingers in the laces reminding me of the feeling of his fingers against my skin, the feeling of them stroking deep inside me. I need to get a hold of myself.

“Hey,” I say, touching his back. “Are you really okay with this? With, you know, all of you and just one me?”

Jansen rakes his fingers through his hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. “Clara, I’m here for whatever, whenever, when it comes to you. If you’re happy, I’m happy.” He kisses me, a deep, probing kiss that makes my brain screech to a halt.

When he pulls away, both of us are gasping for breath. He pauses for a second, his forehead pressed against mine. “I’ll be back in a few.”

I watch him leave, admiring the way his wiry frame twists with the gracefulness of a dancer. I can’t wait to have my fingers back on his skin, to feel those muscles stretch and move because of me.

Turning back to Walker, I run my hands over his chest instead, wishing we’d reached the point where none of us were wearing clothes before RJ had come in. “What about you? This is...” I stop, not really knowing what words to use. Unconventional? That makes me sound like an eighty-year-old grandma. Weird? Too judgy.

Walker kisses my forehead, then my nose, then presses a gentle kiss on my lips, all of me warm, soft, and pliant, and I lose my train of thought. He rolls onto his back, pulling me with him so I’m draped across his chest, my ear pressed against his heart.

We stay like that, and I wonder if I should finish my question—but some part of me knows he’s thinking about his answer, so I wait.

Walker tries to run his fingers through my hair, but they catch in one of my curls. “Damn it,” he whispers, pulling his hand from the tangled mass.

He lets out a sigh, my head riding his chest up and down with the breaths. “I think I’m okay with this, Clara. I think, but I don’t know for sure. I like you. A lot. And I know that you’re

into me, too. But I see you with Jansen, and that also makes sense. You and RJ, that could be something, given time. Fuck, even you and Trips, if he can ever get over his shit, that could be real, you know?” Walker cradles the back of my head, his heart steady under my cheek.

I watch the sky brighten outside my window, waiting. There’s more. Finally, he shifts under me, his thoughts moving to the surface as his fingers trace lazy lines across my bare back. “I enjoy watching you, Clara. You’re different than you were when we first met you. You’ve changed, you’re still changing, and I’m so goddamn entranced. I want to see who you’re becoming. And each of us, we push you, we pull you, we bring out different things from you. And you do the same to us.”

“What do you mean?”

He holds me tighter against him, like he always needs me closer, always needs to feel me beside him. “Jansen hasn’t stolen from me for weeks. RJ is talking to you, even though he’s probably sweaty and terrified while he does—the guy has never been able to talk to a girl unless it was totally platonic, and trust me, that’s not how he feels about you. And Trips is driving you places, which doesn’t sound like much, but he never does nice things unless there’s something in it for him.”

“He packs me snacks,” I say, not knowing how to take this knowledge. My heart is all achy.

Walker huffs. “Damn.”

“What about you?” I whisper, not sure I want to know.

Walker squeezes me tight. “I started drawing again. Not just copying other people’s work, but putting my own stuff down on paper.”

I shift so I can see his face. “Can I see?”

“Not today.”

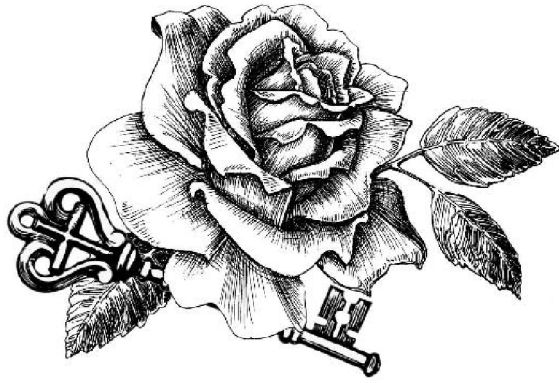
“But someday?”

“Yeah. Someday.”

“Good.”

Together, we watch the sunrise. A new day beginning.

Chapter 51



Clara

RJ mirrored my number to an ancient flip phone, and now I'm staring at Bryce's contact info like it's a portal to a different time.

The guys and I went over the plan so many times. It feels like I've already finished the damn thing.

First, we came up with a list of words that I should try to get Bryce to say, but each time we tried it, I sounded more and more like a robot. Frustrated, I tore up the damn thing (Jansen lit the pieces on fire in the sink, destroying the evidence) and opted instead to ask Bryce what he knows and go from there. RJ and Walker are not fans of this plan, but Jansen gets it.

Now, all that's left is to call Bryce and invite him over.

I set the guys up in my bedroom. We fitted the living room with a bunch of wireless microphones the guys repurposed from the poker room—I'm going to have to ask about that later. Either way, as long as I keep Bryce near the couch, we should be good. Just in case, I have a small body microphone

tucked into my bra, like I'm an undercover agent in a movie instead of a boring old college student.

Sadly, the little mic isn't the best, so I'd have to get super close to Bryce for it to catch our conversation. I don't want to get close to Bryce. The room mikes had better be enough.

I hit the call button, not wanting to stew in this anxiety any longer. He can't hurt me, the guys are here, all I have to do is say "run" in a sentence and they'll rush in. I take deep breaths, waiting for Bryce to pick up.

The phone clicks on the second before it goes to voicemail. If I didn't know him, I'd think he was busy. Because I do know him, I know he sat there, watching my name flash on the screen and waited, putting himself in the position of power, throwing me off my game, hoping I'd stumble when switching from "please leave a message" to, well, him.

"Clara. To what do I owe the pleasure?" His voice is honey smooth. I try not to gag.

"Bryce. I need you to come over. Please." It's not acting that makes my voice shake. All of me is shaking. I don't want to do this.

I forced the guys to leave the room before I called. They make me feel too safe; I have to do this alone. Bryce knows all my tells, all my quivers and cries. He'd know if I was pretending.

He inhales sharply. "But Clara, baby, it's illegal for me to come over. You did that, you know."

He's playing with me. I can see him in my mind, already picking up his keys, calling the elevator in the hallway. "Bryce, please. I think you might be right about my roommates—about them being criminals. Please, I don't know how long they'll be gone. I need to know what you know. Please." I beg the way he always liked, knowing it's his catnip. He'll be here.

He lets out a humoring sigh, signaling that whatever comes next is hardly worth the breath it takes to form the words. "If you insist. But I'm going to need a guarantee in return—no calling the cops."

"O-of course not," I stammer, trying to force out the words he wants to hear from me. "That wasn't me, not all of it. You know me, Bryce."

"I do, baby. No one knows you like I do. No one could love you like I do, and I'll protect you from the villains you live with. I'm on my way." He hangs up, and I stare at the phone.

I'm still shaking as I pace the living room. I recorded my starting bit earlier, me telling "Bryce" that I'm turning on the water, basically implying that I'm stress cleaning. The sound of water in the bathroom sink will hopefully cover up any of the weird audio cuts from feeding the sound out of speakers on either side of the bug. Two speakers, one for me, one for Bryce. RJ set the volume loud enough for the cops to hear, but quiet enough that Bryce and I won't get an echo in the living room.

God, I don't want to do this.

He can't hurt me, the guys are here, all I have to do is say "run" and they'll come get me.

The wait is interminable. I'm glad the guys are staying away like I asked. I am the exact right amount of fucked up when there's a knock at the door. Bryce is here.

I inch open the door, glancing down the street as I let him in. The police van idles a half block away, a glimmer of sunlight flashing off a camera lens.

They know he's here. Now all I have to do is get them to listen.

Bryce is waiting for me in the hallway. He steps closer as I shut the door, looming over me, making me feel small. My heart pounds, my head bowing by instinct, defaulting to his chastisement.

Fuck, I don't have time for this bullshit.

Bryce's arm moves to cage me against the door, but I duck under it, diving for the living room. He grabs for my elbow, but I've already slipped away.

I don't want him to touch me ever again. If he does, I don't know exactly what I'll do, but the options are either to shatter like a poorly glued broken vase or to explode like a match on a pile of pine needles. Neither reaction will get me what I want—Bryce gone and Trips back.

"We don't have long. They went out and said they'd be back by one," I say, curling up in Trips' chair. I'm safe here—Bryce can't sit next to me.

He perches on the arm of the couch closest to me. Always taking the higher ground, always in the position of power. He looks me up and down, and I wait for his critique. “Clara, I know it’s been a rough couple of weeks, but when was the last time you did your nails?”

I haven’t done my fingernails or toenails since we broke up. I’ve enjoyed seeing my own nail beds. I haven’t been biting them, so they don’t need to be covered. They’re purely mine. I tuck my hands under my arms, my feet folding under me so he can’t see them. I chew on my lip, working up the courage to start.

I hadn’t realized how out of control I’d feel with Bryce in the room. I’m simultaneously my new strong self and my old broken self, and both versions are screaming, trying to wrench control of the situation. I’ve never been a great actor. I’m going to have to listen to damaged Clara, to tear open the wounds I’ve only just started to patch. That Clara knows how to talk to Bryce.

“Bryce, I’m sorry I didn’t listen,” I start.

“Clara, baby, you’re forgiven. I always have a place for you, you know that.”

I tug on my shirt, on my shorts, not having a safe place to set down my hands. “I’m scared,” I say.

Bryce assumes my fear has nothing to do with him. “I can see that, Clara. That’s why I got that brute out of here. I knew you’d be able to find your way back to me once he was gone.

We can get you safe right now. Let's go pack your stuff and we'll head home."

He reaches for my hand.

I've never been so grateful for my hands' impersonation of restless birds as when he misses his first grab. Wary of looking like a fool, he settles his hand on the arm of my chair.

I shake my head, forcing my anger back down. It has no role to play right now. "No, I need to know what you know first. You know how I get. I need details, Bryce."

He sighs, and the tightness in my chest eases. That sigh means he feels like appeasing me. He's going to share.

I hold my breath, waiting for him to say something about the assault. He rubs the back of his neck, watching me. He's waiting for another apology. Soon, he'll only respond if I'm crying. God, I hope I don't have to cry for him again. But I'll play his game. Only this time, I have a stacked deck.

"I'm sorry, Bryce. Please, I just need to know. I need to verify what I already found out. Please."

Begging works. It always works. "I don't know about all your roommates. But you should know that brute Archibald is running an illegal high-stakes poker game."

Not what I was expecting. "Really? I thought I'd found something...worse," I say.

"Worse than running an underground gambling hall? It sounds like he collects his own debts—I couldn't find solid proof, but he's a dangerous guy, Clara. He's the kind of guy

who'll break your kneecaps if you owe him money. It's not safe for you to live in the same house as that guy, baby."

Well shit.

Maybe he thinks one of the other guys is trouble? "You said all of my roommates are dangerous, didn't you?"

Bryce puts on his serious face, the one he practiced in the mirror so he could deliver bad diagnoses with the appropriate amount of gravitas. "Archibald's roommates help him with the gambling ring, Clara. I'm sorry. They're all in on it. They're not good guys." He shakes his head. "But at least you have a safe place to land."

Shit shit shit. This plan is not going the way I thought it would.

Bryce reaches forward and snatches both of my hands in his. I shiver, and something lights up in Bryce's eyes. He thinks that's arousal, not revulsion. The guy jerks off to kiddie porn with these hands. And now he has a hold of mine.

I catch sight of Jansen in the doorway behind Bryce. His hands are out, asking if he can help, if he can snatch me away, if there is any way of salvaging this plan. If there isn't, he's pulling me out right now.

Not yet. I stare at my hands as I give a slow but firm shake of my head. I think I have an idea—I don't need saving yet. Glancing back, Jansen is gone. Message received.

Reaching inside, I pull the new Clara to the surface. The one who gets angry. The one who has opinions. The one who

makes mistakes, but works to fix them, who does more than apologize and wait for whatever punishment the world dishes out.

Clara: raw, battered, bruised, but finally healing—finally becoming more than an illusion of perfection, becoming a whole fucking human.

I take a breath, then snap my eyes up to meet Bryce's. He swallows.

“Bryce, I have a question.”

“Of course, baby. What is it?”

“Why me?”

A smile curls on one side of Bryce's handsome face. I used to love those half smiles, even once I realized he was going to insult me with that mouth. That smile meant he cared enough to show me a piece of his joy.

Now all I see is another tool to keep me contained. “Clara, you're beautiful, smart, driven. I saw a kindred spirit in you, my other half. You know what it's like to strive for the top, to always be better, to work on your weaknesses. Baby, you were made for me. No one will ever love you like I will. No one will push you like I will. Together, we're closer to perfection. Together, we're perfectly untouchable.”

I close my eyes, wishing those things were our story. But they aren't. They're a piece of our story, but they're the bare bones outline. It might sound right, but all the details that made it real, that pulled me to pieces, they're all missing.

My eyes blink open, catching the placid blue of his gaze, wishing they belonged to someone I could have loved. It was doomed before it even began. “Are you sure it wasn’t because I was barely legal? Because I look younger than I am?”

Red flushes across his cheeks. “What the hell are you talking about, Clara?”

“Bryce, I know.”

He shoots to his feet, pacing in front of the couch. “You’re delusional, Clara.”

“Am I? Tell me—how much did you make selling videos of the two of us together? Did you get money or some sort of in-store credit at the kiddie porn site?” I spit out.

I hear the crack before I feel it, my eyes watering from surprise more than pain. “You fucking bitch,” he growls.

I rub my aching cheek, stunned. I glimpse Jansen and Walker in the doorway, but Bryce is too agitated to notice them, and I shake my head again. Walker rushes forward, but Jansen pulls him back, out of sight. I need a full confession from Bryce, quick. The guys won’t stay back if he hits me again.

“I deserve the truth, Bryce. Which ones were crowd pleasers? I imagine they liked when I wore pigtails for you. Or that awful cheerleading outfit you said might be fun.” I look up at him, his fists clenched, his face crimson, lost for words in a way I’ve never seen him. I feel a bitter smile crease my face. “No, those were too trite, weren’t they? I bet they liked it when you made me cry. When I knelt at your feet with tears

streaming down my face, begging for your forgiveness. Did I look young enough then to really get them going? To get you going?”

He’s on me in a second, his hand tangled in my hair, forcing my face to his. “It fucking did. But not the last few times. You’re getting too old, Clara. I was willing to forgive it, to give you a chance to make it up to me, to maybe figure out how I could still be with an aging bitch. You were just so well trained. And the way you begged—magnificent. You’d have been the perfect wife, turning a blind eye to my other...wants. But you’re not worth it anymore. I can do better.”

“Are you aiming for barely legal again?” I mock.

He shakes my head before tossing me back into the chair. “Never my type, Clara. I’ll figure it out—there’s always some broken little girl waiting for a man to tell her how mature she is, how beautiful, how perfect. And for a while, maybe she will be. But you all get old, eventually.”

It’s almost enough, but we need more. Just a bit more. “How young, Bryce? How far away was I from perfect?”

His eyes shutter to cold ice, and I shudder.

“I liked to imagine you were fourteen or fifteen. In the half dark, I almost could. But even with all the running, you’re getting curvier. Every time, it was harder to pretend. To get it up for you. You were supposed to be my next best thing. Now, there’s no way you could get me off. I guess I’d better go shopping again. Find myself a new little replacement.”

Jackpot. “I guess you were lucky I like to run,” I say, and Jansen and Walker are there, rushing to stand guard, one on either side of me.

Walker has a hand on my shoulder, needing to feel that I’m okay. Jansen steps forward, forcing Bryce to step back, away from me. RJ hovers in the doorway to the kitchen, giving me a nod. He sent the confession to the cops out front.

“The fuck?” Bryce asks, looking at the guys.

I stand up, Walker holding me back, keeping me from getting within an arm’s reach of Bryce. “Drop the charges against Archibald and I won’t go to the police,” I say. And I won’t. The cops are going to fucking come to him.

“You set me up?” Bryce roars, reaching for me.

But before he gets too close, some prey part of him kicks in, telling him he’s grossly outnumbered. It’s not just me this time. And I’m not the little girl he taught to cower. Not anymore.

My beast is uncaged, and I don’t want to lock her back up. Not for him.

“Drop the charges.” I hand him my burner phone.

He shakes his head.

“Do it. Are you absolutely sure you deleted all the kiddie porn off your computer? Are you positive?”

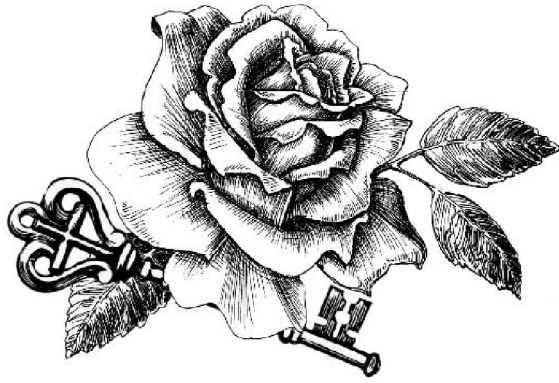
“You fucking bitch,” he growls, grabbing the phone and making the call. Once he’s done, I motion RJ over. He verifies

the number for me. It's legit.

“Go. You're not welcome here anymore,” I say and leave the room, knowing the guys will show my pedo stalker out.

I'm free.

Chapter 52



Trips

I fucking cannot keep my eyes open. God—what time did I get up yesterday? Seven? Six thirty? Where is my dad's lawyer? Did Clara not call him?

The drunks were released first thing this morning. They fucking slept like babies. I, however, watched the door, waiting.

I'm not going to sleep here—I'm going to sleep in my own fucking bed. Not that I sleep well there, but it's better than I would get in this dump.

The door opens, and I'm on my feet, holding onto the wall so I don't fall on my face, my heart lazy as it pumps the blood where it ought to be.

“Archibald Westerhouse?” A uniformed officer looks in the cell. I'm the only fucker here, so I don't know what he's asking about.

“Yeah.”

“Against the wall.”

I stand in position—it sucks that this is getting to be routine. My arms are yanked behind me, my shoulders tight from tension and lack of sleep as the officer snaps on the cuffs. If they think this will intimidate me, they obviously didn't grow up in the Westerhouse family. This shit isn't worth a sniffle of anxiety.

I'm dumped into an interrogation room and kept waiting. I lean back, trying to keep my eyes open. If I close them, I might sleep, and I'm not doing that here. I need to get back home. Where is my bail? Where is my lawyer? What the fuck, Clara?

Officer Tom Reed struts in, all righteous arrogance. Fuck cops, especially honest ones.

I wait to see what tact he's going to take. I'm not going to say anything without my lawyer, and he knows it. I'll listen. It might keep me awake until my bail comes through.

“So, Archibald, let's clear the air,” Officer Reed says.

I tilt my chin, letting him know I'm listening.

“I know you've done some shit. Bad shit. Dangerous shit. And very illegal shit. I know it, and you know it.”

Where the fuck is a lawyer when you need one?

“I think you're a dangerous man and I want you to spend the rest of your life in a cage.”

Those damn honest cops, I tell you. They think they have the answer—hide all the little dust bunnies under the rug, lock up the nuisances. Meanwhile, fucking corporate garbage trucks

dump all the trash on the front lawn, perfectly legal-like. Someday soon, I'm going to light up the fucking garbage trucks with Molotov cocktails, holding up the drivers with nothing but my smile, my fingers pinching their wallets as a bonus for a hard day's work. I've got plans.

I might be a dust bunny today, but I won't be for long.

We stare at each other. I dare him to say more, to show me what he has on me. He smirks at me, hoping I'll lose my temper, that I'll have a tell.

There's a knock on the mirror and Reed lets the tiniest flash of frustration show as he gets up and leaves the room. It's got to be my lawyer. Fucking finally.

I sit for another twenty minutes in the room, my eyes drifting from door to mirror, my eyelids drooping.

The door clicks open, and Officer Reed strides in, my lawyer not with him.

"Up," he says.

I stand up, suddenly unsure where I'm going. Officer Reed pushes me face-first against the wall, firm but not violent. Careful.

This guy is going to be a problem.

"This isn't over," he whispers in my ear as my hands come free from the cuffs.

"Where's my lawyer?" I ask, turning around.

Officer Reed motions to the door. “You’re free to go. The charges were dropped. I’m watching, though, Westerhouse. Your daddy’s lawyers didn’t come to your rescue this time. Maybe your daddy gave up on his troubled second son. What do you think?”

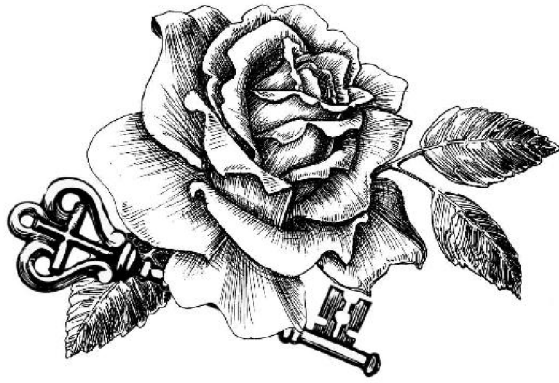
I can’t help the smile that stretches across my face. “A man can only hope.”

A uniformed officer gets me my stuff and escorts me out of the precinct. The afternoon sun sears my eyes as I reach for my nonexistent phone.

Fuck.

Now, how the hell am I supposed to get home?

Chapter 53



Walker

Clara spends seventy-three minutes in the shower. RJ's counting and announcing the time at irregular intervals—it's *great* on the nerves.

Jansen followed Bryce home, wanting to verify his arrest. We just got a text saying they raided his place.

RJ made sure the money trail was easy for the cops to follow. The smart bastard also recovered a bunch of the kiddie porn and Clara porn on the asshole's computer, then tied it up in a bow, filed in a desktop folder labeled "XXXmas Gifts." Clear and accessible for the cops. One thing's for sure, I'm glad he's on my side.

I made cookies while we waited. They're cooling now, but neither RJ nor I are eating them. I feel empty. And honestly, a little useless. I'm not a total weakling or anything, but I'm no good in a fight. I can't hack or steal or manipulate money. I'm a hedonist, a lover of sensations, of color and light and flavor and scent. And that means fuck-all when Clara's in danger.

We hear the bathroom door open—RJ and I freeze, not wanting to spook her, waiting for her to tell us what she needs. This must have been a shitty twenty-four hours for her.

But she did it—she sat in a room with the man who hurt her, who broke her trust in ways I’m only starting to see. She’s a warrior.

And she used her brain—manipulating the cops while still telling the truth, gaining a full confession. She pushed him, tore open her fucking chest and gave the bastard her heart to stomp on, just so he’d disappear, just to get Trips out of jail for a crime he most certainly committed.

She pads into the kitchen, covered in baggy pajama pants and an extra-large T-shirt, her hair piled on the top of her head.

“Cookies?” she says, sniffing the air.

“Yeah. Cookies make things better, right?”

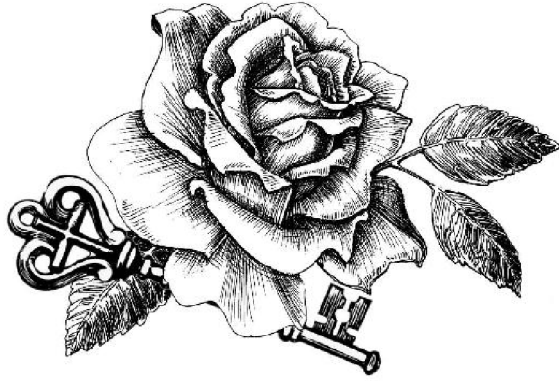
She looks at me, then at RJ, then at her hands, before grabbing two cookies from the rack and heading back out. “Thanks, guys,” she says, the thud of her door ending the conversation.

I raise a brow at RJ. “What now?” I ask.

He rubs the back of his neck. “Honestly? I have no idea.”

I pick up a cookie and take a bite, the chocolate reminiscent of charcoal on my tongue.

Chapter 54



RJ

Opening all the programs I used to set up the audio transfer, I carefully delete them, wiping them, re-imaging my machine just in case.

I should feel proud—I leveled up my skills in ways I never thought possible over one weekend.

But Clara is still in her room and I'm itching to see her, to listen to her voice, to tell her how impressed I was, how brave she was.

Our girl.

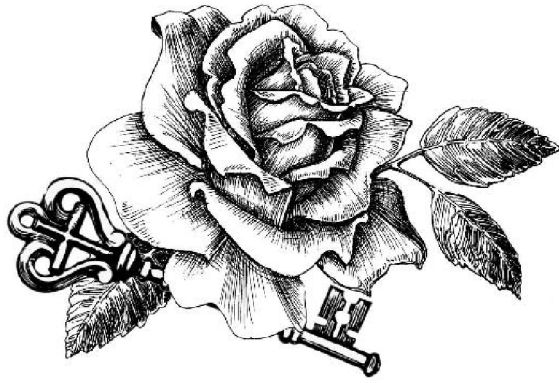
The last thing I wipe are the copies of the videos I grabbed from Bryce's computer—the ones of her. I only watched enough to figure out who they were, what they were. Clara, on her knees, naked and begging for forgiveness.

I delete them individually, a strange, necessary ritual, to prove to myself they are truly gone.

Our girl.

We'll keep her safe.

Chapter 55



Jansen

The buzzing has faded to a dull ache. My head is hollow. I know I'm going to bottom out sometime soon, I just hope I can cuddle with Clara tonight—she gives me just enough of a buzz to keep me from going full drop. I don't like myself much when I bottom out.

I click on my turn signal, navigating away from the sirens and lights, a smile on my face. Bryce was marched out in cuffs just a minute ago. Good riddance.

I'm humming one of my sister's bluegrass songs as I drive, the physical buzz from my own voice tricking me into keeping going. All I want when I get back is to curl up on that stupid floor mattress, watch a movie, and maybe get annoyed at Clara's hair tickling my nose. It sounds perfect.

I'm almost home when I glimpse Trips leaning against a brick wall on the edge of campus. I pull over and roll down my window. "Hey, Trips!" I yell, grinning.

If he's already out of jail, then the rest of the plan went down like clockwork, or an airport, or some other perfectly organized thing with many moving pieces. I might be too tired for analogies.

Trips blinks in my direction, shakes his head a few times before he pushes off the wall and trots to my car, not even looking for traffic.

Two horns blare as he slides into my passenger seat. "Fuck," he says, laying his head back, his eyes already closed.

"Dude. What happened to you?"

"I've been in fucking jail, you bastard. Leave me alone."

I check the street, find a hole in traffic, and navigate back onto the road. "I know you've been in jail. We got you out. Why are you so—" I look at him, sprawled beside me, his eyelids flickering as he tries to force them open. "Are you sick?"

"No, I'm fucking exhausted. I haven't slept in—" he squints at my clock "—why the fuck are the numbers dancing?"

The numbers are not dancing. "It's 6:32, Trips."

"Well, I woke up before seven yesterday. You do the math. I can't see straight, let alone do numbers."

"You're telling me the great financier Archibald Clarence Westerhouse the Third can't do simple addition?" I grin at him. He flips me off, his head settling into the headrest and his eyelids losing to gravity.

“Just get me to my fucking bed, jackass.”

“At your service.”

He stills, but his mouth continues to move. “Why didn’t anyone come get me?”

I shrug, then realize he can’t see me. “We weren’t sure when you’d be released. We thought you’d call when you got out.”

“I didn’t have a phone.”

“The precinct doesn’t let you call for a ride?”

There’s a long pause, followed by a muffled, “Fuck me.”

I turn into Dinkytown, the new construction giving way to old rambling two-story shops and bars. Trips clears his throat. “How’d you get the charges dropped?”

“Clara blackmailed Bryce, and it was absolutely magical.”

One of his eyes pops open. “Just how the fuck did Clara go from calling my dad to get a lawyer to blackmailing her fucking stalker?”

“She’s brilliant, Trips. We had this whole reasonable doubt plan—I broke into the precinct and planted evidence, it was fucking amazing! But then your dad decided to ‘let you stand on your own two feet’ and left us high and dry. Clara came through. She called Bryce over—”

Trips pushes up from his seat, both eyes boring into me. “She invited the asshole to our house? And you fucking let her?”

“No, she was amazing, it was all under control, it was fine.”

Trips vibrates with anger, and I wish we were home so I could redirect him to his heavy bag.

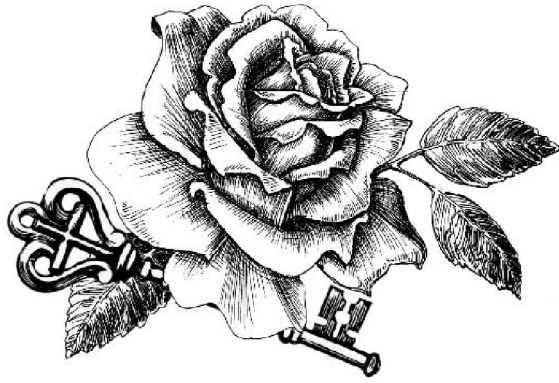
“She invited her stalker over to chat, and you all, what? Signed a fucking embossed invitation?”

I flick him in the nose, and his eyes snap shut reflexively. “Get some sleep. I’ll explain tomorrow.”

His fists clench and unclench, but his exhaustion wins, and he blinks as he relaxes beside me. Trips is completely passed out by the time I take the last few turns toward home. I still can’t stop grinning. Bryce is in jail, Clara is a beautiful genius, and our resident asshole is back.

What more could a guy want?

Chapter 56



Clara

The cloud of breaths from the crowd of runners mingles with the fog in the chilly morning air, and everyone is squeezing in last-minute jumps and stretches while we wait for our chance at the starting line.

By the time my group reaches the start, the sun has risen just enough to light up the haze, a shattered rainbow breaking over the racers.

I move fluidly through my stride, my body dying to run after my taper, ready to push faster and farther than it should here at the start. I hold back—I'll need that energy later.

Luckily, my shoulder is mostly back to normal. It only twinges when I try to grab something heavy from above my head—I can deal with that.

At the one-mile mark, I hear my name shouted over the crowd. I look around, finding RJ squeezing through the spectators, ringing a cowbell. He runs over to me, keeping

pace, just like he has for the last few weeks. “You came,” I exclaim.

“We all did, Emma too. You’ll have someone every mile to cheer you on.”

A grin cuts across my face, and I want to hug him—I want to hug all of them. I bump RJ’s shoulder instead. “Thanks. I’m looking forward to my cheer squad.”

RJ bumps me back, eyes bright. We run in silence for a half a mile before he steps off the course.

“I’ll see you in a few miles,” I call. He waves back, jangling the cowbell as I continue down the road.

Emma is next, her pink hair in space buns on the top of her head, a big sign that says, “You’ve got this, girl!” in her hands. She screams as I pass by, and I wave and blow her a kiss. She catches it and presses it to her cheek.

I haven’t really seen much of Emma this past week. I haven’t seen much of anyone. And while I hate to admit it, I’ve been hiding.

What should I say? To Emma? To the guys? To myself?

I broke the law—or at least conspired to. Even though it was the truth that ended up saving us, I still blackmailed Bryce. I still pushed past the law instead of following it.

Does that make me a criminal?

Or is blackmailing my pedophile, stalker, sex-tape-distributing ex justified in some twisted way?

I need to figure out what to tell Emma. I need to figure out where I stand. I need to wipe the memory of Bryce from my mind, to excise that cancer and leave space for something new to blossom.

I'm working on it.

Walker is next, holding a poster board painted with a gorgeous baroque angel flying over a crowd of modern runners. Scrawled under the beautiful picture he wrote: "Bet you wish you had wings too."

I flip him off and he flashes me a grin. My pounding heart stutters, and I float for the next half mile. Is it really okay to start a relationship with more than one guy?

Jansen is just past the first water station, still half asleep, but holding out a hand—he's giving high fives to everyone who passes him. A flutter starts in my belly as I toss my cup and cross to him. He swoops me into a hug, swinging me back and forth. "Ew! I'm so sweaty!" I cry.

He laughs, tugs my ponytail, and pushes me back onto the course. "You're killing it!" he yells, holding his hand out for the next person coming up behind me. I giggle as I shuffle back into the thinning crowd.

The next mile I spy my dad perched on a folding chair under a golden-leafed oak, clapping for everyone who passes. I cut over to him—he doesn't see me until I'm a step away.

"Dad! You made it!"

“Of course, Clara-girl. Can’t miss your big day. I’ll catch you again at the end.” He waves me away, not wanting me to break my stride for a hug. I’m glad he came, even if my mom didn’t.

Trips stands on the other side of the street, fifteen feet farther down. His hands are in his pockets, his eyes cutting from my dad to me.

I smile and wave. I get nothing back.

He’s been furious at me for the risks I took, so I’m sadly unsurprised. I chose to be in the same room as Bryce, knowing how dangerous that could be. I broke so many laws to get him released—he thinks I just should have pestered his dad again for help.

He’s angry with all of us for doing what we did. He might be right.

The rest of the guys loved the work we did. But Trips has a point—the plan was full of unnecessary risks.

The rest of the race flies by. RJ runs more miles beside me, Walker and Jansen are full of smiles and encouragement. My friends start grouping together closer to the end, Emma joining Walker, RJ with Jansen, and oddly, my dad with Trips. I book it across the finish line, glancing at the official clock, and I can’t suppress my squeal. I just got a personal best.

I’m pulled into congratulatory hugs, my shoulder sore from pushing it for this long. There’s no way that ache is going to compare to how my legs will feel tomorrow. My grin hurts, it’s

stretched so wide. The pale gold of the fall sun peeks through the clouds, lighting up my little collection of love and joy. Even Trips lets a tiny grin pull up one side of his mouth.

While the guys argue about where we should go for brunch, my dad pulls me aside.

“Good job, Clara-girl. I’m proud of you.” He kisses my forehead, his eyes creased, his hair grayer than I remember.

“Thanks, Dad.” I squeeze him tight, happy he made it, glad he chose me over my mom this one time. “Do you want to come out for brunch?”

He shakes his head. “Inventory today—I’ve got to make sure those idiots know where to find all the Glenfiddich.” He kisses my sweaty head one last time. “You done good, mija.”

“Thanks.”

He nods toward the guys and Emma. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I like these folks a lot better than Bryce.”

I laugh. “Me too, Dad.”

One last hug and he leaves to say his goodbyes. Trips gives my dad a genuine smile, a foundation of respect built this morning, before my dad disappears into the milling spectators.



After brunch, we head back to the house, the sun warm enough to announce this might be the last nice day for a while. Red and gold leaves drift from the trees as we spread out on the

porch. The couch in the yard next door has vanished, and the street's still quiet this early in the day.

Fresh from the shower, I'm the last one on the porch. In my absence, the pillows from Jansen's meditation room have been scattered outside, a little Bohemian sitting room in the faded sun. Walker pats the cushion next to him, and I flop down, sprawling out with my head in his lap, my legs demanding more space than they should. Jansen scoots closer and takes my feet into his lap, using slow, steady strokes to massage my calves while I try not to whimper.

Emma is chatting with RJ, or at least chatting at RJ. Luckily, he doesn't seem to mind. Trips pulled his chair to the porch, too uptight to sprawl on the floor with the rest of us.

The surveillance van is gone, at least for now. We had a "city utility" guy come to check our kitchen sink, and Jansen had to sneak the bug out of my bathroom and back to the kitchen so the poor guy could find it and remove it.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Trips tense, while folding his ankle over his knee and faking nonchalance. Someone clears their throat, and I force myself to sit up so I can see who's crashing my afterparty.

Officer Tom Reed stands in the yard in jeans and a light jacket. "Hey," he says, "mind if I join you?"

Trips and I lock eyes and I realize it's my call. The guys are waiting for me.

I swallow, putting on my best customer service smile. “Sure. What’s up?” I ask, watching Reed as he approaches the house, choosing to lean against the porch rails rather than coming up the stairs. A permeable barrier between the cop and the crooks.

He runs his hand through his hair. “I don’t know if you’ve been told, but your ex-boyfriend was arrested. He, well, he was a pretty bad guy. I read through your statement and I’m sorry if I seemed a little tough on you.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I say.

He clears his throat again. “It also looks like he might be wanted for some older open crimes we have on the books. I know it’s a long shot, but two years ago, he might have gotten into a bit of a scuffle. Do you remember if he was ever a bit bruised, maybe had bloody knuckles or something like that?”

Shit. Do I lie? To a cop who just apologized to me?

I shrug, figuring that my slight panic could be interpreted as deep thought. At least, that’s what I hope. “Honestly, I hardly knew Bryce two years ago. We’d only just started dating, so I didn’t see him every day.”

Reed bobs his chin, but he’s watching Trips. “He says he had nothing to do with this other crime, but circumstantial evidence makes him look good for it.”

When Trips gives nothing away, Officer Reed turns back to me. “Let me know if you remember anything. Do you still have my card?”

I nod.

He pushes off from the porch with one last glance at Trips. “Well, I’ll be around,” he says, striding back down to the sidewalk.

I track him until he gets in his car and drives away.

Safe, I collapse back into Walker’s lap, Jansen’s hand warm on my calves.

“Are we good?” RJ asks.

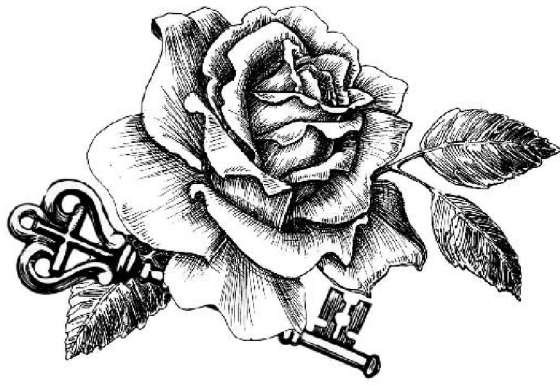
“We’re good,” I say. “But I think I could go for some cookies.”

Everyone laughs as we trudge back to the kitchen, the temptation of melty chocolate stronger than the last of the faded sun.

Gathered in the small space, the smell of warming sugar and flour washes over me. Jansen pulls me up on the counter next to him, Emma claiming the stool closest to me, while Walker threatens anyone who gets too close to his bowl with a wooden spoon—Jansen gets walloped twice. RJ grabs himself a Mountain Dew while Trips watches us all, trying not to grin.

This is good.

We’re good.



Epilogue

Walker

My phone flashes in the middle of the night, waking me. I'm sleeping alone tonight, which sucks, but I don't want to rush Clara. She's no longer tensing up when I touch her, so I hope that's a sign she's feeling safer, stronger.

I grab my phone from my nightstand.

The anonymized chat program RJ put on my phone is flashing. I pop it open.

NightAntiques: Update. IRC.

I run my hand through my hair, blinking sleep out of my eyes. It's 2:48 in the morning—this can't be good.

DaVinciDeux: K. Give me 5.

I roll out of bed and power up my laptop, opening the anonymizer that the fence prefers we use for discussing

business. RJ said something about it rerouting our IP address through pretty much the whole world, so it must be safe.

DaVinciDeux: Here. What's up?

NightAntiques: Client had a change in plans.
Exchange must happen on New Year's Eve.

I glance at my latest attempt at a Rubens. Losing three months of practice? *Great.*

DaVinciDeux: Significant timeline adjustment.

NightAntiques: With requisite compensation adjustment.

The number NightAntiques quotes is more than generous, but the timeline moving up? To New Year's Eve? I swallow.

DaVinciDeux: I'll check with my team. 8 hours?

NightAntiques: I'll be here.

I shut the laptop, staring at my dark room. I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if we can do it. Two months. Less, if

you consider all the family togetherness shit we have on our plates with Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Our first major heist.

This is it. We've got to do it. What other choice do we have?

*Hi! Maisie here! Thanks for reading all the way to the end. I'm so excited for the next part of Clara's story! As a heads up, reviews are **SUPER** helpful for authors, so if you loved Clara and her guys, let everyone know! Thank you so much for your kind words!!!*

Also, shh...

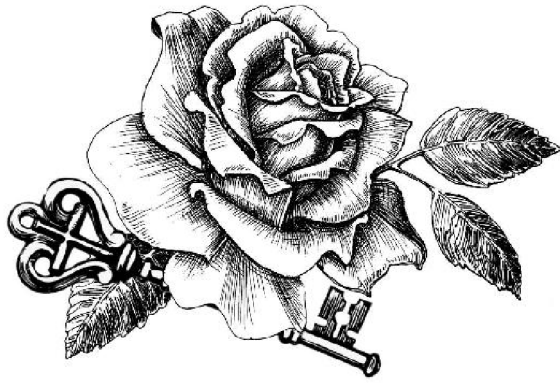
Jansen managed to lift some case notes from Officer Reed's desk. Want to see why he was so suspicious of the guys, as well as other great bonus content?

Or, even better, are you dying to know what happened during the failed heist in the prologue?

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A Sneak Peek of Brazen Deceits

Clara

The doorbell rings yet again, so I peek out into the front hallway. Jansen opens the door, his blond hair back in a ponytail, a dress shirt and jeans hugging his slim waist and leanly muscled shoulders. “Hello, welcome,” he says, holding the front door half open, blocking whoever is out there from coming in. “If I could have the passcode?”

A gangly guy about our age bobs his head in compliance. “Money is a funny honey for a sunny bunny.”

I snort, and Jansen turns toward me, tossing me a grin and a wink before returning to his doorman duties.

“Excellent. Name?”

“Harrison Grant.”

Jansen holds up his phone, scrolling through pictures until he finds Harrison’s. The guys take this more seriously than I realized. “Perfect, Mr. Grant. If you head up to the attic, your first game will begin at the top of the hour. Your guest is your responsibility. Ignorance of the rules is no excuse, and all

consequences will fall on you, even if the actions are hers. Do you understand?”

Harrison Grant swallows, his Adam's apple bouncing in his throat, and he glances behind him. “Got it.”

Jansen swings the door open with a flourish, and Harrison Grant stumbles upstairs, trailed by a blond wearing a killer dress and what must be thousand-dollar shoes. Wow. I guess sushi is the right level of fancy for this shindig.

“Hiya, beautiful,” Jansen says, abandoning his door duties to come give me a kiss. As soon as his lips touch mine, my heart flutters in my chest, my hands pulling him closer of their own accord. With that invitation, Jansen dips his tongue into my mouth with a mad swipe, before releasing my lips so he can nibble my earlobe and down my neck, my shivers following his every touch.

“Hi,” I eke out, tilting my head to give him plenty of space to do his thing. Although, if he does too much more, I'm not sure my legs are going to hold me up. Luckily, he's guessed I'm turning boneless, as his arms wrap around me, bracing me against him the moment before my knees turn to goo.

My own hands sneak up under his dress shirt, feeling the smooth skin of his back, the ridges of his spine. God, I've missed this. Why have I been keeping my distance?

Right now, there's no reason for that oversight.

The doorbell's jingle makes us both groan, my neck damp in the best way possible. “Shit,” I mutter.

Jansen presses a kiss to my cheek, my forehead, and my nose. “Do you think I can pretend they’re not there?”

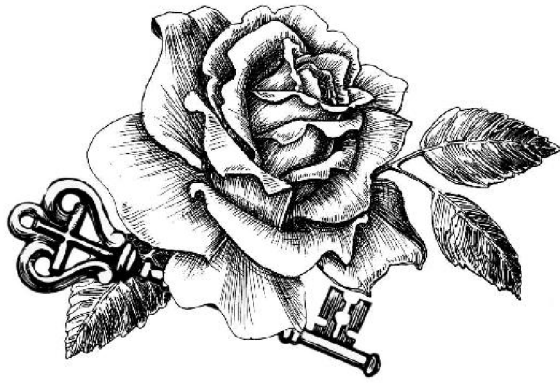
“Trips would kill you if you left one of his rich marks on the porch,” I say, running my hands around his sides and up over his abs, his breath hitching as I debate inching one hand higher—and the other lower.

Jansen watches me, considering the options, before pulling my hands out from his shirt, kissing each palm. With a long look, he throws open the door and greets the next player.

I watch from the kitchen doorway, the words of the entrance ceremony flowing over me, my attention focused on the shift of Jansen’s muscles under his clothes, the control he has over every inch of his body, the body of a dancer. Or in this case, the body of a thief.

Buy *Brazen Deceits* to see what happens next!

<https://tinyurl.com/mkbdlink>



Acknowledgements

Thank you, first of all, to my readers. Without you, I'd just be tapping away in the dark all by my lonesome. But with you, my stories get to find their place in the world. So thank you—each and every one of you. Your time is valuable, and all I can hope is that you passed these few hours having a darn good time.

Next up:

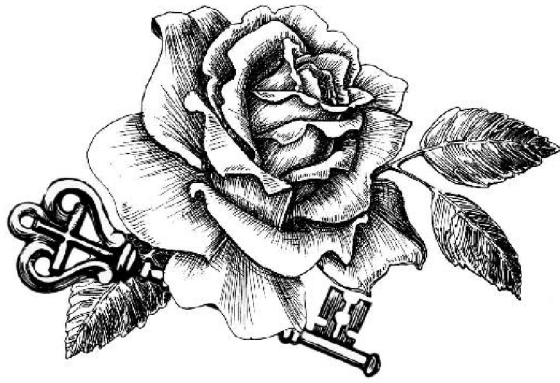
To my husband J. – Thank you for taking on bedtime chaos so this night owl could get in her words for the day. Without you, our little world would stutter to a halt. Thank you.

To L. and R. – Your joy and laughter inspires me to be a better version of myself every day. Keep up all the games of imagination—because yes, there is a magic yellow leaf road in the gully. Don't let anyone tell you differently.

To my most excellent beta readers, L. and T. – Thanks for taking a risk on this book. You helped immensely, and I'm

glad it made your road trip go a little bit faster, even if L. was freaking out at the sexy bits. 😊

To all my IAA peeps – You are all exploding bundles of knowledge, cheerleading, commiseration, and inspiration. Without all of you, I probably still would have gotten to this point, but it would have been a hell of a lot more painful, slow, and not nearly as pretty-like. Thank you.



About Author

Maisie Kane is a writer of spicy reverse harem romances, risk-loving criminals, and fearless love that shatters expectations.

Lover of all things coffee and puppy-shaped, she can be found tending her tiny porch garden while wondering what in the world she's going to do with all that basil.

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