

carnage of
MISERY

THE SHADOWS OF WILDBERRY LANE BOOK 3

M. SINCLAIR

CARNAGE OF MISERY

The Shadows of Wildberry Lane

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Lost & Bound Publishing

Carnage of Misery

The Shadows of Wildberry Lane 3

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The Union of Love & Madness

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DESCRIPTION

Six vicious men brought together by one woman—Dahlia Aldridge.

The future I had craved but never expected to live had been right within my grasp. The world around us had turned chaotic and messy, but I had my men, and I knew they loved me. So when I was suddenly, violently ripped away from that, taken from what I thought to be an impenetrable fortress, I found myself doubting the possibility of having that future... Let alone *any* future.

I knew my boys would come for me—I just hoped it would be within time to bring carnage to the misery being imposed on us.

Wildberry Lane - Home to the extremely wealthy and powerful Southern elite.

Carnage of Misery, the final installment in The Shadows of Wildberry Lane trilogy, is M. Sinclair's debut contemporary reverse harem series. This work features a naive female character hiding a dark secret of her own, the men in her life that will do anything to keep her safe, and a scandal that stretches far beyond the safety of Wildberry Lane's gate.

Warning: This book contains sexual content for +18. Contains swearing, violence, and triggers including, but not limited to, eating disorders, attempted assault, and bullying. Important to note, the bullying is NOT done by the harem, but rather by outside sources. This is a slow to medium burn series.

PROLOGUE

Dahlia Aldridge

May - End of Junior Year

“Bunny, get back here now or I’ll—”

I turned around quickly, a small teasing smile slipping onto my lips as my eyes widened on Yates, who nearly slammed right into me. A tiny squeak slipped out of my lips as the insane man picked me up by the waist, holding me against him while carrying me back towards the others. I pushed against his chest, but my complaints landed on deaf ears as everyone we passed smiled and laughed at our antics.

What they didn’t realize is that I was being kept prisoner.

Honestly, I was surprised he hadn’t done something crazier, like throwing me over his shoulder. Although, considering I was in a dress and there were at least fifty plus people out here in the garden, most likely watching us, I was thankful for it.

“Yates,” I complained as he set me down right between Kingston and Sterling. The latter began trailing his fingers up my spine in a lazy manner that had chills breaking out across my skin. I found my voice as I scowled at Yates. “The bar is literally right over there. I am perfectly capable of getting my own glass of wine.”

Yates’s gray gaze darkened as he bent down and grasped my jaw, fixing me with an amused look that was tinted with

what I swear to the lord was possessiveness. But I had to be wrong about that—Yates and I hated one another.

“Bunny, if you think I am letting you get within an inch of that bar, you must be out of your mind. Do you see who is over there?”

“Fine!” I groaned and rolled my eyes skyward. “Fine, fine, *fine*. Then someone has to go get me a drink since you’re acting crazy.”

“I got this,” Sterling said, pushing off where he had been lounging against a railing, straightening his white linen jacket as he strode towards the bar. I tried to not let my eyes stray to how good his shoulders looked, so instead I focused on Yates, who pointed towards the ground as if to order me to ‘stay put.’

I shook my head. “He’s insane.”

King chuckled. “You have no idea, princess.”

Unfortunately, I believed that completely.

“Don’t laugh at my suffering.” I shot him a playful look before turning towards the view of Lake Como. Its normally smooth surface was wavy as yachts of all different sizes sailed through the picturesque Italian scenery. Normally this type of traffic would be unusual, but not this weekend. This weekend, everyone was in town for the *Concorso D’Eleganza Villa D’Este*. It was the reason for the celebratory mood that filled the air with a sense of excitement. I also knew that many people didn’t plan to stay for a month like our families did, so of course they were trying to take advantage of everything Lake Como had to offer while they could.

Honestly, this annual event was one of my favorite excuses to travel with everyone. My lip dipped slightly... Well, not *everyone*. Stratton and his grandma weren’t here. I tried to shake that thought and pull myself into the present where we were enjoying the luxurious surroundings of my parents’ estate that looked right over the lake. That was when I noticed that Kingston and Lincoln were literally talking over my head. I really needed to get taller.

“I offered to buy it off him, but he seemed hesitant,” King grunted, shaking his head. I let out a happy hum as his arm wrapped around my waist, tucking me against him and distracting me once again.

I couldn't help it when he held me like this.

Lincoln chuckled. “Bastard is obsessed with that car; not sure why you even tried.”

I wouldn't lie, I really didn't have much interest in cars outside of how they looked, which is why it was so amusing to use this event as an excuse to travel here. With the exception of a few members of the Wildberry family, no one in our group had a vested interest in collecting cars, and the event was *literally* completely focused around the hobby. Every year, this luxury showcase featured fifty of the world's most beautiful cars on the shores of the lake, all of which were easily worth far over a million. Don't get me wrong, I was used to money and seeing it spent, especially by my parents, but spending a million dollars on a car? That just seemed excessive.

Wait, had King seriously been trying to buy one? What the heck?

I frowned, tilting my head up to really look at him. “I'm sorry, did you just say you wanted to buy one? King, that's absurd! The price tag is stupidly expensive, and this is coming from the woman that justified purchasing an entire collection of Louboutins only last month.”

Although, to be fair, I felt like that was a reasonable purchase considering they were a special edition collection and would no doubt only have more and more value as time went on.

See? I was investing!

Lincoln chuckled, running his fingers through the hair that had fallen over my shoulder. “It's one of a kind though.”

I eyed Lincoln and then frowned at King. “At least tell me your offer wasn't more than a million.”

King's smile only grew as he shrugged casually. “May have been. I mean, I didn't want to risk coming in too low

since it was the car you pointed out liking.”

Oh heck no.

I stepped away from him and faced both of them with narrowed eyes. “Don’t you dare, King. I won’t accept it.”

King’s eyes darkened with amusement and heat that had my skin prickling. “Yes you would, especially if I told you how much—”

“You are *not* using my ‘gift acceptance’ issue against me.” I gently poked him in the chest, Lincoln barking out a laugh, amused with my predicament.

The predicament was that no matter how hard I tried, I could not *not* accept a gift from someone, especially if they went out of their way to purchase or make something heartfelt. I just didn’t have it in me, which is how the boys got away with so much!

King tugged my wrist as I squeaked, falling forward into him. “How about this? I promise to not spend more than five.”

“Reasonable,” Lincoln agreed, his fingers pushing back hair that had fallen across my face, causing my breath to catch as he tucked it behind my ear. My eyes widened as I processed the insanity he had just spit out.

“Kingston Ross. Absolutely not. Promise me you will not purchase that car.”

His bright green eyes seemed to darken into almost an emerald shade. “I don’t make promises I don’t intend to keep, princess.”

Oh.

It was like the air shifted around us, and my mind sorted through all the promises he had ever made to me throughout our lives and how unbelievable some of them were. Hadn’t he said we were all going to live together? Like two years ago? He had been joking, obviously. Except his exact words had been ‘I promise we are always going to be together, Dahlia—even live together.’”

Before I could question his statement, Yates and Sterling walked back over, the first speaking in a clipped, annoyed tone. I leaned into Kingston, not done with the conversation but unable to help appreciate the beauty surrounding me. It was distracting, to be honest. Not only because of the natural surroundings, but because of everything this estate featured.

It was one of my favorite properties my parents owned.

The main estate house was far over fifteen thousand square feet, with enough bedrooms to fit all of our families and a floorplan to fit several hundred for parties, not including the large garden where we currently were relaxing. This place was made for company, and there were guests lounging in sun chairs, playing lawn games, sitting at tables, and even at the bar smoking cigars while looking out over the lake.

Honestly, this party could have been dropped into a movie seamlessly. The afternoon sunset cast a gorgeous glow over the landscape, and I found myself tempted to grab my camera to try to capture the moment. Unfortunately, I knew that no technique would capture this type of beauty to its fullest extent. This was an *experience*, complete with live music performed by a local band, some of their faces familiar.

My dad totally had his favorites, and this band was one of them.

I had to give my parents this—whenever we purchased a property, they went out of their way to hire locally and to use products, food, and wine that came from the towns around us. It was the small things like that which made me look up to my parents. They could have easily brought staff from back home or imported whatever products they wanted, but they took the care and effort to make sure they were supporting the community.

Sterling appeared in front of me, offering me a glass of Prosecco.

I offered him a soft smile. “Thanks.”

“No problem, sugar.”

That nickname did things to me.

“Dahlia!” My mom called from an upper balcony where she stood near a table that my dad and King’s parents sat at. I couldn’t help but smile at her, loving that despite the type of party this was, she was not only barefoot but wearing a completely dressed-down outfit without a care in the world. When the woman decided she was on vacation, she embraced it fully.

Not missing a beat, I escaped King’s arms and walked towards the grand marble staircase, shooting a quick scowl at the men following behind me. I shouldn’t have been surprised—they were always protective, but this seemed more over the top than normal. What was their deal?

Sterling’s gaze met mine as he offered a wink, causing me to let out a dramatic huff and purposefully jog up the stairs faster.

“What’s up?” I asked my mom, sitting down in an open chair between her and Haven Ross, King’s mom. Both of them offered me smiles, looking excited about something. Oh man, who knows what they cooked up.

“We wanted to see if you were up for a girls’ trip tomorrow,” Haven explained, the excited energy around her affecting me and having me nod without a second thought.

“Absolutely. Where?”

“Milan!” My mom clapped her hands.

“Shopping?” I didn’t particularly love shopping on my own, but with the two of them it was far more fun.

“Exactly.” Haven winked, and I couldn’t help but want tomorrow to come already...although I was distracted by King talking to his dad.

“We should go with.”

I turned to see the concern on his face, and not for the first time, I got the feeling that my boys had started to change. A lot. I knew they weren’t hiding anything from me—at least I hope they weren’t—but sometimes it felt like they knew far more than they let on. I found that both concerning and attractive.

“We are sending a security team with them,” Mr. Ross explained simply before looking at all four of them. “Besides, I have a meeting here tomorrow. I want you boys around.” His words seemed to signify something important and caused a weird tension in the air...before it was broken by the waiter coming around with hors d’oeuvres.

I didn’t take any and Yates immediately noticed, causing me to huff as he urged me up and out of my seat towards a table nearby where the five of us could spread out more. I went to sit down, but he easily tugged me to sit on his knee, causing my face to flush in surprise. But when I looked down at him, his eyes were on Sterling as they talked animatedly about something. I was glad for that though. I could not let Yates see how much he affected me.

We were enemies, after all.

I let out a happy sigh when I took a bite of an adorable stuffed mushroom, loving the vibrant flavor that filled my mouth all at once. I had never given much thought to how much I ate because we always ate healthy, but I wouldn’t lie, when the girls at school started talking about weight, it did make me wonder if I needed to. I was happy with my body, but...there were a lot of things I saw differently than my classmates because I’d been sheltered. It made me wonder if I was seeing myself wrong, that maybe I shouldn’t be satisfied with how I looked.

But on the other hand, one of my favorite aspects of traveling was the culinary one.

I knew it wasn’t polite, but when I got some cheese on my finger, I easily licked it off and looked up to see King staring at me with a frustrated expression. I don’t think anyone else saw it though, which is good, because now I felt like it was rude.

“What?” I asked, my cheeks flushing.

He inhaled sharply, looking down at my lips, and shook his head. “Nothing, princess.”

I eyed him, confused, at how he now looked almost amused. Odd.

I couldn't tell if we sat there for an hour, or possibly hours, because I was enjoying myself so much, the music growing louder as the sun set over the tipsy crowd of guests. I even managed at one point to convince Sterling and Lincoln to dance with me, twirling and soaking up every ounce of their attention and the freedom to touch them without it being weird. When we collapsed back down at the table between them, I realized that it really did feel like they were touching me more, going out of their way to put an arm around me or pull me against them.

It was those small things that had me feeling very dangerous emotions.

Or maybe I was just reading into it because *my* emotions had grown stronger.

When I got up to use the bathroom, I slipped into the main house, not using the attached guest house that the party guests were relegated to. I figured it would allow me just a bit more peace, and I was right. I slipped in and right back out, freshening up a bit before going back outside to find my boys. I hadn't been gone more than five minutes, but I came to a complete halt, seeing our parents but not my boys. Where had they gone? I walked towards the tables and then the bar, hoping that would be where I'd find them. Unfortunately, no luck.

I decided for the moment to stay in one place and sat on a bar stool, asking the bartender for a glass of water. I drank half of it before a weird chill went up my spine that I tried to ignore, going back to searching the crowd.

"Dahlia Aldridge, right?" The accented voice had me nearly groaning.

Now I understood the weird chill, the feeling of eyes on me...because whenever Pavel Volkov was around, he was watching me. I turned to find the thirty-something oil heir staring at me with a level of lust that made me extremely uncomfortable. It wasn't the first time an older man had hit on

me, but it said a lot about them considering it was well known that I was only seventeen.

“Mr. Volkov,” I offered in greeting, hoping that using his last name would remind him to not be such a creep.

No such luck.

His chuckle made me feel uncomfortable. “Call me Pavel, I insist.”

I offered a polite smile while being firm. “My apologies, it is a hard habit to break, especially since you are one of my father’s associates.” There! That should remind him.

Frustration crossed his face as he grunted, “Yes, your father. Where is he?”

I frowned, looking back towards the crowd, noticing that my dad and King’s father were absent from the table with the other parents. “Honestly, I’m not positive.”

“We can find him together.” He urged me out of my seat before I could blink, and I cringed, pulling my elbow back immediately and stepping away. I didn’t like the aggression he was displaying. I also was almost positive that the move to distance myself pissed him off. I wasn’t surprised—despite his creepy personality, the man was beautiful physically, so he probably wasn’t used to rejection. Apprehension trailed up my spine as his blue eyes narrowed on me.

“Princess?” King’s voice had me sagging in relief as I turned towards him, offering him wide eyes. His expression turned concerned, his gaze narrowing as it darted over my head. I let him wrap an arm around my waist as I leaned into him.

“Pavel,” King greeted, his voice tinged with something I didn’t understand, “you are just the man I was looking for.”

I had a feeling he was bullshitting, but I would run with it.

“Why?” Pavel’s eyes were on King’s hand on my waist, and King’s chest produced a noise that had me staring up at him in confusion. His face portrayed no anger, but the tension running through his body said something completely different.

“My father is down by the docks, I wouldn’t keep him waiting.”

Pavel nodded sharply before looking down at me, offering a gross smile. “Dahlia, I am positive this won’t be the last time we see one another.”

I didn’t offer a response, and as he left I turned into King’s chest and let out a small groan. “He is so creepy. I swear, each time I see him it gets worse. I mean, what is his—” I looked up at King, finding that he wasn’t listening. He stared over my head, looking pissed, for sure, but there was something far darker there, and it created a chill against my skin that had my breath catching.

“King?” I asked softly.

He blinked, his expression turning warm again as he looked down at me. “Worried about you, princess. Don’t slip away like that again—I don’t like any of these fuckers thinking they can talk to you.”

“He’s creepy,” I agreed.

King’s eyes moved over my head again as something flashed in his gaze. “Yes, he is. Come on, let’s get back to the others. They are bringing out deserts.”

My smile grew. “That sounds amazing.”

King chuckled before shaking his head. “I love the things that make you happy.”

I felt my expression soften as he used the word ‘love.’ How badly I wanted to tell him that the thing I loved was... them.

Chapter One

STRATTON LEE

Thirty-three minutes.

It had been thirty-three minutes since Dahlia had disappeared, in the hands of whatever dead man had dared to fucking kidnap her. It had been thirty-three minutes of my angel being out of my sight and in potential danger. It had been thirty-three minutes of pure hell, and I was about to lose my shit.

Rage like I'd never known before coursed through me, pushing me into consciousness despite the blow I'd taken to the face. I rubbed the back of my neck where they had injected me with something, but when I pulled my hand away I could see blood on my fingertips. My breathing went rough, the space around me moving a bit slow as my head pounded, struggling against the urge to collapse to my knees.

The only thing keeping me awake was the knowledge that my angel was in danger. That I hadn't protected her.

I hadn't protected my angel. I didn't deserve her normally, I knew that, but now? Now I sure as fuck didn't. Guilt slammed into me as I tried to stand up, pushing myself off of the cushioned seat in the office.

"Stratton," Sterling bit out angrily, "sit the fuck down."

I nearly growled at him, blind with rage, as I tried to regulate my breathing. When I felt his hand on my shoulder, my knees broke and I sat back down.

"You got hit real fucking hard, man," Sterling told me firmly. "Just sit the fuck down. There was a needle on the floor

between Yates and you. It's mostly full—you probably knocked it out of their hand—but we want to get someone here to make sure you aren't drugged—”

“Not until we find her,” I demanded.

“That's what we are fucking doing!” Lincoln snapped. The entire estate was in pure chaos, and the alarms had gone off almost immediately when Yates, having woken up before me, managed to call down to King in the basement. The torture had been forgotten as everyone exploded into action, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. I prayed to a god that I didn't even believe in that it would be enough to get to her in time. That nothing bad would happen to her before we saved her from whoever thought it was okay to take my angel.

Maybe they hadn't gotten off the estate yet... Fuck, I hoped so.

The more time passed, the more we realized how dire the situation was. They had managed to not only kidnap Dahlia, but shut down our security system and cameras for two full minutes. Two minutes that had changed everything. They had this down to the goddamn second. This had been planned.

The concept of Dahlia's life being at stake had changed something in me. As I looked around the Ross family office, I realized that I would sell my soul, give up any morals I even tried to retain, to make sure I kept her safe. I had tried to stay away from this life, knowing I had enough problems, maybe hoping that if I did I could somehow retain some redeemable qualities that my angel would find in me.

That was done now.

That was fucking over.

I would walk into hell and hand over my soul if it meant saving her. Darkness built in my chest as I promised myself that once we got her back and she was in my arms, I would make sure that no one ever touched her again. My chest squeezed as I realized just how bad this would get, and I found that I couldn't care less. If my angel took me back after failing her, I would do anything I could to gain her trust back so she

would give herself freely to me again. To let me take over, to take care of her, to own her.

“Three minutes.” King’s voice was carefully controlled, almost eerily so, as he stared at his head of security. “You have three minutes to find where they are heading.”

So they had gotten off the property. Shit.

The man nodded sharply before leaving, not shying away or looking terrified at the tangible darkness coming off of King. I knew these men weren’t a normal security company—they were embedded in the family business—but that wouldn’t stop King when he had a blackout. Nothing could stop him at that point.

If they came back without anything in three minutes, he would kill them.

I knew that Dahlia would be able to calm him down if she were here, but until then he was like a ticking time bomb. I just hoped he saved it until we found Dahlia; anything before that would be a distraction.

“Did you call them?” Yates, whose face was streaked with blood, demanded of Lincoln. He’d fallen after taking a blow to the back of the head, busting his nose as he hit the floor.

I had no idea how he was managing to stand upright since my vision still wasn’t fully clear, but I was nearly positive that he was so furious that nothing else would affect him. The man was bent over the computer, typing so fast that I prayed more now than ever that his obsession over Dahlia would come to aid us in this moment. I wouldn’t say I condoned tracking her, but if he was, now would be the moment to tell everyone.

Lincoln’s tone was filled with frustration. “They aren’t answering.”

They? I had to assume ‘they’ meant either the Aldridges or the Rosses.

I could tell both of the twins were caught between losing their shit and trying to keep it together. Sterling kept a cautious eye on Lincoln, who was pacing back and forth with the phone in his hand.

Sterling spoke up after looking at his phone. “Dermot just sent a message. He is gathering the rest of the family and anyone in town. Everyone is on alert, and the police have shut down all possible paths out of Ardara. We should know where they are in the next few minutes.” I was hoping that confidence wasn’t a fucking act right now.

Rolling my shoulders, I felt my vision clear a bit as I sat forward, Lincoln offering me a look. “Stratton, if you get up, I’m going to knock your ass out. You are literally bleeding, actively. Stay the fuck down.”

Fuck, was I? I looked down as I brought a hand to my nose, realizing blood was streaming from it as well as my split lip. That didn’t bother me though. What bothered me was that the blood was a stark reminder that I had failed her. I shook my head, knowing I needed to concentrate if I was going to help at all.

Suddenly, an ominous ring had me looking towards the secure line on the large desk Yates worked behind. King, who had been staring at the clock silently, walked over to the phone and answered, throwing it on speaker. I had no idea if he even had the capability to talk right now, if we were being honest.

“What is going on?” Mr. Ross’s voice was so unlike normal that it took me a moment to recognize it.

“Someone took Dahlia.” King barely got the words out, staring at the phone as if it would fix shit.

Silence reigned through the line before Mr. Ross spoke. “What do you mean someone took her?”

Yeah, I was starting to remember how the Ross family could get and why they authentically scared me, which was a feat in its own right after everything I’d been through.

“He means that someone took her,” Sterling hissed, knowing that he was going to have to explain. “She was with Yates and Stratton. Someone knocked them out and took her. They managed to shut down our security system and cameras for two full minutes while dragging her out of here. She’s been gone for thirty-five minutes.”

“Who took her?” Mr. Aldridge’s voice came onto the line, causing me to wince as I fell further out of the daze. It was possible I had a concussion, especially with how I wanted to close my eyes and possibly throw up, but Jason Aldridge was objectively terrifying, so if anything was going to shock me out of it, it was that. Honestly though, if we didn’t find Dahlia, we deserved to die.

King’s tone was clipped. “If I knew, they would be dead.”

“Got into the system,” Yates announced.

“What system?”

Yates inhaled sharply. “I have a system back home that tracks Dahlia.”

Silence greeted the announcement as Lincoln murmured ‘thank fuck.’

“How?” Mr. Ross asked.

“Mr. Aldridge,” Yates spoke directly to him, “I’m going to ask that you don’t kill me until we find Dahlia.”

There was no joking in his tone, and silence met it, void of promises.

“After the security attack in Wildberry, I implanted a microchip GPS tracker under her skin.”

Well, fuck. I’d expected a lot of shit from Yates, but that...

Those things weren’t even available to the public. God only knew what strings he’d had to pull to get a hold of the thing.

Mr. Aldridge spoke immediately. “Find her. Now. We are getting on the jet.”

The call ended as I felt surprise at Mr. Aldridge’s reaction radiate through me. Although I shouldn’t have been surprised, because Yates’s crazy was nothing compared to the panic of locating Dahlia.

Yates grew more pissed as he looked over the screen. “Stupid bastards.”

“What?” Lincoln demanded.

“They took her to the warehouse downtown.”

King stormed from the room and I stood, managing to find my footing, feeling clearer by the moment, as Sterling offered me a frustrated look.

“I’m coming,” I insisted. “I can focus on at least getting her out of there.”

No one argued with that.

As we strode through the compound, I realized fairly quickly that almost the entire ‘family’ was here, and not the ones that you saw on the holidays. No, outside of the normal ‘security’ that the Rosses hired, who were essentially mercenaries, here in Ardara they had an entire militia of people who were part of this bullshit. All of it should have bothered me, but instead I got into the car with both Yates and Dermot, who appeared out of nowhere, the other three taking a second car as we began to speed off of the property. A motorcade of nearly ten cars followed behind us, no doubt planning to surround the building on all sides once we arrived.

“It’s been nearly forty minutes,” Dermot murmured, looking down at his watch. I would have expected him to be furious or angry, but instead he seemed almost clinical and calm. Much like Yates, I had a feeling that he felt more in his element handling this shit. I knew I felt more comfortable when I was fighting rather than trying to explain to my angel how I felt about her. Although, the second was far more rewarding.

“It takes seven minutes to get there,” Dermot added.

“Dahlia is fine,” Yates bit out, his eyes narrowing on the screen he held. “I can’t believe anything else or I’ll lose it.”

I had to believe that as well so I wouldn’t fall into the darkness. The one that I would never recover from. One that I wouldn’t want to recover from. What was the point without her? Dahlia had been keeping the shadows at bay since my parents died, and I needed her light like an addict needed their next fix.

“You know who is doing this, right?” Yates asked. “At least it’s my most likely guess.”

Dermot looked at Yates. “Yeah, I put it together.”

“Who?” I was already feeling sharper, and I took a big inhale, trying to clear the ringing from my head. I could see a doctor after this; first I needed to find her.

“My father,” Dermot stated coolly, seeming to be reserving his anger for when we got there. The only sign of his distress was the way he tapped his foot.

“You have to keep a cool head,” Yates instructed before looking at me as well. “I need you both focused on getting to Dahlia. And Dermot, you have to keep it together until she’s completely safe—I won’t be able to stop King alone.”

“I won’t be able to either,” Dermot murmured. “I will focus on her safety with Stratton, but I can’t guarantee that she won’t see it, Yates.”

My jaw clenched at that, not wanting any of this to touch my angel...but it was too late for that. My guilt intensified. Maintaining her safety had been my obsession for so long in school, it felt like a natural part of me, like breathing.

I was such a goddamn creep. What the hell was wrong with me? I ran a hand over the back of my neck as I trailed silently behind Dahlia. She hummed softly, going towards the large outdoor classroom on the school grounds.

It wasn’t used very often, but considering what a beautiful day it was, it didn’t surprise me. Honestly, it was a nice break from lurking around every hallway in the school. My days doing this were numbered—we only had a week left.

I wanted so badly to enjoy the day with her, to run my hands through her thick, dark hair that seemed almost lit up with auburn highlights. My eyes trailed her long legs and the skirt that covered them, making me uncomfortably hard.

It had been years of this torture, protecting her silently and praying that I would figure out a way to feel worthy of her, to

be friends with her again. Until then, I would watch from a distance.

A relieved breath left my lips when she reached the entrance to the gardens for the classroom. The stupid noise caused her to look back, her green eyes lighting up with happiness.

“Stratton.” Her smile was so soft and beautiful.

“Hey,” I offered, my body tense as I pretended like I hadn’t been creepily following her.

“What are you doing?” she asked curiously, her eyes holding no caution, which made me think she hadn’t known I had been following her.

“I was out here earlier and I thought I had dropped something,” I reasoned, hating how easily the lies came. Her eyes dimmed slightly as she nodded.

“I hope you find it,” she offered sweetly and then added, “I think the guys and I may be having a bonfire tonight, are you interested in coming?”

I hated that her expression looked resigned.

I grunted, “I can’t.”

Her eyes shaded with sadness. Sadness that I’d caused. “I get it, you probably have fun Friday night plans. Just know you are always welcome.”

Then she turned and walked into the classroom, and I was left standing there feeling like the worst type of scum. I just had to remind myself...

I wouldn’t be welcome if they knew my secret.

I had thought Dahlia would be safe within the gates of Wildberry Lane. Or here—*especially* here. Now I knew the truth though. Dahlia would never be safe. Someone would always want her, like a priceless treasure, and I would have to be her personal shield the minute I got her back in my arms. I would have to take care of her so well that she forgot that there

were others outside of us, that anyone would ever dare to hurt her.

Dahlia was ‘perfection’ incarnate. Not just in the way she spoke, acted, or looked, but in the way she loved. She gave everything, surrendering herself to me with trust, and I planned on showing her how much she wouldn’t regret that.

When Dahlia had given herself to me completely, my soul had bonded to hers in a fundamental way. I had already been ruined for life...but now I wasn’t ruined. *I was complete.* I hoped she still wanted me around after this, because I would never leave her be. I would never leave her side.

I would work my entire life to be worthy of my angel.

As we turned onto the street the warehouse was on, a darkness rose up inside of me, knowing that the pavement would soon be painted in blood as a fucking sacrifice to my angel. My Dahlia.

Chapter Two

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

Fight. Flight. Freeze.

You never truly know how you will react in that singular second of terror, until you actually experience it. I could have expected ‘flight,’ although considering how I was tied up, that hadn’t been a possibility from the start. More so though, I had expected ‘freeze.’ That was usually what happened when I was scared—I froze.

Not this time though.

I’d fought, and because of my decision, my entire body pulsed in pain from the hard grip of the men that had dragged me screaming from the bedroom. The image of Yates on the floor bleeding and Stratton knocking a needle from one of their hands before falling to the ground on his knees, a solid hit to the face rendering him unconscious, was burned into my memory. I don’t think I would ever be able to get the image out of my mind.

I certainly would never be able to forget the pure panic I’d felt. I had tried so hard to surge forward, wanting to get to them...but then everything went dark, a cloth stuffed in my mouth and a bag over my head. It had been terrifying, and that’s why I had thought for sure I would freeze up. Instead, something inside me snapped.

The idea that two of the six men I loved—the men who to me were larger than life—being laid out lit a fire in me to not only fight but survive to get to them. It didn’t matter what they had planned for me, and it didn’t matter that I was in danger. I

just started to kick, hit, and scratch, hoping like hell that the grunts I kept hearing meant they were hurting. I had hoped they would let me go, but I should have known that was out of the realm of possibility. Curses surrounded me as I tried to spit out the cloth from my mouth and scream, my breathing turning fast and shallow as I tried to not hyperventilate. Yet no matter how much I fought, how much I tried... I didn't stand a chance against that many men.

How could I be this useless? This defenseless? A surge of frustration toppled over me as panic like I'd never experienced before hit me. What if I had been with our kids and something like this had happened? We didn't even have kids, but the idea of not being able to defend them made me sick to my stomach.

Never again.

I would never again feel as helpless as I did now, sitting in a cold, drafty, seemingly empty room, with a bag over my head that only allowed me to see the faint outline of shapes around me. I was chained against some type of grate, and the floor beneath me was cold and wet. I tried to pull away from the wall, the chains biting into my wrists and tearing the skin, causing me to hiss. The sound echoed through the room, and I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride at the pain in my body, specifically my stomach and ribs.

That had been the only way they'd been able to get me in the car to begin with.

After they'd landed a solid punch to my stomach, I had curled in on myself, being tossed onto a hard floor that was damp and smelled like blood. I had barely caught my breath, my eyes burning with tears, before someone landed a sharp kick to my ribs. It had rendered me breathless, the horrible pain and sudden trouble inhaling making me pray that I hadn't broken a rib or punctured a lung. I thought at the time that had been my biggest issue.

Now though? Considering the strong smell of blood and the wet, clumpy floor underneath me, I had a feeling my problems were much larger than a potential rib issue and breathing pain. Not just violence, either—no, there was

another voice that told me I needed to very much worry about the men who had kidnapped me and what they had planned. A fuzzy memory of the ride here came to me...

I laid face down on the floor, someone's foot pressed to the middle of my back to keep me down. Not that they had to worry—I was absolutely useless right now, the pain overwhelming as a rumble shook the surface I was pressed to. I needed to stay conscious, I knew that, but everything hurt so much, and my eyes felt puffy.

"You almost ruined everything," a voice said next to my ear, the other men in the truck silent. Despite not being able to see, I could tell they were there. The voice continued, "You made a mistake crossing me, Dahlia Aldridge."

Then he was gone, and moments later, someone else was grabbing my jaw. I couldn't see them, the darkness of the car sheltering them in shadows. I'm not positive I wanted to know who I was coming face to face with. I wasn't positive that I wanted to see the person who thought they were powerful enough to go against my boys.

"I wanted this to go differently." His accented voice tugged at a memory, making me know that somewhere in my non-pain-addled brain, I knew who this person was. He continued, "But instead you had them put a hit out on me. Just remember, I gave you an option, and instead I had to pull you from their estate. Forcibly. In some ways, this is so much fucking sweeter, stealing your from their beds in just a damn robe. You probably still have his cum inside of you, you little whore."

I whimpered as a hand slid up my leg to push the robe up near my butt, my breathing growing rough and panicked.

The first voice spoke up in a firm tone. "Do not touch her, boy. I'll have you shot dead."

The hand froze as the man made a sound of disgust before leaning down. "We aren't done here. We will never be done. Understand?"

A hit came to my side from his boot as he stood, and everything went dark again...

Suddenly, a sound yanked me from my memories as a chill of terror went up my spine. I scrambled in my head to think back on those two voices, both of which felt extremely familiar. *Think, Dahlia, think.* Unfortunately, I knew my time was limited and that I would find out soon enough who exactly had thought this was a good idea.

I needed to be prepared to stall them, to keep them occupied.

If there was one thing that I knew, a truth that was cemented in my soul, it was that my boys would find me. They would come for me. Rationally, I knew I should have been freaked out by the level of their ‘find me’ ability, but instead it left me with a sense of peace and confidence.

Even now, like a sixth sense, I could feel their shadows reaching out to me. That knowledge left me feeling far more calm as I prepared myself for the part I had to play in this. I was going to help out the only way I could—by staying strong and delaying whatever plan my captors had while figuring out what the hell was going on.

I could almost feel myself naturally disassociating from this trauma-filled situation, the sharpness of the base need to just survive winning over. I had no doubt that later this would be a problem, but I couldn’t afford to be distracted. I had a feeling that I wasn’t the only one in danger, and I would be damned if my boys got hurt. We were right on the edge of getting everything, and I wouldn’t lose it now.

“Where is our little prisoner?” a voice sang as footsteps echoed through the space, my pulse hyping up as I tried to remain perfectly still.

Suddenly, the bag over my head was ripped off violently, the bright, clinical lights overhead thrown on all at once. I gasped as I lost my equilibrium and fell over, crying out as the wet cement caused a jolt of pain to go through my shoulder. A

hand dragged me up by my elbow, and I heard a chair scraping against the floor, causing me to focus not on the guard holding my arm hostage, but instead on the man now sitting in front of me. My eyes fully adjusted, and I felt fury reign inside of me.

I should have expected this.

“You don’t look surprised, Dahlia,” Dermot’s father mused, lighting a cigarette as his gaze ran over me. I looked down, feeling vulnerable, suddenly thankful that I was wearing such an oversized robe that covered most of me... despite its ability to absorb the blood on the floor. At least it was thick enough that it hadn’t soaked through... I tried to not gag as I realized that those chunks I had felt before on the floor were very much organic matter. As in, they used to belong inside someone’s body and now they were millimeters away from mine. I inhaled sharply and narrowed my eyes on the man.

“Don’t bother with the brave act,” he said, shaking his head. “I know all about you. More than you probably realize. I know that your idiotic parents and even my own nephew have played a part in sheltering you to the point that it renders you useless in our world. The blood alone is probably enough to horrify you, isn’t it? You aren’t used to any of this.”

“Was that your goal?” I voiced, my voice raw from screaming.

“No,” he chuckled, a malicious glint in his gaze. “Unfortunately, we didn’t get a chance to clean up before you arrived. I know it’s hard to believe, but the world doesn’t revolve around you. After all, we run a criminal enterprise here.” He sounded so fucking proud of it, but at the same time, there was a bitterness to his tone.

I couldn’t help the words that came out of my mouth next. “No, *you* don’t run anything.”

When he lunged forward, I expected the slap, and it hurt as much as you would assume coming from a grown man. I felt my eyes water, a small whimper nearly breaking from my lips, but I kept my chin up and looked back at him. I needed to not

goad him, but there was something about this man that did almost the exact opposite of scare me.

He made me...furious. Every time I looked in his face, I saw the resemblance to Dermot, and it reminded me, starkly, of what he'd done to his own son. Of how he treated him.

"If you're disrespectful again, I will bring the boy in here and you can deal with him," Patrick Ross said coolly. Instantly, my entire body tensed, and a grin grew on his face.

"Ah, scares you, doesn't it? Good. That should. Although, I heard you are getting fucked by six men, including my own son, so maybe it's not fear. Maybe that's what you're into."

"No." I swallowed, feeling anger warm my chest and push away the fear of what was coming next.

His eyes darkened as a look of annoyance crossed his features. "I know it's not a kink. I am well aware that all of those boys are obsessive over you...which serves my purposes. You see, Dahlia, as much as I love having you here, I am far more interested in bringing all of them to their knees, and you are going to help me do that."

Never.

I kept my mouth shut as he chuckled softly and looked down at his watch. "I would say we have maybe thirty minutes, which gives us more than enough time to talk."

"Talk about what?" I demanded.

He tilted his head. "I've been curious—you were brought to the compound, but are you really aware of what it is your boys and our family do?"

"Yes."

"Liar." He motioned and the room darkened slightly, a projector starting up and making me jump. I kept my gaze on him, unfortunately, as he walked over and crouched down, turning my chin so I had to look at the screen. My eyes widened at what I was seeing.

A large basement.

A man tied to a chair... No, not a man. Ian's brother, George.

I watched as Kingston and Dermot appeared in the room, Lincoln and Stratton both looking up to greet them. George was unconscious, completely unaware of what I was almost positive was about to be his demise. Oddly enough, despite knowing instinctively what was going to happen, I couldn't stop looking. I *wanted* to look. I wanted to face the reality of what my boys were capable of. I knew it was a darkness that I would never be able to unsee...but I also knew that they did it because they truly thought it was the right thing to do.

I tilted my head, watching as Dermot threw an icy bucket of water onto George, who immediately began freaking out as he was yanked into consciousness. I could hear their voices faintly, but I wasn't focused on that. Instead I was focused on the way that they were talking to him, interrogating him, and the true anger that was on all of their faces, along with something so much more than that...

Fear?

I could see the fear there, but it wasn't for George. No, it was because of Ian. I knew that was what they were questioning him about. Something about Ian really upset my boys, and I had to assume it was because of me. I had to assume it was the threat he posed.

I inhaled, realizing that all of this was...for me. It had never been so clear in my twisted brain that they loved me, and instead of finding fault in their actions, I felt a rightness settle in my bones.

I barely blinked as King came up behind George and pinned his hand to the arm of the chair with a dagger, his screams filling the space. I watched every ounce of pain flash across George's face and the way King seemed to relish in it before he buried another one in his other hand. I could see sweat and blood running over George's skin and soaking his clothes.

I saw him give in when the pain finally became too much, shouting something about Ian trying to find me. Those words

barely registered as I watched, absolutely fascinated, with the way King's face turned furious at how he described me.

That was when it turned really bloody.

I couldn't even tell you the tools they used, Lincoln and Kingston turning into different men than the ones I knew. Stratton didn't partake, but I could see the anger in his eyes, and the cold fury I saw when he fought seemed ten times more present. I swallowed, far more fascinated by them than George

"Do you see the nightmares you let into your bed?" Patrick chuckled, the screen blanking out before he went to go sit back in his chair.

I turned towards him as the lights rose back and answered honestly, "All I see are the men who love me trying to protect me."

Shock crossed his face before he let out a bark of laughter. "I am starting to understand why they thought you could handle this, Dahlia. That's fine, little girl—if you think you can handle that, then I will make sure you are exposed to everything, including when I tear your men limb from limb. Then maybe I will keep you by my side. How does that sound?"

I didn't answer. I knew it was a bad idea.

"Before all of that, though, I have something else we need to handle now that they have left the compound."

Standing up, he came closer to me and pulled my head to the side by my hair. My eyes widened at the scalpel one of the guards handed him. *Oh, heck no.* I started to tug away from him, not bothering to ask what he was doing, but he gripped my hair harder and looked me right in the eye.

"Stay still and this will be nearly painless."

I knew I didn't have a choice with how the guards were holding me, and I prayed to god that he meant it when he said he didn't want to kill me. One wrong move with that thing and I was gone.

Carefully, he used his thumb to press into the soft tissue between my neck and shoulder before letting out an amused sound. I let out a hiss at the sharp way he drew the edge down my skin, slicing it open as I began to sweat, my body going into full shock, no doubt. But all of that was calmed by the simple action of him removing a small, grain-like digital device from my skin. My mouth opened as I met his gaze, and I saw authentic amusement flash across it.

“Oh you can’t be that naive, can you? You have had this on you for at least a few days, but I am guessing they didn’t tell you?” he mused. “Ah, well, better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, right?”

I swallowed, knowing instantly that it was Yates who had put it there. I had no idea how, but it was him without a doubt...and it didn’t bother me nearly as much as it should have. It warranted a talk, for sure, because what the heck? Yet, as much as it caused conflict in me, I also hoped like hell it was helping them get here faster.

I hissed as he placed a bandage on the wound near the back of my neck and patted it roughly, as if impressed with his work.

Standing up, he motioned for the guards to move closer to me, my eyes darting between them as they kept their gazes forward. Patrick’s voice was even and void of emotion as he flicked the tracker on the ground. “I am letting the boy in here; do not let him touch her. I don’t trust him, and I would hate to ruin my relationship with his father after all this hard work.”

Ian. That was who the ‘boy’ was. The voice was so recognizable in my head now.

There was a bit of fear associated with Ian—well, far more than a bit—but I knew that Dermot’s father meant what he was saying and that I could at least be promised that Ian wouldn’t lay a finger on me. I could deal with everything else... probably. My eyes darted up to the security guards as I wondered what it would take to convince them to let me out of here. Most likely a price I wasn’t willing to pay.

When the door opened, I felt hatred fill my chest. I didn't hate easily, but everything about him had me feeling and thinking things that would normally make me think I was insane. I wanted him gone. I never wanted to see him again, and I didn't care what I had to do to make that happen.

The smile Ian offered me was filled with darkness and showed me just how truly untouchable he viewed himself to be. How on earth had he gotten involved in this? Dermot's father was working with Ian's father? Why?

"I bet this wasn't where you expected to find yourself," he mused, not bothering to take a seat and instead walking over and crouching down, his eyes running over me in a way that made me feel completely naked. Cold and naked. Vulnerable.

"No, but this is where I would expect to find you," I answered honestly.

His grin was authentic. "I'll take that as a compliment."

He shouldn't.

"What do you want, Ian?"

"You," he leveled as his eyes flashed with manic light. "You know, I used to think that you were just some silly trust fund girl...but then I noticed how much attention Kingston and the others were paying you, and I realized that you had to be something of value. After all, they don't exactly think anyone else is good enough for them."

My eyes widened. "You want me because...King wants me?"

His lips tilted. "Well, that was how it started, and every time they told me to stay away from you, I realized just how much of a weakness you were to them. I don't want you because they want you, I want you because I know it would fucking kill them. I know it would destroy King to see you with me, and I want nothing more than to make him suffer."

"Why?" My voice was sharp and demanding. I should have acted less interested because I could tell it fueled his amusement, but I didn't care at this point.

His eyes darkened. “Besides him most likely killing my brother?”

“You don’t know he’s dead,” I whispered.

“If he isn’t, he will be when I find him. Fucking snitch.”

“What is wrong with you?” I demanded, my voice filled with horror.

“So much,” he chuckled, seeming to enjoy my question. “But I have a better one—what is wrong with you, Dahlia? What happened to you? What in your life was so bad that you willingly let this in? Or is it your street side showing? After all, I was informed you were a homeless brat picked up by Mommy and Daddy at a food kitchen, right? Maybe there is a sick part of you that you didn’t even realize existed.”

I refused to give him an answer because honestly...I wasn’t sure.

“Why? Why are you doing any of this? If not about your brother.”

“Besides wanting to fuck you? And tie your line to mine forcibly?”

Oh, I didn’t like that at all. Christ.

“The Ross family has been slowly destroying my family’s assets. We are going to be nothing in a few years. It hasn’t been an outright battle, but they are the reason everything has fallen apart,” he growled, looking suddenly furious. “Torin Ross is the reason my mom killed herself. Did you know that?”

My mouth dried up. King’s father... “What?”

“Yep.” He sighed, almost dramatically. “She found out my dad was losing millions, and she just...offed herself. Bitch was already dealing with a lot, so I am positive that she wanted a way out. After all, how do you live with yourself, being married to a man that forced you into a situation where you had to stay, especially if there is no money?”

I had to keep him talking. “Forced?”

“Yes. My father raped my mother, and ten months later she brought her ‘pride and joy’ into the world,” he stated casually, almost bored. “I thought it was horrible until I realized that she had no choice but to stay with him because her own family didn’t want her. So I suppose if the ends justify the means...”

“You are so fucked up.” My voice was hoarse.

Ian offered me a sick grin. “And I am going to make sure that you are as messed up as me. I plan on breaking you in front of them and then keeping you by my side. At least you can serve a purpose then.” The gore on the screen didn’t compare to the picture that he was painting for me.

“I. Will. Never. Be. With. You.” My words were calm and serious as anger filled his gaze.

“You are living in a fantasy if you think that,” he snapped before relaxing once again, “but I suppose that has been your entire life, hasn’t it? One fantasy after another.”

I couldn’t help my final question.

“Why are the Rosses after you?” I had to know. It was the only question left; everything else about him being part of this was making far too much sense.

Ian stood up and walked backwards a step, his gaze growing darker. “You think my mother was my father’s first try? His first attempt at starting a more prestigious line? No, Dahlia. I think you will find Haven Ross is intimately aware of my father’s...preferences.”

I think I saw red for a second as I realized what he was saying. Ian saw the realization on my face and barked out a laugh at the fury and horror there. “If only he had knocked the bitch up, then King and I could be at least half-brothers. Imagine that.”

I couldn’t imagine anything, anger running over my skin like live wire.

No one hurt my family.

“Just know, Dahlia, that I will take pleasure in breaking your fantasy apart.”

I had no doubt. It wouldn't come to that though.

"Ian," I called out as he continued to walk back towards the door.

"What?" He looked over his shoulder with disinterest.

"You won't survive this."

His face paled before he slammed the door, a sense of satisfaction running through me at his obvious fear. The picture he painted was scary, but I couldn't believe it would come to that. No, my boys would come find me, and he would die.

Before I had a chance to try to talk to the guards, the door opened and Dermot's father stood there. "Bring her. It's time for the real fun."

Chapter Three

DERMOT ROSS

“Two minutes out.”

Yates’s statement had me nodding as I adjusted my bulletproof vest and made sure my firearms were all loaded and in their correct places. I didn’t even consider if maybe I was going overboard because the only thing I could focus on was getting Dahlia out of my father’s hands, no matter the means or way.

I also knew that he had something up his sleeve, because the bastard may be a piece of shit, but he was smart—really smart—and I didn’t believe for a second this was going to be as easy as walking into the warehouse to get her.

“He is going to try something,” I warned Yates and the others, the phone between Stratton and me placed on speaker, making me know King and the twins were listening. “He wants us here. But I don’t know why, and I don’t know how we want to play this.”

“We get in there and find her, that is all that matters—”

I cut Yates off, trying to keep a clear head despite hating the situation we were in. Hating the danger Dahlia was in and all the goddamn unknowns. “It won’t be all that matters if he detonates an explosive and kills us before we even get in the door.”

If my father put Dahlia anywhere near an explosive, I would gut him. I would spill his internal organs and then slit his throat. If he actually hurt her, in any way, or broke her skin, I would...

I blinked that thought away. I couldn't afford to go down that path right now. Any sensibility and logic would fly out the window.

Silence filled both our car and the other end of the line, but I didn't try to comfort them, needing to stay focused for Dahlia's sake and to keep my cousin from slaughtering everyone, including our team. I swallowed down my thoughts and continued, "Let's go in, but I would highly suggest that we have teams come in from all sides to do sweeps for explosives."

"Fuck," Stratton murmured, his gaze much clearer than before, enough so that I felt comfortable bringing him in the building. Honestly, I was almost damn positive the bastard had a head injury, but he was keeping it together, and while I wouldn't put a gun in his hand, I knew he would be helpful in getting Dahlia out.

As we pulled up to the warehouse, a cold calm ran over my skin as I gripped the steel of my favorite firearm. It was comfortable, and I knew without a doubt that this would be the easy part for me. *Killing had always come easily to me.* There was a lot I struggled with, but not that.

In that moment, everything became crystal clear as I realized that every bit of training had been for this, for the ability to protect Dahlia. To save her from the monsters that wanted to rip her away from us.

I threw open the door as the car came to a stop, our teams immediately surrounding the building on all sides. I didn't bother waiting for a goddamn greeting party as I gave the signal for one of them to bust in the front door. I couldn't help the smile that slipped onto my face as we were immediately met with the sound of gunfire. I stalked forward, the others following, as I swept my gaze over the massacre that was taking place, body after body jolting at the impact of bullets from our men. I didn't stop to consider if they deserved it or not. They were here, so they deserved it.

We easily cleared out the first room. It wasn't surprising, considering our numbers.

“Sweep the building and keep the perimeter in check,” I demanded sharply as I finally met Kingston’s gaze, his eyes narrowed on the two diverging hallways ahead. My cousin never went silent, and when he did, it wasn’t a good thing. “King, I need you fucking focused.”

The look he offered me was almost chilling. “I’m focused on what we need to do.”

Kill. He meant killing. That was about it.

No need to argue. “Let’s find her. Split up.”

Our men started sweeping through back hallways and stairs before going room to room, Yates and the twins going left as Stratton and Kingston followed me to the right down a long hall. Almost immediately, we were met with men coming out of the doors to our left and right.

I didn’t think, I just shot. I mowed down several lines of people, shells of bullets falling to the floor, as Stratton checked each room we passed, making sure they were actually empty. King walked ahead and busted into one of the doors, the sound of gunfire making me know he’d found men. When I got there, the gunfire silenced, and I found him standing over one of the bodies, splattered with blood.

“King, he’s dead.” My voice was even, because I don’t think he realized that he had just shot the man to the point that his face was disfigured.

King nodded towards the eye patch on the floor. “Remember when I said I would take his other eye for talking about her? I did.”

Because he had no face left.

Rather than responding, I simply nodded towards the hall. Kingston didn’t argue, stepping back into the hallway as Stratton offered us a signal that the final rooms to each side were empty. I strode ahead, knowing that there was only one room left to focus on.

When I used my shoulder to bust into the interrogation and torture room up ahead, silence greeted us...but more importantly, the smell of fresh blood. I tried to not let that red

haze slip over me as more gunfire went off behind me. Instead, I walked fully into the room, turning on the lights to find it not only empty, completely fucking absent of our girl...but the floors covered in blood and chunks of body parts.

Everything went cold. *That wasn't her blood.* I wouldn't believe it.

Stratton cursed and slammed a fist against the wall, the concrete breaking as he strode ahead. My heart beat unevenly, not understanding how this was possible. When Stratton picked up a piece of paper on the table and read it, his face turned white. I growled and grabbed it, not processing exactly what I was seeing at first.

Dahlia was tied up, a bag over her head, as she laid in a truck bed with her entire body covered in a bloodied robe. I couldn't see the extent of her injuries, and a growl built in my throat, knowing that this had been his plan all along.

"How the fuck is this possible?" I demanded of Yates as he strode in, faltering for a minute as he examined the room, a sliver of fear entering his gaze. I had never seen that before, and it concerned me to an extent I didn't want to examine.

"It isn't. The tracker is showing that she is here."

"He's playing us," I bit out.

Kingston knelt to the floor, dipping his fingers in the pool of blood. "This isn't her blood."

"What?" Lincoln demanded.

"This is not her fucking blood. It's too old." King then picked something up as Yates appeared nearly right in front of him, examining it. I blinked in surprise as Yates went completely still, looking like he was about to tip right over into insanity.

"There's another note," Sterling called out, he and Stratton examining a paper that had been soaking in blood.

"Smile for the explosives."

Motherfucker.

Before we had a chance to further search for clues on where she'd been taken, we were sprinting through the room and down the hall. The first of the charges started rocking the building from the outside in, the walls and ceilings crumbling. Luckily, Lincoln had grabbed Yates from hesitating in the room, because seconds after we left it, it went up in an inferno. Whatever evidence was in there was fucking gone now, and I felt like I couldn't breathe, even when we made it outside and all of us got back into our cars. I could tell we were missing men, but that was the risk of this life.

That was the danger of being under Ross protection.

I looked back as the entire building exploded, top-down, and immediately moved my mind to finding Dahlia. To finding my baby girl.

"He wants us to chase, that's why he left the photo," I spit out. "I have no idea if he expected us to die or not, but he is leading us on a fucking chase."

"He cut the tracker out of her?" Stratton said the words that I had been avoiding thinking about.

"King." I looked over at my cousin, his gun in his hand and pointed at the floorboard, his eyes on the skies above through the sunroof.

"Helicopter. I heard it when we were driving here, but I thought I was imagining shit."

I sorted through my head as I tried to think of where the fuck my father would be taking her—

"The cliffside."

"What?" Sterling demanded.

"It's the last place I went with my mother before she left," I grit out. "He hates that place, and he would find it fucking hilarious to bring her there."

I went with my gut instinct and shouted an order to the driver to immediately speed there. I didn't waste time trying to explain it to them and instead pulled out additional ammunition, making sure everyone reloaded.

Just get to Dahlia. I had to complete this mission and get to her. Then...well, then I could let myself feel all the shit inside of me.

Then King's phone rang. He immediately picked up the call.

“Good to know you survived.” My father's voice had me nearly tipping over into the abyss. “Although I cannot say the same about your girl. I have her in such a precarious position—imagine it, a step away from falling off the cliffside, only safe in Ian's arms. I bet both of those things bother you, don't they? I'm sure my son won't be pleased to have his girlfriend die in the same place as his mother. Still, at least come see her before I put a bullet in the center of her head. Then I can do the same to you.”

I closed my eyes, my ears ringing as I considered his words. I had always wondered. I had always fucking wondered if she'd really run away, because I hadn't mourned her like an absent parent—I had mourned her as if she were dead. Had he ever told me she'd run away? Or had he just said she was gone?

My father had killed my mother, and now he was going to kill Dahlia the same way.

“I have to kill him.”

The words were ones I had thought about for some time. It wasn't a 'want' or 'desire.' No, I had to be the one to kill him, and I knew no one would fucking argue the point, especially after what he had just admitted.

When we arrived, parking our motorcade along the dirt road, our team kept a perimeter as the six of us walked forward, knowing that we couldn't bring all of them or else he could act rashly. As we walked up the hill and finally came to level ground, the wind and icy splatters of ocean water cold against my skin, I felt everything come to an absolute halt.

I had felt fear in my life, but not like this. This had the potential to break me.

Ian had Dahlia by her hair, his other hand restraining her hands, right on the edge of the cliff. She was shivering, her face red and lips blue, the deep splotches of color on the robe making me worry how much blood she was losing. My father stood nearby looking supremely confident, grinning at our arrival and motioning to the two of them as if it was a goddamn show.

“He’s way too confident for being cornered,” Yates bit out.

As we grew closer, I realized that Dahlia had rivets of tears down her face, but her eyes were dark with determination instead of fear. When she looked at all of us, relief filled her gaze, and I could see that she thought something had happened to us. Had he told her we’d been hurt? Had he made her doubt we’d come?

Death itself wouldn’t stop me from saving Dahlia.

When her gaze finally met mine, I saw the trust there, and it nearly had me feeling a euphoric sense of relief. Her love and trust were constant, the shadows she could see in us meaning nothing to her in comparison. She had known. She had never doubted us, and it was like the final snap I needed to pull everything into place.

I loved Dahlia Aldridge, and in order to protect her, I knew what I needed to do.

“So good of you to join us, boys. I figured this would be something you would want to see.”

I didn’t ask, and he didn’t give us time.

When he raised a gun, smiling largely and pointing it towards Dahlia, I didn’t think twice. My gun went up, my finger went down on the trigger, and before my father could even go to shoot, I made a decision.

I killed the bastard.

Chapter Four

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

They came. They came for me.

Of course they had. Instant relief filled my system the moment I saw them.

I should have still been scared. Rationally, I knew that, especially since they were blood-splattered and strapped with more weapons than I even knew existed. But the dark outlines of my men on the rainy, windy, moonlit cliffside had me only feeling relief.

Though that emotion was quickly replaced by the anger that surged through me, focused on Ian and the hold he had on my hair. I didn't want his touch, I wanted them. Now.

Patrick's grin only grew upon seeing them walk towards us. There was something wrong here. Suddenly, the need to protect them overwhelmed me. I wanted to scream for them to run, to get out of here before they could get hurt.

Why had he told me they'd been injured in the explosion?

Why had he told me some of them may have even been killed?

I should have never even let those words permeate my thoughts, because I had a feeling that the only people who had been killed were the ones standing in their way. I almost smiled, feeling a high run through me at their mere presence. I was almost positive that I'd lost my sanity along with my ability to stand upright on my own a bit ago...but I would keep going. I would stay strong until we were safe.

The ocean wind was making my face raw, and my eyes stung from the saltwater. I shivered, lacking body heat and not wanting to take any from Ian. I didn't want my men to see any of that though. I wanted them to see that I had never doubted them. That I would never doubt them.

My stomach rolled as I nearly gasped in pain, my breathing uneven and coming in pants. Dizziness spiraled through me as Ian's grip on my hair hardened. I was in shock. At least I thought I was... I'd never been in a position like this before.

My state didn't stop me from looking over them greedily, though. I first looked towards Lincoln, my eyes running over the t-shirt that was plastered to his chest by the winds ripping off the ocean along the cliffside. His azure eyes were black and solely focused on Ian's grip on my hair.

I could nearly see the restraint it was taking him to not walk towards us, and there was a blaze underneath his skin that was almost explosive. I didn't want to defuse Lincoln, though—I wanted to experience it fully. Experience *him* fully.

When his gaze didn't meet my own, my eyes darted towards Sterling to find him already looking at me, the expression on his face causing my eyes to sting with tears. Blood ran down the left side of his face, making me wonder how badly he was injured. It looked like someone had tried to attack him. His shirt was torn in places along the sleeve, a vest strapped across his chest like the others. Unlike Lincoln, though, Sterling had a gun out, and seeing him with a weapon did something to me. It was so different from how I was used to seeing him, and instead of being uncomfortable with it, I fought the urge to tug out of Ian's hard hold to go to him, even if it hurt.

It would be worth it.

Stratton shifted next to him, and when my gaze snapped to him, a frustrated almost-whine built in my throat. His face was bruised and covered in blood, his eyes darting between Patrick and where Ian held me on the edge of the cliff. I could see the anger simmering underneath his skin like a dangerous storm,

and there was something noticeably different with him. I would accept it, no matter what it was, because the relief I felt at seeing him alive was like nothing I had ever felt before.

Yates. Yates was alive too. Thank god. My perfect stalker was fully focused on Patrick, his gun trained on the man, looking completely cool and calm. His white hair was painted in what appeared to be dust, possibly from the warehouse explosion, and his face was spotted with dried blood. None of that took away from the deadly control he seemed to have, standing there with a lethality that reminded me of a bullet. I wanted him to look at me so I could get another rush of euphoric relief at knowing he was okay.

I also knew that he wouldn't be focused if he did. Yates was always focused on me...but this would be different. I knew he would lose it if he really concentrated on the state I was in right now.

I swallowed and looked towards King, my entire body freezing up. I had witnessed so many versions of King throughout the years, and I could say without a doubt that this version of him terrified me. It wasn't because he was covered in blood. It wasn't because of the gun he carried. No, it was because his face was absolutely void of emotion.

Nothing. Literally nothing. His eyes were cold and dark despite being wholly fixed on me, his chilling expression causing my skin to break out into shivers. My pulse hitched, and I was hit with the sudden urge to run from him. Never in my life had I felt that way about King, but every base instinct was warning me that this was a predator we were not equipped to handle.

But that was the thing—I didn't want to handle or fight King, I wanted to love him. That concept blocked out any other instinct, and my love for him rose above it all. My love for all of them had my eyes watering as I refused to break his stare, practically begging him to come back to me. After a long second, I saw a small crack in the void, and it was all I needed to know that my King was still there. That he still needed me.

But he needed to be the scary version of himself in this moment, and the minute I offered him a small look of understanding, everything was sealed back up.

I tried to tug out of Ian's hold, wanting to be back with them, to be back home, and when Ian yanked me back, King released a sound that didn't seem possible for a human to make.

"So good of you to join us, boys. I figured this would be something you would want to see." Patrick's voice pulled me from the moment as I slowly moved my gaze from Kingston to Dermot, who was solely focused on his father.

I hadn't known Dermot for very long, despite the intensity of my emotions for him, but everything about this posture told me that he was in his element. His face was stoic, but his gaze was dancing with a determined inferno that spoke to violence and bloodshed.

No one asked what Dermot's father meant.

I should have expected what happened next. The man raised a gun and pointed it right towards me, the barrel of the weapon causing my knees to feel weak.

I was going to die.

I was going to die.

And the only thing I could think about was how I hadn't been able to tell each of them, each of my men, that I loved them. I had wanted them for so long and would always want them, even past this life.

Our love wasn't one that ended with death.

Our type of love was everlasting and immortal.

If having a gun trained on me meant they would get out of this safely, then I'd surrender to it willingly. I closed my eyes, giving into the moment, as the sound of a gun going off vibrated the air.

Then a solid thunk had my eyes opening in surprise, shocked there was no pain outside of Ian's grip on my hair and

wrists. My gaze focused on Dermot, who was standing over his very dead father.

Holy hell. Dermot had killed his father.

I was so damn surprised that when Lincoln tried to surge towards Ian, I didn't have time to warn him. A cold barrel touched my temple as Ian stepped back with me, forcing me to go up on my toes so my heels didn't hang off the edge. My breathing was stilted, my ears filled with ocean waves and wind, so it took me a moment to get my bearings again. The world was spinning around me.

"Ian, you've lost."

I barely recognized Dermot's voice, and I tried to turn to see him, but the ass holding me only pressed the gun harder against me, causing me to let out a whimper. Ian's chuckle was threaded with panic as he spoke loudly over the wind. "That's where you're wrong, Dermot. If you try to touch me, she's not only getting a bullet through the head, but she's going to find her grave at the bottom of this cliff."

I immediately felt a shift in the energy of the space, everyone hearing the truth in his words, and I realized that if I didn't do anything, this could—and would—go south. Then my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a helicopter in the distance, the tightness in my chest intensifying as I caught the expressions on the guys' faces.

"Back up, now," Ian demanded. "I'm getting out of here with or without her."

I inhaled sharply, trying to figure out how to handle this, how to handle him. An idea came to me as I felt a calm surface through my consciousness, telling me that this was the only option.

"Ian?" I asked softly yet clearly.

"What?" he demanded.

"Is the helicopter going to take us away?" I looked up towards him as surprise flashed through his gaze, replaced quickly by caution.

“Yes.” His voice was hard, his gaze darting to them before moving back to me.

“Good.”

“Good?” He seemed confused by my words, which was perfect.

“I’ve made my decision.” I offered him a knowing look.

Ian smiled victoriously, thinking I was choosing him, his grip on me loosening just slightly as I turned into him. Someone let out a vicious sound behind me and my breathing hitched, but I kept completely focused on what I needed to do.

I decided to be bold to catch him off guard. “You said you wanted them to feel pain?”

“More than anything.”

The helicopter was coming closer. Way too close. If I got onto that thing, it was absolutely over. I had no doubt about that.

“Kiss me.”

Silence filled the space, and I hoped like hell my men understood what was going on. Ian looked down at my lips, and when he surged forward, I let him kiss me. The taste of his lips was disgusting, but the satisfaction of the gun falling slightly from my head as I leaned into him was everything.

Everything I needed.

“Goodbye, Ian.”

Ian let out a cry of surprise as I pushed hard, the gun going off as I watched his body topple off the cliffside into the waiting ocean below.

The helicopter that was growing closer suddenly turned, fast enough that I couldn’t see who was standing at the open side. I moved my eyes away from the helicopter and let out a shuddered breath, my knees breaking as relief filled me and my body crashed. There were a ton of noises around me, but when two large arms wrapped around me, I knew for a fact

that it was one of my boys. My eyes closed as I let out a happy hum in my throat.

“Track down the ’copter. It has to land soon, and I want whoever is on it brought back to the house.” Yates’s voice had me smiling despite knowing what he meant.

I mean...I couldn’t exactly judge anymore.

I’d killed someone.

I had killed a man.

No, I had killed Ian.

Somehow that didn’t bother me much. Rather the opposite, actually. A ragged breath left me and I winced as I was picked up, my bruises killing me.

“Be careful with her, King.” Sterling’s voice was soft. “She could be injured.”

King’s chest rumbled, but he didn’t say anything else, my cheek resting on his solid chest as I finally felt like I could relax. I opened my eyes and looked up at King, noticing that the sky was moving...or maybe we were.

“I knew you guys would come,” I whispered.

King’s eyes were cold and empty as he looked down at me, but I wasn’t scared anymore. His voice was rough and almost unnatural as he spoke.

“Always, Dahlia. Always.”

Chapter Five

KINGSTON ROSS

I was drowning in my rage.

My soul had turned ice cold, my heartbeat slowed, and I couldn't see anything but blood and a dark, heavy wave of fury that blocked out everything else. It was holding my consciousness captive, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't break out from it.

I'd known this would eventually happen.

I knew eventually my rage would become unstoppable. The memories from the past hour were like someone else's memories, or a film, making me wonder what exactly I'd done. How badly had I messed up? Did I even care?

Not really.

No, all I cared about was the small source of warm golden light curled up on my lap. Dahlia. My princess. *My everything*. I knew I needed to do a full inspection of her, to make sure she was okay, but all I could do right now was hold her and absorb every inch of the warmth she offered. It was possible I was imagining her at this point—it was a fear of mine, always had been. That I would wake up one day and realize the source of my obsession, the center of my being had been a figment of my imagination, a golden ray of sunlight that had just passed through this reality but was now gone.

The world could be exploding around us, people being slaughtered by the thousands, but none of it mattered because I was holding her. My nose brushed over her bloodied hair, loving the scent of it mixed with her naturally floral scent. I

wanted to feel guilty about tainting her with my sins, both with the blood on my hands and the darkness in my soul, but I didn't. Instead of dimming her light, our darkness seemed to only make her stand out more. I was a selfish bastard, and I loved that.

I loved knowing that she was ours. Completely. Dahlia could never leave me. I would rather die than to live a life without her in it. The stark reality of that had never been as clear as when I thought Ian was going to push her off the cliff and I knew I would dive in right after her. I had lived so long not wanting the shadows of my life to touch Dahlia, but now I was realizing they could protect her. I wanted her wrapped up in our darkness so that no one could touch her again.

“King?” A soft voice pulled me from my dark hell as I tried to focus on connecting the voice to the woman speaking. I needed to find her. Find my Dahlia. Why was it so damn hard to focus?

I couldn't breathe, my lungs frozen, and I felt like I was so far removed from anything I would have normally recognized as myself. Something had fundamentally changed in me when I'd heard she'd been taken. When someone had dared to take my princess away from me. I had been angry while hurting George, but hearing that had been different, and something inside of me had snapped so violently that I wasn't positive it could be repaired.

I wasn't positive if I wanted it to be. This version of me had slaughtered to find Dahlia, and I would be that man, that monster, as long as she needed me to be. I didn't care what blood I had to shed, I would carry my princess in my arms over it all, showing her the carnage, the massacre made in her honor.

“King?” The voice held more of a panicked tone now, and I frowned, trying to concentrate as my hands tightened on her form. Why couldn't I fucking focus?

“Kingston.”

That voice was different, and the fact that it was masculine had me feeling a level of anger and possessiveness that was

unparalleled. I snapped out of my daze, letting out a feral sound as I pulled Dahlia further into me, her hands rubbing against my chest. Dermot and Yates were staring at me with concern; the others must have been in a separate car. Good. I didn't want any other men around her right now.

I didn't want *anyone* around her right now.

"You need to hold her a little less tight," Yates warned. "She's injured."

My eyes moved down to Dahlia, her face pale and chalky, but her eyes filled with warmth and affection. I could feel the overwhelming and dark emotions I felt for her trying to burn a molten path through my consciousness.

"What did they do to you?" I asked, finally able to speak.

"Kicked me in the ribs and punched my stomach, mostly because I was trying to fight back." Her chin was up slightly, pride surging through me, completely unsurprised by her reaction. Dahlia didn't need to fight for anything. I would give her everything, but I never doubted that her base instinct was to fight back, especially for those she loved.

I ran my fingers over her jaw, the others talking as I continued to examine her face, accounting for all the light freckles that only made an appearance during the summer. Pain shone in her gaze, and when tears started to well there, making her dark lashes almost glitter, something started to rattle in my chest.

We needed to fix why she was sad. Why couldn't I remember how to do that? The icy walls weren't giving in, and I could feel the darkness trying to pull me back under.

"King," Dahlia pleaded, her voice filled with agony, "Please come back to me?"

There was fear in her gaze, but it wasn't fear *of* me, it was fear *for* me. I ran my fingers up across her throat while gently tilting her jaw back, my head dipping to press a soft kiss to her lips. A surprised noise came from her throat as she wrapped her arms around my neck, securing herself against my body. I wanted to carry her around like this forever.

Molten emotion began to burn hotter through my veins, chipping away at the icy walls as a hunger so impossibly strong it didn't feel natural began to batter my head and body, unrelenting in its force. I deepened the kiss as she whimpered against me, her legs splitting further as she slid down completely to straddle me. A groan broke from my chest as she rocked against my hard length, the heat of her pussy making my facade of calm nearly snap in half. Dahlia was this golden, vibrant magma that destroyed my defenses and coping mechanisms with a need that leveled me.

Somewhere, distantly, I felt the car come to a stop. None of that mattered though. No, all that mattered was the way her hands moved over my chest, making me realize my vest was gone, my weapons discarded to the side and forgotten.

I murmured her name as she tugged at my shirt, her eyes flashing with a need that I wanted to fix. I wanted to give her what she wanted and needed. What she was begging for. There was another part of me that recognized I shouldn't take her, not after today, but it was grossly overshadowed by the dark need to possess her.

I tugged on the shoulders of the jacket we'd covered her with, having discarded the bloody robe on the cliffside. A low rattle left my chest as it fell to the floor, my eyes running over her perfect bare form.

"I need you, King." Her whimper had me realizing how much she was suffering.

I knew I had scared her earlier. I had seen the realization and fear in her eyes. I had seen her shy away from me, but now she was handing herself over to me again, after all of this. I was thankful she hadn't tried to run because she would learn very quickly the extent I would go to, to make sure that she never left my side.

"I shouldn't," I murmured, unable to stop running my hands across her smooth skin, a pained noise leaving her lips. That was enough that I slid my fingers to the tops of her thighs, grasping her in a bruising grip while looking down to find her pussy soaking wet, her body nearly shaking with

need. This woman was made for fucking, and I knew I didn't have it in me to deny her.

"Please, King?" Dahlia's simple plea had the last of my walls melting. The desire, the pure need, to fill her up with my cum slammed into me. I needed to make sure everyone knew who she belonged to. I needed everyone to know that she was untouchable and that I would slaughter everyone and anyone that attempted it. Dahlia was ours. No one else would ever get her, and I didn't care what I had to do to ensure that.

I would do anything I could to tie her to me. *Anything.*

It was that force that had me easily undoing my pants, her delicate fingers gripping my hard cock and relieving it from where it had been painfully pressed up against my zipper. I let out a low groan of her name as she moved forward, letting my cock slide against her wet heat before rolling her hips in a needy way. The flush on her skin was returning, and she almost looked like she was glowing. I felt blinded for a moment, and I saw goddamn stars when she positioned herself over me and then slid down, allowing me to impale her completely on my cock, her pussy squeezing me tight enough I nearly fucking came.

"Dahlia," I growled against her neck as she gasped at how I filled her, rolling her hips while running her hands through my hair before tugging. The hard movement had me knowing that she needed something more than lovemaking. Her words solidified that.

"Make me forget the kiss. Make me forget it all," Dahlia whimpered. "Remind me where I belong."

I snapped. I fucking lost it and flipped us, cradling her head before she fell back onto the seat. I grasped her hips, slamming up into her. She let out a scream as her pussy locked down on me and spasmed. There was a part of me, thank god, that remembered to keep my hands on her hips and not her waist or near her ribs or stomach, but the rest of me was hellbent on rutting this woman. I wanted to remind her of this insane connection between us, the intense love we had for one

another, and make her forget Ian. Fucking forget that he'd ever existed.

I set a hard, deep pace, her entire body flushing as I leaned down to bite down on the soft skin of her breast, leaving a mark as she moaned my name. When her arms went above her head, she gripped the leather so hard, digging her nails into it, that it tore slightly. I pumped into her harder, wanting those marks on my back. I let my walls fall completely, the more I buried myself into her, and I just gave into the vulnerability that came with not blocking out what I'd done.

I embraced it.

I had to.

That was when everything snapped into place. Reality brought everything to a halt as I looked at the beautiful woman in my arms, her face filled with so much desire that it killed me. My eyes stung, realizing that I'd almost lost her... I'd almost lost everything. Relief filled her gaze.

“King, you're back.” She let out a stuttering breath, followed by a moan as I surged back into her again, a bit slower and deeper this time, causing her eyes to nearly fall shut. I had no idea how long we'd been going so far, but her entire body was pink and flushed, her pupils blown out and her pussy so wet that I knew she'd come several times.

“I never left you, princess.” I stroked in and out of her, looking over every bruise on her body. Allowing myself to feel the guilt, fury, and every other damn emotion that came with it. I wasn't hiding from my emotions anymore—I fucking couldn't, not with her. Maybe in the moment, but not after. I never wanted her to doubt me.

“King.” Her moan was soft as I slowed down, giving deep, hard strokes again so I didn't jostle her as much.

When her tight cunt squeezed around me, I groaned, burying myself fully into her as I grabbed her jaw. “Dahlia Aldridge, I will always come for you. Every single fucking time.”

“I know,” she whispered before crying my name as I hit hard in her, causing her to climax.

My pace picked up, and I began to stroke into her, feeling my own climax roaring up to slam into me. I groaned as she finally jolted again and I roared out her name, burying my teeth against her neck. She whimpered and completely melted into the seat beneath me.

Mine.

Mine.

Fucking mine.

“Yours,” Dahlia agreed, making me realize I’d said it out loud. Good.

“Holy hell,” she murmured after a moment or so of us laying there.

Gaining my senses back, I sat back and looked over her body and then up to her face. “Fuck, princess, I shouldn’t have ___”

She shook her head and sat up, kissing me despite the wince covering her face. “I needed that, King,” she promised softly. “I was so damn scared I wouldn’t be able to pull you back.”

“You’re the only person that can do that,” I admitted before pulling her into me completely. I looked around the car, realizing that we were in front of the house and that the driveway was filled with the others and security. I felt a momentary surge of pride that the security had probably heard her calling my name.

Fuck. I was beyond possessive over Dahlia normally...but this, this was intense.

“Let’s get you inside, I want you to see a doctor,” I murmured.

Fixing the jacket back on her, I opened the door and lifted her into my arms, tucking her into the warmth of my chest. I didn't meet anyone's gaze, not trusting how I would react with how on edge I was right now. I walked up the stairs and into the estate, my eyes immediately finding my father's from where he stood with Mr. Aldridge, both of them looking at us in partial relief, concern, and maybe a bit of irritation.

Well, if they hadn't known everything before, they would now.

I tightened my grip on Dahlia as my father began ordering the staff around. Mr. Aldridge approached us and looked down at Dahlia, who I was only just realizing had fallen asleep. His hand ran across her forehead as he pressed a kiss there and seemed to gather himself, emotions running wild over his face.

When he looked back up at me, I kept his gaze, wondering if he was going to try to take her from me. I wouldn't blame him. Not only because it was his daughter, but because this was at least in some part my fault. I wouldn't let him take her, but I wondered if he would try.

"Take her to the medical wing. Her mom is there."

"None of us are leaving her side. You know that, right?" I clarified, not wanting to fuck around.

His eyes darkened. "I'm aware, King. We will be having a conversation later...for now, take her to medical. The only reason I am not making you put her down right now is that I don't trust what you would do."

Smart man. I nodded, knowing it was going to be a battle trying to convince him one of us was good enough for his daughter, let alone all of us.

I walked towards the medical wing without delay, the others following as Sterling came to walk next to me. "I'm worried about her, not just medically."

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"I mean that she killed someone, King. She fucking killed someone."

My gaze ran over her face as I nodded. “She did.”

I tried to ignore the surge of fury that toppled over me at the idea of Ian kissing her, even while knowing it had been fucking worth it. I wanted to pull him out of the ocean to kill him again. Maybe cut off his mouth, the lips that he had dared touch to my princess, or some shit. At the same time, I was so damn proud of Dahlia.

Our girl was so smart.

As we entered into the medical wing, Mrs. Aldridge instantly broke into tears as I laid Dahlia down, her pain making me feel like we’d fucked up even though I knew we had done everything we could. It wasn’t enough. I ran a hand through my hair and stepped back, not wanting to but knowing that she needed space to check in on her daughter.

“You did good, King.” My mom’s hand rubbed my back gently, her normally sunny disposition completely absent. That was the thing about my mom—her normal self was very different from how she was when it came to the empire she and my father built. Her hands had been covered in far more blood than anyone realized, and while it wasn’t her favorite thing, she could be terrifying if she wanted to.

It wasn’t surprising to me in the least that all of them had left their couples trip in Naples to come to the compound. Dahlia was loved by everyone, and the idea of her being in danger wasn’t a situation anyone could passively observe.

“I killed. A lot,” I murmured.

“But you didn’t kill anyone important that you love.” She offered me a small smile as if it wasn’t a big deal that I was a complete monster.

Then again, was my father much different?

Before I could say anything, a female doctor came in and I relaxed back into a seat nearby, the others doing much the same. I didn’t care how long I needed to be here; I needed to know that she was okay. Nothing else would be acceptable.

We had failed tonight, letting her get taken from us.

That would never happen again.

Chapter Six

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“Okay. I can do this,” I whispered, gripping the steering wheel of my dad’s BMW as I eyed the driveway ahead of me. I looked towards the house, knowing that my parents weren’t home. Heck, most of the adults except for Stratton’s grandma were out because of the event at the club. Yet I still felt like there were eyes on me, and considering what I was doing, that wasn’t a good thing.

Still, this seemed like the perfect time to try driving.

I knew I should have waited for my dad—he had mentioned teaching me—but I was so jealous that all the boys had been practicing this summer, and I didn’t want to be the only one missing out. Besides, it was almost my sophomore year of high school, so when everyone got back, people would either have their license or be getting them. I didn’t want to be behind.

Staring down at the wheel, I pressed the button to turn on the car, keeping my foot on the brake. The dashboard lit up and I swallowed nervously, my fingers shaking with excitement as I nibbled my lip. I could do this. I could totally do this. Taking in a sharp inhale, I put the car into drive and lifted my foot off the brake. An excited sound came from my throat as I gently pressed on the gas, the car lurching forward causing me to let out a small scream and slam on the brakes again.

Holy crap. Never mind. I couldn’t do this.

I sank back against the seat and considered turning off the car completely. Instead, I looked down at my phone and let out

a frustrated grumble, knowing that there was only one person around who could help.

Not Lincoln or Sterling, who were at practice.

Not King, who had run by the golf course to help his dad with something.

Not Stratton...but that wasn't surprising.

No, there was only one person, and it took me putting away every ounce of my ego and pride to open up my phone and press the button to call him.

"Bunny?" Yates questioned, his voice sounding sleep-filled.

"Were you sleeping?"

"Was," Yates agreed and groaned. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, never mind," I muttered, "Um, forget I called."

I hung up, feeling bad for waking him up and having completely chickened out asking for help. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to make a difference. I was still staring down at the phone when the car door was pulled open.

I jolted in surprise, letting out a small scream as my foot came off for a mere second before I slammed it back on, causing me to lurch forward and hit my head on the wheel. A groan came from my throat as Yates leaned over and threw the car in park, oddly quiet considering how badly I'd just embarrassed myself. I had at least expected him to tease me.

Instead, he turned me in my seat and examined my forehead. I stared at him in shock, realizing that he really had literally just woken up. His hair was messy, and his shirt was wrinkled. It was so unlike Yates, but I secretly loved it.

"What the hell are you doing?" he finally demanded, looking pissed.

"I..." My eyes watered in frustration. I looked down at my hands, feeling stupid as my mouth tipped downward. "I want to learn how to drive like you guys, and I thought it would be good to try it when my parents weren't home."

Yates was quiet for a moment before I looked up at him, expecting to see judgment. Instead, there was a softness in his gaze as he finally exhaled. I felt my eyes widen as he closed the door and tapped the hood, walking around the front and sliding in.

“What are you doing?” I asked softly.

“Teaching you how to drive, bunny.”

My eyes were heavy and my head fuzzy as I let out a small whimper, stretching my hands above my head. I winced, my ribs ridiculously sore, as suddenly a warm, rough hand slid over the tender skin, making me sigh happily.

“Careful, bunny.” Yates’s voice was rough and filled with concern. “Your ribs are pretty messed up right now.”

I bet they were after that solid kick they had landed. I let out a sleepy yawn and turned towards his voice, ignoring the way the movement pinched slightly. When I opened my eyes, I found that I was in a plush bed with soft blue comforters and pillows. Light filled the space, and a large window showcased a lush green landscape that was currently damp with light rain. I let out a happy sigh before moving my gaze towards Yates, who sat in a chair near my bedside.

You know, despite the situation I found myself in, I realized that it took very little to make me happy. Just seeing Yates alive had me feeling ten times better. *Although it would be nice if he didn’t always look so damn perfect—it was unfair.*

“Not perfect.” Yates chuckled at the words I spoke out loud, but it was tinged with pain and what sounded like guilt. “Far from perfect, Dahlia.”

I didn’t like this guilt nonsense.

He sat forward and gently ran his fingers over my skin, shivers trailing his touch. It didn’t take much from Yates to get a reaction out of me. And I fully wanted to tell him that he was wrong, he was perfect, even right now. I knew without looking in a mirror that I was black and blue, that I looked like what

I'd gone through, but Yates? Yates looked like nothing had even occurred over the past few days. There wasn't a hair out of place on the man.

Honestly, if I didn't know the strength of his feelings for me, I would feel intimidated...but instead I just took the time to appreciate it.

Yates's platinum hair was soft-looking and styled back away from his handsome golden face, which was etched in a level of stress and concern I wasn't comfortable with. His impossibly silver, almost unnatural eyes, seemed to be metallic in the shadows of the room. They matched his sweater, which fit against his muscular, lean chest, almost perfectly. My eyes darted down to where he had pushed his sleeves up his forearms. *Lord have mercy.* I was way too attracted to this man. Heck, I was way too attracted to all of them. It couldn't be healthy for my sanity. Right?

"I love you."

Yates's eyes flared with darkness at my words, causing him to stand up and lean over the bed, grasping my jaw gently. I kept his gaze as he examined my expression, looking for something before laying a soft kiss on my lips.

"Dahlia, you are everything to me. My world rotates around you. 'I love you' doesn't seem an accurate enough way to express the intensity of how I feel about you. You are just... everything. Fucking everything. Understand?"

I did understand, and his obsession, healthy or not, was something I craved.

His voice started to deepen with a roughness that matched the guilt on his face. "I promise you that nothing will ever take you from me again."

I fully believed that. This situation had escalated far faster than they could have prepared for, and I had barely accepted their feelings for me before being tossed into a reality where an entire criminal enterprise was at my fingertips. It should have felt like too much, but the lightning pace seemed to soothe something inside of me. Maybe it was the absence of

the insecurity I'd felt for so long, not knowing how they felt? *Now I want all of it. All of them, all at once.*

It was possible that that sounded far dirtier than I intended...or maybe I also wanted that.

Yeah, I totally wanted that at some point.

"Tell me you believe that," Yates demanded after another soft kiss.

"I know you won't let anyone take me again," I murmured. "I trust you. Completely." It was like the rain clouds parted, and the smile Yates gave me was so gorgeous it melted any walls I'd tried to erect to protect myself from my emotions while away from them. It was like my words were ones he had been waiting to hear for a very long time.

That was when reality hit into me, and I tried to piece together what had happened between falling asleep in King's arms and now.

"How long have I been asleep? When did we get back? What happened after—"

Yates sat back, offering me a concerned look as I let out a slow breath, trying to not get overwhelmed. When I attempted to sit up, he gently pressed down on my shoulder, shaking his head.

"No, bunny, you can't get up yet." I could practically see the worry radiating off of him, which freaked me out more than anything.

I huffed, but when he was sure I had relaxed back into the blankets, he told me what I wanted to know. "It's Monday afternoon. You slept for nearly two days. We can handle everything that happened later. You are perfectly safe now, and you have been healing. You had bruises all over from the attack, and abrasions on your wrists that were bleeding..." Yates went silent for a minute, trying to gather himself before speaking again. "But mostly bruised ribs. You are going to be very sore."

"Bruised ribs?" I frowned. "How long does that take to heal?"

“Normally three to six weeks, but yours aren’t as bad as the doctor had originally thought, so she is hoping less than that.”

My brain kicked into high gear, thinking about the possible injuries my men had suffered, considering the blood they had been covered in. I examined Yates, nearly in a panic as I asked, “Is everyone okay? Are you okay? What about Stratton —”

“Breathe, bunny.” Yates’s voice was calm and soothing. “Everyone is fine, I promise. We suffered some minor injuries, but we’re okay. The person we were most concerned about was Stratton—thought he had a possible concussion—but the doctor checked him out and he’s completely fine.”

“Okay.” I nodded, though I wouldn’t be completely at ease until I could lay eyes on all of them myself. “I really do need to get up. Can you help me? I’m super thirsty and more than a bit hungry.”

“You want me to get you some food?” The adorable, determined expression on his face had me realizing that he very much needed something to do, some way he could feel like he was fixing this.

“That would be amazing,” I admitted as he gently helped me to sit, the pinch of pain when I inhaled and then slowly exhaled making me realize that while I was sore, it wasn’t nearly as bad as the pain I’d felt originally. This felt more like being sore after a strenuous workout...if my workout was being kicked and thrown in a truck while being kidnapped.

“Let me go grab something.” He stood up fully and pointed towards the bed. “I don’t want you moving from the bed.”

I was totally going to move from the bed, but I nodded as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head and walked towards the door. My eyes darted down to my arm, where I could feel more pain than elsewhere...reminding me of the not so little tracker incident.

“Oh, Yates?” I called out, and he immediately turned back to look at me. He offered an arched brow as I smiled. “Next time you want to do something a bit crazy—you know, like installing a tracker in my neck?—try to give me a heads up.” His eyes went wide at my words as I tacked on the most important part. “Also, ask. Asking would have been good.”

I watched his ears turn red, heat flashing in his gaze as he leaned in the doorway of the bedroom. “Would you have let me if I asked, bunny?”

I wasn’t going to bother lying to him anymore.

“If you felt like it would keep me safe? If it would make you feel better? Probably.”

A dark light flashed through his gaze as he offered me a nod. “Noted, bunny. I will remember that for next time.”

And I had no doubt there would be a next time.

He was gone then, and I couldn’t help but shake my head at his level of crazy. But was I any better? Being okay with one of my six boyfriends implanting a tracker in my skin? I suppose not. Did that make me crazy? Did that mean there was something wrong with me?

Honestly, I wasn’t positive I cared anymore. I wanted my men and all the darkness and shadows that surrounded them.

My men did bad things for the right reasons.

Standing up slowly, I winced and inhaled sharply, trying to not let the pain overwhelm me. I tried to stretch my arms above my head and found that while I was a bit lightheaded, probably due to blood loss from the arm injury and dehydration, I felt in better shape than I would have assumed. Which was good because there was no way I was not going to be able to do the ‘don’t leave bed’ thing for up to six weeks.

Plus, I clearly wasn’t that injured since King had taken me in the car on the way back here. Heck, I had barely felt anything besides euphoric relief while underneath him. Both because of what he was doing to my body and the hypnotic mixture of the darkness in his gaze and loss of control. Despite

it being almost predatory and sort of hot in nature, I never wanted to lose King to that. To his blackout rages.

I would always step in, even if it was dangerous.

Walking into the large attached bathroom, I found a pile of fresh towels, a robe, and some very familiar beauty products set out on the marble counter. Had my mom sent these here? She must have. I loved my boys, but it wasn't exactly their thing to get me rose-scented shampoo and face lotion that you could only find in Tokyo. Then again, they seemed to do stuff that surprised me constantly, so it wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

Going to turn on the bathtub, I paused and approached the shower instead, the image of being ripped out of the bathroom after taking a bath fresh in my mind. When the shower started up, I slowly pulled off the oversized shirt and shorts I'd been put in, finding myself in a plain white sports bra and boy shorts.

Honestly, I had no idea who had changed me, but I wasn't going to overthink that too much. I had no issue with my boys seeing me naked, very much the opposite, but in such a drastic situation it felt a bit more embarrassing instead of hot.

I frowned, looking at my bruised body in the mirror, the blue and purple marks in the shape of a considerably large shoeprint on my side. Along with that, there were dark grips on my arms and legs, making me look like I'd been through hell...and I suppose I had. Though in this moment, after all that had happened, my looks were literally the least of my concerns.

That probably wouldn't last, but for now there was a haziness coating my mind, protecting me from what I'd been through. And that was fine. I was okay with that because the darkest stuff I had already dealt with mentally. Everything else could wait.

As I stepped under the showerhead, hot water sliding over every inch of me, a shuddering exhale escaped my lips. I took the time, after getting used to the pressure and temperature, to wash my body before scrubbing my hair, making me feel far

better in a matter of a half an hour. My eyes were closed as I absorbed the scent of rose filling the bathroom. When I was finally done, I shut off the shower and stepped out, wrapping a towel around myself. I took my time, feeling a bit unsteady, but when I finally reached the counter, I dried myself off and slipped into a large terrycloth robe that felt soothing against my skin.

I dried my hair with a towel and then put in some leave-in conditioner before running soothing lotion over my arms and legs. I was so relaxed that when a knock sounded on the bathroom door, I barely jumped, knowing it was one of my boys. I walked towards the door and couldn't help the smile that slipped onto my face when I found Lincoln standing there.

“Hey.” My greeting was so casual, and almost immediately his gorgeous azure eyes darkened, sharpening on my expression with a blazing inferno that caused my knees to feel weak. I let out a small surprised squeak as he stepped into me, cupping my jaw and searing his lips to mine in a hard, possessive kiss. A small moan left my throat at the passion he demanded from me, and my fingers crawled up his chest and dug into his shoulder, probably a bit too hard. A rumble left his throat, and when he pulled away, I felt myself melting into his massive form.

Both Sterling and Lincoln were so incredibly muscular, so leaning into them was one of my favorite things in the world. I examined Lincoln's face, seeing dark circles under his eyes, and that white-blond hair was messy, his dark-rimmed glasses currently gone from his face. I could tell he hadn't slept, and I didn't like that at all.

“Fuck, Dahlia.” His voice was steeped in pain.

“Lincoln.” I went up on my toes, pressing my forehead to his and keeping him close. “I was so happy to see you guys. I was so worried, he had told me that you guys had been in an explosion and I'd almost cried. I had thought that you guys had been hurt, or killed, that I would never see you—”

There was the emotional rambling.

Lincoln let out a fierce noise of defense. “I will never leave you.”

I nodded and felt my eyes water as I admitted, “I was scared.”

It almost felt shameful, but I continued, “Not because I thought you guys weren’t coming, but because I didn’t think I would delay them long enough for you to get there. I worried that they would end up finding a way to hurt all of you and that I wouldn’t be able to stop them.”

“You did amazing,” Lincoln spoke softly. “You are goddamn perfect, Dahlia. But you shouldn’t have had to do any of that. You never will again. I don’t want your hands touching any of this bullshit.”

I let out a small sound. “I think it may be a bit late for that, Linc.”

Since I had, you know...killed someone.

“It is never too late to keep you safe.”

“Sure, safe,” I agreed, “but not in the dark. I want to be part of this world with you. I need to be.”

After a moment of examining my face, he nodded sharply, pressing his lips to my forehead and breathing out, “I love you. I love you so damn much.”

“I love you, Lincoln.” I curled further into him. “I love all of you so, so much.”

“Glad to hear it, sugar.”

The voice had me moving my gaze to the doorway, where Lincoln’s twin stood. I offered a small smile, breathing out his name. “Sterling.”

His cinnamon-colored hair was messy, his eyes a bit dull from a lack of sleep, and much like his twin, he was dressed in a very casual hoodie with jeans. A bit different than normal, but I absolutely loved it. I worried about their obvious exhaustion, but I also knew it wasn’t the time to bring it up—no doubt it would remind them of why they hadn’t been

sleeping...which was probably because I hadn't woken in two days.

As he came closer, I became increasingly aware that I was only in a robe, but instead of being nervous or blushing, I just found that I wanted both of them closer to me. Always closer. All I could think about was how easily I fit against Lincoln's large chest and the way that Sterling was able to press up against me, trapping me between them. When Sterling wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and dipped his head to claim a deep, passionate kiss, my center exploded with heat. Lincoln let out a groan, gripping my hips and making me realize just how hard he currently was.

"We were so worried about you," Lincoln admitted, brushing his nose against my neck before nipping it. I could barely pay attention to that though. No, I was far too focused on the overwhelming sensation of being between the two of them.

"Fucking terrified." Sterling pulled back slightly, examining my flushed face.

"I never want to be apart again," I murmured, both of them expressing sounds of agreement. Sterling, in a sharp, smooth movement, tugged my robe open as Lincoln pulled my wet hair away and continued to kiss my neck. My eyes roamed Sterling's face as he looked over the bruises, anger flashing in his eyes before he knelt down in front of me, kissing each bruise gently. His lips scattered around them, and I felt both a surge of affection and a hard-hitting desire that pounded on my body and demanded relief. Lincoln's hands gently smoothed over my ribs and cupped my breasts, a moan leaving my mouth as my center clenched, desperately needing him.

"We have to be so careful with you right now." Lincoln tugged my ear with his teeth while teasing my nipples, his touch a bit harder than I would have expected given his contrasting words. The slight pain had me letting out a moan as I felt my clit pulse, wanting touch there.

"Can't play with you how we would normally," Sterling agreed.

“You can still play with me.” My voice was breathy, disagreeing with them, as Lincoln chuckled dangerously.

“Not this time, but soon,” Sterling promised, my complaint lost in a moan as I leaned further back into his brother.

I let out a surprised sound as he smoothed his hands up my thigh and brought it over his shoulder, causing me to let out a small cry of relief as he buried his face against my center. His hum over my clit as he began to lick and suck had me almost collapsing, only held up by Lincoln. The two of them were playing me in a tune that was so unique to them, and I could feel that they wanted more—the dominant tone that played in the air had me wanting to be more submissive than ever.

I didn’t know how to ask them for what I wanted.

I wanted...no, I *needed* them to take control.

Lincoln wanted to be rough with me, I could feel it. Sterling had a darkness lingering under the surface, waiting to come out and play, but for the moment, neither of them were focused on that. Instead they were focused on teasing me, worshipping my body until I was trembling. Sterling’s mouth and Lincoln’s hand on me were like a euphoric experience. I felt my voice break as I let out a frustrated sound at being so close to coming—

“Come, Dahlia. Now.”

Lincoln’s sharp demand was accented by Sterling sucking on my clit, a climax slamming into me and making me cry out. I felt breathless for a moment, the room spinning as my eyes fell closed. I think I almost fell, Lincoln swearing as he caught me and Sterling pressing me further between the two of them, both pressing kisses over my face and neck, causing me to feel like I was in a bubble of love.

“Sugar,” Sterling finally spoke softly, “open your eyes. I’m worried you almost passed out on us.”

“Oh, I’m fine, I promise.” I let out a near giggle, feeling so damn good. “More than fine. The finest.”

“Lord,” Lincoln chuckled, the tension relieved from the moment.

“She needs food and water,” Sterling expressed, frowning. I reached up and ran my thumb over his brow to smooth it.

Lincoln let out a sound of agreement. “That was why Yates sent me up here. He got caught up talking to his father but had ordered food—”

His father?

“Did my parents call?”

Sterling fixed my robe and offered me an amused look. “Your parents, our parents, everyone is here.”

My eyes went wide as I processed his words. “What?”

“Arrived the night we got you back here.”

Oh.

I swallowed. “How much do they know?”

“Everything.”

Chapter Seven

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

Everything. They knew everything.

“It’s not as bad as you think,” Lincoln offered as I sat on the bed and nibbled my bottom lip, trying to decide how I felt about this.

“I don’t mind that they know about us.” I looked at both of them, wanting to make sure they understood it wasn’t about that. Our relationship was unique, but I wasn’t ashamed of it, I just had imagined us...telling them differently? *Had I?* What would that have looked like? Sitting around the living room and saying ‘hey, just wanted to announce I am dating your sons’? Maybe this was better.

I continued my thought tangent, “I just am worried it will change how they think of me... I don’t want them to not like me.”

“Not like you?” Sterling’s eyes rounded in shock and confusion.

“I mean, it looks bad to some people, one woman with six men.” I shrugged, trying to not let it get to me. Honestly, I didn’t want them to think it over either. I suppose Abby’s words had gotten to me just a bit. I didn’t doubt our relationship, but I worried how others’ opinions would affect my boys.

“First of all, our families could give a shit what something looks like to the general public,” Lincoln said. I sighed, knowing that he was right.

“More so, everyone loves you, Dahlia. The only people at risk are the six of us because your father is not someone to be messed with, especially regarding you.”

“Stop it.” I rolled my eyes at Sterling’s statement.

Lincoln chuckled. “Trust me, Dahlia. Plus, you weren’t there for the conversation yesterday.”

My brows went up in surprise. “You had a conversation? With my dad?”

“Oh yes,” Sterling murmured.

“We didn’t die, so that was a plus,” Lincoln grunted.

“What was said?” I asked curiously.

Sterling grinned. “Sorry, sugar, top secret. But don’t worry, everything is going to work out just fine.”

“As long as we never make you anything but absolutely perfectly happy.” Lincoln flashed a smile.

“I feel like that’s manageable—we have a lot of help.” Sterling shrugged.

“But we also have Yates to manage,” Lincoln pointed out.

“And King’s temper.”

“Stratton’s inability to handle some situations.”

“Don’t forget Dermot wanting to take on an entire gang for her—”

“Stop!” I squeaked, pausing their back and forth. “I officially decided I am not awake enough to deal with any of this.”

When the door opened to the bedroom, I instantly stood, relief filling my chest at the image of Dermot standing in my bedroom door. His emerald gaze was darker and filled with more shadows than I cared for, and unlike the twins and Yates, Dermot didn’t look polished. He was wearing a simple shirt and dark pants, a bulletproof vest hanging unbuckled on his chest. Where had he come from?

“I need a minute with her,” Dermot told them, his thick accent running over my skin as I sat back down on the bed. Both twins kissed me and disappeared through the door, Dermot closing it behind them. When the massive man turned his gaze back on me, I was rocked to the core by the pain there. I let out a soft worried sound as he came towards me, his dark reddish hair out of place as he knelt down and put his hands on either side of my waist, both of us now eye to eye.

“You’re okay,” he whispered, almost to himself.

“I’m okay,” I promised, cupping his face.

Guilt filled his gaze as he exhaled and let out a pained noise. “My father...this is my fucking fault, baby girl. I should have killed him before. I should have never let it get this far —”

“No.” I shook my head, refusing to let him think that way. “No, Dermot, I am not letting you do this. What’s done is done. He’s dead and Ian’s dead. They are both gone, and we are not going to think about it anymore. Okay? It isn’t your fault or anyone else’s that this happened, we couldn’t have expected it—”

“I should have thought about him pulling shit like this.” Dermot’s eyes darkened. “I should have been right by your side. I failed you. I can seem to give you everything else, every part of me, but I failed in the most fundamental way by not keeping you safe. I don’t even feel worthy of your affection—”

“Love.”

“What?” His eyes widened.

“It’s not just affection, it’s my love,” I whispered, looking over his shocked expression. “I’m in love with you, Dermot.”

I had known it for some time now, but my emotions had become crystal clear these past few days, and while my love was growing differently with Dermot than it had with my other boys, it didn’t change the fact that I was in love with this amazing, brave man.

A squeak left my lips as Dermot surged forward, kissing me hard, yet somehow managing to hold me so damn gently before pulling back, his thick accent causing heat to pool all over my body. “I’m crazy about you, baby girl. You fucking know that, right? Absolutely mental.”

“I think I do,” I blushed.

“I’m going to love you forever, Dahlia Aldridge,” Dermot said clearly and so damn seriously my heart nearly imploded. My eyes watered as I felt emotions roll through me that were so strong they didn’t seem possible.

“Good. I want forever.”

Dermot chuckled softly. “Thank goodness, because if not, your father probably would actually kill us.”

I rolled my eyes playfully. “Why do you guys keep saying that? My dad is literally so chill. The man can be such a dork —”

“Your father is not chill.” Dermot almost looked nervous for a minute, which was ridiculous considering how dangerous the man was. “Far from it, baby girl. But I don’t blame him. You are a fucking treasure; he would be an idiot to not flip his shit over the news that his little girl is dating six men...men who are not exactly a golden shining light of morality.”

“You guys told him we were ‘dating’?” I mused. I had wondered what term they would use. ‘Dating’ did not fit this situation, but it would have to work.

“I mean, I think he knows it’s a bit more serious than that... Still, I didn’t exactly come out and tell him directly that I planned on claiming your little ass as soon as possible before putting some babies in you. Figured if I said that I would never get a chance to actually do it.”

My eyes widened. “Babies? What about marriage? Seems like you guys have done a lot of planning without me.” I was mostly teasing. It honestly was far more flattering than I wanted to admit that Dermot was openly talking about having kids with me.

“Well, you were sleeping, baby girl,” he teased.

“And what about this baby thing?” I ran a hand through his hair. “You and King are on about me getting pregnant, have you actually thought about that—”

“Oh, I’ve thought about it.” Dermot offered me a hot look.

I narrowed my eyes. “I feel like I fell asleep and you all got crazier.”

“Completely possible,” he agreed. “Which reminds me—you slept for a long time, how are you feeling now?”

I was totally coming back to this marriage and baby thing, for the record.

“Honestly, my ribs are pretty bad.”

“I have the doctor coming up here before we go downstairs. How about you get changed into something comfortable so she can wrap your ribs and give you some medicine,” he suggested.

I nodded and stood up, Dermot cursing as I stabilized myself. “Sorry, baby girl, I’m not sure what’s taking them so damn long with the food. I brought a bottle of water.”

“That’s okay, my stomach is still a bit rocky.”

I took the bottle and chugged half of it before handing it over, Dermot’s eyes darting down to my lips with heat before he nodded towards the closet. Making my way over there, I let out a small yawn as I closed the door only slightly, exploring the space. I relaxed a bit, recognizing some familiar items as I shimmied off my robe.

I could tell by the end of today I would be exhausted. The emotional back and forth, paired with the adrenaline and pain from what had happened was...a lot at once. *Hopefully all of them would sleep with me tonight.* The bed was big enough.

Putting on a black cotton thong and bra pairing, I slid on a pair of loose sweatpants that I had to tighten around the waist, before grabbing an extra hoodie. I ran my hands through my wet hair and put on some socks and slippers as I came back out... *to find a woman in the room.*

I felt a momentary flash of jealousy because she was smiling at something Dermot said, but when she turned towards me, her eyes immediately lit with almost a maternal warmth that had the negative feelings melting away. Her black hair was streaked with silver and braided around her pale skin, light lines around her eyes making her look like she was maybe in her late forties. She was beautiful, and her eyes were a light blue that were so pretty I was a bit intimidated.

“Dahlia,” she offered with a soft smile, “it is so good to finally meet you now that you’re awake.”

I offered my hand, and she met it firmly as she went on, “I’m Rosin, the family doctor. I have been with the Rosses since I was maybe sixteen? I can’t remember now. My father worked security here and was in charge of the weapons vault in my teens.”

Weapons vault?

“Oh.” I nodded as Dermot smoothed a hand over my hair. I had to admit, her friendly disposition and how talkative she seemed to be immediately made me feel far more comfortable around her.

“Rosin has been around most of my childhood,” Dermot explained. “She will make sure you are all taken care of, I promise.”

“Which reminds me, let’s see those ribs.” She motioned to my abdomen, and Dermot let out a low growl as I eased up my top.

She fixed him with a look. “If you’re going to be a problem—”

His face darkened, and I swear he almost had a pout. “I’m fine. I’m fine.”

I offered him a sweet smile as he stood by my side. After a few short minutes of her testing my pain tolerance and range of motion, she seemed happy.

“I think you are healing fantastic, the bruising is far lighter than I assumed.” She smiled. “I would say wrap them if you need, but you definitely need lots of rest and ice. Mostly

medicine, though, which I will have delivered here. Just make sure to not overdo it.”

“Okay.” I nodded in understanding.

Then she went to check my neck, undoing the bandage that I hadn’t touched in the shower, my nose twitching as I smelled the scent of blood.

“This I am a bit more worried about. I’ve put you on antibiotics,” she explained, “so between the pain medicine and that you should be good to go. You are going to be just fine, but if you have any issues, I live here on the estate.”

“You do?” I asked curiously.

Her eyes sparked with humor. “Yes, my husband took over my father’s job. Nolan is also the same one that trained Dermot here.”

“Oh.” My brows went up, imagining Dermot as a younger child.

“So I have a lot of embarrassing stories about him as a kid.” She winked. Dermot groaned as she left and I turned back to him.

“She seems nice,” I pointed out.

His eyes were soft as a sadness filtered over his expression. “She is. She became somewhat of a surrogate mom, to be honest... I came to her after one of the bad nights with my father, and Nolan taught me to defend myself, and it sort of transferred into me being so damn interested in weapons.”

I squeezed his hand. “She seems wonderful.”

He nodded, and then, as if something was just occurring to him, he grasped my hands gently. “Before we go downstairs, I need to talk to you about everything that happened between my dad and when you—”

“Killed Ian?” I asked easily.

His eyes filled with a flash of malicious light. “Yes.”

“I wanted to feel guilty... I should...” I shook my head as he went to tell me differently. “But I didn’t at the moment, and I don’t even now. I don’t at all. He wanted to hurt you guys... and he was never going to stop. I don’t regret it, Dermot.”

“Good.” He brushed his lips against my forehead. “He deserved far worse than the death he got, but I am proud of you, Dahlia. So damn proud of you, baby girl.”

That felt so good to hear, I couldn’t even properly explain it.

A knock on the door had me looking over to find someone with a tray of food waiting there. When the man brought it in and set it down, I immediately sat down on the bed next to the tray. I began eating the sandwich and sipping water as Dermot said something to him about having water and snacks brought up here later. Honestly, I wouldn’t complain about that, especially after a day like today.

I had eaten literally nearly half of my entire tray when Dermot finally sat down. I looked up at him as he nodded towards the tray, clearly wanting me to continue to eat. After a moment, he groaned and leaned back on the bed, his eyes closing. I took a moment to appreciate how handsome he was before expressing my concern.

“You look exhausted.”

“I am,” he admitted. “It’s been a very long few days. I couldn’t sleep until you were awake, not until I could make sure you were actually okay... even if Rosin said that you were.”

“I think you will just have to sleep in here,” I teased. “You know, to make sure that I’m okay.”

“Oh, for sure.” Dermot grinned.

“Angel?” Stratton’s voice had me looking towards the door. Relief filled his face as I let out a surprised noise, his form darting towards me as I was immediately picked up and sheltered in his arms. Dermot made an amused remark while getting up to leave, and Stratton responded with something about going downstairs, but I wasn’t really paying attention.

At that moment, all that mattered was that I was in Stratton's arms.

"I'm so glad you're up, that you're okay. I came up as soon as the twins told me." He gently sat me down on the bed, concern filling his face. "Sorry, shit, sorry, I didn't mean to jostle you."

"I'm fine," I promised, leaning forward for a kiss. "I promise I'm fine."

"Angel, I love you," he groaned into the kiss. "I love you, I fucking love you."

"Good, because I love you," I admitted breathlessly.

"Thank fuck, or else I would end up feeling like a stalker," he admitted when he pulled back. His gaze darted down to the tray, relief in his eyes as he said, "Keep eating. I've been worried about that, especially since you slept for so long."

"Will you stay with me and then we can go downstairs?" I asked. Instead of feeling pressured to eat, the reminder he'd given me felt good. It felt like a soft reminder to pay better attention to my health, and I think that was how it would start, until I truly got back to 'normal habits.'

Stratton sat behind me in comfortable silence as I ate, his fingers running through my hair as he occasionally kissed me along my shoulder and neck. It was sexy, but it was also soothing.

It really was hard to not get turned on by him, though—between his muscular fighter body and the way his tattooed and ringed hands gripped my legs, the man looked like pure sex. I could practically feel his bright blue eyes on me, and I had to fight the urge to turn into him and straddle him, running my fingers through his dark hair.

"I decided something," he said after a moment.

"What's that?"

His voice was calm and measured as he said, "I'm going to work for the family."

“You sure?” I asked softly, confused by his change of heart.

Stratton’s gaze warmed. “Yeah, angel. I need to take care of you. I need to build a castle around you, a fucking fortress, and that means I need the resources to build a system like that... Plus, I suppose I don’t mind the bastards.”

I almost smiled at that. “You don’t have to do that for me, Stratton.”

He nuzzled my neck. “It’s for us. Our future.”

I turned into him. “As long as that’s what you want.”

I couldn’t help but feel thrilled at the concept of us all being together. It was almost unbelievable that all my dreams, my biggest fantasies, were going to become reality.

After another moment, we stood up and held hands as we began to make our way downstairs. I could hear familiar voices coming from the office, and when I turned the corner, I couldn’t help but smile at seeing all my men together.

“King,” I whispered. The man looked up from his desk, the others still talking as I began to cross the room to get to him. He immediately stood and rounded the desk, wrapping his arms around me and burying his nose in my hair. A sound came from his chest as I felt his darkness wrap around me comfortably, the reality of who he was no longer a secret.

“Dahlia.” King sounded almost choked with emotion. “I have been holding you for hours in bed, fucking begging you to wake up. I am so damn glad you are up. I was fucking terrified.”

King terrified?

“I just woke up,” I murmured.

He pressed his forehead against mine, and the room stilled. The universe stilled. I knew that soon we would probably need to see my parents—all of our parents—but in that simple moment, it was just us.

Chapter Eight

YATES CARTER

Yesterday...

“Mr. Aldridge wants to see all of you in the cigar lounge,” my dad announced, walking into the main office and nodding towards the door. I was laid out in a large armchair, my eyes closed, as I realized officially that I wouldn’t be able to sleep until Dahlia was awake. I had figured that would be the case. Hell, I wouldn’t even be down here if I hadn’t known this conversation was essential.

“Fuck,” King muttered as he got up and walked out of the room, the others following. I stayed put, arching a questioning brow at my dad. You would think he would be more concerned about his son’s possible upcoming death.

“I don’t believe that he didn’t know before now,” I stated.

My dad poured a drink before offering me an amused look. “And you would be right, but it’s very different assuming than having it thrust in your face. Dahlia has never dated anyone, and now he has to have a conversation with six of you. I don’t blame him for being a bit pissed.”

I scowled at the thought of Dahlia dating. “Do you even realize how hard it was to keep her single? Throughout all of school?” He should honestly be glad I didn’t cause more legal issues for him. I could have easily killed one of those bastards that assumed they could ask her on a date.

My dad barked out a laugh. “Son, I am well aware of everything you have done to keep tabs on Dahlia.”

“Everything?” I felt my chest squeeze, a sliver of nervousness invading my consciousness.

My father shook his head in mock shame. “It’s my damn house, Yates. You think I didn’t check out what the hell you were doing up there?”

Honestly, I hadn’t because I figured I would have been shipped off to a mental institution if he had.

Before I could respond, he nodded towards the door. “I wouldn’t keep him waiting.”

I muttered a curse and strode towards the cigar lounge, wanting to get this over with. I wouldn’t lie, not much outside of Dahlia’s well-being mattered to me, but I would prefer if Mr. Aldridge approved of this situation. Either way, Dahlia was still ours, and nothing—not even fucking death, let alone her parents’ approval—would keep me from my bunny.

“Sit.” Mr. Aldridge pointed towards one of the six chairs facing the desk he was leaning against, the others silent as I produced a frustrated sound. I didn’t sit on command, fucking ever. Still, out of respect, I sat down and kept my gaze on his expression as he looked over the six of us. I managed to glance over at King, who offered me a look that told me to keep my shit together. I nearly scoffed at that.

As if he had room to talk.

After looking at all of us, Jason ran a hand over his face and looked skyward, letting out a resigned sigh. “I could say a lot right now, and I have half a mind to put the fear of fucking god in each one of you.” He crossed his arms as unease crawled over my skin. I really hoped he didn’t threaten me because I had no idea how I would handle that.

Probably not well.

“With that being said, I have known this was coming for a bit now,” he admitted, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Now that we are here though, I don’t know exactly how to handle this... I’m torn, boys.”

“Torn?” King asked.

“Yes,” he hissed, “because I have watched all of you grow up into the men you are today, men who I trust with my daughter’s safety on a daily basis...but this is different. I want to make it extremely clear that just because you have grown up together and are best friends does not give you some right to be with her. If Dahlia wants to be with you, it’s her choice, but I don’t want any of you to view this as a given.”

Ah, but it was a given, because I would never let Dahlia leave.

She was ours. It was really that simple. But I kept my mouth shut because in theory, I understood what he was saying. He didn’t want us to take Dahlia for granted. To assume she would always be there for us. What he wasn’t considering is how we had literally planned our entire futures around her happiness.

I had half a mind to expose just how deep the obsession ran.

“Mr. Aldridge, if I may, we will never be good enough for your daughter,” Lincoln said, causing Mr. Aldridge to narrow his eyes on him.

What the fuck was Lincoln doing?

“But no one is going to love her more than us,” Sterling followed up.

Okay, that could possibly work.

“I don’t disagree with that,” Jason admitted before asking a reasonable question. “Why now?”

“We waited until she was done with school and until we were more settled in our plans for this year,” King explained, “but it was coming to a point where she was starting to think we didn’t feel the same as her, and that wasn’t acceptable.”

After a moment, he looked towards Stratton. “What about you, son?”

Stratton’s entire face turned dark as he spoke far more truth than I expected. “I don’t have an excuse. I thought I was

doing the right thing by making sure I kept to myself until I could fix my family issue.”

“You hurt her. A lot,” Jason countered.

“I know.” Stratton ran a hand through his hair before sitting forward. “I still don’t think I’m good enough for Dahlia, never have, but especially since I have absolutely nothing.”

Mr. Aldridge examined his expression. “Money isn’t important in this type of situation, but you and I will be talking about that later.”

Thank fuck. Someone needed to get through to the dense motherfucker.

His gaze turned to Dermot next. “What part do you play in this, Dermot?”

Dermot’s face was void of emotion. “I love your daughter, that’s the part I play.” Mr. Aldridge arched a brow as Dermot continued, “I know you don’t know me well—”

“I know enough about you,” he said evenly before looking at Kingston. “You’re putting my daughter into danger by bringing her into this type of lifestyle.”

“No disrespect, sir,” King gritted out, his patience with being talked to like this clearly running thin, “but she would have never been free of the Ross family shadow. The minute that you and my father decided to work together, it was an assumed connection... More than that, Dahlia is aware of what this lifestyle consists of, especially now. If I had to give it up to be with her, I would, but I’m not giving her up. None of us are.”

Mr. Aldridge had been a staple in all of our lives growing up, and I respected him, even liked him, but I think King was very clear about the situation here. This wasn’t Jason’s decision.

Mr. Aldridge didn’t say anything for a moment before looking at me. “And you. I have a problem with you, Yates.”

Shocking.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” His temper flared. “Putting aside that it came in handy in this particular situation, you will never fucking implant anything on my daughter again without her permission.”

“And if I get her permission?” I asked, King chuckling. I hadn’t meant it to be funny.

I was also assuming now was not the time to explain that the tracker was a technologically advanced version that was much more accurate and smaller than standard GPS devices. Or that I *may* have gotten it from a military source that also traded on the black market. No, I had a feeling neither of those things would make him feel better.

His jaw clicked. “She’s an adult and can make her own decisions.”

Good. I knew Jason had one on his wife, so he was being ridiculous.

“I am obsessed with Dahlia.”

My words stilled him as he offered me a bewildered look. I continued, “I’m not going to bullshit you. If she didn’t love me, I would more than likely be in jail because of the extent of my obsession, one she is fully aware of...but instead I’m here. So while I understand your point and don’t disagree with you about getting her permission in the future, this type of thing won’t stop.”

Ever.

In fact, I predicted it would get far worse.

King spoke up then. “None of this is light or casual, Mr. Aldridge. We are in this for the long haul, and we plan on marrying her. I have no idea how we are going to pull that off, even if it’s just ceremonial as a group, and then married officially to one of us...but it’s happening. We want your blessing for that, but we don’t need it. Dahlia is ours.”

I watched Mr. Aldridge’s jaw clench before he looked towards the large window in thought. “If you want my

blessing, then there are a few conditions you have to agree to.”

Yeah, we didn’t usually do well with rules.

“What are they?” Dermot frowned, clearly not liking that idea.

“Dahlia has been safe most of her life within the Wildberry Gates. I don’t know how you plan to replicate that, but—”

“We bought Dermot’s house and are having a designer come in this week to work with Dahlia,” King said.

Jason groaned, running a hand over his face. “Of course you are.”

A small excited sound came from the door as Dahlia’s mom slipped in and came to stand next to her husband. “Just ignore me, I’m just curious about what you just said.”

“We got the designer from that one show she loves,” Lincoln offered.

Kristy Aldridge offered a smile that she quickly tried to smother when Jason pinned her with a look. “Honey, I am trying to scare these boys.”

“Why?” She rolled her eyes. “They have been in love with her since they were like five, and Dahlia loves them back—what more can you ask for as a parent? They make her happy, and she loves them.”

Exactly! I could only hope he would see her logic.

Her voice lowered. “Plus if they stay on Wildberry Lane, our grandbabies are going to be right across the street.”

“Lord.” Jason chuckled, closing his eyes. “Fine. Here’s the thing. I will give you my blessing, but I need you to do something. I know this situation is untraditional, so I understand why you all want to live together...but not until you are engaged. I won’t have you wait until marriage, but you have to be engaged so she has a promise from all of you.”

That would not be a goddamn problem.

“Okay—”

“And”—he put up a hand—“Dahlia sets the timeline for when the wedding is, whether that’s now or in four years. She may want to go to school or she may decide not to, but I don’t want her feeling rushed into anything. Understand? I don’t care if all of you are ready—”

“Jason.” Kristy frowned. “You forced me down the aisle a week after we met.”

His eyes jumped with amusement before he shrugged. “Great thing about being a parent, you get to make the rules.”

“That works for us,” I admitted, knowing that we would agree to that. Living together and engaged was fucking perfect, and then Dahlia could decide when we officially got married.

As in, decide that next week was the best time, while she was in a euphoric state from being fucked so much that she could barely see straight.

“See?” Kristy nudged him. “Now come on, you grump. I want to go check in on her. The doctor is going to be going up there soon.”

After a moment, Jason looked at all of us and then narrowed his eyes. “If you ever hurt her, I will bury you alive.”

I blinked, wondering how such a simple threat could make me feel so uneasy.

Dahlia’s mom huffed and grabbed his arm as they walked towards the door. She turned back and looked at all of us. “Love you boys.” Her eyes were filled with warmth despite the exhaustion and concern for her daughter that was clearly affecting her. “Oh, also don’t forget to work some grandbabies into this entire plan.”

The door closed as Jason bit out something about that I couldn’t hear, leaving us all in silence.

“Thank god for Mrs. Aldridge,” Stratton muttered, making me nod.

“She’s a godsend,” Sterling agreed.

“I say we give her exactly what she wants.” King flashed a smile.

Lincoln arched a brow. “Grandbabies? Somehow I think that comes after the marriage part.”

“We probably need to get a ring,” Dermot pointed out.

“I may know which kind she wants. She added a ton to her Pinterest board two weeks ago,” I said casually. Luckily, none of them seemed to think that was odd. I had almost lost my shit thinking she had been thinking of getting married to someone that wasn’t us, but luckily I had calmed myself down before storming to her house and demanding answers from her.

“We need to handle that this week,” Sterling said, and I felt my smile grow.

I could not wait to see a ring on her far too bare left finger.

Present...

Dahlia’s beautiful laughter pulled me from where I was staring out into the gardens, the large lounge we were all in filled with comfortable conversation and familiar noise. I couldn’t tell you how long I’d zoned out for, but a large part of it was because I finally felt on more stable ground, if only to a small extent, now that Dahlia was awake. Not only awake, but safe with all of us. Everyone was currently gathered in the lounge right outside Mr. Ross’s office, and no one was talking about anything out of the ordinary, but it still felt different to me.

Our feelings for Dahlia had been a secret for so damn long, and suddenly they weren’t, and it was almost surreal. My eyes moved to where Dahlia was sitting on Sterling’s lap next to Lincoln, surrounded by all of the moms, including my own. While they seemed to just be casually chatting, I could practically see the excitement between them. Considering

Dahlia had been the only ‘daughter’ any of them had, I knew they were thrilled. I also knew for a fact that the moms had talked about all of this for years now. It had started as a joke, but I don’t think they were very surprised when they saw the unique relationship forming.

The fathers, on the other hand... Well, I could tell that all of them were half amused and half worried about losing their sons to Mr. Aldridge’s temperament. The man was sitting with Mr. Gates, talking quietly but seemingly in good spirits. Mr. Ross and my own father were in the office right next door, handling a legal issue with the city before the conversation we needed to have. I briefly noticed that Stratton and Dermot had stepped outside to smoke, something I was glad for. Somehow I had a feeling we would get more shit for smoking around Dahlia than for the violence she had seen in the past week.

Speaking of violence, King crossed the room, offering me a tumbler of amber liquid that I took without a second thought. I shot it back, feeling oddly more on edge now that everything seemed at peace. Something would happen, I had no doubt. That wasn’t me being negative, either—I loved the peace and serenity most of our life had, but this didn’t feel like that. There was something on the horizon, I just wasn’t sure what that was.

“This is how it’s going to be forever, you know that?” I nodded towards the room. King smiled and sat down in the chair next to me.

“This is how it’s meant to be.”

When elegant hands came down on my shoulders, I tipped my head back to find Dahlia looking at both of us with a soft, affectionate light in her eyes. There was an excited flush to her face, and the woman was nearly glowing with energy. It was so beautiful that it was almost easy to forget about the bruising on her jaw.

Almost.

“You both look so serious,” she teased, coming to sit on my lap as King gently pulled her long legs up into his own.

“Just enjoying the peace.”

She smiled softly, her lips causing me to get distracted for a moment.

I was tempted to kiss her, but I didn't want to push it just yet. I knew that Mr. Aldridge could easily get upset if he felt like we were being disrespectful, and I didn't want that. I knew how much Dahlia's parents' opinions meant to her, so I wanted to do everything I could to keep it a positive experience...even if I had casually admitted to my not-so-small obsession with their daughter.

Before I could kiss her, the office doors opened up, my dad and Torin Ross coming to stand in front of the rest of the room. I turned, and Dahlia curled against my chest, my fingers stringing through her hair. I was curious to know how they would address the insanity of what had occurred the past few days. I mean, it wasn't just Dahlia who was being exposed to all of this, and while I knew most of the moms were aware, I think this was the first time it had been so open with all of us here in the compound.

In the past two days, nothing had been hidden as we all tied up loose ends with the situation in Ardara. I knew the plan moving forward, specifically the one for the seven of us, but I wanted to know how Mr. Ross thought we should handle all this. There weren't many people, older than me or not, that I would listen to, but Torin Ross I would.

I knew what the man was capable of and what his priorities were.

“Before we eat dinner,” Torin said, calling the attention of everyone in the room, “let's talk quickly about the plan moving forward.”

Once he was sure all eyes were focused on him, he began. “For the next week, the group of us are going to stay here, tying up some loose ends and making sure the media and any of the possible issues from this event disappear.”

King shifted, no doubt going to say that we could handle it, but his father shook his head, which meant that he had a larger

reason for wanting us gone and not just to ‘tie up loose ends.’

“You seven have enough attention on you right now, so I want to keep this out of the limelight, which means you need to leave, for your sakes and for the sake of restoring peace. All the situations on this end have been handled, and I would like us to move on.”

He wasn’t wrong. Every single one had been handled.

Ian was dead.

Patrick was dead.

Everyone who had been loyal to Patrick was dead.

Even George was dead, and not because of the pain we’d inflicted on him.

No, the stupid bastard had broken out of the chair, and our security had followed orders and shot him on the spot when he tried to leave the basement. I didn’t feel bad about that.

The final loose end though? Ian’s father, the man in the helicopter, was dead.

Last night, we had dragged him down into the basement, where Mr. Ross no doubt took great satisfaction in making him scream. I had seen a lot of versions of Torin Ross, but last night seemed extremely personal, and I had a feeling it had to do with his wife’s connection to Ian’s father. Haven had stood there watching every moment of the torture, only solidifying my theory.

“So where do you want us to go?” I asked curiously, wondering if they wanted us to go home. I wasn’t opposed to the idea—fuck, I would love to get Dahlia in my actual bed—but I didn’t think the attention issue would be any better there.

Maybe we needed to get used to the media aspect. It was possible, considering who we were and our relationship, that it would always be a problem.

“I would like you to go to our house in Monaco,” Mr. Ross said simply. “At least reroute through there for a day or so. I have been made aware you need to get back, partly because of school—” the other part because of the FBI issue, no doubt

“—but if you spent a couple of days there, it would pull the media attention away since most of them aren’t allowed into there.”

It was true—in Monaco, we would blend in with everyone else who had stupid amounts of money.

“Are you okay with that?” I asked Dahlia. She nodded, looking more relaxed. I had a feeling our girl needed to get out of here. It was a lot at once; I didn’t blame her.

“Are you guys okay with that?” Torin looked towards Jason and Kristy Aldridge, who both looked a little hesitant.

Dahlia turned to them. “I need to get out of here, and I know you guys are needed here. I will be totally fine.” Her father looked tense, but she wasn’t wrong—it was clear that Jason played a far larger role in Torin’s shit than I even realized.

“We almost lost you.”

The words filled the space as I saw everyone really absorb what he was saying. It was a painful reality.

“But you didn’t,” she stated softly. “Plus, if we are trying to avoid attention, traveling as a family is a horrible idea—think about every vacation we go on.”

It was true, the media loved the Aldridges and were constantly following them. I had no idea how they had managed to shield Dahlia from it for so long.

“Let’s talk about this later, but that should work,” Mrs. Aldridge conceded.

I had a feeling that Dahlia would need to convince them pretty strongly for them to fully agree to that concept.

“Fantastic, let’s go eat dinner then. It’s set up in the pavilion,” my father offered, breaking the tension. Everyone got up and headed out through the side doors, but Dahlia didn’t make a move to get off of me. When the others came to sit near us, I could tell she was thoughtful, watching the parents gather around the large outdoor table.

“What’s going on in your head?” I asked softly.

“I have a question.” She drew her bottom lip in with her teeth.

“Okay,” Sterling encouraged.

“When you had George here...what did you do to him?”

One of them made a concerned noise, and King offered me a look that made me realize he was actually worried about her response to the truth. I fixed my gaze on Dahlia and really looked at her, realizing that she knew. She knew the truth already.

“What?” she asked softly.

“You know what we did. I don’t know how you know, but you do,” I stated confidently, her cheeks staining pink.

“I do,” she murmured. “I don’t want to be left out of the loop anymore... I don’t need details, especially specifics about that stuff, but I want to know what’s going on. I don’t want to feel clueless.” Her comment was directed to King, who nodded stiffly.

“Your father,” she continued, motioning to Dermot, “showed me a video of you guys in the basement with George.”

Fuck.

Silence filled the space as she looked at all of our faces before giving a small smile. “Well, that’s not the reaction I expected. You all look terrified.”

“You aren’t?” Sterling audibly swallowed.

Her face turned thoughtful. “I think that had been his intention...but it didn’t scare me. I think I knew what you guys were capable of. He asked me what I saw, and I just said ‘the men I love.’”

My perfect, sweet bunny.

I burrowed my nose in her hair, hiding my smile, and she continued, “I want to make something clear though. There is nothing that can scare me away. I’m here for the long haul, as long as that’s what you guys want.”

King let out a choked noise, looking dazed. “What ‘we want’?”

“Yep.” She nodded simply.

“What we want is you,” Dermot responded immediately.

“Forever,” Stratton added.

Her smile was fucking glorious. “Fantastic. Now let’s go eat.”

I blinked as she escaped my arms. Somehow this magnificent woman continued to surprise me. I had a feeling there would never be a moment that I would find out everything there was to know about Dahlia.

Chapter Nine

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“I just don’t understand how you got a bed this big, King,” I pointed out, the sunshine streaking across the emerald green bedding in the late morning light.

I had woken up maybe only thirty-minutes ago, and the day was already looking up, especially since my sleeping arrangements had been more than ideal.

After dinner, our families had stayed up long enough into the night that I’d fallen asleep tucked into Stratton’s side. When I woke, I found myself in a truly massive bedroom. The ceiling was easily two stories and peaked with wooden beams, the stone walls making it look like a medieval bedroom suite fit for...well, a king. Considering it was Kingston’s bedroom, I was finding that fairly amusing.

That was the first thing I noticed, followed by the fact that I was in bed with all of them. *Yes, all of them.* My fantasies come to life.

My head had been resting on Dermot’s chest, and King had fallen asleep with his arms wrapped around my waist with his face pressed against my stomach. Stratton had knocked out next to me, and to his far side was Lincoln, his glasses tossed to the side and his face more relaxed than I’d seen it in days.

Sterling had slept to the other side of Dermot, his hand up and behind his head, his face completely peaceful. When I’d slowly sat up to look for Yates, I’d found him spread out horizontally, closer to the end of the bed, his laptop closed and laying on his chest, his one hand reaching out to wrap around

my ankle. Honestly, the moment had been enough to nearly make me tear up with happiness.

However, it was a pain in the butt to get up and try to go pee. When I finally managed it, I also brushed my teeth before trying to slip back into bed.

Now, thirty minutes later, I was sitting on the plush bed in my pajamas, slowly sipping coffee that had been delivered minutes ago as my men got up for the day.

“Yes, King,” Lincoln chuckled, “How did you get a bed so big?”

King narrowed his gaze at Lincoln but then looked back at me with warmth. “I had it made.”

I arched my brow. “Why?”

My old insecurities would have had me thinking it was for...well, I didn't even want to go down that mental path. I knew better now, though, and I waited patiently as I watched his jaw clench, caution filling his gaze. Hadn't he realized that nothing he could say would change my mind about him?

“Because I eventually hoped we would be here, like this,” King admitted, motioning to the room. I smiled at the sweet notion while Lincoln shook with laughter at King's embarrassment from where he sat behind me, up against the large wooden headboard.

“I love this,” I admitted, looking towards the window and the large assortment of leather couches that sat in front of the fireplace, where Sterling, Stratton, and Dermot sat drinking coffee and watching the news. The broadcast was set low enough that I couldn't hear what it was saying, but if I had to guess it was something to do with everything that had happened.

“Good, I have one in each property,” King said happily.

The bedroom door opened as Yates walked in, the only one of us dressed and ready for the day, his gaze immediately meeting mine. “King, your dad wants to see all of you before we leave. Bunny, if you want, I can show you around for when we eventually come back.”

“Yes please.” I hopped up and walked towards the bathroom to get ready for the day. I have to say, I was completely unsurprised to find an entire area of the counter stocked with my products. Brushing out my hair, I washed my face, not bothering to shower since I had last night before bed. My hair had dried surprisingly wavy today, and I didn’t bother braiding it, slipping on a robe before walking back into the now-empty bedroom.

Momentarily, my thoughts strayed to the conversation I had with my parents last night.

“Are you sure you are comfortable with this?” my dad asked, his tone filled with a serious nature that I didn’t often hear from him. “I understand what Torin wants, but I don’t care about that. I want to know what you want. If you want to go home with us or stay here with us, that’s what we will do. You come first, so if you don’t want to go with the boys to Monaco before heading home, you don’t have to.”

I had a feeling my dad was still recovering from the revelation of the situation at hand. Well, that and his daughter being kidnapped and almost dying.

Yeah, my parents were probably going to be a bit protective for...well, forever.

My mom’s arms were wrapped around me as we sat off to the side of the small get-together, my answer one that I was feeling far more confident in as the minutes passed.

“I think this is for the best. Not only is it dangerous to be together, because that’s what the media will expect, but I know Mr. Ross needs your help, Dad. He may not have said it directly, but it seems both of you”—I narrowed my eyes playfully at my mom—“have been at this for a bit.”

“I knew you would eventually find out,” my dad conceded, “but I didn’t want it to be like this. I didn’t want such a horrible situation—”

“I knew before this,” I responded evenly. “King told me what his family was involved in before we left for the trip.

Plus, I feel way better.”

“Honey,” my mom spoke quietly, “I know you feel better, but—”

“I want to be with them. I want to go to Monaco with them.” My words were clear, and I could tell both of them understood where I was coming from. “They have always been with me, and that isn’t going to change now. I promise you, if I wasn’t okay with this situation, I would tell you.”

My dad exchanged a look with my mom before nodding. “As long as that’s what you want. Torin is sending the best of his security with you, including Owen Stoll, but make sure you listen to the boys as well. Trust your judgment, and if they say something is dangerous, it probably is.”

“Especially with how protective they are,” my mom added.

“We are going to be home as soon as we can,” my dad promised before saying, “I want you as safe as possible. Just think about it as helping the boys.”

“Helping them?”

“Yes, because if you even scrape your knee, they’re fucking dead.”

I had a feeling he wasn’t joking.

When the conversation was done, I could tell the tension my parents were holding onto eased a bit. I don’t think anyone would have been mad if I had chosen to handle this a different way, but I also knew my boys wanted me with them. I felt my lips tip up at that. Actually, I was almost positive that Yates wouldn’t let me *not* be with them.

After I changed into a pair of dark jeans and a sweater that fell off my shoulder, I looked around, trying to find Yates, realizing that the bedroom suite had an entire section to it that I hadn’t seen. I walked through an archway towards the far wall and came into a balcony-like space that was framed by large, iron-framed french doors. Immediately, I smiled, finding

Yates sitting at a table, reading through something on his tablet.

The estate grounds were a gorgeous green, and I noticed that it always seemed to be right on the edge of possibly raining. A soft wind brushed over me as I inhaled the fresh air, feeling a jolt of energy that far surpassed anything coffee could have offered. I let out a happy hum, reaching my arms above my head.

“You look beautiful.”

Yates’s words were soft, and the warm affection he regarded me with made my cheeks turn pink.

Instead of answering, I sat down on his lap, and he immediately wrapped an arm around me. “Eat up, bunny. We are going to be busy today, so I want you to get something in your stomach. Especially with all the medicine you’re taking.”

“Oh, that reminds me—”

Yates reached into his pocket and pulled out two bottles, making me smile at how freakin’ prepared he was. When he also put my birth control on the table, I offered him an arched brow. He shrugged, apparently not thinking it was weird or inappropriate at all that he’d totally gone through my stuff.

After taking the first two pills, I popped open my birth control and felt my eyes widen slightly, running my finger to the ‘Monday’ column. Three. Three were there that shouldn’t be. Lord. I felt my throat tighten a bit, instantly thinking about King and me in the car. Would he be upset?

“Dahlia.”

I looked at Yates, who was watching me with confusion. “What’s wrong, bunny?”

Nibbling my lip, I showed him the birth control. “I missed three pills, not including the one I took today... Obviously we were traveling, and then I was sleeping—”

“Unconscious and recovering,” Yates growled, “not sleeping.”

“Still,” I murmured, “I didn’t take them... and King and I, we...”

“Bunny.” His fingers tilted my chin. “What are you worried about?”

Was it that obvious?

“I didn’t mean to have unprotected sex, and I know King made a joke about pregnancy...” My throat tightened again. “I’m just worried he will be upset.”

Yates chuckled, making me scowl, his eyes lighting up with mirth before he leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Bunny, you have absolutely nothing to worry about.” I watched as he picked up his phone and my eyes widened in horror. I tried to lean forward to grab it, but his large arm blocked me.

“What’s up?” King asked, familiar voices in the background.

“Dahlia just realized she has missed three birth control pills because of everything that has happened, and she’s concerned you will be upset at the prospect of her actually becoming pregnant—”

King’s warm chuckle instantly had everything inside of me relaxing. “You there, princess?”

“Yes.” My answer was short, and my voice was a bit wobbly.

“What did I tell you after we slept together the first time?”

I sighed. “That you would be okay with me going off my birth control?” I had a feeling this is where he would have taken it. “But this is different, King. This is a real possibility —”

“That I love. A possibility that I love. I will always take care of you, Dahlia, no matter what happens. The idea of you getting pregnant is an extremely appealing one, so do not worry about me being upset. Okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, feeling loads better.

“Enjoy your day, princess,” King said before chuckling. “I’ll make sure to let the others know.”

“King...” But he was already gone. Yates offered me a cheery smile as he put down his phone.

“See, bunny? Nothing to worry about. Now take your medicine and eat.”

Staring at him for a minute in disbelief, I muttered under my breath about him being bossy...before doing what he told me to do.

I took the last pill and then began to pick at the assortment of pastries and fruit on the table, knowing that if I didn’t, the combination of my pill, antibiotics, and pain medicine would make me sick to my stomach.

While I ate, Yates continued to look over a document, and honestly it made me feel a lot more comfortable to eat without eyes on me. Although, I couldn’t lie, there had been a large shift inside of me since the other night. While I knew my issues with control and body image were far from gone, my eating issues and Abby seemed like a world away compared to the imminent danger we faced. They just didn’t seem as big while I worried about not only my life, but the life of my boys and my family. It was a concern that paled in comparison.

We sat for a while in comfortable silence, and by the end of my second cup of coffee and some food, I was feeling ready for the day.

“I’m done,” I announced, standing up. Yates’s eyes darted to the tray of food that was surprisingly half gone, relief filling his gaze before he stood and offered me a hand. I had no idea where we were going, but I followed him easily, loving the moment of solitude we had managed to find.

As we walked through the large bedroom and out into the hall, I realized what it was about this place that made it feel a bit off—it was largely empty. Even though our estates were large back home, there was always someone doing something, but here even the housekeepers seemed to keep themselves scarce. The entire place had a very heavy tone to it.

“It’s so quiet here.” I looked up at Yates. “Is it always?”

“Every time I’ve been here it has been.” Yates squeezed my hand. “It isn’t a place that has seen a lot of happiness. It serves a purpose, but that’s where it starts and ends.”

As we stepped through a large archway into the back yard, I noticed that the property was huge and that a line of trees far in the distance most likely marked the property line. It made me wonder just how many acres this compound was. Despite his words, I saw the potential in this place.

I spoke quietly, “Do you think sometimes that it could be something more? Somewhere that people could form happy memories, even if it still serves a larger purpose?”

“I think we would have to be careful to make sure the two don’t come together, but I think it’s possible,” Yates admitted. “What’s on your mind, bunny?”

I nibbled on my lip. “Okay, I am going to assume this won’t freak you out and just tell you exactly what popped into my head. Promise you won’t think I’m crazy?”

Yates’s eyes jumped with amusement. “There isn’t anything you could say that would freak me out.”

“Unlikely,” I countered.

He stopped me and cupped my jaw. “Trust me. There is nothing.”

I blinked, realizing he was serious, and then tugged his hand so we could keep walking. “Okay, fine. So, assuming that we have kids one day...would we be able to bring them here? Safely? Could they play out here? Would we be able to hold family parties like back home? I want their lives to be filled with as much happiness and closeness as ours was, and I worry that this place won’t be able to be like that. I know that we won’t live here, but I want them to travel, I want them to see how beautiful it is here... And I know it won’t be an ‘all the time’ type of thing, but this will be at least one-seventh of their extended family. I don’t know, I realize that eventually they will have to understand what comes with being in the

family, but until then I want them to be able to enjoy themselves here.”

Before he could answer, I continued, “I mean, we are going to have to host a lot of holidays as it is, because I am not about to travel six or seven places just to see extended family. I don’t know... I mean, I do know, but I am just rambling now... I guess what I’m saying is that I want to make sure our kids still get to have freedom and safety while traveling and experiencing things... What?”

I had finally looked up at Yates, who had a ridiculously stunning smile on his face. Before I could question him further, he surged forward and seared my lips in a kiss. When he pulled away, I was breathless, and his smile was huge and happy still. Crap. He should not be able to smile like that.

“What was that?” I asked, my voice a bit breathless.

“I love you. And I really fucking love you talking about our future family and kids like that.” He wrapped me up, nuzzling his nose in my hair. “I can promise you, Dahlia, that whatever you want for our family, you’ll have. They may have to have the best security known to man surrounding them, but we will make it happen. Hell, I would shut down an entire fucking city if it meant you wanting to go there. Okay?”

I examined his face and nodded, blushing. “Okay.”

His words made me feel far better, I wouldn’t lie.

“Come on, I have something to show you.” He gently tugged my hand, and when we turned a corner, my eyes went wide at the large hedges that rose above me like some grand entrance into a hall. I followed him as we walked through the manicured greenery, the rustling of leaves having me look down to where an adorable bunny hopped past, making Yates chuckle.

I scowled at him, knowing that it had to do with my nickname.

“What is this?” I asked curiously before we finally turned a corner to find a gorgeous garden of bright flowers and benches surrounding a large open space and fountain.

Yates's expression turned momentarily vulnerable, and he shrugged. "When you were talking about the kids, I just thought of this place immediately..."

He paused, and I raised my brows before he grunted, "I have thought about it before now. Imagining you here with all of us and our future family."

"Yeah?" I leaned close to him, unable to stop myself from smiling.

"Yeah, bunny." He brushed my nose with his own. "I have wanted this, all of this, for far too long to be rational."

What he didn't realize is that I had too.

"Yates, this is exactly what I want and where I want to be."

There was no doubt about that.

Chapter Ten

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“You’re going to lose to her,” Sterling casually pointed out, looking up from where he was flipping through a catalog of some kind. I hadn’t checked, but I think it featured boats, maybe? I was far too focused on the task at hand.

I was also very comfortable, tucked into the leather seat of the jet we were on, surrounded by a warm blanket as we soared towards Cote d’Azur Airport in France. We had been in the air for about an hour, so I knew we would be landing fairly soon.

I was hoping to finish this game before that. I had a point to prove.

Lincoln made a frustrated noise as he moved his checker piece forward, and I smiled to myself, knowing he was aware he couldn’t win this. Dermot shook his head, looking very amused from where he sat in the seat to my other side, a small aisle separating us. Unfortunately for my focus, he looked especially handsome this morning, his massive arms barely contained in the dark sweater that he wore.

Also, was it just me, or did they all smell ridiculously good right now? It should have been illegal to be trapped in a jet with six amazing-smelling men. It was a disaster waiting to happen.

“He’s not wrong,” Yates said in passing, walking back towards where King and Stratton were talking about something important. I didn’t know what, but I could tell it

was important by how quiet they were being. I would have gotten up if I wasn't loving how cozy I was right now.

Three turns later, I had in fact won, and Lincoln groaned, putting his head back as my smile grew. I sat forward slightly. "Sorry, Linc. Next time I'll let you win."

His eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. "Let me win?"

I squeaked, seeing the vengeance in his gaze, and hopped up out of my seat. I let out a small dramatic cry as he followed and caught me around the waist, nipping my neck. I winced, wanting to laugh instead, but overwhelmed by the pain radiating through my ribs as I felt almost completely breathless. I must have made a noise, because Lincoln turned me immediately, his hands gliding over my ribs as he offered me a horrified look.

"Fuck, I am so sorry Dahlia—"

"It really doesn't hurt that much anymore," I promised. "I don't think they were bruised as bad as they looked." Lincoln shook his head in disagreement, leaning forward and capturing my lips in a hard kiss that had me melting into him. Of course they still hurt, but I didn't want him to feel guilty. That was the last thing I would ever want.

"Angel," Stratton called out to me. I turned around, Lincoln grumbling, and went to where he was sitting, looking far more relaxed than before. He and King must have been done with whatever they were discussing. I sat down on his lap as King looked at me from across the table, seeming to consider something before he spoke.

"I want to talk to you about something," King said.

"Okay, so saying that so doesn't help my anxiety," I pointed out and looked down at Stratton. "Who freakin' does that?" His icy eyes filled with warmth and amusement as King chuckled and drew my attention back.

"It's not bad, I'm just worried you may not like it," King hedged. I huffed in exasperation. I swear to the lord, people who didn't have anxiety had no idea the panic that the phrase 'we need to talk about something' created.

“Go on...” I motioned for him to continue. His eyes darkened at my sassy tone, so I flashed him a smile. I knew if I kept it up, one of them was going to do something fun instead of treating me like freakin’ glass. I just had to push the right buttons. Being sassy with King was almost always guaranteed to work.

“When we get back to Wildberry, you aren’t going to be able to go anywhere off the property without one of us or security.”

I shrugged, feeling like that was logical considering the situation at hand. “I mean, if you think that’s best. I don’t really go to a lot of places without one of you, and if I really need to, I get the need for security...” I paused before continuing, “But if I am going somewhere without one of you, is there any way it can be a female bodyguard? After that last incident, I’m just a little cautious.”

‘A little cautious’ was the understatement of the century. I wouldn’t tell my boys, because I knew it was an impossible situation to fix, but the mental image of security in their dark outfits constantly had the events of last week playing through my mind.

You know, that time when Yates got brains all over me. That one.

“Well, that was easy,” Stratton hummed happily.

King blinked at me and then chuckled, shaking his head. “Yeah, that’s perfect... I didn’t expect you to be so agreeable.”

“Why not?” I frowned.

“I just worry you are going to resent us for cutting off your freedom.”

I really loved how honest King could be.

I tilted my head. “But you aren’t. You are working to find a way for me to live exactly how I want but in a safe way. I want to be around you guys all the time. And if I ever need to go somewhere by myself or with our kids one day, then I would expect security. It’s clear our small town is way more dangerous than I thought.”

In fact, our world in general was far more dangerous than I had naively assumed.

King's face lit up. "Kids?"

I realized in that moment that this was why the train was on the fast track for our relationship. Throughout my entire life, there hadn't been much of anything I'd hidden from my boys. In fact, until Abby, the only secret I'd had was my feelings for them. But now we were being completely honest, so everything that popped into my head, from marriage to kids, was on the table. There was no game-playing or concern about bringing stuff up—it was just that simple.

"Oh yes," Yates chimed in from across the aisle, "Dahlia was talking all about having kids earlier."

"Like soon?" Sterling asked, peeking his head over the seat.

"I wouldn't be opposed," Stratton murmured.

I couldn't fight the smile on my face. These men... What did I even do with them?

"No, not super soon," I pointed out, making Lincoln scowl from where he was leaning over the back of the seat.

"Why?" Dermot asked, his eyes jumping with amusement.

I narrowed my eyes at him. See?! He enjoyed causing trouble.

"For one, we aren't married, and call me old fashioned, but I would like for that to at least be a thing, somehow." I waved my hand, trying to not overthink that, but fully falling off the edge of 'future' talk. "But also, we are literally eighteen, except for Dermot. We can't."

"Why not?" King asked, as if the word 'cannot' didn't exist to him.

I opened my mouth, closed it, and arched a brow. "Are you actually saying you are ready to settle down and do the entire family thing?"

After all, planning to have a family was far different than accidentally getting pregnant...

“I mean, I think that’s exactly what we are doing,” Yates pointed out.

“Especially since King bought the house that Dermot is living in for that exact purpose,” Sterling added.

I looked at King, his glare at Sterling nearly making me laugh, then glanced around at all of them. “Seriously?”

“Which reminds me, the interior designer for renovations is coming Wednesday,” King said.

My eyes widened. “We still aren’t married.”

I was seriously trying to find a way to mentally stop the train I was going down, because if we were being honest...I was ready for all of that. I was having trouble accepting that I was ready for all that, but I was ready for it, especially with them. Of course, I wouldn’t mind waiting for kids for a little bit, but I wanted to live together, I wanted to get married, I wanted to start living my life with them. It was all I’d wanted for a very long time.

“But we will be soon,” Lincoln said.

I offered all of them a confused look, trying to ignore the bubbling joy in my chest. “Were you going to ask?” I demanded, trying to not laugh at the confusion on all of their faces. Stratton was smiling against my shoulder, and Dermot, the troublemaker, just offered me an amused look.

“I mean, yes, but you don’t really have an option, bunny,” Yates mused, continuing to scroll through his tablet. The twins both nodded as I looked to Stratton, who just shrugged, looking like he was loving this. King, though, was the funniest—he looked so determined, like I was somehow going to fight him on this.

I had no intention of doing so.

I nodded. “Okay, well, you still have to ask officially, and then maybe we can think about kids.”

I looked with interest at the papers they had on the table, silence filling the space.

“Thank fuck,” Lincoln exhaled.

“Did you just agree to marry us?” Stratton demanded softly as I looked around at their surprised faces.

“You said I didn’t have a choice.” I gave a coy smile and then shrugged. “Guess you will have to officially ask to find out.” I hopped up and went towards the back bedroom, my face flaming and needing a moment to myself.

I couldn’t help but laugh as they immediately broke into conversation behind the door. I let out a happy sound and melted into the bed, closing my eyes and realizing that it was completely possible that everything I wanted was right within reach.

My sleepy thoughts immediately turned to the time when I first realized, around freshman year, that I wanted to spend every moment, every holiday, with only one group of men, and it was my boys...

“Hey, Dahlia.”

My head snapped up from where I’d been scanning through my English notes before class. I had it on good authority—as in Lincoln hacking into the school computers last night—that we would be having a pop quiz today...which I was oddly thankful for because today was turning out to be a bit of a rough one, and I needed a distraction.

Unfortunately, I had a feeling that Huck, who was now staring at me expectantly, was going to only make it worse.

“Hey.” It was a small, polite greeting paired with an awkward smile.

Normally I was far more friendly, but Huck was frustrating for more than one reason, the main one being that he would never take ‘no’ for an answer. He didn’t read into social cues, and if he did notice I was uncomfortable, he clearly didn’t

care. Instead he just kept asking me out on dates, and I kept telling him very clearly that I didn't date.

It wasn't a lie, either—I didn't. Not only would my mom and dad have a fit if I tried to go on a date because I was only sixteen, but more than that...I just wasn't interested in Huck. Yet instead of believing me or picking up on how uncomfortable he made me, the jerk was convinced that I was just playing 'hard to get.'

I didn't understand the logic of that way of thinking at all. Plus, it was now at the point that whenever I saw Huck, I got this horrible anxious tightness in my stomach. It had only been two weeks that he'd been so hyper-focused on me, so I couldn't imagine how I would feel if it kept going... I was trying to put off telling my friends so I didn't bother them with it.

At the same time, I knew they would take my concern seriously. I didn't ever want to be alone with Huck, and he kept finding ways to do exactly that. Maybe this was more serious than I was allowing myself to believe.

"So I know you said no before..." He stood over me as I tried to lean back, not liking the way he seemed to loom over the table. I think he was trying to offer me a charming smile, but it made me uneasy enough that I didn't hear him at first when he said, "...but I was wondering if you wanted to go out tonight for Valentine's Day. There is a new movie out that I've been wanting to see."

I kept my expression serious and steeled myself. "Huck. I don't want to go out with you."

There! I had said it! That hadn't been very hard...

His eyes flared with victory and anger, a confusing mix to say the least. "I fucking knew it. This was never about mommy and daddy not letting you date, was it?"

My eyes went wide at the venom in his voice. "Well, no, there is also that aspect—"

"You just think you're fucking better than all of us," he spit out. "Whatever, Dahlia. It's your loss for being such a—"

“For being such a what?” King drew out, his voice filling the space of the library. He nearly appeared out of thin air, allowing me to rest easy as relief flooded into every single part of my body.

Huck turned paper white as he looked over my head, stumbling back as King’s hands smoothed over my shoulders in a comforting way. I should have felt bad about taking pleasure in Huck’s discomfort, but he clearly did the same to others, so instead I sat back in my seat, not terribly surprised when Sterling appeared in the seat next to me. He gently pulled my braid in a friendly way, but his eyes were on Huck.

“Kingston.” Huck swallowed and then looked down to Sterling.

“Leave. Now.”

Huck practically jumped and ran off, scampering like a scared puppy. Sterling let out an amused hum, the two of them seeming far more intense than usual as King made his way around the table to sit across from me. Despite only being sixteen, both of my friends had gotten huge over the summer, and I could tell the other boys were scared of them.

“We need to take care of that later,” Sterling suggested.

Take care of what? Huck? I didn’t get a chance to ask though.

“Are you okay?” King asked softly as Sterling wrapped an arm around my shoulders, making me feel ten times better.

“Much better now.” I smiled softly. “It’s been a rough day.”

“Why?” Sterling asked, his brow dipping.

I motioned to the library that was currently decorated in red and pink for Valentine’s Day.

“You love holidays.” King frowned. “Especially Valentine’s Day.”

“Because it used to be fun. We would get candy and exchange cute little cards. Now everyone is making it this big thing about dates and stuff,” I murmured, not understanding

why it bothered me so much. “That’s why he was asking if I wanted to go out to a movie.”

“No.” King frowned at that idea before he tilted his head, looking thoughtful. “You don’t like the romantic aspect?”

“It’s not that,” I hedged. “I think it’s just the pressure. Like, it’s cool if it happens naturally...but it’s making me feel weird that everyone is insisting you have to have plans. Like what if I want to just hang out and watch movies at home?”

“Then that’s what we will do.” Sterling squeezed my shoulder. “No date or anything else like that. We are on the exact same page as you.”

“Agreed. No date.” King seemed very insistent.

I nibbled my lip. “And no one has asked you guys out? Or did you guys make plans?”

Both of them looked at me like I was crazy.

“Nope. Wouldn’t be interested anyway,” King said seriously.

“Plus, now I’m excited about our movie night. What do we want to watch?” Sterling asked.

Immediately, King pulled out his phone to look up what was available, and I couldn’t help feeling happy and content. This was far better than anything romantic. No matter what happened in the future, I always wanted my holidays to be with these boys.

I wanted everything to be with them.

Now I would have every moment and holiday to look forward to, with them and our families...and future families. When a warm hand brushed through my hair, I opened my eyes to find King laying next to me, his eyes on the ceiling of the bedroom in thought.

“You okay?” I asked, letting out a yawn.

“Didn’t want to wake you.” He frowned slightly. “We are going to be landing here in a minute before we take a

helicopter into Monaco.”

I nodded sleepily and crawled up into his arms, feeling the tension running through his frame as I rested my head against his chest. “What’s wrong, King?”

“I feel like I should be helping the family out and getting this sorted, but I also know this is safer,” he whispered, as if admitting his concern was somehow bad.

I lifted my head from his chest to look at him and spoke honestly, “I think you handle a lot more than you recognize. You are even handling making sure we get somewhere safe. I’m sure that’s a massive amount of mental pressure off everyone’s plate. Don’t discount what you are doing.”

He seemed to consider my words before nodding seriously. King closed his eyes as I examined his handsome face, running my finger along his jaw. He popped open an eye and flashed a smile.

That smile spelled so much trouble.

“What?” I asked.

“You know the minute you have a ring on your finger, I’m going to knock you up, right?” That devious smile grew wider on his face.

“King!” I nearly squeaked as he chuckled. “You are not!”

“Right, right.” He nodded, closing his eyes. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, princess.”

I couldn’t help but smile into his chest.

I didn’t need a warning for something I wanted.

Chapter Eleven

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“They are saying *what?*” Dermot’s sharp demand had my brows raising in concern, his voice going from relaxed to infuriated in a second flat. I honestly hadn’t heard what Lincoln had just said, but that was partly because I was tucked into Stratton’s side, his large jacket wrapped around me as we walked towards the helicopter to fly us into Monaco.

Unfortunately, taking the jet into Monaco wasn’t an option since they didn’t have an airport, so this would take us right to the helipad on the Ross estate. Unfortunately, the five minute drive to this location had not been without problems. Rather the opposite. Somehow it had gotten around that we would be landing, and our car had nearly been swarmed with cameras and questions. I felt bad because it was mainly my fault. I hadn’t thought twice about taking off my sweater and switching into a breezy tank. It was beautiful in France, and the ocean had only made the breeze warmer. While I had been perfectly content, none of us had considered the jumps the media would make when they saw the bruises littering my body. Questions had been thrown at me left and right, so much so that I finally asked for Stratton’s jacket because I felt so self-conscious.

“They have a million fucking conspiracies for the bruises on her arms,” Lincoln growled, tossing his phone towards Dermot, his gaze scanning across the phone before his jaw clenched. I had a feeling the article was far worse than any of us would have imagined.

“They think we did it?” Dermot snapped, looking almost horrified.

“At least they aren’t connecting it to the problems in Ardara,” I murmured. Mr. Ross hadn’t been wrong—despite trying to keep it quiet, the explosion of the warehouse had gained attention from the national media, so I was really glad we weren’t there now.

“There is already a negative light on us because of this video from back home,” King said, “Pair that with what you have gone through in their eyes, being bullied, and they are going to jump on anything they can. I suppose one positive is that they are not viewing you as part of the problem, more the victim, but I would rather they didn’t even say your fucking name.”

“I’m sorry guys.” I shook my head. “I didn’t think twice about taking off my sweater.”

“No,” Sterling warned, “you are not apologizing for wanting to be comfortable. You shouldn’t have to overthink what you’re wearing because of these assholes.”

“Okay,” I murmured, offering a small huff. Yates chuckled next to me, my place between Stratton and him having my body humming with a soft magnetic energy.

As we grew closer to the helicopter, I couldn’t help but appreciate how beautiful the aircraft was. It was matte black with a gold scripted ‘R’ on the side, the family crest outlined below. I had to give the Rosses this—they didn’t let anyone forget who they were, and I found that I loved it a bit more than I expected.

The pilot greeted us as Dermot helped me with protective ear gear and showed me how to talk if I wanted to, although I had a feeling that I would be too busy looking at our gorgeous surroundings. I squeezed between Dermot and Stratton as the boys talked, my eyes on the landscape as we finally lifted off the ground and took off towards our destination.

The ocean below us was bright and vibrant, the sky matching it as the sun turned all of the coastal buildings into a

warm, glowing white. A mass of different size yachts dotted the ocean, and I wondered briefly if we were going to go out onto the water while we were here... Honestly, that sounded pretty amazing. I would find any excuse to lay out in my swimsuit, especially if it meant seeing my men shirtless. I let out a happy hum at that thought.

Maybe this little side vacation was exactly what we needed.

After maybe ten minutes, we began to approach a series of large estates up the hillside. I had been around some very large pieces of property, but even I had to admit that the Ross estate in Monaco was the epitome of 'excess.' I mean, heck, the garden even had a massive *R* made of flowers so that you could see it from above, and that wasn't including the large fountains I could see.

It was placed on one of the highest spots on the coast looking over the ocean, and the warm Spanish tile that adorned its roof had me feeling excited to be here. In a place with so little open real estate, they not only had a massive open backyard, so large there was a helicopter pad, they also had a pool and tennis court. The closest neighbors weren't close at all, and I had to assume that they had bought this piece of land a very long time ago, because it was no doubt worth an absurd amount if purchased today.

Then again, that probably wouldn't have stopped them.

Because we were landing right on the property, we didn't have to worry about the media, and apparently the security team had been sent ahead early this morning so once we were on the property, there would be absolutely nothing to worry about. I let out a pleased sound as we landed and I removed my headphones and hopped out, someone calling my name as I walked off the pad and towards the house.

I let out a sound of surprise as Sterling scooped me up from behind in a bridal hold, my eyes wide as he looked down at me and winked.

"What are you doing?" I asked, unable to stop the giggle that escaped me. There was an energy to Sterling today that

was far different than normal; the way he looked down at me had my toes curling in excitement. I had noticed that he had seemed to be holding back from me since yesterday, and I knew it was because of my injuries, so I was glad that he didn't seem to be acting as cautious anymore.

“Making sure you rest.” He shrugged, offering me a wink as I leaned further into him. This man was so damn perfect it was actually unfair.

“I feel a lot better than I thought I would,” I admitted softly. “The bruises just look bad.”

Sterling looked over my face and hummed in agreement, leaning forward and brushing his lips against my head. As he walked up the back steps of the property, I took in the massive archways and the mix between classic Spanish architecture and more transitional modern decor that filled the space. Everything was so clean and open... Honestly, I was starting to wonder if this wouldn't end up being my favorite place to visit. It was clear we needed to travel way more than we had been, though, if I was ever going to actually have a favorite.

“Where are we going?” I asked Sterling as he carried me off into the house without the others, his lips tilted up in amusement.

“Food. We are eating because I'm starving, and then we are going to lay out somewhere. I haven't gotten to touch or hold you nearly as much as I need to,” he admitted, nipping my ear as I let out a small sound that was pretty close to moaning.

“I mean, I wouldn't be opposed to you kidnapping me.” I nuzzled into his neck.

“I may just do that. You've been running around so much, I may have to tie you down to the bed.”

Shivers went across my skin as he offered me a wicked, knowing smile. Before I could convince him to find a bedroom or some other place where we could be equally alone, we arrived in a gorgeous open kitchen where an older man was flipping through the well-worn pages of a book, his pristine

white coat and gray mustache very much making him look the part of a chef.

“Mr. Gates, welcome back to the estate,” he said, looking up as we entered the kitchen.

The greeting was genuine, but I scowled up at Sterling.

“When the heck have you been here?” I teased.

“Last summer.” He winked. “It was while you stayed in Nice. Nice to see you again, Noël.”

Okay, that was fair. I hadn’t taken them up on that day trip opportunity...but I had also been distracted by Lincoln, who had convinced me to lay out on the yacht all day and nap.

“What do you want to eat, sugar?” he asked while sitting me on the island counter.

“I can make anything,” Noël promised.

“Oh, I couldn’t—”

“Dahlia.” Sterling kissed my shoulder. “Just say what you’re in the mood for.”

Luckily I saved myself from saying ‘you.’

I nibbled my lip. “I could do risotto or something—”

“Lobster risotto?” Noël asked, looking excited. “I have been wanting to try a new recipe. What else?”

Sterling laughed at my expression. “Can we just have some poached pears and the risotto for now? I know we are still planning to eat dinner.”

The chef nodded, looking a bit disappointed, and I found myself wondering what else I could ask him to make...but before I had a chance to offer, Sterling was carrying me outside. My eyes opened wide as he brought us to a garden that overlooked the coastline, the gorgeous rose bushes lining the windows and house providing us a bit of shelter and privacy from anyone in the house. Which was good, because instead of allowing me to sit on my own, Sterling pulled me right onto his lap, sitting sideways, as his large hand ran up my thigh.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my skin breaking out into shivers and my voice catching slightly.

“Touching you.” Sterling brushed his lips against my neck. “Something I don’t get to do nearly enough, to be honest.”

I couldn’t agree more.

The moment we were alone, something shifted in Sterling, his confident, relaxed facade taking a darker turn, and I could feel both need and panic coming off of him. I was starting to wonder if the situation back in Ardara hadn’t affected him ten times more than I’d originally thought.

“You’re always welcome to touch me,” I murmured. He was welcome to do whatever the heck he wanted, but I had a feeling now was not the time to mention that. I tried to wiggle, but his grip on my leg tightened and became far more firm.

“I didn’t tell you to move.” Sterling nipped my neck, his voice relaxed but holding a thread of dominance to it as my thighs pressed together.

“Oh?” I made a small teasing noise before shifting suddenly so that I was straddling him, my hands running up his shoulders to his large chest. “Was I supposed to wait for permission to do that as well?”

Because Sterling telling me what to do in bed was a wonderful, surprising twist that had my skin breaking out into a flush as my nipples hardened, my attempt to not roll my hips against his hard length nearly a failed one. Lincoln and Sterling were constantly surprising me, and I had a feeling that once I was back to full health and they got their hands on me, I would be completely screwed...in the best way possible.

His hand came out to grip my hair, stringing through it so that he was holding it at the base of my skull, a needy sound leaving me. His voice was lower than normal as he brushed his nose against mine. “Ideally, especially since you’re still hurt.”

I rocked against him, his hard length causing me to shiver in anticipation, as a groan left his throat. My answer was almost breathless. “Trust me, not that hurt.”

His gaze filled with a hint of doubt and concern. “Hurt enough for me to be careful with you, sugar.”

“What if I don’t want that?” I leaned forward to brush my lips against his, feeling far bolder than usual. I’m not positive what inspired it, but I couldn’t help the feeling that if I pushed Sterling enough, I would get what I want.

“I want you, Sterling. Don’t you want me?”

His chuckle was strained. “That has never been in question.”

I let out a happy hum as his fingers pushed Sterling’s jacket off of my shoulders, allowing it to fall to the floor, leaving me in a tank top and jeans. Unfortunately, not the most accessible outfit. Sterling let out a groan, looking down at my breasts that were pressed against the silk bra and tank I wore, my nipples so hard that he could see them, his cock jumping against my covered center.

“Fuck, Dahlia...”

The need in his voice seemed to fuel mine, making me feel almost in a frenzied state of wanting him, my fingers finding their way into his hair as his grip tightened on my ass, causing me to grind against him.

“Please?”

It didn’t matter that this wasn’t the place or time, it just mattered that I needed to feel connected to this man. I needed him to take me in a way that made him feel like I was truly his. That I was truly okay after everything that had happened.

“You need this?” he demanded softly, a dark dominance flashing in his eyes.

“Yes,” I whimpered, “I need you—”

A surprised sound left my throat as he easily stood and set me back down on the chair so that I was kneeling and facing away from him.

I tried to look behind me to see his expression, but he grabbed my jaw gently and kept it forward, his voice rough. “Don’t move, sugar. Not unless I tell you.” Something that

was hard since I felt so exposed, yet filled with excited anticipation as I knelt on the padded wicker lawn chair.

Those thoughts were suddenly completely unimportant as he flicked down one strap of my tank top and bra, biting down on my right shoulder as I leaned back into his chest, loving how massive he was compared to me. I knew he could cover me completely, and when his lips soothed over the bite mark, I let out a soft breath of his name at how hard he was pressed against my ass.

“You promise to be a good girl?” His voice almost held a note of amusement to it, but I could hear the darkness there.

“Maybe—” I let out a small surprised sound as he tugged my other strap down and my breasts were bare to the backyard, both of his hands cupping them and teasing my nipples until I thought I’d lose my mind. He didn’t even give me a moment to try to control myself as my hands came out to grip the back of the chair, his hands unrelenting in their teasing.

“Say it,” he demanded, pausing as frustration welled through me.

“Yes, I’ll be good,” I whimpered.

“Spread them,” he growled, and I spread my legs, falling forward so that my breasts were resting on the upper part of it, completely bent over for him. The chair, considering the padding on it, was actually rather comfortable, and I inhaled sharply as he tugged my wrists back behind me. I had no idea how he knew or managed it, but the position I was in completely removed any possible pain, and instead I was just filled with an overwhelming sense of need. My pussy was wet and my breasts ached but were treated only by the fabric of the chair instead of his fingers.

“What are you—” I moaned as Sterling’s hand came across my ass hard enough that it sent an electric shock to my clit. I nearly climaxed right there. I put my head against the chair as he suddenly wrapped what I was almost positive was his tie, which had been casually around his neck, around my wrists.

“No moving,” he demanded, his voice almost hypnotic in quality. I had never seen this side of Sterling, and I desperately wanted to turn around to see what was turning his voice into this, but I couldn’t move, at all. I think that was the point.

Not only could I not see him, but I was completely on display to anyone who walked out here. The amount of trust I had in Sterling was unlimited, so I gave into it and let out a small moan, wiggling against the ties just to test them.

He let out a pleased rumble when I couldn’t budge before reaching around and slowly unbuckling my jeans, his growl vicious as he tugged them over my ass and pushed them down my thighs so I couldn’t move at all.

“Fucking hell, Dahlia.” He let out a frustrated sound, his hands squeezing my ass hard. “I’m sorry, sugar, this isn’t going to be soft or romantic like I wanted our first time to be. I’ve needed you for way too long... I can’t go anymore without having you. Tell me I can have you.”

“You can have me,” I breathed out. “You can have all of me—”

My moan filled the space as his fingers brushed over my wet heat and he let out an almost feral sound. His voice was far more rough and deep as he spoke, “Do not try to change positions, okay? I want you to take every single inch of me just like this.”

A needy sound left my mouth as I pushed back, suddenly feeling his hard length pressed right between my ass cheeks. Hot desire coursed through every inch of me, making me feel like I was almost in heat. My skin was flushed, and the idea of being caught by one of the other boys only turned me on, the head of his cock running through the slick heat of my pussy before nudging at the entrance.

I was close to begging him to stop teasing me, but when one of his hands gripped the binding of my wrists and his cock pressed right into me, I let out a sound of relief that had my body nearly giving into my building climax. My eyes flared, letting out a sound of concern, as I realized just how thick

Sterling was...before he punched forward, surging completely inside of me.

“Holy fuck!” My voice was choked as a sound I didn’t even recognize came from him. My eyes fell shut and I forced my body to relax, unable to believe just how big this man was. All of my guys were big—I didn’t need to be with other people to know that, I could just tell... But the twins? Holy smokes, they were just so long and wide, it was actually a bit terrifying. My body wasn’t even positive that we were able to handle this, handle him right now.

My teeth were nearly chattering with need as he held himself inside of me, his cock pulsing, as I was torn between begging him to move and asking him to just stay exactly where he was.

“Sterling!” I cried out his name as he pushed further in, making me realize he hadn’t been completely inside of me yet. The adjustment to him had my eyes watering as pleasure and tightness pulsed through my center. I couldn’t move or adjust, either, I just had to take all of him, and my breathing came nearly in pants as he finally bottomed out.

“That’s my good girl,” Sterling growled softly. “Fuck, you are taking every single inch of me, aren’t you? You are so fucking tight, Dahlia, I wouldn’t be surprised if I came after a few strokes. This pussy was made to fuck.”

“Then fuck me,” I whimpered, needing him to move.

A dark chuckle left his lips. Somehow I had a feeling that I was in trouble.

I let out a scream of his name as he pulled back before puncturing his hips forward, hot pleasure slamming into me. Without giving me a moment to adjust, he gave me exactly what I wanted and started to rail in and out of me, making my head spin. My center tightened around him, my body exploding with heat as he took me like he had been wanting to for forever.

I was such a whimpering and moaning mess, begging him to keep going, that when he finally stopped, his stroke so deep

it felt like he had hit my womb, I let out a sound of frustration.

“Gotta be quiet, sugar. Don’t want to send everyone running out here.” His voice had a tone of warning, pure need, and dark amusement. I couldn’t tell you if he liked that idea or not, his cock seeming to grow bigger as he started to pump into me, slow and deep, as I tried to muffle the noises leaving my lips.

“Or maybe that’s what you want,” he groaned. “Do you want to have everyone see you spread out like the fucking feast you are? Goddamn, you were made to be worshipped on all fours. Every single one of your tight holes should be filled with cum all the time.”

“I’m not opposed,” I admitted, moaning as he reached around and began to stroke my clit. I let out a small scream as my first climax slammed into me, making him groan at how I squeezed around him.

I’m almost positive he came, his liquid heat spilling inside of me, but he only pumped harder, and the mixture of our pleasure made it easier for him to stroke in and out of me, his grip on the tie tighter than before. I cried his name as he slammed in and held himself there, the world around me growing dizzy before he pulled back and did it again.

His pace was punishing and fast, as if he knew we didn’t have a lot of time, but the way he continued to tease me contradicted that until I was a needy mess after climaxing so often.

I finally gasped out, “Sterling, I want you to come. I can’t come anymore—”

“Yes you can,” he argued and pulled out slightly, stroking fast and shallow. I groaned in frustration at the loss of him deep inside of me, his responding chuckle evil.

“I won’t go back inside you fully unless you come for me.”

“I can’t,” I whined, tears of pleasure streaming down my face. “Please, Sterling? I need you. I need you inside of me, all of you—”

Sterling slammed into me once more, contradicting his words and giving me exactly what I needed to detonate. I let out a scream as he groaned, completely burying himself in me as I felt him come again, his seed seeping back out of me and onto his cock as he held himself there over me, breathing deeply.

I...I just had no idea what to even say after that. Did I even know any words?

I blinked, trying to rationalize the moment. These men could not be normal, right? They were my normal, though, and honestly, I was blessed.

Holy hell.

I was a wobbly mess as he gently untied my wrists and then drew up my jeans and righted my clothes, kissing every part of my skin as he went. After he got dressed, he picked me up gently, pulling me onto his lap. I melted into his chest, tipping my head back as I looked at my artist. His azure eyes ran over my expression as he let out a hum and pressed his forehead to my own, the contentment and pleasure in my system running over every inch of me.

When he took my wrists and kissed the red spots lightly, I saw his eyes flash with something. My voice was a bit shaky as I asked, "Do you like tying me up?" His eyes went wide as he examined my expression, a thread of caution there as if he was concerned how I would react. So I figured I would be honest. "Because I liked it."

Sterling's eyes darkened as he let out a small groan. "Thank fuck. Yes, I loved it."

Before I could say anything, the sound of someone walking outside had us looking up to the chef, who offered us an unknowing and happy smile, setting down our food and walking back away. Before I could go to reach, though, Sterling shifted me slightly and put some risotto on a spoon and offered it to me.

"I can feed myself," I mumbled but leaned forward and took a bite.

I moaned at the explosion of flavor as he chuckled softly.

“I know.” He kissed my cheek. “But I love doing it.”

How could I argue with that?

Chapter Twelve

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“Wait, what are we doing?” I asked Dermot, unable to stop myself from smiling as he wrapped a firm arm around my waist and pressed a kiss to my lips, one that was hard and persuasive, as if I would somehow say no to him. The Ross men seemed constantly convinced that they would have a battle with me, and I could tell them with one hundred percent surety that I usually wanted to do whatever they had planned.

Especially if it was something hot.

It had been a long afternoon of lounging around, and now that it was early evening, my boys were relaxing on the large terrace of the property while drinking and talking. I had spent a solid fifteen minutes on Sterling’s lap, allowing myself to soak in the moment, and realize that this could easily be the rest of our lives. Plus, now it seemed like Dermot wanted to make my night even better.

His voice was rough and played against my ear. “Just a little trip. I promise we won’t be gone long.”

I nibbled my lip, seeing the excitement in his gaze as I nodded, unable to resist giving into his request. I let out a surprised sound as he surged forward and picked me up, his hands gripping my bare legs as my sundress fell around me. After lunch, I’d taken a long shower and freshened up. The moment of solitude was nice before I got lonely while putting on my makeup. That was when Stratton had showed up and leaned against the counter, watching me curiously while keeping me company. I had a feeling that Stratton had watched me far more than he let on, because there were little things he

seemed to know about me that had me feeling almost high off of his attention.

The boys didn't ask where we were going, so I assumed they knew. Dermot carried me through the house and towards the helipad, making my eyebrows go up. I wasn't positive what I'd expected, but it wasn't that he wanted to go up in the air.

I loved it.

My eyes widened as Dermot opened the door and helped me into the second-in-command seat before walking over towards the other side, holding a pair of keys. I saw him send a message on his phone before he hopped up and flashed me a smile.

“Where is the pilot?” I asked, but he just winked and leaned over to grab a headset, settling it on my head before putting on his own and starting the aircraft up. I buckled myself in quickly, finding myself fascinated by another talent that Dermot seemed to have...flying a helicopter.

It was loud around us, but it was muffled by the headset, and when the system turned on all I could hear was Dermot saying, “You good to go, baby girl?”

I nodded and then let out a squeak as we lifted up from the helipad. Surrendering to the moment and knowing that Dermot would do anything he needed to keep me safe, I relaxed and watched the way he confidently navigated the aircraft, rising high above the luxury properties that filled the landscape. My eyebrows went up as I felt my breath catch, looking down at the vision that was Monaco at twilight.

The skies were painted an ombre of blue and purple, darkening over the sea scattered with yachts that were now glowing with light. The sight was absolutely stunning, almost picture perfect, and I found myself reaching over to squeeze Dermot's arm in excitement.

“It's gorgeous!” I exclaimed through the headphones, wishing I had my camera with me.

His chuckle at my obvious excitement was comfortable and sexy, making me look over at him, his eyes lit up with authentic happiness. I was caught off guard in that exact moment by the overwhelming wave of emotion I felt for him, and I tried to not stare like a total creep but failed, his handsome profile outlined against the night sky.

After about five minutes of flying, I realized he was lowering us, and it wasn't by the house. In fact, it almost appeared like we were on a large cliffside over the water, and if it wasn't for the lights that were scattered along it, I would have wondered if he had landed here by accident. When he finally touched down and turned off the helicopter, I took off my headphones and looked around the peaceful location.

"Where are we?" I asked softly.

"One of the villas right outside Monaco." He didn't explain further but got out and rounded to my side, opening the door and lifting me out. Obviously it was a very nice villa since the helipad here seemed like it was purposefully built to solely access this villa and nothing else.

I didn't bother asking any more questions, wanting to be surprised by what he had in store, as he intertwined our fingers and walked us up a small hill that was lined with lanterns. When we turned a small bend, there was a gorgeous small villa bathed in glowing light, and outside of it was a table facing the sea that looked set for dinner.

"Dermot," I whispered in awe.

He squeezed my hand, offering me a small smile. "Figured if we are over here talking about marriage and babies, I should probably take you on an official date."

"Oh yeah?" I grinned. "I suppose we did skip a few steps. One might even say we rushed it—"

He dipped down and seared my lips.

"Wouldn't want it any other way, baby girl," he admitted. "Can't slow this shite down when it comes to you. Wouldn't want to even if I could."

“Mr. Ross!” A French-accented voice had me looking over to an older woman standing right outside the villa. “I’m so glad you were able to make it.”

I offered him a questioning look as he squeezed my hip gently.

“Thank you for having us on such short notice, Natalie. I wanted to show Dahlia the best of Monaco, and you guys have it.”

She flashed a smile and came up to me, tugging me into a hug. “Of course, any friend of the Ross family is a friend of mine.”

I offered her a small smile when we pulled back. “It’s wonderful to meet you.”

“Come sit.” She waved us over to a table. “We are almost done!”

Natalie disappeared like a whirlwind as Dermot sat down in the chair right next to mine so we were both facing the ocean. I turned my body to look up at him, and his eyes traced my face, looking for a reaction.

“What is all this?” I asked curiously, knowing this wasn’t a restaurant or any type of normal business.

“I took as many opportunities as possible to get out of the compound and my family home growing up,” he offered quietly, looking pensive and maybe a bit sad. “Monaco is one of my favorite locations that we hold property in, and when Uncle Torin needed someone to supervise the new construction process, I was the first to volunteer. Natalie’s husband was one of the contractors, and they used to invite me for dinner up here every weekend.”

That made sense.

“It’s beautiful,” I admitted softly as he tucked a piece of hair behind my ear.

“It is,” he agreed and then leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Then again, anywhere with you is beautiful, Dahlia.”

This man was going to kill me. Seriously, I felt like I was absolutely melting.

My cheeks flushed as I leaned further into him. “You’re sort of a romantic, Dermot... I love it.”

His face was serious as he cupped my jaw. “I wasn’t anything before you, Dahlia. These feelings aren’t ones I’m used to, and I know I will probably mess up, but I am going to do my damn best to show you how I feel whenever I can... The other night scared the hell out of me, baby girl. I thought I lost you. I really thought I fucking lost you.”

“You will never lose me,” I promised.

The promise was one I hoped to keep, and for a moment, the two of us were suspended in time, wrapped up in one another. When we were interrupted by them bringing out food, the moment was broken, the tone turning more relaxed but equally as comfortable.

That was how it had always been with Dermot, so natural and comfortable. It was like I’d known the man forever.

When Dermot started telling me about how King and him used to get into so much trouble, it became very clear through his words alone, the fondness of his memories, that the two were extremely close. I loved that. I loved that so damn much.

I couldn’t tell you how long we sat there, but eventually it became a little chilly, and he wrapped me up in his jacket. Even after I was stuffed full of good food, including pastries and a bit of wine, Natalie tried to feed me more, and it was fully night by the time we wished her goodbye and walked back towards the helicopter, a happy buzz running through my system.

I let out a contented sigh as we reached the helicopter.

Dermot surprised me, pressing me up against the side of the helicopter, kissing me slow and deep, as if he were savoring the experience. I felt my entire body flush at how he held me. It was both with a demanding and firm touch, but also as if I was breakable. I loved both aspects.

I loved Dermot.

“We need to get back,” he murmured.

“You sure?” I teased. “We could just sleep out here, it’s nice enough.”

Dermot let out a rumble. “I want you in my bed.”

I made a small sound of agreement, not knowing if he meant to just sleep or far more, but either way it sounded absolutely amazing. Being wrapped up in his arms was one of my favorite places to be.

Once I was buckled up in the helicopter, my eyes fell heavy as I curled into the seat, barely noticing the headset that was put on me. I dozed off happily, not worried about anything for the first time in days.

Dermot Ross

Pride surged through me at how happy Dahlia looked, replacing any of the stress and anger I’d felt this past week. The radiant woman was sleeping easy because of me, and I was so fucking glad that I had decided to do this. There had been a part of me that had been nervous, which was almost laughable considering the shit I’d done in my life...hell, even considering everything between Dahlia and me.

Yet the idea of taking Dahlia on a date had been a bit nerve-wracking.

The flight back was smooth, and when we neared the estate, I was unsurprised to see Kingston and Stratton waiting near the flight pad, both talking and looking at the sky expectantly. As I landed, I hopped out and rounded the aircraft, easing her out of her seat as I nodded towards both of them.

“Good night?” King asked, looking more stressed than when I left. I realized pretty quickly then that there was

tension running through both of them... I just didn't understand why.

“Very. What's wrong?”

“I can take her,” Stratton offered. I grunted but handed my baby girl off. Stratton strode towards the house, his steps faster than normal. King was staring towards them, mainly at Dahlia, in thought, before motioning me to follow towards the house.

“We got a call from Callum.”

“I feel like I am not going to like what you're about to tell me.”

“There's a hit out. One that is targeted at us.”

Fuck.

“What? On who?” I snapped. The warm haze that Dahlia's affection had left me with was suddenly stripped away as I demanded an answer from my cousin.

King's mask of calm slipped away, and I knew the answer before he looked me dead in the eye.

“Dahlia.”

Chapter Thirteen

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

A weird sense of apprehension woke me up, the bed so cold that I instantly knew I was alone. I looked around, feeling like there was something fundamentally off. The room had an odd feeling to it, and when I looked over to the balcony window, I found it open. I considered getting out of bed to close it, but something stopped me, my entire body locking up as I realized what I was feeling. There was someone else in the room; I knew it instinctually.

I felt fear course through me as I tried to remain calm, knowing that I somehow needed to get out of here, and I didn't think the door was an option. My eyes darted around the room. A slight creak in the flooring and shift of the curtains had me fisting the blankets wrapped around me as my breathing turned fast.

The lights turned on, and a scream left my throat before I could stop it. I slammed my hand across my mouth when I saw Stratton standing in the doorway of the bedroom, looking at me with concern. My breathing was rough, and I realized my ears were ringing as he was trying to talk to me, everything feeling almost hazy. I looked up at him with tears in my eyes, realizing the room was empty.

“Someone was here, Stratton, or is here. I woke up because of it. It wasn't one of you.” I curled into his chest, hyperventilating.

“Shh,” he soothed, “it's okay, angel. I've got you. I shouldn't have gotten out of bed, I'm sorry—”

“This may be a delayed post-traumatic stress response,” Dermot said as he entered the room. I shook my head, more worry filling his gaze, as my heart continued to pulse extremely fast. Dermot didn’t hesitate to move to the balcony and check the curtains and the space itself, not finding anything. It didn’t do anything to make me feel better though.

“I’ll go check the cameras, baby girl,” Dermot promised, leaving Stratton and I.

“I’m telling you, someone was here,” I sniffed.

“We are about to leave anyway,” Stratton said softly as he helped me out of bed. I clung onto him, feeling shaky. I could hear my boys talking in the hallway, but I didn’t leave Stratton’s arms, looking over the room, still feeling that weird sensation. My eyes narrowed on the shadowed corners of the bedroom that weren’t illuminated by the small table light he had put on.

“Shit, you are literally shaking.” Stratton called for King, who appeared in the doorway, agony at my panic painting his face. It shouldn’t have surprised me anymore how much my emotions affected him, but it momentarily distracted me, caught off guard by his pain. I tried to school my features but failed, still shaking from the adrenaline rush.

“We are talking to Owen and checking the cameras, princess. We will figure this out. Stratton, stay with her. If she feels like something’s off, then I don’t want to discount that. Dahlia, just get ready to leave. We are getting out of here.”

After a moment, I walked towards the bathroom, Stratton following and pausing in the doorway. I washed my face and tugged back my hair, letting out a shaky breath as I looked back to Stratton, his normally ice-blue eyes like deep wells of ocean water. I shook myself, wondering if maybe Dermot was right... Maybe I was imagining everything.

“Let me go grab you something to wear.” I walked out of the bathroom, Stratton’s body turning so he could keep his eyes on me as I passed him and entered the bedroom.

That was when time completely slowed.

The shadows over Stratton's shoulder seemed to move, and when the breeze wafted through the balcony curtains, they shifted to reveal a dark shadow. A scream caught in my throat as it sprinted towards us, the shine of a gun or knife making me know that I hadn't been wrong. This was the threat I'd been feeling.

I didn't think twice, slamming into Stratton and catching him off guard, as he rolled us to the floor. The sound of a gun going off echoed twice.

I expected pain.

But there was none.

The gunfire went off again, but this time my body was shielded by Stratton over me, the room suddenly flashing with chaos. I couldn't worry about any of that, though; instead I was completely focused on Stratton and making sure he was okay. Everything buzzed and rang around me, reality slamming into me as I found that Stratton was furious. More furious than ever before, his eyes filled with a burning blue fire that had my own tearing up. At first I couldn't hear him, only feeling his rough touch on my face, but when I did, I felt a sob leave my throat at how worked up he was.

"Dahlia." His voice held so much emotion, it rocked me to my core. "Fuck, angel, tell me you're okay. I need to hear you say it. Focus on me, only me right now."

"I'm okay," I whimpered.

"What were you thinking?" he demanded, his gaze almost manic. "You never jump in front of a gun for me. Ever. Do you understand me? Fucking ever."

His entire body was rigid, and he looked both livid and terrified. "You could have been killed! You could have gotten yourself killed, Dahlia! I would fucking lose myself without you. I can't live without you. Fuck—" His voice cracked at the end, his throat seeming to close up.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice small. "I just acted. I didn't want them to hurt you. I couldn't let them hurt you."

Stratton pulled me up into his arms, barking something out into the room before striding out from it, my legs wrapping around him as he held me tight, his hands shaking despite having a firm grip on me. I could tell he was barely holding back right now, and the tears kept streaming down my face, the terror of almost losing him searing through me.

My hands went into his hair as I kept mumbling about the violent threat, and the growl that rattled from his chest had me knowing that he was in a completely different place than ever before. I found his lips right as we entered into a room, and I let out a moan as he carried me to the bed, laying me out on the sheets and searing his lips to mine in a hard kiss.

“Holy fuck,” Stratton bit out, pulling back and keeping me completely pinned with his gaze. “That...that was the single most terrifying moment of my life.” He caught my jaw and looked me dead in the eye. “Promise me. Fucking promise me that you will never walk in front of a gun again.”

“Stratton...”

“No!” he snapped. “Promise me. Now.”

“I won’t.” My eyes watered more. “Not if it means saving you.”

Stratton let out an unsteady breath, putting his head down. “Fuck, Dahlia.”

“I love you.” My voice cracked. “I love you, and I’m not going to apologize for it. You have always protected me, and I am going to do anything I can to keep you safe in return.”

“I can’t lose you,” he mumbled several times, looking like he was working himself up. “I can’t fucking lose you, angel. You almost died. You almost ripped out my fucking heart and died...for me. You can’t...Dahlia, promise me you will never do that again. I don’t care if I have to lock us in a goddamn bunker for the rest of our lives, promise me that you will never do that.”

The anguish in his eyes was enough that I finally gave in, “Okay, okay, I won’t.” He let out a sound of relief, burying his nose against my throat as I let out a small sob. When he pulled

back, anguish filled his expression, his eyes red rimmed. I gripped his face and he let out a shuddering breath while pressing me down into the bed, as if shielding me from everything and everyone.

“Stratton,” I whimpered.

His lips trailed along my jaw before meeting my mouth again, his grip on me hard and unforgiving. “Angel, I never want to let you out from underneath me. Never fucking again —”

“I don’t want to be anywhere else,” I responded breathlessly, causing him to let out a low rumble. I saw his eyes flare with heat, his energy almost frenzied, like a chaotic, raging storm, because of what I’d done. I let out a moan as he rolled slightly to the side so that he was able to grip my throat and sear a hard kiss to me. I shuddered against him as he brought his knuckle against my pussy, and I let out a moan at how quickly the adrenaline in my body switched to heat.

“Fuck.” His voice was almost uneven. “I’m sorry, angel —”

“I need you.” I tugged at his pants, feeling frantic. Stratton sat back and allowed me to push down his sweatpants as I took his hard length in my hand. He let out a nearly feral sound as he pressed a hand to my chest so that I laid back down. His fingers coasted against my wet heat before he tugged the side of my sleep shorts so he could line up right with my center.

“Sorry, angel,” he hissed against my lips, completely covering me as he surged forward. I cried out his name as he filled me, causing my body to jolt at the invasion of his length. I squeezed my legs around him, the pinch of adjustment causing me to string my fingers through his hair and pull slightly.

“I have to get the edge off,” he admitted in a low growl. “I’m so sorry for taking you this way—”

I let out a cry of his name as he began to piston in and out of me. I felt the adrenaline crash with the relief of him being okay, tears welling in my eyes as he kissed me hard, the tears

seeming to only intensify the moment. I didn't think twice as he gripped my hands and tugged them above my head, his entire energy dominant and all-consuming.

I felt the shift as he stared down at me when he completely snapped.

He groaned, continuing to hit that deep, white-hot pulse of pleasure that was so acute it was almost painful. "Angel, you are not allowed to leave me. Ever. Do you understand? Tell me you will never do that—"

"Stratton!" I called out.

"No, tell me," he growled, gripping my jaw hard. "I want to hear it again. Promise me."

I whimpered at the hard heat in his gaze and how on edge he seemed. "I promise, I promise," I tried to get to his lips again but he growled, shaking his head and instead pulling out and slamming back into me.

"No, angel, not right now. I fucking love you, but I'm goddamn livid. You tried to leave me, so you are going to take me, fully, and then maybe I'll give you what you want."

My climax slammed into me at his words as he surged in and out of me, using my body in a demanding way that somehow still made me feel euphoric. He needed this. I could feel that he needed to feel in control.

"This is mine," he growled, finally bringing his lips down to mine, "all of you is mine, Dahlia. Say it."

"I'm yours," I breathed out.

"Who owns this little pussy?" he demanded, his energy wild and intense against my own as I felt myself completely melt, the submissive edge to our relationship fully blossoming in me. I wanted this man to own me.

"You do, Stratton."

His kiss was hard, and his pumps were wild and his movements frantic. I let out a scream of his name when he finally slammed into me, and I was left a panting, whimpering mess underneath him, my climax causing a warm, molten

sensation to roll through my veins. I felt my eyes close as he grunted, pressing his forehead against my own.

“Angel.” His voice was pain-filled. “I’m so sorry—”

“No.” I swallowed, catching my breath. “I loved that...I needed that. I feel better. Safer.”

Stratton grunted and lifted me from the bed, walking me towards the bathroom. I was in such a haze that I didn’t even notice we were in the shower until the hot water slid against my skin. Stratton held me to him possessively, and I could feel the tension draining from his body, his mood stabilizing. I could tell that this, especially after the punishing way he had taken me, was making him feel far better. I let out a happy hum, feeling exhausted as he finally dressed me in warm, comfortable pants and a hoodie before drying my hair.

“We need to leave.” The voice came from the door, surprising me.

Stratton let out a low rumble at Lincoln’s words. “I’m not letting her leave this room until we are ready to take off. Too goddamn dangerous.”

Yates’s voice was sharp as he joined the conversation. “The helicopter is ready. We have no idea if there are any more of them coming. We are leaving now.”

I didn’t have a moment to even blink before Stratton had me in his arms and was striding through the doors of the house, past a ton of guards. A weird nagging sensation went through my head as Owen, the head of security, caught my gaze, but I couldn’t focus on it, and all too soon we were out back. By the time we were all on the helicopter, I could see tension running through the group dangerously.

“How did they get in?” Stratton demanded.

“We think it’s someone from the security team. We have been cleaning house, but someone is pulling fucking strings.”

King was sitting there, frozen, staring at my face with an expression I couldn’t read. It would have intimidated me, but instead I just held his gaze back and spoke softly. “Where are we going?”

“Home,” King answered. “We are going home, princess.”

Chapter Fourteen

LINCOLN GATES

My gaze ran across Dahlia's sleepy face, her eyes closed and sexy frame laid out, wrapped in the soft bedding of the jet's bedroom suite. I knew she was exhausted, so I didn't wake her...but I wanted to, desperately. I needed to see her face, to make sure she was okay, to know that she hadn't been hurt... and then punish her little ass for doing something so ridiculously reckless.

She'd jumped in front of a gun.

Holy fuck. This woman was going to kill us all.

Adrenaline spiked in my system as I considered the very real possibility that Dahlia could have died. In less than a week, Dahlia's life had been in true jeopardy twice, and needless to say, that wasn't fucking okay at all. My brother was still pale and trying to not flip a shit when I left to come back here, and his reaction was on the milder end of the spectrum. Stratton was absolutely silent and seemed to be in his own world. Yates was furious and trying to figure out this security issue, because it was very clear now that this was an internal issue. King, of all people, was having to talk Dermot down because he was fucking livid and ready to commit murder.

We needed to do better. We were failing at taking care of her.

"Lincoln?" I looked down to find Dahlia staring up at me with caution in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

My voice was rough with disbelief. "Am I okay?"

She nodded hesitantly, and in a fast movement, I tugged her leg so that she fell flat on her back. I caged her to the bed, her breathing and pulse both picking up. *That shouldn't have made me hard.* I knew I couldn't have Dahlia right now, especially after earlier. She may have been sleeping for a few hours, but I knew that Stratton had only had her a few hours ago, and from what I could hear, it hadn't been soft or gentle. That wasn't including my own brother taking her earlier in the day.

I locked her hips to the bed as I gripped her jaw a bit harder than I probably should have, examining her face as her pupils expanded out and her legs fell open to wrap around my hips as my hard length pulsed against her center. Goddamnit. I was glad there were six of us, because I wasn't positive just one of us would be able to keep up with Dahlia.

“No, I am not okay,” I growled. “I am far from okay. You almost fucking died. Again. I am so far from okay, it's unreal. You—*Dahlia.*” A groan left my throat at the way she leaned up and tugged on my bottom lip teasingly. A chuckle escaped, the sound filled with the sexual frustration I felt, as I pulled back enough that she let out a sound of discontent.

“What are you doing?” I growled softly.

“Trying to distract you from being mad at me,” she admitted, looking at me from under her lashes. I felt a dark surge run through me, one that had to do with punishing Dahlia, and I knew that I was balancing on a very thin edge of control. One that would take very little to topple.

“That's highly unlikely since you almost died,” I warned her, pulling back further. I looked down at the oversized shirt she was wearing with these tiny lace boy short panties underneath, the material tight against her pussy and showcasing how wet she was right now.

“I would do it again,” she whispered under a harsh breath. “I would do it again for any of you.”

My breath caught as I looked up at her to see the reality of her words. I felt a surge of love at the same time I felt frustration, knowing that she didn't understand the monster

she was pulling from me. The monster that wanted to punish her, that wanted to turn her skin pink.

She was already hurt. She was too hurt for anything—
“Dahlia, no.”

I tried to pull back all the way as she scowled at me, her fingers threading through my hair and tugging me down for a kiss. My cock pressed right against her panty-covered center and she jolted, a moan leaving her throat in surprise.

“Please, Linc? Just a little? I need you—”

A growl broke from my throat. “All you need right now is a damn punishment for being so reckless.” Dahlia knew exactly the game she was playing, and there were only so many times I could warn her without giving into it.

Her eyes heated. “Then punish me.”

The darkness inside of me escaped its barrier with a roar of heat as I sat up and dragged Dahlia across my lap, a surprised sound coming from her lips that was muffled by the bed, her perfect ass up in the air as I ran my large hands over her lacy panties, the flimsy material so easily torn...

“You really want that, Dahlia?” I growled softly. “I shouldn’t, considering how hurt you are—”

“Stop,” she snapped, looking back at me with an unrelenting gaze. “I’m not breakable, Lincoln.”

Her tone had me snapping into action, and my hand came across her ass as she let out a small scream at the sting of pain, which quickly turned into a moan. I smoothed my hand against her skin in a comforting touch, her whimper of need almost frustrated at the soft touch, her skin breaking out into shivers.

When I brought my hand back again and hit her pert ass, an unfiltered moan of my name left her lips. I made sure to soothe the hurt I caused before doing it once again, the intoxicating effort to turn her skin pink damn near mesmerizing. So much so that I didn’t realize how needy she was until she let out a small cry of frustration, her eyes meeting mine, her entire face flushed.

“Lincoln, please?” she grit, her teeth nearly chattering with need. My fingers smoothed over her panties. I so desperately wanted to fuck her, but I knew I wouldn’t be gentle. I couldn’t be gentle.

“I can’t control myself right now,” I hissed out. I needed to let her get up, but instead I found myself lifting her and placing her so that she was laying flat on her stomach in the middle of her bed, my body wedged between her open legs as she rocked her ass back so that I could imagine very easily just sliding right into her tight fuck hole.

“I don’t want your control,” she whimpered as I let out a snarl and unbuckled my pants, gripping my painfully hard length that dripped with precum. I didn’t bother taking off her panties, just wedging them down right over her ass, as I ran my tip against her wet slit, causing her to let out a high-pitched, needy sound.

“What do you want?” I growled, leaning forward and running my hands over her hips before pressing slightly into her. When Dahlia went to answer, I nipped her neck, turning her words into a moan. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter what you want. You’re going to take your punishment and everything I fucking give you.”

I slammed into her, hard, causing her to let out a scream of surprise, a low, dangerous noise escaping from the back of my throat. I didn’t pause to let her get used to my size as I began to thrust deeper inside of her, going all the way in before pulling back out, my body shifting back so I could tug her hips further up and my eyes could run over the way my cock seemed to split her in half. It was goddamn obscene, and I loved it.

Her moans and whimpers fueled me as I began to pump in and out of her, knowing that there was no goddamn way I would be able to tease her right now. There was too much raw emotion in me, and I was using her for relief. I was taking it out on her, and I couldn’t help myself. Instead of hating me for it, she was gripping the sheets and pushing back into me, her pussy milking my length as I pistoned in and out of her.

“Holy shit, Lincoln—” Dahlia’s voice was filled with need as I leaned forward and gripped her throat from behind, a dangerous growl leaving my lips.

“Is this what you wanted? Wanted me to use you and punish you? Wanted me to pretend like I don’t care that you are hurt? Wanted me to use you for relief?” I growled as she whimpered, her body arching as she climaxed on the spot, screaming as she gripped my cock so hard I saw stars. I pulled back and flipped her over, impaling her once again as her nails tore into my shoulders and she pushed her hips up, trying to take as much of me as possible.

I didn’t try to control myself and instead thumbed her clit as she screamed my name and I let out a growl. “Come on it. Come on my fucking cock— *Fuuuck*,” I groaned as she came again. I couldn’t help myself, sliding in further as I buried my face against her neck, biting down hard and emptying every drop of my cum into her waiting body.

She jolted, tightening around me, as I growled out her name, before it felt like the world snapped into place for me. I had always known my life was centered around Dahlia, but until that moment, I didn’t realize that she was the only thing...literally the only thing that existed for me.

Our connection was impossible to describe, almost unnatural.

I pulled back slightly and looked at her, face flushed and eyes closed, as she offered me a sleepy smile. “Remind me to get punished more often.”

My chuckle was soft and dangerous. “That wasn’t a true punishment, Dahlia, that was me needing to get inside you and feel you come around me. That was me needing to make sure you were okay and to confirm you were actually here and not —” My voice broke off as I tried to not consider the alternative.

Instead of continuing down that train of thought, I lifted her gently out of the bed and walked us towards the attached bathroom suite, turning on the steam shower. A minute later, we were standing under the multiple shower heads as I took

the time to hold her, recognizing she was in my arms, ignoring how hard I was again because I knew for a fact that would never go away. It was the issue with being in love with such a perfect woman.

When I was done, I was washing my hair as she stood underneath the water, her eyes closed before a small frown line came between her brow.

“What’s wrong?”

Her eyes opened, and she seemed to consider something before speaking honestly, “It feels weird going home... The pain that I felt there, the insecurities... It feels like nothing compared to what I’ve gone through these past few days. I mean, like you said, I almost died—twice—and before I left home, the biggest thing I had to worry about was you guys finding out that I wasn’t—” Her eyes widened slightly as I made a noise, knowing what she was about to say.

“Eating. That you weren’t eating,” I whispered. Her eyes grew dark with emotion and I stepped into her, cupping her jaw and pressing my lips to hers in a deep kiss full of a slow burning passion, as I tried to express just how much I loved this woman.

When I pulled back, I spoke candidly. “We knew, Dahlia. At least partly, and we also suspected it even after you said the bullying had stopped. We didn’t want to push you away by pressing you to talk about it, but we were always watching. I don’t think you realize just how much we notice about you... It’s everything. We notice everything about you.”

“I didn’t think it would get that bad,” she whispered and shook her head. “I have no idea how to feel, and I know that eventually my brain is going to catch up with what happened, and it won’t be good. Until then, I just don’t know how to handle any of this.”

“One day at a time,” I promised and then said, “I also think talking about it more openly will help you and us supporting you. I know you may not be comfortable with that, but I promise you, every single one of us wants you to be safe, happy, and healthy more than anything, Dahlia.”

“I can try,” she murmured softly.

“Good.” I offered her a grin. “Because once you live with six men, you’re going to be around food so much it will probably shock you.”

“I can’t believe we are actually moving in together.” She nibbled her lip. “I have been wanting this for so long, but I didn’t think it was a possibility, and now all at once it’s colliding and somehow, somehow, I’m going to get exactly what I’ve always wanted. It feels almost impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” I promised. “Just ask.”

When a knock on the bathroom door sounded, I grunted at the intrusion as Yates demanded, “It’s been almost an hour. Bring her back out here, I need to talk to her.”

Dahlia’s eyes went wide as she shook her head. “I’m not available.”

Yates chuckled, although I could hear the tension in it. “Bunny, if you think we are just moving past that you jumped in front of a bullet, you must be out of your mind.”

I had a feeling this was going to be a long trip home.

Dahlia Aldridge

“Let me go,” I complained to Stratton as he tightened his arms around me, tucking a blanket further around me. I swear, he had somehow managed to tuck me into a cocoon of blankets with him, the two of us taking up a section of chairs where he had his nose buried against my throat and was somehow touching every part of me. I couldn’t help but love the moment. We hadn’t gotten to fully enjoy our time after being together, and despite me complaining about how he was holding me, I secretly loved it.

“Never,” he murmured softly. “I haven’t been able to touch you or take care of you since everything happened... I need

this.”

“Well, if you need it,” I gave in, making him smile.

“There is a lot I need.”

“Yeah? Like what?” I wiggled slightly, wondering how I was still turned on. It was like my body didn’t have an ‘off’ switch—it was seriously overwhelming.

His head snapped up as he offered me a look. “Nothing that fun, unfortunately.” His eyes moved down my body. “Although I would take that as well, angel. Always.”

“Without the bullet thing,” I teased. Yates let out a distressed sound from across the aisle. I could practically see him pouting right now, but it was his fault. He had held me captive for an hour! An hour of him telling me how reckless I’d been and a bunch of other stuff, the concern across his face making me feel bad because it was clear he was worked up.

He wasn’t the only one, either. No, King was trying to keep Dermot from losing it, but I could tell that he was also on edge. Sterling just kept trying to hold me and kiss me, his face a bit paler than normal. At this point, I just wanted to be home and have some semblance of normality.

“Which reminds me... I have an idea,” Stratton pointed out, examining my face.

“What’s that?”

“So King and I were talking about looking into my family’s business, which has been demolished, and I came up with the idea of transforming it...” He exhaled. “I’m thinking of starting a security company so that everything is in-house for us and we don’t have to worry about any of the bullshit we’ve been dealing with so far.”

“I love that idea,” I told him sincerely. “Is that something you are actually interested in?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and his eyes darted to my lips. “I’m interested in protecting you.”

I gave him an understanding smile. “Let me know if there is anything I can do to help. I love the idea of you doing

something you love.”

He smiled, seemingly satisfied. “Good. I will make sure to surround you with security at all times, especially since these fuckers don’t know when to stop. Especially with this hit out, I can’t wait to fucking—” He stopped himself, violence flashing his gaze.

I frowned, thinking about his words. “Hit?”

He exhaled. “Yeah, there is a hit out.”

“Is that what happened last night? Is there a hit out on you? Or one of the others?”

“No,” he growled, “it’s a hit out on you. We think that there is more than one issue in the security, and we are going to be cleaning house because it’s clear they are paying people off. The only people I can assume who would be doing this are the same ones who managed to get that one security guard on Wildberry.”

“The one Yates shot?”

He nodded. “From what I understand, it’s one company that is contracted by the family in both Wildberry and Ardara, and the head of security is someone that has been with the family for over three decades. Mr. Ross is currently talking to him and trying to figure out where the issue is—there has to be someone who is letting these people in. It’s hard to know who to trust.”

My ears were buzzing as my brain tried to process all the new information. “A hit out on me.”

Stratton looked mildly panicked. “We’ve got this handled. I know that last night was terrifying, but no more. You will never be left unprotected, even with just our security. At least until we get this shit handled.”

I frowned. “Why did no one tell me?”

“Didn’t have a chance and didn’t want to scare you,” he murmured.

Nope. That was not a good excuse.

I sat up and then stood, looking over all of them. “Did no one want to tell me that there was a hit out on me? When did you find out?”

“While you were out with me, baby girl,” Dermot explained.

Oh. “Fine, but next time someone wants to kill me, a heads up would be appreciated.”

“How about their head on a platter for you?” King offered, his eyes flashing with a level of fury that had my breath catching.

“I mean, it seems a bit old school, but sure.” I shrugged, Dermot finally cracking a smile.

Yates scoffed and shook his head. “You would not be okay with that,” he insisted.

“You don’t know that.” I put my hand on my chest in mock offense.

“Yeah, maybe she’s got a thing for severed heads,” Sterling pointed out.

“We could have a collection in our house,” Lincoln added.

“Could be an issue if law enforcement ever came over,” Stratton sighed.

I smiled at the lightness the conversation seemed to inspire, just absorbing the improvement in the mood. After all, it was just a joke... Right?

Chapter Fifteen

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

There was nothing better than going home after a long trip. *Usually.*

Yet, as we rode in the car, the early morning sunlight highlighting each of my boys, I found myself feeling a bit off. Sure, we were on our way to figuring out what was going on with security, and just to make sure we were double secure, we had called in Callum's contacts.

Apparently, the FBI had a vested interest and were willing to send their people to keep a perimeter on Wildberry. I wasn't positive if the head of security for the Ross company was aware or if they were still just trying to figure out where the weak link was in the fence. Either way, I planned on just staying with my men until this all blew over. I knew I could trust them, and that meant more to me than anything.

The guys were so paranoid, they hadn't even used our normal driver. Instead Dermot drove our SUV with King up front next to him, the two talking quietly. The familiar drive home from the private airstrip felt different this time, and I had a feeling why that was exactly.

I intertwined my fingers together as I looked out the window, examining the familiar green landscape that should have made me feel a happy sense of contentment. When we drove past the gates of the golf club entrance, I closed my eyes, experiencing a weird wave go over me, and tried to quell the anxiety growing in my stomach. The others were talking around me, and I had no idea if they could tell where my head was at, but I was relieved when they didn't say anything or try

to ask questions. I was in a very odd mood, and I had a feeling there was very little that could make it better.

Maybe sleep.

Yeah, sleep sounded amazing to be honest.

“It’s Wednesday, right?” I asked softly. We had been traveling so much, I needed to make sure.

“Yep,” Yates murmured from next to me.

I frowned and nodded, realizing that I would most likely miss my first class today. It wasn’t a photography one, so I wasn’t terribly upset, but suddenly the idea of going to school in general left me with a sour taste in my mouth.

Truth be told, I’d been doing it because I felt like it was expected. I mean, what else was I supposed to do? I felt stupid just telling my parents I wanted to take pictures, travel, and have a family. I shouldn’t because I knew they would support it, but I had still signed up for classes because it felt like the ‘thing’ to do.

It was true, though—those were the things I wanted. I wanted to study photography, not for a job or even a career, but for the opportunity to travel and take unique pictures. Outside of that, the thing I wanted the most, the thing I’d always wanted the most, was to build a family.

Not just having children, either, although the idea of having a baby with the boys was extremely appealing... I just wanted to build a home. I wanted to be surrounded by the people I love, like I had been my entire life, and spend every day doing things that we enjoyed.

Now that I knew these men were mine... I wanted everything.

Everything I thought I would never have.

I wanted to live together, get married, and wake up every day surrounded by my men. I wanted to go down into the kitchen after waking up the kids and help them with breakfast before packing up lunches. I wanted to spend my days taking photos and organizing things to do as a family before all of us

sat together for dinner each night, enjoying each other's company. I just wanted that peace and contentment, and I felt like I was so close to getting it.

So freakin' close.

"Bunny?" Yates asked softly. I blinked, realizing that the car had come to a stop. I looked around, noticing there were no obnoxious media trucks. Security, both the newly hired guards and others with FBI vests, was no longer trying to hide. They stood prominently at the gates, looking threatening and leaving me with a sense of security and safety. Not as much as I got from my boys, but still a ton.

"Sorry." I squeezed his hand. "Just tired."

"Let's take a nap." He led me out of the car as I noticed each of my boys heading towards their houses. I frowned, wanting to be together, but Yates's words calmed me. "They are dropping off their stuff and showering, but coming over right after. We are going to my house today. I want to have access to everything Mr. Ross or the FBI possibly needs so I don't have to leave your side."

I kept forgetting how much intel Yates had, and not just from watching me. I almost blushed at that, still not over the knowledge of how hyper-focused he was on me. It was extremely flattering.

"Can I borrow something to change into?" I asked.

"Of course." He answered, and when we entered his bedroom, he went into the closet as I flipped off the dress I'd been wearing. A yawn slipped from my lips that was overshadowed by Yates's groan. I arched a brow as his gaze ran over my body with heat...before he tugged a hoodie over me aggressively.

I let out a squeak of surprise. "What the heck was that?!"

"If you weren't so damn tired, I would take you right now," he threatened, helping me slip on a pair of oversized sweatpants, then picking me up and carrying me towards his bed. I knew that everyone would fit in this room—hell, even on this bed—but none of that mattered to me because when

Yates dropped me onto the bed, he crawled over me and brushed his nose against my neck. Despite his words and how hard he was, I knew that he just wanted to hold me.

“Tell me what you’re hiding,” he demanded after a moment.

“Hm?” I asked curiously, tilting my head as he pulled back to look at me.

“What were you thinking about in the car, bunny?”

Oh.

“Honestly? I was thinking about how I would miss class today and...I didn’t care. I love photography, but I don’t think I need a degree for it. I mean, I can take those classes whenever I want, and missing one isn’t the end of the world. I don’t know, I still want to learn, but this entire situation has really put things in perspective. I just...I just want what I’ve always wanted.”

Yates let out a knowing hum. “A family.”

I smiled. “I shouldn’t be surprised you know that.”

“I know everything about you.” He ran his hands up my waist. “When we were kids, you always wanted to play ‘house.’ Not school. Not tag or pirates or princesses... Not anything else, just house. I remember you used to make us all do stuff to help out, and then make us all sit down for dinner together with that fake plastic food you had in your toy room.”

I blushed. “Did I really do that?”

“Oh yes.” He chuckled softly. “It was adorable. I’m also positive that all of us were your husband.”

“See?” I teased, “I didn’t even want to choose then.”

“And you never will have to,” he promised. “You never have to do anything you don’t want to. Don’t go to school if you don’t want to, Dahlia. I want to give you whatever you want, whether that means traveling the world or settling down and having a family.”

My brow dipped. “I guess I just feel guilty? I have so many opportunities that I could take advantage of, and instead I want to just have a happy home with all of you.”

“There is nothing wrong with that,” Yates insisted, looking completely confident, as if any decision I made would be the perfect one.

“You really like me, don’t you?” I didn’t mean for it to sound so silly, but it was a bit awe-inspiring to realize the command I had over this man’s feelings for me.

“I love every part of you,” Yates vowed.

“Where are you guys at?!” I smiled at Kingston’s voice as I heard Lincoln laughing behind him. Yates groaned and rolled off of me as I felt my eyes close and a yawn pulled from my mouth. I wasn’t tired enough to sleep though, and all too soon, I was curled up in bed with Sterling next to me, his arm wrapped around me and Dermot on my other side, laid out.

We had a movie on, one I didn’t recognize, as the other boys spoke in the living room by the big windows, about something relating to the FBI.

When my eyes finally closed, I hoped to be pulled into a peaceful memory, but was instead tugged into a nightmare...

Usually nightmares were vivid and strong. This wasn’t like that.

No, this felt like a living nightmare, my skin crawling as I felt pain push through me. Tears streamed down my face and adrenaline pumped through me, someone screaming in my ears to run. Everything from the past week began to slam into me, from Ian trying to attack me at the golf event, to the security guard that I watched Yates kill in cold blood. I could even feel the sensation of Ian’s chest as I pushed him off the cliff.

The scent of blood and the panic I felt as someone came running for Stratton. The gut-wrenching feeling of the world falling out from under me when Dermot’s father insisted my men had been killed.

I let out a scream, the idea of losing my men had me feeling like my heart was being ripped out and shredded through a meat grinder—

“Dahlia!” The dark tone of voice had me sitting up, out of breath and flushed, tears streaking down my face. I could hear someone speaking to me as shadows moved around the room, but I couldn’t stop crying, and I realized pretty quickly that this was the moment when I broke.

I was finally safe at home, and I just broke open. Sobs wracked my entire body. I felt like my chest was breaking open, and I didn’t even recognize that it was my body making the noises that filled the room.

I couldn’t tell you how long it took before I realized that it was Kingston holding me, his hand smoothing through my hair as he spoke gently in my ear. His scent was comforting, and despite trembling and clinging to him, he seemed to be just holding me protectively, his hands stringing through my hair as he spoke in an even, relaxed tone that was making me feel ten times better. My breathing began to slow as my tears grew less, and I lay completely limp against him, unable to fully move.

I finally came back into life when hot water surrounded me and I was lowered gently into a massive tub of hot water, the feel of King’s body behind me as he pulled me against him. I sniffed and buried my head against his chest. I couldn’t hear anyone else around us, and instead of trying to apologize or get myself together—hell, any of the stuff I normally did—I just laid there and let my brain, heart, and body catch up with what had happened to us and the fact that we were finally safe.

“Princess.” I could hear King’s concern, no longer seeped with darkness. Instead there was a soft vulnerability that had me looking up to find his eyes dark green. The bathwater around us was continuously seeping over the edge and refilling, so it was constantly warm. I could have stayed in there forever, and I didn’t bother keeping track of how long we soaked. I wasn’t positive I cared because it was slowly thawing me from the complete meltdown I’d just had.

“Sorry,” I whispered.

His eyes flared with frustration. “What are you sorry about?”

“I just lost it.” I felt tears well in my eyes, hot ones that streaked down my face.

“Dahlia.” His voice was soft. “You have been the target of a nationally followed social media attack, followed by finding out that your boyfriends are part of a high crime organization, followed by being kidnapped and then having to kill someone, only to have a hit put out on you and being nearly shot in your bedroom before stepping in front of a gun to save Stratton... If you hadn’t lost it at some point, I would be far more concerned.”

I blinked and then closed my eyes. “I know you’re right, I just... All of you are so damn strong, and I feel like I am constantly needing to be saved.”

I didn’t have the energy to put it any other way than that. It was the bare bones of my insecurities.

King tilted my head back to look at him. “You are strong, Dahlia. You are just strong in a completely different way than us, one that literally brings us all together. I know it seems normal to you, but the ability to consistently handle six different emotional spectrums while simultaneously loving those six men isn’t easy. You are so in tune with your emotions and those of others that it comes naturally to you. The ability to walk people through that is a strength on its own.”

His words did something to my heart, calming the anxiety I hadn’t even been aware of.

“Yeah?” I asked softly.

“Yeah.” He kissed the top of my head, and I angled myself so my lips could brush his.

“Dahlia—” he warned as I nipped his bottom lip.

“What?” I teased softly.

Unfortunately, before anything fun could happen, his phone went off, causing him to groan. I leaned forward,

standing up and stretching my arms above my head as he looked over my body, picking up the phone despite clearly not wanting to.

“What?” he barked into the phone.

King listened before he seemed to relax. “Okay, send her over to the house. She already has clearance.”

I tugged on a robe and frowned, not liking that he was talking about an unknown female.

Wow, possessive much?

“Who was that?” I questioned as he stood up, grabbing a towel. A flash of heat went over me, my breath catching at how hard he was. I didn’t realize how close he was, his hand wrapping around my throat as his thumb ran over my pulse.

“Keep looking at me like that and you’re going to be on your knees.”

I let out a pleased sound as he chuckled softly, kissing me before pulling back. “Normally I would say fuck this appointment, but the designer is here for the house.”

Pure excitement blasted through me. “Really? Who are you using?” I knew most of the local ones.”

“Edwina Lovett.”

I stared at him, my mouth dropping before I grabbed his face urgently. “Are you serious?” I swear to the lord, if he said yes I was going to do a dance.

His smile grew. “Very much so, princess.”

I let out an excited squeal, searing my lips to his before I left the room, my anxiety momentarily forgotten... They had hired freakin’ Lovett! As in Lovett from my favorite design show!

Oh my lord, I was about to pass out... After the appointment.

Chapter Sixteen

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“I can’t believe I am actually sitting here with you!” My smile was impossible to contain as Edwina offered me a genuine smile, her normal ‘posh’ attitude completely absent in this environment. She still had the English accent, but she was actually very relaxed and genuine as we both sat at the large dining room table in Dermot’s home... Well, our future home? I wasn’t positive what to even call it anymore.

The guys were currently roaming around the house and relaxing because they wanted me to be able to talk to her without their input at first. Honestly, I wanted them to be a part of this as much as possible, but this seemed important to them, so I wouldn’t argue.

“Believe it.” She winked while opening her notebook and taking out some papers. “Now, Mr. Ross has sent over some notes on things you might like, but before we begin any of that, I want to hear what your vision is, in your own words. What do you consider the heart of the home? Tell me everything.”

I almost laughed hearing her refer to King as ‘Mr. Ross.’

I inhaled and really thought about it, wanting to be fully transparent with her, but still nervous about addressing our situation so directly. “Well, as you can probably tell, our situation is a bit unique.”

Her smile softened. “It is, and that’s one of my favorite parts of this project—it will be like nothing I’ve ever done before.”

Oh good.

I nodded, trusting her to take me seriously, and trying to express how I imagined our home. “I have always loved this home, so the idea of making it our own is almost overwhelming, to be honest.”

“Well, let’s start small. What is the most important thing to you?”

“Having a large open living space for our family,” I expressed. “I want somewhere that can fit all of us—our families, the seven of us, and any kids we have.”

Her eyes lit up. “I love that. I think that there may be one or two walls we need to take down, but this house, especially considering the time in which it was built, is surprisingly open.”

My mind kept whirling. “I also really like dark wood on the floors and railings, but everything else I prefer to be light and neutral. I want it to feel very open and peaceful but still warm.”

She nodded and began to write down some notes as I continued to explain everything I liked style-wise, from light fixtures to materials. Her smile grew as I spoke, her eyes meeting mine.

“What?” I asked softly.

“These men know you well—almost everything you’re saying appears in the papers they put together.”

My cheeks heated. “They do know me, you’re right.”

Turning the page, her eyes meet mine. “Which brings me to the rooms upstairs, mainly the bedroom count.”

Oh, man.

I nodded, and she spoke candidly. “Normally I would suggest guest bedrooms for visiting family, but I don’t think that will be a problem in this situation?”

I nodded in agreement.

“Perfect. So what do you imagine the sleeping arrangement to be?”

“All of us in the same bedroom,” I answered immediately. “I would like everyone to have their own office or workspace, a place to relax and get away if needed, but I would like to all sleep together.”

She nodded and said, “One custom bed on its way.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that, but her next question threw me for a loop.

“Now, you mentioned children—do you have an idea of how many bedrooms you would want for that?”

My eyes widened as I looked towards the boys, who were relaxing and talking. I blushed as the number instantly popped into my head, feeling like it was far too many. I looked back at her and spoke quietly. “At least six, but I don’t know what they want...or how to ask them that, exactly. This is all fairly new.”

Actually, I was almost positive I could ask them and they would have an answer, but they were so over-the-top that I couldn’t tell if they were joking or not a lot of the time.

She nodded in understanding. “Let’s plan on having six children’s bedrooms and then maybe a larger ‘bunk room’ just in case.”

I nibbled my lip in contemplation. “Let’s do eight, but I like the bunk room idea as well.”

“You have more than enough space for it,” she agreed. “The children will have an entire wing of the house with a hangout area, if you like the sound of that.”

“Oh yes.” I nodded in excitement.

I couldn’t help but be excited as we continued to talk about everything else for over an hour, and before I knew it, she was standing up and looking towards the boys. “How about I come over next week, sometime in the morning, and we can have a larger family meeting? I will have some concrete ideas by then, and once we get those down, we can inform the

contractors. Despite the size of this project, I think we will get it done by the new year, if not sooner.”

I darted forward and gave her a hug despite it being unprofessional. She returned the hug before pulling back with an affectionate smile and said goodbye to the boys. I let out a happy sigh and nearly floated towards the table and sat down, unable to help the smile on my face.

“Good meeting?” Sterling asked.

“The best,” I admitted and then blushed.

“What?” King asked curiously.

I leaned against the table, tilting my head as I tried to consider how to bring this up without being a total weirdo. Sterling was now sitting down, the others still not paying attention fully, immersed in some big conversation about the game on television. Which was good. I could barely deal with the two of them in this conversation, let alone all six.

“So, she was asking me questions and I told her I want a bedroom to fit all of us,” I began, King sitting and nodding as if I was saying something completely reasonable. “And then, she asked me how many bedrooms we needed for future children.” I nibbled my lip.

Sterling froze as King continued to look at me, completely unperturbed. “I hope you told her ten.”

Sterling barked out a laugh as Yates walked over with the others. “What’s going on?”

“The designer asked Dahlia how many bedrooms we need for the kids,” Sterling explained.

“How many did you tell her?” Lincoln asked curiously.

“I said ten would be a good number,” King pointed out.

Dermot let out a hum of agreement. “If that’s what Dahlia wants, I wouldn’t complain.”

“Then again, fifteen is a rugby team...” Lincoln mused.

They were joking, right?

I blinked, my eyes darting between all of them, as Stratton came up behind me and leaned against the back of the chair, pressing a kiss to my shoulder, amusement radiating off of him.

Yates was watching me as he arched a brow. “What did you say, Dahlia?”

These men were crazy. That was the only explanation for it. What group of guys were invested in not only locking me down but also having a ton of kids with me? Like ‘Hey, Dahlia, let’s have ten kids if you want.’ I mean, I did want to have a lot of kids, but I really did not expect them to be so damn excited about it.

I felt like I was going to one day get used to them being like this, and then when we interacted with anyone outside of our family, they were going to think we were insane.

Okay, to be fair, we were insane, but that wasn’t the point.

“Well...” I inhaled sharply before rattling off my thoughts, “I had said at least six, and then she said six bedrooms and a bunk room and I said ‘let’s make it eight,’ plus the bunk room...mostly because I had no idea you freakin’ nutjobs would think it’s a good idea to have ten flippin’ kids!”

Silence filled the space before King broke out into a chuckle, followed by Dermot making another comment about a football team. The others were talking animatedly, and I just stared at them, not understanding how I didn’t see the truth in how crazy they were until now.

“Eight sounds about right,” Sterling agreed, drawing my attention.

“Whatever you’ll give us.” Stratton kissed my shoulder.

The other conversation broke through as Yates said, “May have to start soon for that to happen.”

“Yates!” My eyes went wide, though I was secretly loving this.

“What, bunny?” His lips pressed up. “You accept that I literally stalk you, and somehow me wanting to get you

pregnant is shocking?”

“I mean, yeah, a bit!” I squeaked.

“Her dad said we can’t have kids until we are married though.” Lincoln let out a frustrated sound.

“Well then, we have to get married.” King shrugged.

This entire situation was spiraling. I should have slammed the brakes on, but I couldn’t. I was just watching it unfold, realizing that despite them laughing and looking relaxed...they weren’t joking.

None of this was a joke.

“Well, he did say we had to get engaged to live together, and then if it happened, it happened,” Dermot pointed out. “Unless Dahlia wants to get married soon, but he said she picks the timeline for that.”

All of them looked at me expectantly.

My cheeks flamed. “Don’t look at me, you didn’t officially ask me!”

“We need to get on that,” Yates murmured.

“Oh my lord.” I inhaled, dropping my head into my hands. “You are all insane.”

“Killing doesn’t bother her, but this, this makes us insane.” King shook his head.

Stratton spoke against my ear. “Take as long as you want, angel. We have all the time in the world.”

I looked back at him and offered him a sweet kiss, a low rumble breaking from his throat.

“What the hell did he say to get that?” Yates demanded, sounding grumpy as hell.

“Doesn’t matter,” Stratton said before kissing the top of my head.

“Well, what do we want to do now?” Sterling asked curiously, his fingers moving across the table to intertwine with my own.

“I’m sort of hungry—”

Apparently, that was all I needed to say.

To say my boys could be over the top sometimes was the understatement of the freakin’ century. After we had left Dermot’s and gone over to my place, I’d called my mom and dad while my guys handled dinner. I hadn’t been in my room in what felt like forever, so I had laid on my bed, face-timing them and telling my mom about the little breakdown I’d had.

It was hard to open up about it because I never wanted my parents to feel bad or think they had somehow been responsible for being part of my emotional distress, but instead my mom had talked through a lot of it with me. I wasn’t positive if she knew about what I’d done to Ian—I sort of glossed over it—but the way she talked about him made me think she wouldn’t have minded in the least.

I was learning my mom had a bit of a mean streak towards people who threatened her family.

After that, I’d come outside to find the backyard area set up with food that must have been brought in from a restaurant, the ambiance enhanced by a beautiful flower arrangement and soft music. I knew they hadn’t meant it to be romantic, but I’d almost teared up seeing it. Sitting there for nearly three hours, all of us seeming to detox and relax, was exactly what I’d needed. I had even managed to eat a little. I knew that my problems were far from over—and hell, these past few days had added a ton on—but just for that moment, it felt like my life had found a semblance of normality.

I just prayed it wasn’t calm before the storm.

Now I sat on my bed, breathing in the fresh air from the open balcony, as Dermot’s hand gently ran up and down my back, the two of us watching a race that the others apparently had bet on. Well, more importantly, the Rosses had bet on it, which if I had to assume meant they had fixed it. They were standing out on the balcony smoking cigars with the TV tilted

towards them, far too vested in a race for it to be just for the fun of it. I wish I could say it bothered me, but it barely fazed me as I curled against Dermot, his warm, rough hands making my skin break out into shivers.

I rolled onto my back slightly and looked up at him, his emerald green eyes running over my face. “You’re beautiful, baby girl, you know that?”

My cheeks turned bright pink as I narrowed my eyes. “You trying to get me to blush?”

“Seems I already did that.” Dermot winked.

“I’m gonna find a way to get you to blush.” I scowled.

Dermot barked out a laugh. “If you can manage that, Dahlia, we have a way bigger issue. I don’t think I’ve ever blushed before... Then again, you make me react like no other, so it’s always possible.” He nipped my nose, and I was suddenly very glad the others couldn’t see us from this angle. I mean, it’d be fine if someone walked in, but like this, just Dermot and me... I was suspended in a small sexy bubble of wanting to be completely underneath this man.

I squirmed underneath him. “Yeah? How else do I make you react?”

Dermot let out a deep, throaty rumble that had my nipples tightening and my pussy clenching, his fingers running over the loose dress I was wearing. I had maybe decided to wear only a light, somewhat see-through sundress without panties... Not for any particular reason. Obviously not because it was easy to take off.

I let out a surprised moan at the hard press of Dermot’s kiss. It was like a slow-burning wildfire grew in the center of my chest, and I couldn’t control the way my fingers tightened on his shoulders as his hand brushed over my ribs, a groan rattling from my chest as he cupped my breast, running a thumb over my hard nipple.

“Dermot,” I whimpered.

“What do you need, baby girl?” His voice was filled with a level of dominance that had me nearly coming from that alone.

My legs shifted together, his hand leaving my breast as he wedged them apart and gave a teasing bite to my bottom lip.

“You,” I admitted. He hissed as I dug my nails into his chest but then kissed me so hard everything went fuzzy, making me realize that he liked that. He liked that I had left a mark. I understood that completely, because being marked by them was...amazing.

“Please—”

“Shh.” He put a hand over my mouth, his eyes filled with mischief as he pushed down my dress, kneeling over me before bringing his lips down to my breasts. I let out a moan of his name as he teased my nipple, his knee not allowing me any friction to fix the desire pulsating in my center.

“Stay quiet or else I won’t be able to finish you off before they come back in here,” he growled, somehow making all of this ten times hotter. “No panties, baby girl? If they saw that you had this little pussy out, there would be a fucking line to get inside of you, Dahlia. I want you to myself, just for a goddamn minute.”

Oh, holy hell.

A growl left his lips at how wet I was, his fingers skimming across my center. I let out a small cry as he circled my clit in a teasing way that nearly had me bucking off the bed. When he moved down my body, he offered me a warning look to keep quiet as I whimpered, trying to not call out for him again.

It was almost impossible not to, though, when he wedged his massive shoulders between my legs and his lips closed over my clit at the same time two fingers slipped inside of me, giving me the fullness I needed. I didn’t realize just how sensitive I was until I felt my climax blast through me, causing my eyes to nearly roll back in my head. I felt the loss of Dermot’s mouth, his fingers continuing to pump in and out of me, prolonging the effect.

When I felt it suddenly replaced with his hard length, my eyes flew open in surprise as he leaned down to press a kiss to

my lips. “Quiet, baby girl. I’m not going to fuck you right here, not until I can get you completely alone...but I want my cum on you while you sleep. Maybe even inside of you.”

“Yes.” I nodded, my breathing fast and uneven.

Dermot was big—like, really big—and the way he stroked his cock while pushing the tip in before pulling back out, again and again, had me wanting to tug him closer. The way he kept my hips pinned made it impossible, and I could practically feel him getting off on torturing me. His lips brushed my ear as he spoke words that I never expected to come out of his mouth.

“Do you want my cum, baby girl? I didn’t even realize how much I wanted you to have it all, every single drop inside of you, until I thought of making it so fucking obvious who you belonged to, who you let in between your legs ten months ago, so that no one would even think about talking to you.” His snarl in my ear had me clenching around his tip as he let out a low groan.

Dermot wasn’t done, though. “The idea of you walking around in this little sundress with my cum dripping down your thighs is enough to bring a man to his fucking knees, Dahlia.”

“I want that,” I whispered, feeling bold. “I want your cum inside of me.”

“Fuck,” he cursed, and when I felt him come inside of me, I whimpered and my body trembled. I shot off like a goddamn rocket at the idea of him wanting to mark me. I was out of breath by the time he finally zipped up his pants, adjusting my dress but keeping his hand there to keep his cum against me. I stared at him, wide-eyed, as he tucked us underneath a blanket, his hand staying between my legs as he nuzzled my neck.

Holy hell.

“Dermot.” My voice was breathy.

“That’s how you make me react, baby girl.”

I almost laughed at that, but he wasn’t done. “None of that was just heat of the moment.” His tone was almost threatening and hot. “I didn’t realize I wanted that so badly until we talked about kids...and now I can’t stop thinking about it.”

My voice was shaky. “I think I’m okay with that.”

A rumble broke from his chest, victory flashing in his gaze as I curled into him. As I snuggled in, I realized just how ready I was for...well, everything with my boys. My body melted into the mattress, and I fell asleep to the sound of the boys talking and laughing outside on the balcony, Dermot’s cum between my legs.

Chapter Seventeen

STERLING GATES

“I’m glad she’s finally sleeping,” Lincoln admitted, his cigar smoke drifting out of the balcony we sat near, having come inside a bit ago. My eyes were trained on the way Dahlia’s chest moved with even, relaxed breaths. Dermot had rolled over but was sleeping as well, making me a bit jealous that I wasn’t in bed with her instead.

There was only one thing that could eclipse that desire, and it was the need to draw Dahlia. Currently, her face was pressed against the soft sheets, and the light from her nightstand almost made it look like she was glowing. My hand continued to move across the sheet of sketch paper perched on my knee, deciding not to bother responding to my brother. I don’t think he expected it, either—he knew how I got when I was focused on drawing or painting her.

“I was worried earlier,” my brother continued.

Maybe he did expect a response.

“When she woke up screaming... I thought that maybe she wouldn’t calm down, or that when she did, she would realize that we were the ones to cause this entire thing, to bring all of this on her—”

His voice was choked at the end, and my pencil paused on my paper.

I looked up at him and spoke quietly. “It’s possible that she could still feel that way one day, but we have to trust what she’s saying. Dahlia may keep some things to herself, but if

she wasn't comfortable with this, she would tell us... especially after something this insane."

"I hope you're right," Lincoln murmured. "I don't want to lose her."

"That won't happen," Yates said from where he leaned against the balcony archway, sounding supremely confident.

"Yes, I understand that in theory—"

Yates chuckled, but it wasn't a nice noise. "No, Lincoln, I mean it won't happen because we would never let that happen. *I* would never let that happen. I don't care if she blames us, she's not allowed to leave. Ever. She can hate us, but she can't leave."

I started sketching again because I was unsurprised by his words.

Lincoln scoffed. "You sound fucking crazy."

Which was saying something, coming from Lincoln.

"I am crazy." Yates shrugged unapologetically.

"This isn't something we need to worry about," King said evenly. "Dahlia is telling the truth about how she feels."

I looked towards Stratton, who sat next to Lincoln, silently smoking a cigarette but very clearly paying attention to the discussion. It was odd because while he didn't say a lot, Stratton always seemed to be part of the conversation.

"What do you think?" I asked him.

Stratton tapped some of the ash off his cigarette on the railing and spoke evenly. "I think Dahlia is going to deal with issues following the trauma this caused her...but I don't think she's lying." He sighed. "The woman openly admitted to wanting to marry us, agreed to live together, and said she wanted to have not one, but possibly six to eight kids with us. I don't think you have nearly as much to worry about as you're thinking. Dahlia is strong, she just will need to adjust to this new lifestyle. I mean, hell, I'm in the same boat."

His words seemed to calm my brother, who chuckled. “Yeah, she did agree to have kids with us.”

“I still think ten is a better option.” King sighed.

“Just want to keep her pregnant forever?” I mused.

King flashed a grin. “Pretty damn good way of showing that she’s claimed... Well, besides a ring. We need that for sure.”

“How are we going about that?” Yates asked curiously.

This had been a long-held debate, how we would do the engagement ring. The issue was that all of us had a very different idea of what Dahlia would want...or maybe what we wanted for Dahlia. Which was the problem. I was starting to understand, though, that what she wanted and what we wanted for her were probably somewhat different.

“Big. Very visible,” King suggested.

Stratton chuckled. “She’s supposed to like the ring, King—it’s not for you.”

King shot him a look and crossed his arms. “Alright Stratton, you show me what you think she would like, because we haven’t been able to— Shit, that is perfect.”

I flashed a smile as Stratton immediately pulled out his phone, clicking on an app and tossing it King’s way.

That didn’t surprise me in the least. Stratton had been self-isolated for a very long time, and he had no doubt been thinking about Dahlia for most of it. While we hadn’t understood why he had disappeared, none of us had ever assumed that he was no longer into Dahlia—that made no sense with the way he protected her at school and caused a problem with anyone that tried to give her a hard time or talk shit.

“Let me see,” Lincoln demanded.

I looked over his shoulder when he grabbed the phone and couldn’t help but smile at the picture of the vintage-style ring. Even Yates, the self-proclaimed ring expert, approved.

Stratton's voice was rough with emotion. "I'm not saying this is the one, but I think we could have one very similarly made, and it could be cool to personalize it."

"I have someone I could call," King murmured, taking out his phone.

"I'm one hundred percent unsurprised you have a jeweler on speed dial." I shook my head.

King shrugged. "My dad uses him all the time."

When he walked away, I looked back towards Dahlia. Her lips were tilted slightly in sleep, making me wonder what exactly she was dreaming about. I wish there was a way to crawl inside her head, experience what was making her happy, after so much. After she had been put through so damn much.

Overwhelming emotion slammed into me all at once as I considered how the hell we were supposed to protect her.

I thought Stratton's idea was completely viable. Having a family-run and in-house security business would give us control over who we hired, but more than that, it would ensure that we always had the best of the best. A small moment of panic hit me, realizing that it wouldn't just be Dahlia we needed to protect—no, it would be everyone, including our own children. I shook my head, and as if Stratton heard my thoughts, he brought up her safety.

"She has class tomorrow. Photography," he pointed out.

Yates answered, "She may want to go to that. She didn't seem interested in her other classes, but she will most likely want to go to that and test out the semester."

It had surprised me that Dahlia had wanted to go to school, to be honest. Not because of her intelligence, either—Dahlia was extremely smart. No, it was more that I knew what she really wanted, what she had always wanted, and it had nothing to do with school. I would go along with whatever Dahlia decided as long as she was happy. Her happiness was essential to me.

"Someone will have to go with her," Yates murmured. "We are supposed to be handling something with this Dixon

asshole...” He paused and shook his head. “As well as figuring out who the hell put a hit on our girl’s head.”

The fury that whipped through me at that concept was unstoppable, and I had to take a deep breath before going back to drawing, not wanting to think about what I’d do if I found the motherfucker who thought that had been a good idea.

“I’ll go with her.” Dermot’s accented voice had me looking up to where he was getting up, looking oddly alert. I had a feeling he didn’t sleep very often, and I watched as he tucked the blanket back around her. I eyed the newly vacant spot next to her, trying to decide if I wanted to continue to draw or pull her into my arms.

“You don’t want to go to the meeting?” Lincoln frowned.

“It’s not that.” Dermot shook his head. “I need to be there with her the first time she leaves to go somewhere public or else I’ll lose my shit.”

I nodded. “I get that. Honestly, I hate the idea of her leaving Wildberry right now.”

“I also don’t want her to live in fear,” my brother admitted.

“She’s going to probably get embarrassed, but let’s throw as much security as possible on her tomorrow,” Dermot suggested.

“I have a feeling she won’t be as embarrassed as you would think,” Stratton said. “Plus, tomorrow her personal bodyguard arrives—and yes, she’s female.”

I chuckled as all of them relaxed. Honestly, it was amusing that they even considered that Stratton and King would find someone male to be her bodyguard. Although, if it meant her not getting hurt, I was pretty much willing to do anything.

“We need to get a doctor here to look at her,” Lincoln said, nearly reading my mind.

“Is she in pain?” Stratton demanded, looking panicked at the idea of not realizing that her state of being was anything but perfect..

My brother shrugged. “Hasn’t said so, but I want her ribs checked. I have a feeling that the bruising was less than we initially assumed, but I still want them checked to make sure.”

“I also want them to check that she’s not dehydrated or anything like that,” Yates pointed out quietly.

“She’s been eating and drinking,” I told him.

“We would be stupid to think a few meals are going to fix months of this,” Stratton said, presenting us with the raw truth.

I grunted and looked back down at my notebook. I mean... he wasn’t wrong. I just didn’t like it.

“She also has been taking her medicine like she should. Her neck seems to be healing,” I pointed out. “I think she has about four days left on the antibiotics.”

“We should fill her prescriptions a second time just in case, at least for the pain medicine,” Yates suggested. “I’ll do that tomorrow.”

With that we eased back into normal conversation, not wanting Dahlia to wake to us talking about how hurt she was. King walked back into the room at some point, and the others were still up when I finally put my sketch pad down and walked towards the bed, kicking off my shoes and crawling into bed behind her. I let out a small groan as she turned into me, her face was buried against my t-shirt-covered chest, making me wish I was shirtless.

Then again... I didn’t trust myself, especially now that I knew what it felt like to be inside of her.

My eyes had closed for what felt like only a moment when a whimper escaped Dahlia’s lips that had me looking down in concern. Her brow dipped, and her face twisted into one of fear and pain.

Fuck. I immediately knew she was having a nightmare.

Looking around, I realized that everyone was spread out and sleeping, my brother on her other side. How late or how early was it? Dahlia whimpered again, and I drew her more

firmly into my arms and spoke softly in her ear, not wanting to startle her awake.

“Dahlia, honey.” Her body tensed as a shiver went over her skin, making me worry that she was somehow deeper into this nightmare than I’d assumed. I didn’t want her to get scared and think I was someone who meant her harm.

“Dahlia,” I tried again, “I need you to open your eyes. It’s just me.”

Her breathing went rough as her body tensed up... Before she finally seemed to melt into the bed.

I had no idea where her mind had been, but it hadn’t been anywhere good at all, and I was thankful when her heavy eyes finally opened.

“Sterling?” Her voice was soft.

“I got you,” I whispered.

Her face was pale, and her breathing was uneven. “Can you tell me something to distract me?”

I could tell she wasn’t fully out of her nightmare-induced state, her panicked pulse making me worry that she would work herself up to the point of passing out or something equally as scary.

“I drew you tonight,” I admitted.

She stilled and looked up at me with soft affection. “Can I see?” she asked quietly.

I reached over and grabbed the sketch pad as she propped herself up on an elbow, leaning into me as I gave her the entire book. I pointed towards the bookmarked page, which she opened and made a pleased noise. It wasn’t my best one of her, but the way she lit up, offering me a smile, had me wanting her to know just how often I drew her.

“That entire book is just you.” I felt my ears heat as her eyes went round.

When she began to flip through them, she offered me a shy smile, the moonlight bouncing off her pretty skin. “You make

me look so beautiful, Sterling.”

“You are beautiful, and the drawings don’t do you justice,” I whispered. “I’m glad you like them because I was worried about you seeing my new collection of paintings I’ve been working on.”

“What are they?” Her brow dipped.

“You. All of them are based on sketches of you,” I said easily.

“Can I see them soon?” Her hands tightened on the notebook. “I love your art. You are ridiculously talented... I just had no idea you had ever drawn or painted me. I mean, that feels so special, Sterling. Holy crap.”

“Sure, sugar.” I rubbed my nose against hers. “Tomorrow we can go to the studio.”

“I love you,” she whispered, looking excited.

“I love you more.”

“Promise?” I could see she was teasing.

“Always.”

It was a vow I fully intended to keep.

Chapter Eighteen

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

I knew I had slept well when the first thing I felt when waking up was the satisfaction of stretching. I was obviously still a bit sore, but raising my hands above my head and allowing all my joints to crack had me letting out a happy sound. The scent of roses filled the space around me, and when I managed to finally open my heavy eyes, I realized that there was a brilliant light filling my room. I couldn't tell exactly what time it was, but I would guess late morning, early afternoon. I sat up easily, wanting to see who was still in here—

My thoughts came to a complete halt.

Oh.

Well, this was an amazing way to wake up. Goodness gracious.

I had no idea where my men were right now, but my bed was covered by six large black velvet boxes that had gold cursive script on them. Each had a large gold bow, and within them were roses that were packed so tightly that all you could see were the flower heads. I felt my eyes water as I leaned over to grab the note that lay on top of the first one.

My smile grew, realizing that each and every one wished me a good morning, each of my men telling me that they loved me in their own way. I swallowed down my emotions, my eyes watering as I looked around the room, wanting to know where they were so I could thank them properly. Noticing that the balcony door was open, I walked towards it and peeked out,

briefly hearing what I thought was King's deep laughter from the pool patio. Had they just let me sleep in?

Not only did I sleep in, but I'd woken up well rested and surrounded by flowers! I swear, these men were going to be the death of me. I looked towards the large clock on my bedroom wall and noticed that it was noon already. My head was a bit sleep-filled, but I knew that I had photography class at some point today. Oddly, compared to yesterday, I was excited at the prospect of going to this class.

Before running around to get ready, I grabbed one box after another and lined them up on the console table that sat behind my sofa, a bright, vibrant addition to my room. A girl could get used to this.

Taking a long shower, I made sure to shave completely, noticing that the bruises looked even worse today, if possible, even though they felt better. I knew that was common, but I also knew that my men would probably be upset if they saw them.

I reached my hands above my head, and while there was still a small twinge of soreness—okay, maybe more than a twinge—my breathing didn't feel nearly as labored. I got out of the shower, feeling far more awake, and after nearly an hour I'd managed to not only blow dry my hair but put on a full face of makeup. It was going to be slightly cooler than normal today, so I was hoping I wouldn't sweat it off, but you never knew.

Walking towards my wardrobe, I slipped on a pair of light blue lace panties and a matching bra, my eyes shooting up around the corner of the room, realizing that there was a very large possibility that Yates could see me. I smiled to myself, knowing that I would have fun with that when I had more time...especially if he was busy.

Grabbing a blue and yellow plaid skirt, I matched it with a blue sleeveless dress shirt that tucked into the skirt before adding a pearl-accented belt. After adding some pearl earrings, I slipped on some flats and made my way downstairs, hoping to find my men to thank them for the flowers.

It didn't take long, since I found Yates waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I flashed him a huge smile. "Hey, you."

Yates looked up at me and narrowed his eyes, amusement there despite him looking grumpy. "I know what you're thinking, and if you do that you're going to be fucked so hard you won't be able to walk for weeks," he warned.

My mouth dropped, and I stared at him wide-eyed. "What are you talking about?" I demanded, knowing exactly what he was talking about.

"I saw you look right at the camera, bunny," he growled, intertwining our hands. "Now come on, breakfast before you have class."

"So grumpy," I complained before smirking. "I do have to say, that doesn't seem like much of a punishment—"

I let out a squeak as my back hit the hallway wall and he grabbed my jaw, brushing his lips over my own. "Don't, bunny. It has been way too damn long since I've been inside of you. Today is not the day to tease me or else I'll fuck you were you stand."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I sassed.

"Out back, now." He urged me forward, his hand swatting across my ass. I let out a squeak and scowled at him as he flashed me a wicked smile.

"You look beautiful today."

"No, you do not get to be sweet now." I narrowed my eyes as he grasped my hand and ran his lips over the skin there, but I couldn't hold my scowl for long. I was going to have way too much fun messing with Yates.

"Morning guys," I called out happily as I walked out into my fairly crowded back yard. It was a new day, and everyone looked far more put together than yesterday. The table out back was covered in fresh fruit and pastries, and I almost immediately sat down next to King as Yates sat on my other side, putting together a plate for me after I tried to and he stole the plate. I didn't even bother arguing with him, knowing he

would say something about me trying to ‘stop him from doing his job’ or some nonsense.

“What are they doing?” I asked curiously, noting that Stratton and Dermot were talking to a group of guys that looked to be normal security. I didn’t see any FBI vests, so I had to assume that. Also, where the heck were the twins right now?

“Briefing them.” King kissed my hand. “You’re going to class today?”

“I’m going to give it a go.” I nodded and then nibbled my lip. “I think it could be fun... I just get a bit nervous.”

Sterling’s voice filled the space as he walked outside. “Don’t worry, sugar. Dermot is going with you, plus security.”

I melted back into my seat a bit, nodding as I picked up a small blueberry muffin and nibbled on it.

“Oh!” All of them looked at me in concern. I nearly smiled at that but continued, “I just wanted to say that I loved the flowers, they were super sweet.”

“Like you.” Lincoln appeared out of nowhere, pressing a kiss to my cheek..

“I’m glad you loved them, princess.” King squeezed my hand.

“Now keep eating,” Yates growled. I rolled my eyes but did as he said, secretly loving how bossy and grumpy he could get. I listened to the four of them talk as I slowly sipped my coffee.

I watched casually as Dermot and Stratton handled the security, ordering groups of people around. It was hot. I still felt a bit weird about the security situation, like there was some aspect to it that I was missing... But it was easy to ignore it while staring at them.

Stratton was wearing an all black outfit, his shirt showing off his tattoos and his expression completely stony and expressionless. Dermot was wearing a black polo with aviators that made him look hot as heck.

I hopped up, ignoring the calls to come back, as I made my way towards Stratton. Without caution, I wrapped my arms around him as he looked down at me, his eyes melting from ice chips into clear pools of water. “Morning, angel. How did you sleep?”

“Wish I had woken up to you next to me, but pretty good,” I teased. “The flowers were gorgeous.”

“I’m glad you liked them.” He dipped his head, brushing his nose against mine.

“Baby girl,” Dermot called out before walking over, ignoring the men he’d been talking to. “You look fucking edible.”

I made a surprised noise as he kissed me hard, making Stratton grumble. Then Dermot was gone, back talking to the men, my eyes wide as I looked up at Stratton in confusion.

He shrugged. “He’s a bit worked up today, not positive why.”

Maybe because we had all but had sex yesterday...and then he came inside me? That would be a solid reason to be a bit worked up.

“Dahlia!” Sterling’s voice called my attention back to the table, my chest suddenly clenching as I narrowed my eyes at the woman standing near him.

Stratton kissed the shell of my ear before he let me go, and I looked over the objectively gorgeous woman near my men as I walked. My eyes darted to each of them, noticing their gazes were completely on me, making me breathe a bit easier.

I wouldn’t lie, though—this woman was intimidating.

First of all, she had to be 5’8”, maybe 5’9”, and was built like a model with long, lean muscle. She was dressed in jeans and a black shirt with combat boots, her black hair tugged back in a tight ponytail. She examined me with curious bright blue eyes that held no hostility, and when I offered her a hesitant smile, she nodded back.

“What’s up?” I asked, looking over at my boys before back at her.

“This is Devyn,” King explained easily, seeming to watch my reaction. “She is one of the possible bodyguards we’re considering for you.”

Oh.

I offered my hand to her. “It’s nice to meet you, Devyn. I’m Dahlia.”

“I know.” She flashed a small polite smile.

“She was recommended by India Lexington,” Yates added.

My eyebrows went up. Well, that for sure gave her a bit of brownie points overall.

“Let’s talk?” I motioned towards the pool chairs, and she followed after. I was a bit nervous, but I tried to channel my mom’s confident energy as I sat down, offering her a polite smile.

“Is it weird, going to people’s houses for this type of thing?” I asked curiously.

Her laugh was authentic. “Yeah, it’s a bit different. I actually don’t normally do this type of thing, but I was changing my location from the East Coast to here, and India suggested contacting the Rosses to see if they needed any help.”

I nodded and then tried to figure out a serious question, I hadn’t exactly been prepared to do an interview today.

“What made you want to be a bodyguard?” I felt like that was reasonable.

She was so relaxed, and the way she seemed to ease the awkwardness of this situation had me already liking her. I didn’t really have any friends that were girls, so I always felt like my communication was slightly off while interacting with them.

“I was trained in the military,” she explained before adding, “Not US-based; I actually am from Novosibirsk.”

“Russia?” I arched my brow.

She nodded sharply. “When I came to the US a year ago, I figured this was the best line of work.”

“You don’t even have an accent,” I stated in slight wonder.

Her smile grew. “I’ve traveled a lot. I wasn’t exactly a ‘normal’ soldier, but the skills served me well. Still do.”

“Would being my bodyguard feel like a boring downgrade?” I asked. “I feel like it might... I have to tell you, my life is not exciting at all.”

Her eyes lit up with humor. “That’s not what I heard.”

“Okay, recently it has been far more exciting than normal,” I conceded.

“The men you surround yourself with have enough enemies... I have heard all of their family names long before coming here,” she admitted with a small smile as if she were breaking news to me. “You probably are in far more danger than you even realize. With that being said, between having a bodyguard and a security team like the one they seem to be putting together, I don’t think you will need to worry very much.”

Let’s hope.

I was finding that I really liked Devyn, but I also knew it was important to clear the air. “I think this could be a good fit...but I have to know, are you uncomfortable with our situation? I know some people may be.”

“Polyamory?” she asked, a softness in her features. “Nope, doesn’t bother me a bit.”

I was really getting this whole ‘clear and honest’ thing down.

“Okay.” I nodded and then stood up. “I think this could work then.”

I didn’t want to decide anything for sure without talking to my boys, but I felt comfortable around her, and I had a feeling

she was a complete badass. After saying goodbye to Devyn, I sat down with the boys and offered my opinion.

“She seems really cool,” I admitted. “I think it wouldn’t be too bad to hang out with her whenever I have to go places...as long as it’s not like twenty-four-seven. I still want to be able to spend time alone with you guys.”

And as much as she seemed to not have an interest in my boys, I didn’t want her around them all the time. I knew it was possessive, but I also knew how amazing they were, and I didn’t want her to realize that and possibly end up liking them... Man, there was something seriously wrong with me.

King made a sound of agreement. “Don’t worry, princess, it would only be when you leave Wildberry alone. The rest of the time she would be with the security team around the property and not specifically with you.”

I nodded and grabbed a glass of orange juice, already feeling more positive about today. Maybe going to classes would be uneventful.

I nearly shook my head at that, knowing it was highly unlikely.

Chapter Nineteen

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

There was nervous energy under my skin as I stood outside of the classroom, hesitating to go in, my fingers tightening on my camera bag as Dermot's fingers smoothed over my back. I turned into him, letting out a startled squeak as someone walked past us. Dermot's gaze tracked their movement before looking back down at me with affection. There was so much heat there as well that it actually had my heart stuttering, my brain still finding it a bit impossible that someone like Dermot—heck, any of my boys—were into me.

“Maybe this isn't a good idea.” I inhaled sharply. I knew why I was nervous, and it had nothing to do with class. No, this purely had to do with the fear that someone would bring up the social media incident, and honestly? It wouldn't surprise me. We had caused quite the scene this morning alone when we'd arrived on campus.

We weren't exactly being subtle.

“Baby girl,” Dermot spoke softly, “you have no reason to be afraid. I am right outside this door. This building is surrounded by FBI agents and our security team, and every person in your class, down to the teacher, has been through a full review. I promise you that no one is going to cause an issue. Just go in there and enjoy learning about photography, and when you're done we can go home and I'll distract you more.”

“Distract me?”

He stepped into me, and I leaned against the wall outside of the classroom, looking up at him. His fingers ran over my waist and played with the edge of my skirt as he bent down to brush his nose against my own.

“Oh yes.” He pressed his lips against mine gently as my body broke into a flush.

“Dermot.” My voice was breathy. “You can’t—”

“Can’t what, baby girl? Appreciate this fucking skirt you decided to wear? Have been all morning.”

Lord. I could not handle Dermot when he was like this, his full attention completely on me and his energy focused on turning me into a puddle of need.

“I can’t go into class if you keep doing this. My face is literally pink!” I murmured as he looked over my face, his eyes filling with pleasure.

“Good.” He leaned forward again and molded his lips to mine. There were three security guards in this hallway alone, and I knew there were at least ten outside. Overkill? Yeah, probably. I mean, we had literally driven to school in a freakin’ motorcade of dark SUVs.

Then again, I had a hit out on my head, so I couldn’t blame them completely. I had offered to not go to class to make it easier on them, and they insisted it would be fine, but I still felt guilty. I felt like I was somehow making it harder on them.

Maybe after this, I would stick to online classes... At least until the hit was no longer an issue. Or maybe just my photography classes? It would only be twice a week, anyway.

“Dahlia, breathe.” Dermot was watching me as he pulled back from the kiss. “I can feel how tense you are. I don’t want you to overthink this, okay? I promise you that you’re safe.”

“I feel guilty, I feel like I’m making things more difficult ___”

“No.” He shook his head. “Hiding away won’t stop these people. I don’t want you to live your life in fear. It’s our job to worry about that shit, okay? Let us do that.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Ms. Aldridge?” A feminine voice had me turning to find a woman, maybe in her mid-forties, with bright red hair, offering me a soft smile. “If you are ready, I would love to start class.”

Dermot spoke before I could answer. “You’ve been made aware of this situation, I assume?”

The woman looked at Dermot, wide-eyed, and nodded, paleing slightly. “Yes.”

“Fantastic.” Dermot nodded and looked down at me. “Go into class, baby girl. I will see you in an hour or so.”

I went on my toes and kissed him, following the teacher in, before looking back and seeing the dark and possessive look that flashed across Dermot’s face. My skin broke out into shivers, but I looked around the large classroom with massive windows that I entered.

I could see the men dressed in black suits standing around the building, and I nearly groaned, noticing that the other students, around ten in total, were staring at me with varying expressions. Mostly curiosity, but I saw annoyance there as well.

Wonderful. That was all I needed.

“Feel free to sit wherever you want, Dahlia. My name is Ms. Dempsey, let me know directly if you have any issues,” she insisted as I sat down at the closest seat available, next to a blonde woman around my age. Instead of giving me a weird look, she just offered me a small smile.

When the instructor started talking at the front of the classroom, I felt a streak of excitement go through me. The syllabus was being passed out, and I put my brown leather camera bag on the desk before taking out a notebook, cursing slightly that I didn’t have a pencil.

“Need a pen?” the woman next to me asked.

I had a feeling that she wasn’t from around here, and not just because of her northern accent. She was wearing a hoodie

with leggings, and her hair up in this sporty ponytail. It wasn't really my style, but it was super laid back, and honestly very refreshing since everyone looked like a clone around here. Really pretty, expensive, put-together clones... But still clones.

"That would be great," I admitted. "I was a bit rushed this morning."

"I feel that," she said sympathetically as she offered me a pen. "I thought I would be late today because there was this entire security thing at the front of the building. I have no idea what's going on, but it has to be something big. I think one of them even had an FBI vest."

I offered her an awkward smile. "Yeah, that's sort of my bad."

Her eyes went round. "All of that is for you? Why?"

"Long story," I hedged. "They are being protective."

"Who are they?" She arched her brow, looking amused. "I mean the security, obviously, but are your parents someone important or something?"

"Something." I shrugged. "But that's mostly because of my boyfriends."

I didn't correct myself with the plural, and she just shook her head and offered a sly smile. "Girl, I have a feeling you have some crazy life... Which means we need to be friends and have coffee so I can hear all about it."

"That would be cool," I agreed, trying to ignore the giddy excitement at the idea of having a friend.

The instructor's voice rang out, and I immediately refocused on the front of the classroom, relaxing more into my seat. I had no doubt, absolutely none, that there were plenty of people in here who were not only shocked to see me but probably letting their friends know or trying to take photos. I couldn't think about that though. I couldn't let it affect me.

I was learning that I should probably stay away from social media in general since Dermot's Instagram had been the last

thing to seriously mess with my anxiety. I had actually told him about that this morning...

“Can you text King, baby girl? Just tell him I will let him know when we leave campus,” Dermot asked as he drove down the long road that led away from Wildberry Lane, following three SUVs and trailed by three more. I had said goodbye to all the boys before leaving, and I was already missing them after only moments. I picked up his phone to send the text, unlocking it with my fingerprint and remembering that I very much needed to ask about that.

“When did you add my fingerprint?” I asked softly.

“When you were sleeping,” Dermot admitted. It was after I found you during the social media attack.”

“Why?”

“Because I never want there to be anything between us.”

“Oh,” I whispered and looked down, figuring I should be truthful. “The other night, before Stratton found me, I... I was having a panic attack. I had opened your phone and went onto your Instagram—”

I peeked up and found him looking at me with concern.

“I saw that picture from a bit ago with those girls, and I got insecure about holding the attention of six men,” I murmured.

Dermot’s hand moved to tilt my chin as he came to a stop, pausing the entire motorcade, his eyes searching mine. “First of all, Dahlia, never doubt the attraction or attention you hold. You’re everything, baby girl, and absolutely priceless.” My face flamed with color as he continued, “But more than that, no one—and I mean absolutely no one—meant anything to me before you.”

“And the girls on your social media?” I asked softly.

“Consider them deleted. I’ll fill it with so many pictures of you, people will think it’s your account. But I will keep it private because I’m a selfish bastard.”

I let out a small laugh and intertwined my hand with his. “Were they people you dated?”

I wasn’t positive I wanted to know.

“I’ve never dated anyone,” he responded seriously.

“Okay, hooked up—”

Dermot leaned over and kissed me, speaking softly. “Despite what is probably assumed, I have been with very few women, and I have never considered dating someone, let alone starting an entire life together.” He focused his emerald gaze down on my lips before moving it up again, a haunted shadow passing through his eyes. “Outside of that, I was a bit more focused on handling my father. I didn’t have time for dating.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help but smile at that, but then frowned. “Dermot, I’m glad your father’s dead. I’m glad Ian’s dead.”

Dermot let out a hum of agreement. “Yeah, baby girl, I am too.”

Honestly, despite it sounding weak, his words had gone a long way to making me feel better about the situation. Those happy thoughts allowed me to focus on the class, and I found myself so engrossed in what I was learning that I didn’t even realize the time until Ms. Dempsey ended the lesson and people started packing up. When I went to stand up, I turned to return the pen to my new friend.

“I’m Tracey, by the way,” she offered easily.

“Dahlia,” I returned, wincing as she offered me a surprised look, recognition sliding through her gaze, before it turned sympathetic.

“I get it,” Tracey said easily. “Seriously, I do. I may not have had national attention, but there is a reason I am here and not going to school back in Michigan.”

There was a story there for sure.

“Thanks.” I smiled and then paused. “I would say you should text me, but I don’t have a phone anymore.”

“Email?” she asked, looking unsurprised.

I nodded and wrote it down before saying goodbye and walking towards the door of the classroom, finding that the hallway had cleared out fairly fast. My smile grew to see Dermot standing there, looking way too handsome. I nearly twirled into his arms and he spun me around, chuckling at my excitement.

“Good class?” he asked, intertwining our hands as we walked out the way we came.

“It was.” I nodded. “I even met a girl, Tracey. We exchanged emails. And then the instructor gave us this entire syllabus and schedule to look over. I am super excited to learn more techniques on how to take certain photos. I think that taking this class is exactly what I needed.”

Dermot was smiling at me, affection turning his eyes nearly light green. “Good. That is exactly what I wanted to hear.”

As we stepped out into the fresh air, I found that I didn’t want my time alone with Dermot to end at all. I casually suggested lunch, which he immediately latched onto, informing security that we would be eating at a restaurant across the street.

When we got there, I thought it was odd that the restaurant was cleared out, but I was glad for it because we could sit in a small, cozy booth with me tucked into his side. It was only minutes later that I learned Dermot had already had our teams clear out the place purposefully. While my immediate reaction was ‘overkill,’ I wasn’t going to question what they thought was necessary to keep me safe. Not anymore, not when the situation was this serious.

As the two of us ate and relaxed for nearly an hour, I couldn’t help but envision us being like this for the next sixty to eighty years... And I loved it.

“You know you have taken me on my only two dates?” I squeezed Dermot’s hand. Well, my only two dates that hadn’t

been ruined by Yates.... Which had been the entire point, for the record.

His smile grew. "Yeah?"

I offered a sly smile. "I may have to give the others a bit of a hard time about that."

"Make sure I am there." He chuckled softly.

As we walked outside, I spotted a coffee shop near the security cars lining the curb and mentioned stopping in. Security surrounded the place as Dermot got us coffee, and I slipped easily towards the bathroom. Brushing my fingers through my hair after using the washroom, I walked back out and nearly slammed right into a wall of lean muscle.

I made a surprised noise as my head snapped up to look right into the face of someone I never hoped to see again... Max Brooks.

"Dahlia." His face looked almost gaunt, a bruise against his cheek and his eyes filled with shadows.

"Max." I felt my entire body stiffen. "You're here, on campus."

"To see you." He offered me a tight smile. "We need to talk. I have all the info you want."

'The info I want'? Yeah, this had trouble written all over it.

"I'm good." I started to take a step back and prayed that Dermot would come to check on me.

"I wasn't giving you an option." He tried to grab my wrist, but I stepped away fast enough that he stumbled. When he tried to move forward, a dark shadow appeared behind him. I relaxed into the wall, feeling relief at Dermot's presence... Well, until I actually saw how pissed he was.

My eyes widened on Dermot, his entire body bathed in an intense, crazy energy that had shivers breaking out across my skin. I let out a surprised sound as he pinned Max to the wall by his throat and bent down so they were eye level.

"Run, motherfucker."

His words were rough and dangerous, my pulse picking up as I felt nervousness shoot through me. Followed by desire... Why could I never get my mind and body to agree on how we should feel? Honestly, I felt like a freakin' mess most of the time.

Max coughed as Dermot let go of him, and Max shot me a look before he sprinted away from us, Dermot instantly pressing a device against his ear. "Have someone tail him. I want eyes on him from now on. We need to know where he's heading."

"Oh wow," I breathed out. "That was... Dermot?"

Dermot walked me backward into the large bathroom, my steps stumbling slightly, before he kicked the door shut. Somehow I had a feeling Dermot had reached his breaking point.

Chapter Twenty

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

“Dermot?” My voice was soft and unsure as he backed me up against the wall of the bathroom, my pulse picking up at how worked up he appeared, his gaze darkening on me with heat.

I wasn’t scared—maybe a bit cautious, but not scared—because there was something so incredibly powerful underneath the aggression coming off of him. Something that was literally turning me into a puddle of need that could only be fixed by him. I shivered as he locked my hips against the wall and gave me a serious command.

“No.” He pressed his lips to mine lightly before taking me in a deep kiss and then pulling away again. “No talking unless it’s my name.”

“But—”

“I am so on edge, Dahlia, that if you talk about anything regarding what just happened, I am going to lose my goddamn mind,” he snarled, his hands tightening on me.

“Okay,” I whispered, my legs pressing together and my center pulsing.

“Good girl.” He nipped my bottom lip before dropping to his knees, his hands running up my thighs before pushing my skirt up to my waist. I whimpered as he buried his nose against my damp panties and let out an almost wild noise. Sweet christ.

“Who are you wet for, baby girl?” he demanded, his hands gripping my legs in an almost bruising hold. I found myself hoping it would leave marks.

“You.” I swallowed. “For sure you.”

“Good. Now put your hands on top of my head.” His order was low and throaty, his accent growing thicker, as I strung my fingers through his hair and tugged slightly, an untamed look filling his face.

Before I had a chance to ask what he was doing, he tugged my panties to the side in a movement fast enough I heard a rip, then buried his mouth between my legs. I let out a moan as my head fell back and a flash of heat soared over me, his mouth suctioning over my clit. I cried out his name, taken off-guard by his aggressive, direct action, my legs trembling slightly as his thick fingers slid into me. The magma-like inferno at my center had the ability to level me, absolutely wreck me, but I couldn't ask him to stop.

If anything, I needed more. Always more of him.

“Holy hell.” My moan was followed by a sound of complaint when he leaned back.

“What did I say, baby girl?” he growled softly. “I don't want any of those fuckers hearing anything but my name on your lips while I make this little cunt come.”

“Dermot”—I tightened my hands in his hair—“please?”

“Fuck, I love when you beg,” he snarled, his accent so thick that it caused shivers to break across my skin. He went back to devouring me, his teeth grazing my clit as he curled his fingers inside of me. I moaned out his name and absolutely exploded on his lips. He groaned and continued to devour me, fucking me with his tongue while lapping up my wet heat.

I let out a sound of complaint when he stood up. I didn't want to stop like the night before. I wanted all of Dermot, even if we were in a coffee shop bathroom.

I was thrilled as he pressed me further against the wall and kissed me hard, my taste between us making him produce a low, vicious rumble. “Wrap your arms around my neck, baby girl.”

I didn't hesitate to listen to him, but I did lean forward and nip his lip hard. The taste of blood passed between us, a nearly

uncontrollable energy shaking the air around us.

When he undid his jeans and stroked his cock with one hand, my knees nearly broke in anticipation. In that moment, I decided then that it would be worth breaking the rules, and I went down on my knees and wrapped my hand around his cock, the thickness of it not allowing for my fingers to touch as my tongue darted forward to lick the precum that came off the tip.

“Fuck, Dahlia,” he hissed as I teased his cock, realizing how much I loved his taste on my lips. He made a strangled noise as I took him fully in my mouth and gagged. The way he gripped my hair had me deep throating him further, and I felt like I was being burned alive by the wicked undertone of the moment. I had never imagined being on my knees in a public place with Dermot in my mouth, but now I craved it. More than anything, I craved him losing complete and utter control.

It seemed my action broke him as he suddenly pulled me off his cock and lifted me up. I moaned as he pinned me to the wall, his grip hard on my hips, but it felt good. It felt hot and secure, possessive in nature.

“Goddamnit.” He kissed me hard before pulling back. “Your fucking mouth should be illegal. Did you like getting my cock all wet so I can fuck into your pussy nice and easy? I know it’s going to be a damn near impossible fit with how tight you are. I’m going to need you to hold on, baby girl. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” I whispered before a moan came from my throat. The man slammed into me all at once, and I jolted, arching against him as his length fully stretched me. Everything about the man was huge, and being trapped against the wall by his massive body and completely impaled on his cock spoke to such a base, almost primal part of me. I didn’t even feel bad as my fingers dug into his shoulders hard enough to draw blood. I was finding that Dermot and I enjoyed marking one another... and I was completely here for it.

Dermot didn’t give me a moment to adjust before he began to absolutely destroy me. I clung to him as he slammed inside

of me like a man possessed, almost like he was trying to prove a point. I felt a flush break out across my skin, and my center began to tighten in excitement as I wondered if I would survive this climax. My breathing was jagged, and when my eyes fell shut, I felt a hard slap to my ass.

“Eyes on me,” he ordered. I opened my eyes and kept his gaze as one of his hands came off my hip and tugged at my shirt. I let out a small yelp of surprise as buttons went everywhere. He lifted me higher up against the wall and sucked my hard nipple into his mouth through my silk bra. I cried out as my pussy pulsed, and I began to pant out his name, the sound of him fucking in and out of me causing the world to spin.

“Who do you belong to, Dahlia,” he demanded.

“You. All of you,” I answered immediately as he nipped my bottom lip and continued to pump inside of me. I could tell he was only getting more worked up.

“Exactly, baby girl,” Dermot growled. “You belong to me. You belong to us. No one fucking else.”

“Dermot—”

“Only we get to fuck this little cunt and fill it up.” His voice was filled with a possessiveness I was overwhelmed by. “Every bastard we pass wants exactly that, and none of them will ever get it because they would be dead the minute they even came near you.”

Oh shit.

“Now tell me to fill up this little pussy with my cum,” he commanded. “Tell me you want it between your legs all damn day so that everyone can fucking tell that you are already owned. Already claimed.”

“Please,” I whined.

“I won’t let you come until you say it,” he threatened.

“Please fill me up,” I whimpered. “I want to feel you there, I want it,” I moaned. “I want it dripping out of me.”

I couldn’t even be embarrassed.

“Good,” he snarled. “Now come on this cock and take all of me.”

I cried out his name as his restraint snapped and he began to fuck me like a wild animal, pinning me between him and the wall. He pumped in and out of me until I saw stars exploding on him as I threw my head back and screamed. Dermot roared out my name and leaned into my neck, sucking the skin there hard enough that I whimpered, before pouring his cum into me.

I whimpered as I completely went limp against him, his mouth pressing in the soft space between my neck and shoulder.

“Fuck,” he groaned after a minute. “Goddamn, Dahlia, I have no control with you.”

“Good, I loved that,” I admitted shyly.

When he pulled back and out of me, I winced as he stared down at us, making a pleased, almost feral noise. He put himself away before lowering me to the ground, smoothing my hair back from my shoulders and running his thumb against my neck, a dark flash filtering through his eyes.

“I like that on you.”

I arched my brow. “Seems like you like a lot of stuff...on and in me.”

Dermot let out a sound of agreement. “You trying to get fucked again, baby girl? Keep saying shite like that, and I can guarantee it will happen.”

My eyes went wide. “Not positive that’s a good idea right now... You are really big...”

“We’ve gotta get out of here,” he groaned in response to my words.

I turned towards the mirror, and my eyes went wide, seeing the massive hickey on my neck. “Dermot!”

“What?” He smirked, his grin cocky. “I like it.”

I did also.

“I can’t go out there like this!” I motioned to my neck and then my torn shirt.

“Your clothes are also wrinkled and you smell like sex.” He chuckled softly before looking at my shirt, tugging his jacket off and wrapping it around my shoulders. “Come on, let’s get home and then I can get you back out of this outfit.”

As we left the bathroom, we found the guards standing at the end of the hallway, the coffee shop mostly cleared out. A weird sensation tickled my spine, and when I looked toward the barista, she refused to meet my gaze.

Something was wrong.

It was that guttural instinct.

“Dermot, something is wrong,” I warned.

Our security was walking out, some of them behind us, the moment in time almost seeming to freeze...

Before everything exploded.

My ears rang as everything around me seemed to blow up. I was hit hard, Dermot’s scent mixed with ash and fire surrounding me, as I distinctly heard someone roar out in pain. Everything grew fuzzy around me, a burning in my left leg making me feel almost sick.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter Twenty-One

YATES CARTER

“Where is she?”

I didn't recognize my own voice as the nurse practically jumped out of our way, pointing towards a door down the hall. I would have been pissed that she gave away the information so easily if I wasn't positive that they'd already been briefed about who we were. I ignored Dermot completely as he came out of the room, despite him looking like he'd been through hell, and felt my entire world come to a sudden halt upon seeing Dahlia in a hospital bed.

No. No, that wasn't right at all.

Dahlia shouldn't ever be in a hospital. It was completely unacceptable, and the feeling of failure hit into me. I had promised her that no one would ever take her from us... But someone had tried, and now she was here.

My bunny was laid out in a cold, sterile room with tubes attached to her arms and her skin covered in ash and debris. My knees felt almost weak as I grabbed the bed, not understanding how this kept fucking happening. What the hell weren't we seeing? A cold energy seeped over my skin as I let out a harsh breath.

Brushing a kiss over her head, I retreated to one of the chairs in the room. I didn't trust myself to do anything but sit and watch over her. There was something we were missing here, some element to the picture that wasn't occurring to us, something larger than this just being a simple internal team

issue... And it could cost Dahlia her life if we weren't careful. That wasn't acceptable.

If I lost Dahlia, there would be no point in continuing on.

Without her, there was no reason to exist.

Lincoln Gates

Leaning against the doorframe of the hospital room, I rubbed the back of my neck, unable to calm to the rapid tempo of my heart. When we had gotten the call about the explosion, it had felt like my entire world had narrowed at the idea of her being in an explosion. At the idea of possibly losing Dahlia.

“You good?” Sterling asked me quietly.

I nodded sharply.

I wasn't, of course, but I was doing better than a lot of our group, so I had to keep it together for now. Especially for the sake of the nurses who were doing their best to keep our girl comfortable. I knew rationally that she was stable, but it didn't make me feel any better. I wanted to hear it from the doctor's mouth, and then *maybe* I would feel slightly relieved. Although it was highly unlikely.

The only thing that would truly fix this would be Dahlia opening her gorgeous eyes. I closed my eyes and sent up a prayer to a god that no doubt couldn't hear me over the crackling flames of hell. No, I had a feeling I was as far from heaven as one could imagine if that shit actually existed.

That was okay with me, though, as long as my Dahlia was okay.

As long as she opened her damn eyes.

“Lincoln.” Sterling's warning had me looking down to the doorframe, which I was gripping so hard I was nearly white-

knuckling it. I cursed, stepping out from the room for a moment to gather myself.

I needed to get it together for Dahlia.

I couldn't lose myself until she was here with me, in my arms.

Stratton Lee

The sound of the heart monitor was the only thing that seemed to be grounding me to the moment. If it wasn't for that, I would be losing my shit. My hand was wrapped around Dahlia's far too delicate one as I stared down at the standard hospital bedsheets, wondering if these places were supposed to be this silent.

I suppose, since the entire wing had been cleared out, it made a lot of sense.

Were these sheets comfortable enough for her? Probably not. Maybe I could get them to switch them out...but then she would have to be moved, and that wasn't acceptable.

I looked up to see if she'd opened her eyes yet, only to find them not just closed, but her face devoid of any expression. Usually when she slept, she would either smile slightly or make a small frown that dipped her brows, but this? I didn't like this at all. I had watched her sleep far too many times, so I knew well that this wasn't normal.

It didn't help that her skin was chalky and pale, showing just how much blood she'd lost. Dahlia was stable now, and besides a hit to the head from flying debris, Dermot had taken most of the damage. Well, except for the glass that had wedged itself in her leg, but luckily that hadn't hit any major veins or arteries and was now removed.

I had no doubt the recovery process was going to be a bitch, especially since my angel didn't like to sit around for

long. Maybe I would just carry her everywhere so she could still be happy. I wouldn't complain—having her in my arms was beyond ideal.

Especially after...I closed my eyes, trying to not think about the single most terrifying moment of my life. She had jumped in front of a fucking bullet for me. I took a deep breath to steady myself. I had no idea how to even handle that; it left me feeling weak in my knees.

“Dermot,” King snapped from where he stood in the hallway, “just listen to the fucking doctor and sit down. You are going to be useless if you are knocked out when she wakes up.”

Dermot stormed past Sterling and Lincoln, who were standing guard at the door, and he sat himself in a chair next to Yates, looking livid. Yates, who hadn't moved since he got here, his gaze completely focused on Dahlia.

I really couldn't predict how any of them were going to react to situations... Well, that wasn't completely true. It was pretty easy to see that Kingston was a second away from going on the goddamn war path.

I knew we had been trying to work with the FBI, and I hadn't discussed it with the guys yet, but this was the final straw. We had barely been back twenty-four hours, and the first time that she goes out, she is targeted for an explosion in a public venue. Paired with the presence of Max Brooks? Yeah, we were going to end up finding a way to eliminate the problem, and not through legal means.

“This needs to be handled, tonight,” Dermot said harshly, his eyes manic.

King replied quietly, “It will be, but we can't talk here, so shut the fuck up and get the doctor to look at you. We aren't doing anything until Dahlia is at home and safe. She's our first priority.”

And then blood. Lots of fucking blood.

I was really damn glad my MeMaw was staying with her friend right now. This wasn't the time or place for her to be

anywhere near the crosshairs of such a dangerous situation. I also knew that if she found out about Dahlia and everything she had been through, she would be extremely upset. She absolutely adored my angel.

“How did this happen?” Lincoln demanded, keeping his voice low in the quiet of the hospital.

“The coffee shop wasn’t planned, but they had searched it before we entered, which means that it somehow managed to either slip past them, which is highly unlikely, or someone planted it post-search,” Dermot hissed.

“Max,” I offered.

An odd look crossed Dermot’s face. “I don’t understand how the fuck he even got in. Something isn’t adding up.”

I finally admitted what I’d been thinking. “I think the security problem is higher up than one of the ground crew. The fact that shit keeps getting past means that there is someone pulling the strings.”

“Maybe we should talk to Owen,” Sterling conceded.

I shook my head. “I wouldn’t. Do we know we can actually trust him? I know he’s been a family friend and someone you have trusted for decades, but Dahlia’s life is at stake. I wouldn’t trust anyone.”

That concept seemed to silence everyone.

“Fuck,” King cursed, pulling out his phone and no doubt contacting his father. I couldn’t blame them for wanting to trust Owen—there were a million reasons to—but sometimes when you were that close to a situation, shit got messy.

“Max dies tonight. No matter what,” Yates finally said, his gaze never leaving Dahlia.

No one disagreed, and honestly, I hadn’t expected them to. He did deserve to die, because I was almost damn positive that he was the reason the bomb went off.

When there was a knock at the door, we all looked to find a middle-aged man in a white coat giving Dermot a no-nonsense look. “Son, I would highly suggest getting those

injuries cleaned. You wouldn't want to die before Ms. Aldridge wakes up, would you?"

"In here," Dermot snapped back. The doctor nodded and called someone in to help as he approached Dahlia, a concerned look coming over his expression.

"She's stable and should wake up soon. It may have aggravated her previous injuries, along with her leg now... I have to ask, how did she get bruised ribs? I can tell they were inflicted by someone."

I could practically taste the accusation in the air.

"She was kidnapped and beaten," King growled. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

The doctor eyed him before looking back at Dahlia without a word. "The bruising isn't my only concern. Ms. Aldridge is not only dehydrated but lacking sufficient vitamins, and it points to unhealthy habits." He hesitated before asking, "Is this something you were all aware of?"

Dahlia's voice filled the room. "Yes."

I squeezed her hand as the doctor looked down at her.

"Yes?"

Then she said the words that I hadn't thought she would ever say out loud.

"Yes, they are aware of me having an eating disorder."

Dahlia Aldridge

They say there are moments in your life where everything changes and you are forced to view things through a new lens... I was having one of those moments. My perspective had slowly been shifting over the past few days, but this had been the final straw. The moment where what I'd previously thought was important became obsolete.

Eating disorder.

I'd said it out loud, confronting the elephant in the room. I could feel the boys staring at me, but I kept my gaze on the doctor, not knowing what came next. I could see the man, Dr. Sanderson, according to his badge, was surprised at my words as he came over and checked my pulse, comparing it to something on the machines without a word. My eyes flitted to Yates, who was staring at me with an expression I didn't fully understand.

"You woke sooner than I expected," the doctor said, sounding pleased. "You shouldn't be feeling any pain from your ribs or leg, but if you need more medicine—"

"I am totally good," I promised. I really was—I couldn't feel anything at all.

"Well not exactly." The doctor sighed. "Are you getting treatment for your eating disorder?"

"No. Not formal treatment."

He nodded. "I am going to send some literature home with you regarding facilities and a few other elements like that, but the main thing I need you to consider is this—not eating, not providing your body with the right nutrition and vitamins, can negatively impact your health. It may seem obvious, but you need to start thinking about that and how it could affect your life in the long run."

I nodded, knowing he was right, because the truth of the matter was that while I craved control, I *needed* the happiness of those around me and the future that I'd been pining after for years. I wasn't going to let myself be the reason that I didn't end up getting it.

I would change my behavior.

"The paperwork would be nice," I agreed, not commenting any further. I knew it was a good idea to see someone. Did I think I needed a rehab facility or anything like that? No. Partly because if I was going to do something like that, I would much prefer to have someone come to our home and privately discuss what I needed to focus on to become better. Not only

would that be better for me logistically, considering I didn't want to be separated from my boys or family, but it would allow me to work through the emotional issues in the long term much better than I'd be able to if staying at a facility for only a month or so.

Honestly, the idea of having someone to check on my health, my vitamin levels and water intake? Someone to help me prepare meals that I was okay with for the week and to make sure my family ate healthy? I could deal with that. I think I was starting to come to terms with this far more than I assumed before, and oddly enough, the boys being here didn't bother me. It was exhausting keeping secrets, especially from the men you love. I didn't want there to be anything between us anymore. I refused for there to be anything between us.

Dr. Sanderson nodded, moving to the next topic. "I am going to send your prescriptions to the pharmacy. I was informed you are currently on pain medicine as well as antibiotics? Any other medications?"

"I haven't been taking the pain medicine as much as I should, but I have been taking the antibiotic daily. I'm also on birth control."

"Okay," he said, jotting a note on his pad. "I won't prescribe you the antibiotic for now, so finish out your current seven days and then we will go from there. Before we move further, is there any possibility that you could be pregnant?"

I blinked, my cheeks flushing. "Um, no. I mean—" Why was I so awkward about this? I had literally slept with all of these men. "When I was first injured, I was asleep for almost two days... So I missed two then, and a third one because of the time change while traveling, but I went back to taking them normally on Monday, so probably not."

Dr. Sanderson looked up at me and frowned. "And you're sexually active?"

"That's none of your—"

I cut off Dermot's harsh, angry words with a sharp look. He swore under his breath and went back to glaring at the

doctor.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I am.”

“And when was your last period?”

“Maybe seven weeks ago? I have always had a super irregular period, though—it’s why I went on the pill to begin with.”

Dr. Sanderson examined my expression and nodded. “Well, just to be safe, I will prescribe pain medicine that is safe for use while pregnant.”

I blinked at him, the room seeming to have the air sucked out of it all at once.

What the heck had he said?

“You don’t think that’s actually possible, do you?” I asked softly, not meeting any of my guys’ gazes.

“It’s possible.” Dr. Sanderson offered me a small, sympathetic look, clearly seeing I was caught off guard. “Just because your period is irregular doesn’t mean that would translate to you having less of a chance of getting pregnant. Only three days missed makes it somewhat unlikely, but still a possibility. If you are, it would be very early on, most likely undetectable, but something to keep an eye on.”

My ears went static, not really hearing the rest of what he said because... I just didn’t know how to fully comprehend what he was saying. Pregnant. I could be legitimately pregnant.

I stared down at my hands. A possibility... How much did we want to bet that having six men come inside of you would increase those chances?

“Angel?” Stratton pulled my attention. I met his eyes, which were filled with a knowing light. Honestly, I wasn’t nearly as upset or anxious as I would have assumed... Instead there was a cautious curiosity and hope in my chest.

I knew it was highly unlikely, but it didn’t stop the corners of my mouth from twitching up.

“You really need to get checked out,” the doctor said to Dermot as I tuned back into the present moment. “We can’t tell if any debris or anything else has gotten in the cut from just cleaning it.”

“I said no.” Dermot’s voice was hard, and I turned my head to really get a good look at him.

“Dermot,” I chided mildly, the concern clear in my voice. I reached out a hand and he walked over, allowing me to wrap my arms around him. “Please let them make sure you’re okay?”

Dermot sighed in resignation, sitting on the bed with me as the doctor closely examined his wounds. I exhaled in relief as Dermot’s fingers intertwined with mine. I could feel that the others knew where my head had gone about the birth control thing, but I didn’t have time to analyze their expressions. It was painful, having all those intense gazes on me when I didn’t have any answers.

When King finally came over, switching places with Stratton, his entire body was vibrating with a dangerous tension as he rested his lips against my forehead, holding me close.

“We are talking after this,” he murmured.

I nodded, feeling oddly calm as I looked up at him. “Promise me that whatever you have planned, you will include me in it.”

King’s eyes filled with caution. “Princess...”

“No,” I stated firmly. “If I am part of this, I am part of it. Fully. They tried to hurt Dermot, and I am not okay with that. I want it over, King. Do you understand?”

I had never felt more clear-headed in my life, and honestly a large part of that was because of this shift of perspective I’d undergone, one that now included the possibility of me being pregnant. Something that was unlikely, but it didn’t matter—it had me thinking about the future and how much there was to focus on instead of the darkness that had filled my mind with insecurities.

“I understand, princess,” he murmured.

It took maybe another forty-five minutes, including a call with my parents, for us to be discharged, and when I finally stood up, I realized how dizzy I was. Yates caught me against him, lifting me into a bridal hold, and I looked up to find his gray eyes nearly metallic in an effort to keep any emotion from seeping into his gaze.

“You okay?” I asked softly.

“I am not okay, Dahlia. I am very far from okay. I don’t want to scare you, bunny, but I plan on absolutely slaughtering everyone of these motherfuckers tonight.”

When would they learn?

That didn’t scare me at all.

Dahlia Aldridge

“So...” I said, trailing off, hoping someone would pick up the thread and start the discussion for me.

I was tucked into the couch in the office as King walked back and forth, clearly in thought. Everyone was in an odd place, and I couldn’t blame them. I knew we needed to talk. Hell, there was a lot we needed to do, but the main one was to talk about this thing that the doctor had decided to tell us. You know, the important thing where I had been screwed seven ways to Sunday and I’d missed some doses of my contraception.

“So?” Lincoln offered me what was almost an amused look, a single brow arching in interest.

I guess no one was going to help me out with this. “We should probably talk about what the doctor said.” I nibbled my lip.

“Which part?” Dermot asked, scrolling through something on the computer.

I looked around the room, and not one of them looked concerned in the least... Crap, they had actually been serious. They really were not bothered by the idea of having kids *now*. Well, that was...that made this a lot easier.

“The part where I could possibly be pregnant because I missed some pills,” I explained, King producing a noise that sounded far too pleased with that idea.

“But we knew that,” Lincoln said. “It’s not like any of us were purposefully careful in trying to prevent that outcome.”

“I mean, I think this is sort of cool. It’s like a surprise.” Sterling shrugged. “Could happen, could not.”

Stratton chuckled at the distressed noise I made, his lips brushing against my head. I voiced my concern, “With everything going on, the idea of being pregnant is a bit scary. I mean, I have a hit—”

“Something that is being handled tonight. I don’t give a fuck what we have to do, this ends now,” King bit out.

I huffed before my gaze moved to Yates, who was watching me with a look that had me narrowing my eyes slightly. “Yates, you are being suspiciously quiet about this.”

He smirked. “You didn’t ask me anything, bunny.”

“Never has stopped you before,” I pointed out.

Yates nodded and exhaled. “First of all, I am trying to keep my shit together after what happened today, but more than that, you know how I feel about the idea of you being pregnant.”

I nearly groaned at that, “I have no idea how I went from nothing—literally not even kissing—to this. I mean, it’s not exactly like I was getting laid before—”

Yates flashed me a smile. “Damn straight you weren’t.”

“Yates.”

He chuckled. “What, bunny? I’m not going to apologize for wanting to tie you to us every way possible. If I had it my way, you would have been already living with us and married ___”

“For sure already pregnant,” King agreed.

“—way before now,” Yates finished with a shrug.

“Before now?” I questioned.

“Dude,” Sterling groaned, running a hand over his face. The others broke into conversation, finding the situation entirely far too funny for my taste.

I narrowed my eyes as he walked over and crouched down, looking me in the eye. “I’m not sorry, bunny. I know it’s a low chance you’re pregnant, but I am still not sorry.”

“I’m mad at you now,” I decided.

His smile grew. “I was just giving you what you want, bunny. I’ll always do that.”

Shaking my head as if I was pissed, I let him pull me into his lap on the couch. I should have been far more upset than I actually was, but instead I found myself lulling to sleep against his large shoulder, the pain medicine for my leg kicking in.

I wanted to get some sleep before tonight, I had a feeling it was going to be a long one. I just hoped King remembered his promise to keep me involved.

Chapter Twenty-Two

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

I knew something was wrong the moment I woke up.

Largely because of the cold metal pressed against my temple. My eyes flung open, and I nearly let out a scream. I wasn't positive who I expected to see holding a gun against my temple, but it certainly wasn't the head of our security.

Owen had been a part of my life as long as I could remember. I hadn't interacted with him a ton, but the sharp sting of betrayal as tears started to leak down my face was authentic. What the hell was going on?

When he motioned for me to sit up without a word, I did so, a light turning on as I curled in against myself. Owen stayed completely silent, his eyes filled with regret. It was almost eerie how quiet it was, and I knew if I made a sound before I was supposed to, he wouldn't hesitate to shoot me. There may have been regret there, but there was also resignation.

My gaze snapped to the side, my eyes widening as I prayed to the lord that I was imagining what I was seeing... who I was seeing. That he wasn't sitting in a chair facing my bed, his eyes filled with amusement and a manic darkness that made me feel extremely uncomfortable.

"My, my, my." Chills went down my spine as Max Brooks's voice filled the room. "What an opportune time I seem to have caught you at, Dahlia. The boys are out of the house, and here you are, defenseless. Couldn't have gone better even if I'd planned it...which I did." Something about

his words felt off, and I knew that after everything, there was no way my boys would have left me. My eyes darted up to the camera I knew that Yates had in here as I swallowed, trying to decide how to handle this.

“What do you want?” I demanded softly. I didn’t bother to scream or anything like that. The once relaxing breeze from the balcony door was now cold on my frame, and I felt vulnerable in just the sleep shirt I wore. My body was hurting more than before, but the medicine from earlier was still making everything a bit more hazy than normal.

Shit. That was really, really bad.

“What I’ve always wanted.” He sighed, almost in disappointment, before standing. I let out a small panicked sound as he raised a gun, holding my breath as he clicked off the safety. “Go, Owen. Keep watch in the hallway. I have this handled,” Max bit out.

The man offered me a look before grunting and pulling his gun away from my temple, my form shrinking as Max moved closer to me. His smile turned gross. “We have his daughter tied up in my basement, you know that? It’s amazing, the things you can convince a man to do when his child’s life is in danger.”

We? Who was we?

“You are the lowest scum,” I spit out.

He chuckled softly, his gun pressing right to the middle of my forehead. *God, I was so tired of having guns pointed at me.* “You have no idea, Dahlia. But you will, especially because you and I are going to have some alone time before I have to kill you.”

“Kill me?”

His eyes flashed with heat. “Yes, you were supposed to die in that explosion. I tried to get you out of there—I would have hid you, kept you safe and let them believe you died... But now... Well, now I have to kill you.”

“Why?” I swallowed nervously as his other hand darted out to grip my throat, pushing me onto my back as he kept the

gun pressed to my head. Sweat broke out across my body as tears continued to crowd my eyes.

“Doesn’t matter.” He shrugged casually, but I could see that he was nearly shaking with tension. “I said I would handle it, and now I will. Then they will let her go—”

“Let who go?” I breathed out, hoping to keep him distracted, ignoring the way his eyes moved over my trapped frame.

“Does it really matter?” he responded lazily.

“Max, did something happen to Abby?” I felt like it was the only reasonable explanation.

A growl broke from his throat. “Yes, something happened to her, because of you, you bitch!” He seemed to gather himself before chuckling like a mad man. “But that will all be over soon. See, you can’t do anything to hurt Dixon Glenn—he’s well protected by the Denim Moths, no less, so I have to do this. I don’t have an option because he is hell-bent on taking everything he is owed...and I find myself planning to do the same.”

A whimper caught in my throat as he ran a hand down my body, groping me, as he pressed the metal more firmly against me. His intentions were clear, and I felt fear course through my veins as I realized what he planned to do. What he meant by getting what he’s ‘owed.’ I completely froze, not wanting to make a move too fast. His finger could slip on that trigger so easily.

When he pushed my shirt up, though, panic surged through me, my breathing increasing rapidly as a full scream broke from my throat.

I expected the gun to go off, but it didn’t. He slapped me so hard across the face that I saw stars, closing my eyes and curling in on myself. “You fucking bitch, you have to ruin everything—”

Which is how I missed the chaos that broke out.

Gunfire sounded in the room as windows shattered, and an almost inhuman roar filled the space. I whimpered as the gun

was ripped away from my head and Max's presence was quickly removed from my body, allowing me to sag in relief. A sob came out of my throat as I heard my men around me. I let out a staggering breath as I fell, familiar hands gripping me and keeping me from completely crashing onto the floor. My men were trying to speak to me—to soothe me, to ask if I was hurt—but I couldn't focus on them. My world narrowed to King as I watched him absolutely detonate.

There would have been a lot of ways to kill Max...but King had a blunt object, a piece of decor from my console table, that he was continuously using to bash in Max's face. My eyes widened in shock at the very clear void of emotion or rage, and I found myself breaking out of the hold that was around me, Yates telling me to not go to him. I couldn't listen though. My ears were filled with white noise, and when King finally took out a gun and shot Max in the face seven times, it silenced everything.

The mangled corpse at his feet didn't remotely resemble the man who had just tried to rape me. I crawled towards King, not caring about the blood, as he fell to his knees, dropping the gun and blunt object. I gripped his face when I got to him, whispering soothing words, as his gaze met mine.

I knew Kingston was still in there...but I wasn't positive what it would take this time to pull him back.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

This week—sorry, make that week and a half—had been the longest of my life. Easily. I knew after all this was sorted I would be dealing with the mental, physical, and emotional effects, including exhaustion, for a long time to come.

It would be worth it, though, if it meant, my men, my family, and myself were safe.

I would have thought that I would be a bit more distressed considering everything that had just happened, but instead I felt numb. Part of the reason for that was me keeping it together for King, whose lap I was sitting on, my fingers sifting through his hair. We were in his office, and Yates was clinical and in control, talking to the others as I played ‘keep King from losing his mind’ while he held me, shaking slightly, and soaked in blood. He was absolutely not okay right now, and while he was managing to sit and hold me, I had a feeling that there was only one thing that would solve this, and it was a rather bloody situation.

I had attempted to convince King to shower, but instead he had just sat on the edge of my bed as I’d gotten dressed, the others having moved the body from where it’d been soaking my wood floors with blood. An image that I wouldn’t soon forget. I had no idea where they had taken the body to, especially since the FBI field agents were now questioning Owen regarding his involvement in this. I don’t think anyone had considered that particular betrayal, and it hurt. But I was far more focused on hoping that he wouldn’t talk about Max, because it would be difficult to explain where exactly he had

gone off to. Or maybe they wouldn't...maybe they would ignore it.

Honestly, I had a feeling if enough money became involved, almost anything could be put aside. Forgotten. I nearly shook my head at that.

I curled my legs up, not caring that my clothes were getting blood on them. I was wearing a pair of black sweats, my leg still wrapped from the explosion earlier, and a long-sleeve shirt that kept me warm. I knew that when the adrenaline crashed I would get cold, and Yates had nearly insisted that I wear a coat. Although, even now, this haze and numbness was keeping me very comfortable. It took a minute to sort through my brain before I finally got it working, wanting to help my boys out.

“Did you listen to the video yet?” My question was directed at Yates.

“Not yet,” he answered. “I don’t understand how the hell he got up there. We were standing right outside.”

I relayed the story to them, from the moment I woke up to everything that Max had said, but I cut the story off at the end, not needing to relive those terrifying moments. Instead I kept it simple. “Dixon Glenn is in the area, being protected by the Denim Moths, and Max was sent to kill me in order for Abby to be released from wherever she’s being held. I have no idea why he wanted him to kill me, but maybe it was because the original hit didn’t work? Either way, I think that Owen has been allowing Glenn’s people to bypass the normal security protocols. So when you guys stepped outside, he snuck him in. Max mentioned that they have Owen’s daughter tied up in his basement. Essentially, if we can find the Denim Moths, we can find Dixon Glenn.”

“You get all that?” Yates asked Dermot, who nodded while typing something out and picking up the phone. I raised a brow.

“He’s telling Callum,” Sterling explained. “He is covering up the Max situation and keeping the FBI field agents focused on the security and getting Owen’s daughter.”

Oh, good.

“Do we know where these bastards are located?” Lincoln demanded softly.

Stratton let out a grunt. “Yeah, I know exactly where they are located.”

I tightened my hold on King as he looked up at me. “You good? Or should we wait to do this another night?”

He shook his head, his eyes dark as I realized he very much wanted to get this done tonight... I did worry why he wasn't offering a verbal response though. A quiet King was never a good thing.

“Bunny, you are going to—”

“Go wherever you go,” I interrupted before Yates could finish that thought with something ridiculous. “I am staying with all of you. If we are bringing enough people to overwhelm the Denim Moths three times over, then I will be there. Put me in bubble wrap or anything else you want, but I will one hundred percent be there. I won't be able to move on unless I see all of this end myself. I will always be looking over my shoulder.”

After another moment of staring at me, Yates nodded sharply, clearly knowing he wouldn't win this argument. Also, the fact that he agreed so quickly made me know he was set on finishing this tonight and bringing a conclusion to this absolute miserable symphony of constant problems and threats.

“I don't know how we didn't consider the Denim Moths,” Sterling said.

“I was wondering about their sudden increase in drug distribution,” Yates admitted. “I just assumed it was part of the larger problem, not that they were at the center of it.”

“King.” Dermot's tone was hard. “I need you ready to go. We need to grab shit from the back room, so snap out of it until we get there.”

Kingston let out a dark growl as his eyes moved to his cousin. Dermot didn't move his gaze, but I did notice he

looked almost slightly unsure. To be fair, King was nearly feral at this point...which was weirdly hot, but I think I had jumped on the crazy train a while ago. I was one hundred and ten percent past the point of caring.

“Why don’t you help Dermot,” I suggested. He looked down at me, his fingers wrapping around my throat as he stared at my pulse for a minute before nodding. I stood with him, and he leaned down and pressed a kiss to my forehead before following Dermot towards the secret door. All the guys filed through it, leaving only me and Yates.

He motioned for me, and I didn’t hesitate to go to him, sitting on top of the desk as he stood and trapped me there, looking over my expression. “Are you sure you want to go? I don’t doubt your safety there, especially with our numbers, but what you went through tonight—”

“Is one thing in a line of many,” I admitted.

Yates pressed his forehead to mine and spoke quietly, “I didn’t watch the video because I don’t think I can manage it while keeping a cool head.”

I tried to figure out what I could say to make him feel better and spoke honestly, “It made me feel more safe knowing that you were possibly watching me. I like knowing that you’re always there.”

“Even with it being a gross invasion of your privacy?”

“Even with that.” I swallowed. “Yates, after this, it feels good to be protected and safe. I know it’s going to sound crazy...but if something makes you feel better, even if it’s something like tracking me, it will probably make me feel better.”

His gaze darkened. “Yeah? I don’t know about that, bunny. I worry you are going to get tired of just how invasive I am in your life. There isn’t anything you do or say that I don’t have access to.”

I tried to find the words for how I felt about that. “I...I like that, Yates. A lot. I prefer it that way. You guys have been my

entire life for so long that it doesn't feel intrusive. I won't ever get tired of it."

Yates gave me a heated kiss and then helped me off the desk, tucking me into his side as he led me towards the door to the Ross secret room. I blushed, remembering how such a short time ago, King had laid me out on the couch down here...

I tilted my head as we entered the room.

Where the hell did that couch go? No seriously, this was new furniture.

"He ordered new furniture and had the old stuff placed in his room," Yates said, reading my mind. I blushed as he offered me an amused look, one that clearly said that I shouldn't be surprised by any of this. I wasn't, to be fair—it was King, and if there were a lot of men that came in here outside of our group, that would probably drive him crazy.

Walking through the space, I realized how different I felt compared to before. I was no longer being blindsided by information, rather the opposite. I may have been through hell, but I felt like I knew my place in this world now.

Dermot motioned me forward, King's gaze on me from where he leaned against a table in the weapons room. I wanted to say something to him, but I had no idea what to say to make him feel better. I felt someone, Stratton I believe, pull my hair back into a ponytail as Dermot slipped a bulletproof vest over my shoulders. Everyone else was getting ready, and the quiet conversation made me feel far better than before.

"You moved the couches out of here."

My statement had King blinking, confusion almost crossing his features, before he let out a low sound in the back of his throat. I let out a small squeak as he moved forward and cupped my jaw, searing a kiss to my lips before retreating towards a wall of weapons. I looked up at Dermot, who was muttering something under his breath.

"What?" I winced slightly as he strapped my vest together. I hadn't told them just how hard Max had hit me in the

stomach, and I felt like it would only serve as a distraction right now.

“Just be careful, baby girl. I can tell you’re still in pain, and I don’t trust King to recognize that while interacting with you. Not right now,” Dermot admitted.

“You think he would hurt me?”

“I don’t think he would mean to, but I also don’t think you’re up for another moment like the one in the SUV,” he hedged. I made a sound of agreement, because as much as I wanted these boys, my body was a bit sore. Although, the thought of them touching me, buried inside of me...maybe that wasn’t such a bad idea. It would for sure relax me. I willfully ignored the heat rolling through me, instead letting Dermot outfit me with more protective gear.

When he walked away, Stratton appeared in front of me. “How are you feeling, honestly?”

I knew Stratton wanted the truth. I knew he did, and I knew he would be hurt if I lied to him. “Not great,” I admitted quietly. “The medicine has worn off, but I don’t want to take more right now because it makes everything hazy.” I paused, seeing his eyes fill with warmth at me confiding in him. “Plus, Max hit me pretty hard, but I don’t want to worry about it right now because I just want this over with.”

Stratton’s eyes flared, his gaze moving over the red mark that was no doubt in the shape of Max’s handprint. “I want you to stay by my side, and if you start feeling any worse than you are now, tell me. I know I can’t convince you to stay back, but I need to know you are going to be okay.”

“Promise.” I went up on my toes to kiss him, letting out a happy hum as he deepened it.

“Good girl.”

Oh man, I did not want to analyze those words right now. When he crouched down to re-tie the shoes I was wearing, emotion caught in my throat. I could tell he was just doing it for my safety, but something about the action, especially with how dominant Stratton was, caused my chest to squeeze.

“When this is done, you’re learning how to shoot,” Dermot announced.

Yates muttered a curse but didn’t disagree, coming over and tightening my ponytail. The twins were talking quietly, and I could practically see the stress rolling off them. I needed to make sure they were okay, but first...

I turned into Yates and spoke quietly. “I promise you are still the one protecting me, I just want to be able to also do it... especially once we have kids.”

His eyes, which were hard with frustration, melted just a smidge as he exhaled roughly. “Alright, bunny.”

“Wow, that was easier than I thought.”

“You’ll find that bringing up marriage, kids, or any other way to tie you to me forever will work similarly,” he grunted, almost seeming upset with himself. Then he grinned. “Plus, I am eager to get to the part where we kill these fuckers.”

How the heck had I missed this bloodlust before?

“I’m ready to get rid of them,” Lincoln agreed. “The Denim Moths deserve whatever is coming to them.”

“Which is a lot.” Sterling smirked, offering me a wink that totally did not fit the context of this situation but still had me smiling.

“Well, since they pulled a gun on Dahlia last time, I don’t want any of them alive,” Dermot growled, fury flashing across his face.

I froze.

Oh no.

Oh no, that was bad. I was really, really hoping he didn’t just say that.

Kingston froze from where he had been strapping a third gun to himself, his gaze hitting Dermot before sliding to mine, a dark inferno building in his gaze that seemed to melt away everything else. “What?”

Well, plus side is that the void was totally gone, and there was for sure emotion there... Lots of emotion. Lots of intense, overwhelming emotion.

“When the whole thing happened with them at the last fight, I got a gun pulled on me,” I murmured in explanation.

King seemed to evaluate my expression before inhaling sharply and crossing the room towards me. I let out a concerned sound as he backed me up until I was against the wall, his hand tightening around my throat as he spoke softly against my lips. “You know you’re getting punished later for not telling me, right, princess?”

I think he had assumed I would view that as a bad thing...

My knees felt weak as I nodded, and he seared my lips with a hot, deep kiss that was claiming and possessive, making me know that King was somewhat himself right now. I loved the feeling of his hand around my throat, and when he finally pulled back, he offered me a warning gaze and stalked out of the weapons room.

“Christ,” I murmured as Dermot chuckled from nearby.

I narrowed my gaze at him, but he just shrugged. “Took it better than I assumed.”

Insane. All of them were absolutely insane.

“Let’s get this over with.” Yates’s voice was calm and collected, making me feel far better. But he was right—it was time to get this shit over with.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

The car that we took was one I'd never seen before. It was a legitimate armored vehicle, and there were ten others, five on either side of us, as we finally pulled out onto the street. Turning back around, I looked at the gates closing on Wildberry. I still felt the same as I always had about it—I loved every single element of it—but when I came back from this, life was going to change. Drastically.

It was going to be the beginning of something new, and I couldn't wait.

The drive to the Denim Moths clubhouse was a quiet one, and I was tucked between the twins, watching the dark scenery go by. As we drew closer, King's hand wrapped around my throat from behind. I looked up at him, his expression both serious and intense, more alert than before.

I had no idea what had snapped him out of it this time, but clearly something had. I would have to ask him later.

"I need you to promise me, princess, that if I tell you to do something, you will listen. Even if it's to run. I don't foresee any of this being a problem, but I need you to promise me anyway."

"I can't run very well right now..." I teased. His eyes narrowed, not amused that I was trying to make light of the situation. "Okay, okay, fine. I promise."

"I love you," Kingston murmured.

"I love you too." I tilted my head back down and looked around the car. "I love all of you."

All of them offered me different versions of the same intense, heated look, but before any of them could say anything back, we arrived at the clubhouse.

Before we'd even come to a complete stop, men poured from the building, flooding the space in front of what appeared to be a warehouse. Not that I could pay attention to that, because they were firing at the armored vehicles, my eyes going wide at the amount of firepower. King grunted and picked up his radio, commanding, "Exit through the other side of the vehicles. Let's mow down these fuckers."

And they did exactly that. I didn't even try to leave the car as they got out along with a ton of the other men, immediately rounding the vehicles, overtaking the Denim Moths by numbers alone. I watched as bodies jolted with the thud of a bullet, target after target falling to the ground. The sound of gunfire was constant as I watched my guys join the other men we had brought with us. Men who did not look like normal security and were for sure not the FBI.

After several moments, the gunfire ceased, and Stratton opened the car door for me. As I stepped out, everyone was watching the entrance of the warehouse in anticipation. I didn't say anything, going quiet, until a small surprised noise left my throat, massive field lights illuminating the area. The scent of pot and alcohol wafted from the clubhouse, and I was confused for a minute why we weren't going in.

"There isn't another exit. They have to come out; we have the entire space surrounded," Stratton murmured.

"You have exactly one minute until I torch this entire fucking clubhouse!" King announced, looking almost a bit bored, but his body language showed how tense he was. I nibbled my lip as I looked back at the door, and my eyes widened in shock.

Well, I would not have expected that.

Along with the ass from the fight, the one who threatened Stratton since he refused to join the Moths, Robert Brooks, of all people, came out behind him.

“Fucking Julian—” Stratton bit out quietly, looking pissed.

Julian, the ass in question, seemed to almost be guarding Brooks, a gun in his hands as he eyed all of the bodies in front of him. More men came from the warehouse but no one shot, everyone seeming to be waiting on someone else to make the next move.

I couldn't stop looking at Robert Brooks though.

He seemed...different. The suit was gone, first of all, and he was dressed almost like he was working on a ranch. He wore dark cowboy boots and had two guns strapped to his chest, wearing only a dark tank and showing off extensive tattoos. I seriously had no idea what to make of this man. He was clearly the same person, but he looked far more dangerous than before.

When his gaze met mine, he smirked before looking at King. “Kingston Ross, what can I do for you?”

Well, that was a casual way to handle the thirty-something bodies bleeding into the ground in front of you. Mr. Brooks walked around Julian and kicked at one of the bodies, making an annoyed face before looking back up at King for an answer. I wasn't positive why this man was so damn confident, considering the circumstances, but there was almost a wild, manic glint to his eyes that made me feel like he enjoyed this type of danger.

“Robert.” King shook his head. “You shouldn't have gotten yourself involved in this. We aren't here for you.”

“I think you are, though,” he mused.

“You get involved because of your kids? Do you even know where they are right now?” King growled, looking disgusted.

“Abby?” Mr. Brooks nodded towards the door. “Jacob! Why don't you bring Abby out here, our guests want to see her.”

My gaze moved to the president of the Denim Moths, the fearful look in his eyes belying his otherwise stoic expression.

He was scared of Mr. Brooks... But why? Also, where the hell was Dixon Glenn? Wasn't he supposed to be here?

"We don't care about Abby," King bit out. "We are here for Glenn."

Mr. Brooks ignored him, and my eyes widened as Abby was dragged out. Her clothes were dirty, and there were tears streaking down her face. I didn't want to feel bad for her, but I did. I felt so bad for her because I could see the fear there, I could see the bruises on her arms and her face. I fought the urge to go to her, knowing it would possibly put everyone in more danger.

Mr. Brooks spoke lazily. "I recently decided the girl is useless. I am hoping to have someone buy me out of having to take care of her..." He grinned at me. "Of course, if any of you are interested..."

"You would sell your own daughter?" I couldn't help but demand.

Mr. Brooks shrugged, looking unaffected and uncaring. "We offered her to others who would pay more—" *Dixon Glenn, probably* "—but apparently she has no value. Shocking."

"So you won't give a fuck that your son was slaughtered less than two hours ago, then," Dermot spit out.

Abby let out a wail of horror as tears filled her eyes, staring at Dermot like he was going to take his words back. There was so much sadness there. So much pain. I found my eyes watering, unable to ignore the agony she must be feeling at losing a sibling...even if he was a vile man.

"No loss there." Robert Brooks shrugged. "Shut it, girl."

"We are here for Glenn, no one else," King leveled, redirecting the conversation.

"Why is that? Is it because he put a hit out on your little whore? Then you brought her here like a sacrificial lamb." Mr. Brooks shook his head in mock disappointment. "How stupid, boys."

None of them responded, and honestly, I was far more focused on Abby. The man holding her had let her go because she was sobbing on the ground, but I could tell she wanted to run. I could tell she wanted to get away from them. I felt a groan build in my throat, knowing I was going to help her.

I met Abby's eyes, saw the pleading light in there, and swore under my breath. Then I straightened my spine and stepped confidently next to King. "I'm not a lamb, and you're the one who has thirty slaughtered men at your feet and are harboring a criminal. You're fucked." Honestly, I had not expected my words to come out as strong and confident as they did, but they had the effect I wanted—Brooks was surprised.

"Seems you have grown more bold, Dahlia. I did hear that you have been running into some potential problems lately."

Potential? Was that how we were describing it?

"Princess..." King warned, his jaw clenching, but I kept my gaze on Mr. Brooks.

"Why are you doing any of this? Is it the drugs?"

"No, you dumb girl—"

Abby scrambled up, taking advantage of everyone's diverted attention, sprinting towards our side to hide behind one of the men. I cursed as Mr. Brooks raised a gun and shot right where her foot was...but he was too late. A man from our side picked Abby up and placed her behind him. Instant relief flooded my system.

"You would help a girl that tortured you for months?" Mr. Brooks asked in disbelief.

I felt realization hit me. "I would help someone that was forced to do something. I would help someone that was put into a situation they couldn't control or handle on their own."

"He isn't my real father!" Abby announced as fury filled Mr. Brooks's face.

"What?" I demanded as Kingston pulled me back behind the line, everyone raising their guns as Mr. Brooks tried to step

forward. Abby met my gaze from behind the large man in front of her, her eyes clear and filled with panic.

“He hired my brother and I to act like his children, to make his place here believable—” She whimpered as Mr. Brooks let out an enraged sound, but he was unable to do anything with the amount of guns on him.

“Why?” I felt like we were just about to put this together.

“He’s not Robert Brooks—he’s Dixon Glenn.”

Oh shit.

My head snapped to Mr. Brooks—Dixon Glenn?—just in time to see him raise a gun and shoot it right at me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

Yates darted in front of me, letting out a grunt as he pushed me to the ground.

“Yates!” A panicked scream left my throat as gunfire exploded around us. Yates was lying next to me, groaning where he had hit the ground. I knelt next to him and felt his vest, a relieved breath escaping. *Thank God.* I wrapped my arms around him as he sat up, and the only thing that pulled me from that was Dixon Glenn’s scream.

I turned my head and found the president of the Denim Moths, along with all the members, dead. The only one still alive was Glenn, who was being pinned up against the wall by King.

“Not yet,” Dermot warned King.

I stumbled to standing as I walked forward, feeling far more confident. “You’re Dixon Glenn?!”

His eyes were manic. “No use in keeping it a secret now, I suppose. Yes, I am Dixon Glenn.”

“Liar.” Yates seemed to be goading him. “We know what Dixon Glenn looks like, you stupid bastard.”

“You don’t have to believe me.” He grinned. “You can change a face. You can change everything. I don’t need to survive this; I have already started a problem that can’t be extinguished. Your town is going to drown in addiction, and there isn’t shit you can do about it—”

His words were cut off by a bloody gurgle as King shot him right in the chest and then in the head. I stared at Dixon's collapsed body, wanting to feel remorse, but instead I just felt...disgusted. He went out of his way to do all this...but why? Now he was just a washed up drug dealer, no longer able to hide from his past sins. I didn't say this often, but he deserved to die.

There was silence before a voice boomed, "Clean this shit up!"

I turned to see Callum, of all people, approaching from a dark car. Kingston offered him a nod before meeting his hand. The group of darkly clothed men that had brought the vehicles began to do just that, placing bodies into three vans that had appeared.

"Good job handling this shit," Callum told King.

"He tried to shoot my girl." King shrugged. "Wouldn't have lived anyway. Hope you didn't need him for questioning."

"No, he confirmed his identity, that was enough," Callum said. "When he escaped prison, we knew Dixon had gone down to Mexico for a bit, but then he disappeared. Seems like he underwent reconstructive surgery and hired Abby and Max to act like pawns and all of this shit. For some time it was willingly, but then it turned into a forced situation."

"Why do all of this?" I demanded.

"Because our families helped put him in jail the first time," King explained.

Nodding slowly, I turned to look towards Abby. She was curled up in a blanket next to one of the large mercenaries, his eyes on her face with concern. I approached and I saw fear fill her gaze, which almost had me pausing, not knowing how to feel about that.

"You okay?" I asked her.

She nodded. "I..." Her brow dipped. "I can't excuse or explain what happened. It started out as a job to get out of our trailer back home, and then—"

“You don’t have to,” I promised and added, “I forgive you.”

I wouldn’t forget, but I did forgive. Abby may have started my problems, but they were my responsibility to deal with now. I couldn’t blame her for the rest of my life. Relief filled her gaze as I offered her a small smile and walked back towards where my boys stood with Callum.

Before I could reach them though, I turned my head to watch a figure step out of the dark Cadillac that Callum had come from. India Lexington. Her gaze moved towards Abby, a sneer pulling at her lips, before she nodded for me to walk over to her. I did so easily, knowing that the threat was gone for now.

Hopefully.

She leaned against the car as I joined her, her watchful gaze moving over the bodies that bloodied the land. Instead of looking like her polished, socialite self, her hair was down and she was wearing a hoodie along with several dark rings, each containing a script I couldn’t read.

“You good?”

“Honestly, yes.” I exhaled. “I have been through a lot of shit lately, so this doesn’t seem nearly as intense. It’s just a relief it’s done.”

India nodded. “You become numb to it after a while. Hopefully this type of situation won’t be a common occurrence for you—you didn’t sign up for that type of lifestyle, and it shouldn’t be forced onto you.” There was a slight bite to her tone, and I could tell this wasn’t really about me.

“I’m surprised you’re here.”

She smirked. “Callum doesn’t like loose ends, so he wanted to make sure this shit was cleaned up before we fly out. I’m considering it a date night.”

I grinned at that.

India grew more serious. “If you ever want to talk about what you’ve been through, let me know.”

I looked at her face. “You’ve changed since we last hung out.”

She let out a hum while looking to Callum, who was making his way towards us with King. “In ways that probably aren’t for the best.”

“I’ll let you know if I ever want to talk,” I promised, “but you do the same. Right now, though, I just want to go home with my guys.”

“Yeah, are we going to talk about how we are both with multiple men?” she teased, lightening the mood.

“Good excuse for a date night.” I laughed.

“That would be hilarious.” Her eyes lit up. “And possibly really violent for others.”

“I would love to hang out... Although I’m not sure my guys should be hanging out with FBI agents. Could put Callum in a bad position.”

“Callum is only sort of an FBI agent.” She shrugged and motioned towards the bodies. “Think of it as a cover. He is—we all are—a part of something much bigger than that... Which is actually why I wanted to talk to you.”

“About?”

“Next time if you need help, skip the bureaucratic bullshit or even the mobster crap and just give us a call.” She slipped a card to me, pressing it into my hand as I realized that something about her words were important. I nodded seriously before she straightened up.

“I’ll see you around?” I asked softly.

“More than likely,” she agreed before nodding towards Abby. “That the bitch who messed with your head?”

I didn’t even bother asking how she knew that.

I nodded, and India stared at her for a minute before speaking. “She should be dead. I understand why you saved

her, but she should be dead. Next time someone fucks with you, make sure you kill them. It's better that way."

Then she got into the car, Callum giving me a nod in greeting as he joined her.

King took my hand and led me to the others, who had gathered near our SUV. As we walked, I examined the card India gave me. The black matte card had a glossy black *GG* embossed on one side, and when I turned it over, I found a phone number in gold. That was it. I frowned, turning it back and forth until Yates appeared next to me, looking far better.

"What was that about?"

"I don't know exactly," I murmured and then showed him the card. "Said if we needed anything to just call them."

Yates's eyes widened as he let out a soft chuckle.

"What?" I frowned.

"That makes far more sense than the FBI. GG is a group that—" He shook his head, looking around at the large warehouse setting. "We can talk about it later, but they shouldn't exist, and the fact that she took that risk means she thinks we'll need it."

"Something to deal with tomorrow?" I asked softly as I tucked it into his pocket.

"The only thing I want to do right now is get some damn sleep."

As we got into the car, I looked at all of my guys, who seemed to be shaking themselves from the violence that we just went through. "Is it really over?"

"It's really over," Kingston voiced.

I let out a shuddering sigh and closed my eyes, tears of happiness gathering as I curled up against Stratton. "Good. Now we can focus on more important stuff."

"Like?" Dermot asked.

I smiled lightly. "I don't know, something fun, like getting married."

That would give them something to think about.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

Three weeks later...

“Yates—we can’t!” I let out a small squeak as he pinned me against the wall, kissing down my neck as I let out a small whimper, my knees feeling weak.

“You knew exactly what you were doing, bunny.” He grabbed my wrists and tugged them above me, my pulse beating erratically as he sucked hard on my neck, causing me to jolt before he pulled back and offered me a hot, almost climax-worthy look.

Good lord.

“No, I didn’t.” I offered him my most innocent look. “How was I supposed to know that you would be watching me? I was just taking a boring nap—”

“Naked,” he growled, looking at the oversized button-down I’d thrown on when he’d called me as he drove home from the office.

“Maybe I was hot!” I insisted.

“Oh, you’re fucking hot, that’s not in question.” He nipped my lip before sliding one hand down my waist, his fingers skating across my center. “You’re also wet. You knew I would be watching, bunny, didn’t you? You wanted to be caught.”

I one hundred percent had.

“Maybe I’m tired of you treating me like glass,” I admitted breathlessly. His gaze flashed up to mine, a darkness turning his eyes almost to charcoal. When he stepped into me, I whimpered at just how hard he was, his intensity causing my skin to prickle.

I wasn’t lying, though. While the others had taken me... well, a ton, if we were being honest... Yates had been treating me like I was so damn delicate it was painful. The others had been like that the first week, but it had been nearly a month at this point!

“And how would you like me to treat you, Dahlia?” he growled, the sensation moving across my skin. I let out a small moan as he sank a finger inside of me.

“Like that first time,” I admitted breathlessly.

“Bunny.” His gaze moved down my body looking pained.

“You said you would give me anything I wanted,” I argued, his gaze snapping up to mine. “Anything. And I want you to take me like before.”

His hands tightened on my body as he spoke softly, his voice dark. “Like before?”

“Y-yes,” I managed to breathe out as his fingers continued to move in and out of me. I hesitated and decided to push the final button, adding, “Like you own me.”

Yates’s eyes flared. “There is no ‘like’ about that, bunny. You are fucking mine.”

“Then show me,” I challenged.

That was all it took. I let out a moan as I was lifted and pressed against the wall, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I heard his belt drop to the floor. I felt my inner walls squeeze, and when he buried his head in my neck, my eyes fluttered shut at the hard bite he placed there.

The pain was nothing compared to the pleasure of him dropping me onto his cock, filling me in one full push. I let out a moan of pure pleasure, and his hand came across my lips as

he sank further into me, trapping me against the wall and pressing our foreheads together.

“Quiet. I don’t want any of those security guards hearing your moans, bunny. Absolutely not.” His demand was soft and dark.

“Yates, please move—” I moaned softer this time as he lifted me slightly and then dropped me back down, the feeling of my center tightening around him causing my body to almost go lax with pleasure. Everything went hazy around me, the way he owned my body seeming to radiate through every element of my being.

I tightened my legs around him as he pistoned in and out of me, hard and unforgiving, my back pinched against the wall. His hands were bruising on my hips, and I cried out his name as the first climax slammed into me, causing me to shudder around him. When he seared my lips and my back hit the bed, I felt him snap completely.

He placed me on the bed on my stomach, and on pure instinct I tried to move forward, but he tugged my ankle back so I was bent over. Yates let out a low hiss as he slid back inside of me, his hand on the back of my neck.

“Fuck.” Yates let out a low rumble. “You are just so fucking hot and tight. You knew exactly what you were doing when you laid out in bed and spread those pretty thighs. Is this what you wanted, Dahlia? For me to come home and fuck you like I couldn’t wait another goddamn minute? Like I couldn’t survive another second without getting inside this cunt?”

“Yes!” I gasped as my back arched and I gripped the sheets. A hard slap came across my ass as I tightened around him, and he continued to pound into me, nearly making the bed move. I spread my legs out further, wanting to take as much of him as possible as he let out a low hiss.

“You want all of me, bunny?”

“Please, Yates?” I whimpered.

“And where do you want me to come?”

“Inside of me.” I buried my face in the sheets, knowing I would only feel complete with his cum inside of me.

“Good girl.” His fingers strung through my hair, gripping closer to my head and pulling back as he said quietly, “You can’t go a day without our cum between your legs, can you? You fucking need it.”

“I do,” I moaned.

Yates groaned and kept pumping in and out of me, his stamina absolutely ridiculous. My body was weak with pleasure, but I kept clawing at the bed, hoping like hell that I wouldn’t slip off. I let out a cry of his name into the sheets when he fisted my hair and pulled just enough to cause my body to tremble and seize.

“Shit,” Yates grunted, pumping in and out before slamming inside of me one last time.

I saw stars as I came around him, his cock pulsing inside of me and leaving me gasping for breath. I felt my eyes fall shut, knowing I would feel him dripping out of me after this.

“I am doing that again,” I murmured. Yates barked out a laugh against my shoulder and pulled back, letting out a groan. I turned on my back and stretched, his eyes running over my skin.

“Next time you do that”—Yates stepped closer, and I watched with a flush as he gathered some of his cum that was leaking out of me and pushed it back in with two fingers—“I am going to make you wait.”

“No,” I pouted.

With a small smile, he lifted me up and carried me into my bathroom. When he set me down and turned on the shower, I looked over my skin, which had almost no bruising to it. I had healed almost completely, and I was finding it amazing what the human body could recover from.

Yates came up behind me, stripping off his clothes. “You better be glad your parents are over at my place, or else you would have gotten me shot just now, bunny.”

I rolled my eyes. My dad would not have shot him...most likely.

Our shower wasn't long, but it was needed considering our plans for later. After washing my hair, I stretched and let out a happy sigh, knowing tonight was going to be fun. Yates kissed me on the head, going back into the other room and leaving me to get ready. After the relaxing process of blow-drying my hair and putting on some light makeup, I was happy with how I looked. Family parties weren't a big enough deal to overdo it right now. Plus, it was just a fun little bonfire we had planned since the weather was finally getting cooler.

It was insane how quickly life could go back to 'normal.'

Following the incident at the warehouse, I had easily slept for three or four days. When I woke, our parents were home and my guys seemed to have put everything on the fast track. As in, Dermot's house already had people working in it, which blew my freakin' mind. I smiled softly, remembering when I had been drinking coffee on the front porch and my dad had stepped out and narrowed his eyes at the place, like it was some great evil.

He hadn't told me what he was thinking, but I imagined that seeing the house of your daughter and her six... boyfriends? I guess that was the only term right now... Anyway, seeing where your daughter and her six men would be living wasn't the easiest thing in the world.

I had a feeling that once we were engaged, he would feel better. Some girls might feel a bit nervous since it had been three weeks and we weren't engaged yet... But I knew my boys, and I knew they wanted this more than almost anything, which is why I wasn't insecure about the other element of this. I opened a drawer in my bathroom where I had a box of pregnancy tests waiting for me.

I could take one now.

I had been planning to wait until tomorrow, but I could take it now. Shaking my head, I decided to save it until they were at least nearby so I could tell them. I knew they would be happy either way, but in the past three weeks, after examining

what was really important to me, I was maybe...possibly...hoping for a positive test. It felt embarrassing to say that. I was eighteen! I shouldn't be ready to be a mother, right?

At the same time, the concept felt right, and I didn't want to feel ashamed of wanting a family. It wasn't for everyone, but it was for me.

"Are you waiting?" Yates's voice pulled my attention to where he was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, standing barefoot in the doorway of the bathroom.

I frowned and tilted my head. "Are you wearing jeans? Holy Jesus. You look way too hot in those. I do not normally find jeans—"

My rambling was muffled by Yates appearing in front of me and kissing me hard. He pulled back, looking amused. "Answer the question."

"Yes, I want to wait till everyone is around."

He nodded and then looked over my towel-covered frame. "Good, now get dressed before I decide to bend you over that vanity."

As we walked out, I stared at his butt in those jeans... Damn. I felt jipped that he almost never wore jeans.

Taking Yates's lead, I dressed in a pair of jeans and a breezy top, then walked barefoot downstairs, where I could hear Kingston's voice. It was filled with amusement and I sighed happily, so glad to have him back to himself. I appeared in the kitchen and went up to him, pressing a kiss to his lips.

In the past three weeks, Kingston had been sorting through some emotions, and he had been oddly open about his blackout rages. It really did seem to function as a separate part of himself, and while he didn't understand it fully, he had promised to work through it a bit. Just like how I had decided to work with a nutritionist on making a healthy meal plan I was comfortable with. I now had prepared, small meals. I still wasn't fully up to what I needed to eat, but my appetite was coming back.

I slipped past King and opened up the fridge, grabbing a container of fruit. Turning around, I let out a squeak, finding Dermot looking handsome as hell. Stratton's gaze met mine from where he sat in the breakfast area.

"Hey, you," I teased Dermot.

"You slept in today," he pointed out.

"I know," I groaned, "but it was one day off, guys!"

Stratton shook his head, smiling. "Self-defense every day, angel."

"And shooting twice a week, as in today," Dermot pointed out.

"You could have woken me up."

"Then we would still be in bed." Stratton shook his head.

Dermot kissed me hard and then walked towards the entrance of the kitchen. "Tomorrow morning, baby girl."

I muttered a curse as I opened my snack and Kingston ran a hand up my back. Once I was done, the five of us walked over to Yates's house as I let the cooler breeze run over me, already looking for the twins, who I knew had come over here about an hour ago. I blushed, thinking about this past weekend when I had gone golfing with the two of them... That had just been an entirely unfair situation. I had been so worked up through the entire day because of how they'd been teasing me, and then I had been stuck having dinner with my parents instead of sneaking home with them.

Luckily, Lincoln snuck over later and fixed that and then some...and it helped that Sterling showed up the following morning and made my day with his mouth between my legs. I swear, I was the luckiest woman alive.

When we arrived at the bonfire, a sense of contentment settled in my chest, knowing that everything about this was exactly how it was supposed to be. No matter what my boys had done and what I'd been through, this moment was right. This was our future.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

DAHLIA ALDRIDGE

The riverbank was slightly colder than normal, and my skin was still warm from the bonfire only hours later, so I was perfectly comfortable with my camera as I tried to finally capture this freaking picture. I didn't have hope that it would happen, but since the boys had suggested we come down here, I figured why not give it a shot. After about four photos, I let out a sigh, considering getting up to find where they'd gone off to.

I looked up at the moon and narrowed my eyes, determined to get this. Crouching down, I tried it at a slightly different angle and sent a small prayer up. The shutter went off, and when I pulled back, I prepared myself to not be happy with the—

Holy shit.

I'd gotten it. It was gorgeous. The nighttime black and blue hues paired with the full moon directly reflecting down on the still river. I let out a squeak of pure excitement and joy, feeling like maybe those classes were paying off. I jumped up and let out a small surprised noise as two large arms wrapped around me.

I turned to look up into Sterling's face, his eyes filled with warmth. "What are you so excited about?"

I showed him the photo, and he tilted my jaw up and examined my face. "That's beautiful, sugar."

I blushed and put away my camera, Sterling taking the bag from me. I could tell something was on his mind, but I wasn't

positive what. Instead of leading me towards the cars, he took me down a pretty path along the river.

“I’m just glad I finally got it,” I admitted.

“I knew you would.” Pride shone in his eyes, and I knew he understood more than anyone. I almost blushed further, thinking of his collection of paintings of me. Honestly, I had never felt as beautiful as I had when seeing those. It was like he saw me in this light I didn’t even realize existed.

“Where are the—” My words were cut off as my eyes went wide.

We were approaching the part of the path that led to a secluded circular garden with a bench that overlooked the river. The path was lined with groups of candles at regular intervals, lighting patches of the pavement in their warm glow. Sterling squeezed my hand as I looked up at him, seeing the affection there.

“What is this?” I asked softly.

“I promise you’ll see at the end.” Sterling cupped my jaw and pressed a soft kiss to my lips, and I moaned into it. His touch was as dominant as normal, and I clung to him, almost sad when he pulled away.

“Sugar, I don’t think I can ever express how much I love you.” His voice practically melted against my skin. “Every day I think that I can’t possibly love you more than I do now. That it’s not possible. But every single morning I realize how wrong I am.”

“Sterling,” I murmured, feeling overwhelmed by emotion.

The depth of love I felt for him nearly had me clinging to him again as he pressed a deep kiss to my lips. I whispered his name as he pulled back, looking heated.

“I want to keep kissing you, but”—his serious expression turned slightly more amused—“you need to get your cute ass down that path or else I will probably end up dead.”

I rolled my eyes but pressed a light kiss to his lips and looked ahead to the next lit-up clearing down the path. He

nodded forward and I nibbled my lip, my excitement growing. I had barely taken a step towards the next clearing when I let out a giggle, two arms wrapping around me and lifting me up.

“There is no way in hell I was about to let you walk a path at night,” Stratton grunted as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“This is amazing,” I pointed out, knowing this was something much bigger.

“No.” He shook his head, keeping me in his arms despite being by the candles now. “You’re amazing, Dahlia. I thought for so long that I was doing the right thing by keeping a distance, but I can’t live without you, angel.” I cupped his jaw as he continued sincerely, “You have been my home this entire time, and I promise I will show you that every damn day of our life.”

“I know.” I pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “I love you, Stratton.”

He let out a low rumble. “I don’t think any of us thought about how damn hard it would be to actually let you go to the next person.”

I smiled. “Want to carry me to the next one?”

“I always want to be holding you, angel” He brushed my nose with his.

A breeze ran over us, and I curled further into him. When the next light came into focus, he gently set me down. “See you soon, angel.”

I felt giddy walking ahead, and I was somewhat distracted by looking around this part of the path, nearly running right into Dermot. He let out a laugh and picked me up, my legs wrapping around him. When his lips met mine, his taste exploded between the two of us, and I found myself wondering how this massive man had a kiss that tastes like sugar. When he finally pulled back, his eyes were dark and his hands tight on me.

“You probably have figured out what’s going on here.” He pressed his forehead against mine as I let out a pleased sound

because yes, yes I had.

“I love it,” I murmured. “I love you.”

His face turned serious. “I love you so damn much, baby girl. You turned my world upside down when we met, and I realized that I’d been living in a fog before I met you. This thing between us is so intense, and I never want to lose it. I never want to lose you. I will always choose you in life, no matter what.”

My eyes started to water as he demanded another hard kiss. He put me down gently and nodded towards the next light. “When this is over, you are in my bed tonight.”

“Maybe,” I teased, stepping back as he narrowed his playful eyes. I let out a happy hum, already seeing Yates, who leaned against a tree right by the entrance of the circle of light. I couldn’t help but smile at him.

“Bunny.” His voice was soft and demanding, his eyes sparking dangerously.

“What?” I bit my lip, edging closer to him.

“Come over here.”

“I don’t know,” I sang. “Seems a little odd, coming across my stalker in the—Yates!” I squeaked as he pinned me against the tree and gripped my chin. He kissed me hard and growled as I finally opened my mouth, his kiss invading me completely. I let out a breathless sigh as he pulled back.

His arm was on the tree above me as he spoke in an almost reverent tone, his gaze intensely focused on mine. “I don’t need to tell you that you are everything to me, Dahlia. You know how deeply I feel for you. How I will always feel for you. I’m goddamn obsessed with you, I live for you—” He seemed to stop himself and took a sharp exhale, growing more serious. “I promise you, bunny, that you will always come first. Your safety and happiness are everything to me.”

I went up on my toes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “I know, Yates. I love how you feel about me. It makes me feel less crazy for being so obsessed over you.” His eyes flared as I

continued, “Plus, you know I like the crazy stuff—it’s why I let you do the new tracker.”

His rumble was amused. “I would have done it anyway.”

“I know.” I slipped from his arms and walked backwards. “Now, if you don’t mind, I am just going to—”

“Get punished for being a damn tease later.” He flashed me a dark smile as a chill rolled over my spine.

“Maybe, if you can catch me,” I pointed out, slipping back onto the path, his laugh following me. He had a right to laugh—he would no doubt catch me.

“Lincoln?” I called out as I walked to the next group of lights, finding him looking over the river before striding up to me. I moaned into his lips as he kissed me hard.

“Wow,” I breathed out.

“I’m an impatient bastard when it comes to you,” he murmured, pressing his head to my own. “I have wanted this for so long, it seems unreal.”

“Wanted what for so long?” I teased.

He tilted my chin up. “You know what, Dahlia.”

“I love you.” I felt a string of nervous excitement.

His eyes darkened, cupping my jaw. “I love you, Dahlia. I love you, and I have known since the time we were five that there was only one person for me. That’s you. You’re my soulmate, and I am going to live my entire life making sure you realize what that means.”

“Lincoln,” I whispered.

He pressed his forehead to mine as he squeezed my waist. “Alright, get yourself to Kingston or else I am going to lose my goddamn mind.”

I smiled softly. “Got something you need to get to?”

“Or get in.” He looked over me, my cheeks turning pink. As I escaped his hold, his chuckle at my surprise filled the air.

How was I supposed to expect he would come at me with something so hot?!

The pathway was a bit longer to reach Kingston, but when I reached him, I instantly smiled, finding him perched on the bench looking out over the river.

“King?” I called his name softly, breaking his trance. There was no hesitation in his gaze, just adoration as I walked up to him and wrapped my arms around his neck. The kiss he landed on my lips was soft, making my skin break out into shivers.

When I went back down on my toes, my hands pressed to his chest as his large hand smoothed over the column of my throat, his thumb brushing over my pulse.

“You know you’re ours, princess.” His tone was soft but extremely persuasive. “You have known for a while, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted breathlessly.

His smile grew. “But we want to make this official.” He drew a black box out of his pocket as he met my gaze. “You deserve the best, Dahlia. You deserve everything in the world, and we plan on giving you that.”

“King—”

When he opened the black box, my mouth dropped because... holy moly.

My eyes watered as he lifted the ring out of the box, taking my left hand. The classic white gold ring was an Art Deco inspired vision that had a massive, and I do mean massive, oval diamond in the center, surrounded by a starburst of six clusters of tapered baguettes, smaller diamonds adorning the spaces between.

It was like I had the sun itself on my finger. And *yes*, it was on my finger—Kingston just slid it right onto my fourth finger, and it fit there perfectly, like it was meant to be.

“Princess, you are my addiction. My entire life. You are mine forever, do you understand?” He tipped up my chin as I

nodded, feeling my body flush. “Marry us, Dahlia.”

I looked behind me, where all the others now stood, my eyes watering as I nodded my head, smiling up at him. “Yes. Of course I am going to marry you.”

The moment of silence was almost like a release of tension, and King scooped me up in a bridal hold and kissed me, the others gathering around us in a moment of vibrant excitement.

This was the beginning of *everything*.

EPILOGUE 1

Dahlia Ross

Four weeks later...

“A wedding this big? In four weeks? Makes you wonder what they are hiding!”

I nearly rolled my eyes at the gossip channel. After the media cluster of the past four weeks following the announcement of our engagement and rather ‘alternative’ lifestyle, it would have taken a lot to faze me. I hadn’t been avoiding it, either, instead watching it with amusement while putting together a wedding in under thirty days.

“I don’t understand the point in that comment. Like, if you think you know what is going on, just say it,” my mom huffed. I offered her a small smile while taking a sip of my tea. The hair stylist behind me was taking careful time to loop each piece of my hair, and Haven Ross was standing next to her, making small comments and corrections.

“The dress is here!” Trinity Gates called out as Lilly Carter opened up the door for the small party of individuals clad in black ensembles featuring a gold scripted letter, representative of the dress’s designer. I smiled as Delphine herself waltzed into the room, wearing an emerald pantsuit that stood out in comparison to the pale autumn shades around her. Somehow she managed to pull it off.

“You look stunning,” she gushed before turning to her team. “Everyone out, I can handle this.”

The door closed, and she looked at me. “How are we feeling?”

I offered her a smile because I'd already been asked this by all of the moms. I think people were waiting for me to get nervous.

"Honestly, really good. Just hoping the dress fits." I nibbled my lip.

"It's only been two weeks—it will fit, and if not, I can make adjustments." She offered me a sweet smile. My makeup had already been done, and my hair was almost done, so we were not rushed in the least. The gorgeous, light-filled room we were in at the venue only seemed to make this moment seem more peaceful and relaxing. More right.

"Alright, you're perfect." The hairdresser offered as I smiled and stood up. I shed the silk robe around me and stood in just a shapewear slip that was far more comfortable than wearing a strapless bra and panties. Walking up onto the platform in the center of the room, the moms chatted with excitement as the dress was brought over.

I had imagined myself in many different wedding dresses over the years, but the one Delphine had made for me by hand? In under a month, no less? It was the dress of my dreams.

The silhouette of the dress made me feel like a goddess, the skirt made of soft, transparent floating material that made me look like I was surrounded by a cloud. The waistline was empire, the bodice was a deep v-neck made of chunky yet elegant lace embedded with diamonds. The sleeves were made of the same material as the skirt, and we had purposefully matched the veil to it, which ended up having to be cathedral length because the train of the dress was insanely long. It was gorgeous, and more importantly, it was comfortable.

I ran a hand over my abdomen as I stepped into the dress, smiling as I thought about why exactly I found it necessary to be so comfortable...

I glanced at myself in the mirror, purposely keeping my gaze from the test on the counter, my fingers tapping as I admired my engagement ring. I totally could have waited another day to take the test like I'd originally planned, but it almost felt

like less pressure to say I was just slipping into the bathroom real quick.

My phone buzzed as the timer went off, and I swiped it away, my eyes immediately moving to the test.

Ho-ly crap.

No way. Absolutely not, there was no way.

Pure joy soared through me as I did a little wiggle-like dance before opening the drawer and placing the test in there so none of them could see it before I got to say something. Casually washing my hands, I walked back into the room where all of my men were relaxing. We hadn't told our parents about the engagement yet because they had all been in bed when we had gotten back, but now it appeared we had double the news.

Maybe I would wait a few days before I shared this second bit of information... My dad might lose it.

I sat down casually next to Yates as Sterling brought my feet up into his lap. Yates's lips brushed my head before he tilted it up. I offered him what was supposed to be a casual smile, but his eyes narrowed.

"What is she looking so suspicious for?" King asked curiously.

Damnit.

"I was just wondering when you guys wanted to get married." I shrugged, looking around the room. All of them seemed to like my question.

"Like, ideally, I would like it to be in the next month or so —"

"Abso-fucking-lutely," King agreed.

"I mean, we could also wait... I just would rather, you know, since we know it's going to be a big old socialite event, to not be showing at the time. So I was thinking about next month."

"Makes sense," Lincoln agreed. My smile grew.

“Showing?” Dermot walked around and looked at me, Lincoln snapping his head up, realization showing on his face.

I offered a big grin at all of them as King circled around., “I’m sorry, can you repeat that?”

Yates chuckled. “You took the test.”

I tried to not smile at his amusement.

“What did it say?” Stratton demanded, looking like he needed confirmation.

I felt happy tears well in my eyes before I told them the good news.

“I’m pregnant.”

Lord, would their reactions fuel me for the rest of time. It had possibly been the sweetest and most overbearing stuff I had ever seen. King had literally picked me up, making a noise of celebration as everyone else seemed to lose their shit and start talking, the insane man kissing me so hard I got dizzy. Sterling had stolen me from him and captured me between both him and Lincoln, talking about how excited they were to start their rugby team... And then insisted I was, of course, pregnant with twins.

I guess it just made sense to them.

When Stratton pulled me from their grasp and lifted me up, my legs wrapping around his waist, he started mumbling all of these adorable things against my lips before promising that he was going to do everything he could to keep our family safe. I thought I had seen tears in his eyes, but maybe I was imagining it... Probably not though. Stratton could be very emotional.

At that point, Kingston had been already talking animatedly to his cousin and Yates, the first coming over to me and kissing me softly before pressing a large hand to my abdomen. The sensation had caused my entire body to warm, and he had just kept it simple, whispering that he loved me.

Then there was Yates, who stared at me with a look that had me turning bright pink as he curled a finger at me. I

wiggled onto his lap as he wrapped his arms around me, offering me the most gorgeous smile on the planet. Then he had made some vague stalker comment about making sure that I was constantly being watched and followed. I didn't expect any less.

The announcement to our families had gone amazing, and between the house renovations, which were set to finish this weekend, and this massive wedding... It was a lot of excitement, and I was looking forward to our honeymoon at home. Completely alone. I think I had heard one of them say something about turning one baby into two with how much they were going to keep me in bed?

Because that was logical.

I smiled as the dress slid onto my frame perfectly, everyone helping arrange the skirt and my shoes. At only three months, I wasn't showing yet—at least not much—but I could honestly say I felt more beautiful than ever before in my life.

Which was good, because I was about to be in front of hundreds of people and the media. Yeah, we had decided from the start that we would just do it full out. Plus, and this was just a concept in my head, I had a feeling there were far more families like ours out there, and maybe, just maybe, seeing it like this would encourage them to feel more comfortable with being out there in the open about it.

Moments later, I was being led into the hallway where the moms filed past me, my own mom pressing a kiss to my cheek. All of them were wearing different autumnal shades to match the outdoor venue. The gorgeous estate we were getting married on had acreage that fit at least a thousand people for this type of thing, if not more.

When my dad appeared, I felt my eyes water as he offered me an emotional look, pulling me into a hug. “You look beautiful, pumpkin. Those boys do not deserve you.”

I looked up at him with a slightly watery smile. “Yes, they do, stop it. Now don't make me cry, I am going to mess up this makeup.”

“And then your mom is going to kill me,” he grunted.

I squeezed his hand before he put it on my back, the wedding coordinator on her headset and leading us to the entrance of the long pathway to the front. Already people were shifting in their seats to look back at us, and while no cameras were allowed, I knew video was being taken of us.

“You ready?” my dad asked as I looped my elbow through his. My gaze moved up to the very front, where my six men stood in their classic tuxedos. I nearly smiled as Kingston flashed me a grin that was so bright I could see it clearly, even from back here. I knew they were as relaxed as they seemed for several reasons.

One, this venue had more security than an event with presidential attendance, and not just because the president was indeed here, along with foreign royalty. No, this had been tailored to ensure my safety completely, as well as the safety of the guests. Specifically, the security was provided by the company that Stratton had already started to establish. Something that would have been a far longer process if it wasn't for the offshore account that he discovered his father had been keeping secret. MeMaw had not been happy about that one, especially once she realized how hard Stratton had been working to keep everything afloat. Now, though? Now I could see the confidence and excitement Stratton had towards this new venture, and considering it also helped the family, I loved it.

There was also the small fact that I knew my boys were strapped with weapons, something I was growing very used to. It helped that Devyn, my bodyguard, was somewhere up front, waiting for me to walk up there to keep tabs on me.

Like I said—very secure.

But that wasn't the only reason they were relaxed.

See, I was already married... Specifically to King, legally. The Ross family name was now officially mine, along with everything that came with it. It had been decided pretty much without me, and I was glad for it, as it had become obvious I couldn't choose between my boys. We had also possibly

already had a ceremony for the small group of us and our family last night.

So why the heck were we doing this?

Because my men were possessive as hell and wanted everyone to know that I was theirs... Which they would, since this would be aired everywhere. Honestly, I loved that they were so open and happy with our situation.

A wave of emotion hit me, realizing that despite all the suffering and anguish I'd gone through, the misery had never won out. I had survived a lot, and I would continue to do so because my family was more important to me than anything else. I nearly touched my stomach. *Our ever-expanding family.*

“Dahlia?” My dad squeezed my arm as the music started up.

I offered him a big smile, finally answering his question. “Never been more ready in my life.”

EPILOGUE 2

Kingston Ross

Ten years later...

“Dad, how late do we have to stay?” Ronan’s frustrated voice nearly had me smiling. *So damn impatient.* Then again, I was pretty sure most boys at nine were nearly this impatient, if not more. I looked down at him and offered him a pointed look as he put his head back and muttered something under his breath.

“Watch the language, your mom doesn’t like that,” Dermot warned from his other side. I almost chuckled at the last part, because he wasn’t wrong. I probably wouldn’t notice my own son swearing if it wasn’t for Dahlia telling him not to. I mean, it was probably a good idea for him to not swear when he was this young, but it was just an ingrained habit at this point for me.

“I don’t like art,” Ronan grumbled.

“But your sister does,” I pointed out as I nodded towards where Sterling stood with Ciara in front of an art exhibit. This was a local studio, and it was currently showcasing different works from artists in town. Something my daughter seemed to be critiquing.

I shook my head, wondering how the hell she was growing up so fast. She was already almost eight and acted thirty—it was both adorable and worrisome. Right now, her little nose was up in the air as she argued with Liam about something.

We had kept our promise to Dahlia about having as many kids as she wanted, and so far that meant six. There was

Ronan, our oldest, at nine. Followed by Ciara at almost eight and Liam at six. The other three were under five.

I frowned, looking around to find them, and nearly chuckled when I spotted them.

Stratton stood near the exit with our fourth son, Brayden, hanging off of his shoulder. He knelt down to try to put him on his feet, but it wasn't working. Out of all our kids, he was by far the most energetic. Then there were the twins, who were both one. Yates currently stood with Dahlia and Lincoln, both of them holding a baby, as she searched through her purse for a toy. When she finally found it, Shannon made a cooing noise and grabbed it. Something that made Fiona far from happy.

"I got it." Dermot strode towards them, seeing the potential meltdown.

Ronan grunted again as I put a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, let's walk around. You know it was her turn to pick what we did. We went where you wanted last week."

He offered me a dry look that had me smiling.

"Dad, I picked a racetrack, and only half of us went."

"It was a bit loud for the twins," I mused.

As we turned the corner, I immediately frowned, noticing a little girl wandering from exhibit to exhibit. As most parents would, I looked around for the adult accompanying her, and when I looked back, Ronan had already approached her.

"Ronan—"

He offered me a look that had me raising my eyebrows as he went back to talk to the young girl. "Are you lost?"

Immediately, I noticed that the girl looked far from taken care of. Her face was covered in dirt, and her hair was tangled. She couldn't have been more than five, maybe six, and she looked freezing, wrapped in a threadbare coat.

"No, just getting warmed up," she offered.

My son looked up at me, seemingly panicked as I looked back down at the girl, feeling concerned.

“Go get your mom,” I told him, but he shook his head and grabbed her hand. I called out for Dahlia, not understanding exactly what was going on here. My gorgeous wife rounded the corner, offering me a big smile before her face transformed into one of concern. In the past ten years, Dahlia had not only succeeded in becoming a successful photographer, selling some of her works for thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, but become far more than what one would call a ‘philanthropist.’

My princess’s focus? Children’s safety and shelter. She had opened four shelters in the area, and I knew more would be on the way. She was careful to not be fully involved because of how much danger our name could cause, but she was working completely behind the curtain on all of it. It didn’t surprise me—Dahlia’s heart was ever expanding.

“What’s going on?” Dahlia asked, crouching down by the girl.

Ronan’s face turned panicked. “She’s not with anyone and she’s freezing.”

Dahlia examined the little girl’s face and spoke softly to Ronan. “Could you go with your dad”—she nodded towards Dermot—“and grab a jacket from the car? I promise she will still be here, but I would like to talk to her.”

Ronan looked down at the girl, who was offering him a small smile. He nodded and followed Dermot out, Dahlia turning to the girl. “Honey, where are your parents? Are you here alone?”

“I live alone, I don’t have parents... That I can remember, at least. I live with other kids, but they usually leave me places, and I have to find my way back before dinner.”

Fuck. This poor kid.

“What’s your name?”

“Navy.”

Interesting name.

Dahlia nodded. “Okay, Navy, how about you come home with us? Get you into some warm clothes and have some food? Then we can figure out what to do.”

“Mom—” Liam came to halt next to me before he made a confused noise. “Wait, who is this?”

“Navy,” Dahlia explained softly before standing up and offering the girl a hand. I wasn’t positive what her plan was, but I knew she had one. I also knew my princess would never walk away from a child in need.

Ronan was back then, helping Navy into a jacket. Yates came over, offering me a concerned look. “She was alone?”

“Completely.”

“Something about this is off,” I said.

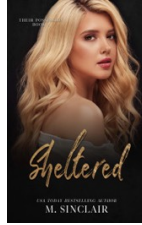
Stratton appeared next to us. “I’m having them check the cameras. If there is something to worry about, we will figure it out.”

I believed him.

My smile grew as I watched Dahlia load the kids into the SUV with the others’ help. We had faced a lot of issues in the past ten years, but it would always be worth it because the family we built was something completely unique to us. Something absolutely priceless.

All because of my princess.

AUTHOR NOTE



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M. SINCLAIR

USA Today Bestselling Author

M. Sinclair is a Chicago native, parent to 3 cats, and can be found writing almost every moment of the day. Despite being new to publishing, M. Sinclair has been writing for nearly 10 years now. Currently in love with the Reverse Harem genre, she plans to publish an array of works that are considered romance, suspense, and horror within the year. M. Sinclair lives by the notion that there is enough room for all types of heroines in this world, and being saved is as important as saving others. If you love fantasy romance, obsessive possessive alpha males, and tough FMCs, then M. Sinclair is for you!



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