



*fighting fate*



WEST RAVEN ACADEMY

SCARLETT HAVEN

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## **Fighting Fate**

West Raven Academy, Book Two

Scarlett Haven

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## **ABOUT THIS BOOK:**

*Maybe I'm just fighting fate to stay alive.*

I'm not going to survive senior year, and it has nothing to do with the hit on my life.

It's homecoming week, but who I'm going with is the last thing on my mind, especially since the last guy I dated tried to kill me.

Hunter is closer than ever. He's hiding something from me—something big. I'm just trying to fight my growing feelings for him.

After getting chased by a guy with a hammer, I realize I'll never have a normal life. Maybe I'm just fighting fate to stay alive.

**Friday, October 9**

**Hunter is hiding something.**

Hunter is hiding something from me. I can tell it.

He thinks he's a good liar. In fact, he *brags* about how good he is at it. He talks about the acting classes he's taken and the terrorists he's fooled. And maybe he is good at fooling other people, but he can't fool me. I *know* him. And the way he avoids eye contact with me is a dead giveaway.

During training, Hunter even goes easy on me, which isn't like him. He always goes hard, claiming that a bad guy won't hold back with me. He's predictable like that—always giving me the same responses. So the fact that he's acting differently now means that something is up, and I will get to the bottom of it.

Since today is Friday—casual Friday—I don't have to wear my school uniform. Even though the uniforms aren't as bad as I first thought they would be, I'm still glad to be allowed to wear something else today. I put on a sundress, one that Liam bought me. It was on sale for five bucks at the mall. It was in the middle of winter and there was a snowstorm—not a lot of people were looking for summer clothes. Liam said it was cute, and I agreed. So he got it for me and I wore it a lot this summer. It's one of my favorites.

It's starting to get colder outside already, which makes me sad. I wear a cardigan over the dress, putting on a pair of sneakers with it. I just leave my hair down, not bothering to style it. I think it looks pretty natural.

I've never liked my hair until recently. I guess I always thought brown hair was boring, but now I happen to think I look pretty—dark hair, like my dad, dark eyes, like my mom. She thinks I got the worst from the two of them, but I happen to think I got the best.

Stepping away from the mirror, I grab my phone from my nightstand and my messenger bag from the floor. Putting the bag over my shoulder, I glance at my phone and see that I have a text from Griffin.

Griffin: *When is homecoming at WRA?*

I furrow my brows, glancing at the screen.

Is Griffin going to ask me to homecoming? Wait, can he even come to *my* homecoming? I wasn't planning on going to homecoming at all, to be honest. Even if Griffin asks me, I probably still won't go. Dances aren't really my thing and the last dance I went to was kind of a disaster. Of course, that was when I had a massive crush on he-who-shall-not-be-named.

Stupid Preston.

I type my response.

Me: *It's next Saturday.*

My phone vibrates with his response right away.

Griffin: *Nice. Yours is a week before ERA.*

Oh.

That's it?



I fully expected him to ask me to go with him. I'm equally relieved and disappointed that he didn't ask.

I like Griffin, don't get me wrong. He's cute, friendly, and *hopefully* not a psychopathic murderer. But after my last almost boyfriend tried to kill me, I've sort of sworn off guys. At least until I get rid of this hit on my life—or maybe until I graduate high school, whichever comes first.

Uh, I really hope I still don't have a hit on my life when I go to college. *That* would suck.

If I still have a hit on my life then, would Hunter go with me? I cringe at the thought of him following me around to my classes and freshman parties. At this rate, the odds of me getting a boyfriend is highly unlikely.

Twisting the doorknob, I head into the living room. I find Hunter standing by the front door. He has a paper coffee cup in each hand and he holds one out to me.

Okay, now I *know* he's hiding something. Why else would he bring me a coffee? I know it's not out of the 'goodness' of his heart.

Still, I grab the coffee from him, taking the bribe. I need the caffeine too much this morning to argue.

"You look cute." Hunter's eyes slowly scan my outfit.

I grab the bottom of his tie, tugging it slightly. "You know Fridays are casual, right? No uniform required."

His eyes widen. "Sweet! I'm going to change real quick."

I shake my head and laugh as he runs off toward his room to change into some different clothes. I'm not quite sure how Hunter forgot. Every Friday is casual Friday. Yet, every Friday I find him wearing his uniform.

A couple minutes later, Hunter comes back. He's wearing a pair of jeans and a hoodie. I can't help but be jealous of how easy it is for him to get ready. I have to spend a lot more time planning my outfits. He spends a minute throwing on his clothes and he looks... well, better than I ever could.

My bodyguard is way more attractive than any boy in high school should be. Though, maybe that's because he's *not* in high school. Hunter is nineteen-years-old and he looks every bit of his age. I hate to admit it, but the guy is hot.

His pale green eyes meet mine, nearly taking my breath away.

"You ready?" he asks.

I nod, turning my head away to make sure I wasn't drooling.

Nope, my chin is perfectly dry.

That's the last thing I need—for Hunter to think I was checking him out. I'm not sure his large ego could handle knowing that I find him attractive. I'm also not sure I can handle the teasing that would occur if he knew.

I take a sip of my coffee as we head out to the SUV. I'm pleasantly surprised when the taste of vanilla hits my tongue. I turn to Hunter.

"What?" he asks.

"You remembered how I like my coffee." I hold up the cup.

He snorts. "It's not hard. You like coffee flavored sugar."

I roll my eyes. "And now I have to take away, like, half the points you got for being nice and bringing me coffee. Do you always *have* to be sarcastic?"

He opens the passenger side door for me. "I get my points back for opening the door for you. And yes. I think we both know that I always have to be sarcastic. Sarcasm is practically a personality trait for me."

He's not wrong.

I get in the seat, letting him shut the door behind me. I put on my seatbelt and sip on my coffee as he gets in the driver's side.

Once Hunter starts the Jeep, he clears his throat. “So, uh, you think Griffin is going to ask you to homecoming?”

I turn to him. “How can he? He goes to East Raven, I go to West. I’d be the one who would have to invite him.”

He laughs. “Yeah, and we both know you’re too scared to actually ask him to go with you.”

I stick out my tongue at him. “Whatever.”

“I’m just saying.” He shrugs. “I think he’ll ask you.”

“And I’ll say no.”

“Why?” He looks at me with wide eyes. “I thought you liked him.”

“I do.” Kind of. “I’m just not into the whole homecoming thing.”

“Why not?” Hunter seems baffled.

“Dancing isn’t my thing.”

“Homecoming is about more than dancing. You can hang out with Harper and her boyfriend. And your brother too. It’s about making memories. And it’s your senior year. You’ll regret it if you don’t go,” he says.

“Did you go to homecoming?” I give him a pointed look, daring him to tell me how ‘magical’ homecoming was for him.

He chuckles. “Spy School doesn’t have homecoming. Or prom. Or any kind of dances.” He pauses. “Well, that’s not exactly true. We do have a dance class—it’s mandatory. But it’s just for training.”

“See... you didn’t have homecoming, I don’t need it either.” I cross my arms over my chest stubbornly.

“Whatever you say,” Hunter mumbles. “But do you really think Harper is going to let you skip homecoming?”

The car comes to a stop outside of the school and I unbuckle my seatbelt, thinking Hunter is probably right. There is no way that Harp is going to let me skip homecoming.

My best friend is way into the whole ‘school’ thing. She dresses up for games and even though she pretends to hate high school, I know she secretly loves it. She wouldn’t miss homecoming for anything. And me being her best friend means that skipping homecoming definitely isn’t an option.

Still... I’m not going to change my mind. There is no way. Not even Harper can convince me to go.

I turn up my coffee, finishing the rest of it in a couple of swallows. I grab my bag and then get out of the SUV. I don’t have to look back to know that Hunter is following me—he’s always following me. He wouldn’t be a very good bodyguard if he weren’t.

You’d think that since his friends got my name off the hitman websites he’d chill, but nope. I don’t think Hunter has ever been chill a day in his life. He definitely isn’t going to start now either.

I have a feeling that it’s going to be a long school year.

## You’re going.

Harper is beaming as she sits down at the table in the dining hall at lunch. Either she’s really excited about her cheeseburger, which *does* look good, or something I’m not going to like is about to happen. Who knew I would meet a girl with fire red hair and more energy than the sun when I came here?

“A week from tomorrow.” She squeals with delight.

I raise an eyebrow. “What is a week from tomorrow?”

Her jaw drops open as she looks at me. “Have you been living under a rock, Coco? Duh! Only Homecoming. I’ve already got my dress laid out so I can stare at it every night.” She lets out a girly sigh, one that I didn’t even think Harper was capable of.

“Oh.” I shrug. “Well, have fun.”

She jerks her head in my direction, narrowing her eyes. “Why does that sound like you aren’t coming?”

“Because I’m not.” I use my chopsticks to put a piece of sushi in my mouth, hoping that I’m signifying that we’re *done* with this conversation.

“Yes you are Cove Lawson,” she says stubbornly.

Hunter chuckles, so I shoot a glare his way.

“It’s *homecoming*,” Harper continues. “And more importantly, it’s senior year. It’s your last chance to experience things like this. And something tells me that you didn’t go to junior homecoming.”

Yeah, no. I would have rather pulled off my own fingernails than endure the torture of a dance at my old school. I shudder just thinking about it.

She gives me a pointed look. “See. You *have* to go.”

“I don’t even have a date,” I counter.

Harper rolls her eyes. “Because you don’t want a date. You could ask any guy in this school and he would be dying to take you. Or even Griffin. Inviting a date from East Raven is allowed.”

“He doesn’t want to come to homecoming with me.” And I don’t want him to come to homecoming with me. Bringing him to homecoming would mean that it was a date. And dating is the last thing I want to do right now—at least not until Hunter and his spy friends figure out who put a hit out on my life.

“He does want to go with her.” Hunter scoots closer to me, getting into mine and Harper’s conversation. “He texted her this morning to ask when her homecoming is.”

Harper gasps. “See, Cove! You’re so oblivious to guys flirting with you.”

Hunter snorts. “I know! Guys flirt with her all the time and she doesn’t have a clue.”

She grins, wiggling her eyebrows at me. “You could even take Hunter.”

I groan. “I’m not taking Hunter. And I’m *not* going.”

“Oh, you’re going.” Harper leans forward. “I cannot have my best friend sitting at home on what could be one of the best nights of her life.”

I roll my eyes. “Dramatic much? It’s a stupid high school dance.”

She pouts. “Please, Coco. I need you.”

I sigh. “I don’t even have a dress.”

She claps her hands. “That means dress shopping tomorrow! I needed an excuse to go to the mall anyway. I need clothes for Spirit Week.” She points a finger at me. “And don’t even try to get out of it—you’re participating in Spirit Week.”

“Fine,” I grumble.

I planned on participating some anyway. Who passes up on wearing *pajamas* to school? Not me.

In a private school where you’re forced to wear a school uniform four days of the week, you jump at the chance to wear anything that isn’t plaid.

“Yay!” Harper dances in her seat. “I know where all the good dresses are too.”

I swallow hard as I realize—we’re going dress shopping. And being as I’m not the favorite child, I don’t exactly have money.

Harper chats on, talking about all the stores she wants to go to, but I can’t shake the pit in my stomach.

What am I supposed to do? Should I ask Liam to give me money? But a homecoming dress isn’t exactly cheap. I know he wouldn’t care, but it feels like too much.

No, I can't ask Liam.

I suppose I could call my grandparents. Even though they hate the fact that I exist, they are always willing to throw money at me—probably to ease their guilty conscious. But then again, what if it was them who put the hit out on my life? We still don't know for sure who did it and it wouldn't surprise me if they were guilty. They've never made their hatred of me a secret.

Harper snaps her fingers in front of my face. "Hello, earth to Cove."

I look up, shaking my head. "Sorry, what?"

"I said—" she gives me an annoyed look, "that now we just need to get you a date."

I frown. "Can't you just go with your boyfriend and let me go stag? We can still dance together."

Harper frowns for a half second before grinning again. "No. You have to have your own date. I refuse to let you go stag to homecoming—it wouldn't be right. As your best friend, I can't condone it."

I use my thumb and index finger to squeeze the bridge of my nose. It does nothing to ease the stress headache I feel coming on.

Now, not only do I have to worry about somehow finding money for a homecoming dress, but now I also have to worry about finding a date. I'm not sure I can handle the stress.

"Besides, you have two very good options. There are two guys who would *love* to take you," she says. "It's a good problem to have. I'm jealous."

I furrow my brows. "What planet do you live on? Nobody wants to take me to homecoming. Not even my brother."

She laughs. "Oh, Coco. My sweet innocent Coco. I'm not talking about your gorgeous brother—"

"Gross," I chime in.

“I’m talking about a certain hottie from East Raven Academy who has a crush on you.”

I roll my eyes.

She shrugs. “And, of course, I’m talking about Hunter. Because you’re both clearly in love with each other but you haven’t figured it out yet.”

My cheeks grow warm.

Hunter slings an arm around me. “She already knows I’m madly in love with her. She’s the one who doesn’t reciprocate.”

I shrug his arm off. “Fine. I’ll figure out how to ask Griffin.”

Harper claps. “Yay!”

Hunter puts his hands dramatically against his chest. “How will I ever survive the rejection of my one true love?”

“We need to get you a date,” Harper says, turning her attention to Hunter.

I grin, glad that for once she’s not hounding me. I glance over at Hunter. “Yeah, Hunter. You need a date.”

He shakes his head, a frown playing on his lips. “I’m going stag. And neither of you will change my mind about that.” He gives me a pointed look—one that I can read all too well.

Hunter can’t have a date for homecoming. He can’t be distracted. Somebody is trying to kill me and if he turns his back for one second, they may succeed. There is no way he’d risk my life by taking somebody. It’s why he’s a good bodyguard

“Fine.” Harper pouts at Hunter. “But I know for a fact that half the dance team would love an invite from you.”

I would imagine so. Hunter is a good looking man—and I say *man* because he is a man. He’s nineteen, no longer a high school boy, and he spends a lot of time working out and training. It’s no wonder the girls are all attracted to him.



“Talking about being oblivious,” Harper says, shaking her head. “Cove, Hunter will be surrounded by girls flirting with him and he’ll still have his eyes on you. It’s like he doesn’t care about them. You’re so lucky to have found a love like that in high school.”

I sigh, standing up from the table. “I’m going to grab another coffee. I need caffeine if I’m going to make it through the rest of the day.”

Hunter stands with me. “Same.”

Harper smirks, clearly thinking it’s true love. She’s wrong, of course. It’s not true love. It’s just Hunter doing his job of keeping me alive, which is actually harder than it sounds.

Truthfully, I’m not sure if I believe in true love anyway. Though, maybe I’m a little cynical because my first almost boyfriend tried to murder me so he could get the half a million dollar reward.

Love is the last thing on my mind right now. Surviving is at the forefront, for sure. And now...

Money.

How am I supposed to get enough money to buy a dress?

## **Spy School knows all.**

I sit on the couch in the tiny cabin that Hunter and I currently reside in. My books are open in front of me, but I’m not at all paying attention to anything I’m reading. Instead, I chew on the end of my pen, wondering how in the world I’m going to pay for a stupidly expensive homecoming dress.

Why wasn’t I more insistent with Harper? Why did I let her talk me into homecoming, knowing that there is no way I can afford a dress?

I suppose I could always wear the dress I wore to the welcome back to school dance earlier in the year, but somehow wearing the same dress twice is worse than not going at all.

That's it—I'll just have to put my foot down and tell Harper that I'm not going. I wish I could explain why to her, but that's just too embarrassing. Knowing her, she'd try to pay for it, which would be mortifying.

Everybody knows who my stepdad is. The last name Bradbury is very well known, especially on the Upper East Coast. What will they say when they find out that his stepdaughter can't even afford a homecoming dress? What would they say if they knew how much he hated me?

I shake my head, trying desperately to focus on the mathematical formulas I'm supposed to be solving. Instead, I'm worried sick that Harper won't want to be my friend anymore when I tell her that I'm not going to homecoming. No way am I going to homecoming.

The couch sinks beside me, but I don't look over. I just keep chewing on my pen, staring at the book in front of me.

“Do you need help with your homework?” Hunter asks.

His voice startles me slightly. I look over at him, still in a bit of a daze. “No. I have an A in math right now.”

He furrows his brows. “Then why have you been staring at the same problem for the last thirty minutes?”

I sigh, shutting my book. “Maybe I just need a break or something. To clear my mind.”

Hunter gives me a pointed look. “Talk to me.”

I shake my head. “There is nothing to talk about.”

Jumping up from the couch, I walk past him, toward the kitchen.

Maybe I just need a snack. I open the fridge, looking inside. The only thing inside is a bottle of ketchup, a box of

leftover pizza, which is likely stale by now, and a few bottles of water.

What was I expecting? It's not like Hunter and I go grocery shopping.

Annoyed, I shut the fridge. When I turn around, Hunter is standing directly in front of me. I jump, putting a hand to my racing heart.

"Geez, Hunter. You scared me."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "And I will scare you more if you don't talk to me and tell me what's wrong."

I let out my breath in a huff. "I don't have to tell you everything. Some things are personal and *none of your business*."

"Trouble, you are my business." He raises an eyebrow, like he's daring me to argue.

"You keeping me alive is your business, yes." I put my hands on my hips, not backing down. "But my personal life is none of your concern."

"I beg to differ."

I shrug, not saying anything either way. I'm not really in the mood to argue right now.

Hunter takes a step closer to me, invading my personal space. "It's not about me, right? You're not secretly in love with me and daydreaming about our future babies."

"One, ew." I wrinkle my nose. "Two, I'm in high school. Babies are the absolute last thing on my mind."

"Ew?" He flexes his arm muscle. "I don't think I'm ew."

I roll my eyes.

Maybe he's right about that, but I'm not going to be the one to inflate his ego.

I take a step back from him, no longer wanting him to be in my personal space.

“Do you think I can fake a fever on Saturday?” I chew on the side of my lip, wondering how I can pull it off. But even if I did manage, Harper would insist on us going through the week. She wouldn’t even complain about missing Spirit Week if it meant me going to homecoming.

Hunter raises an eyebrow. “Still trying to get out of homecoming?”

I shrug.

“Are you really that worried about getting a date?” He leans against the island, crossing his arms over his chest.

“No.” To be honest, getting a date is the last thing on my mind. If I could figure out how to get a dress, maybe then I’d worry about it.

I would send Liam and text and tell him my dilemma, but Hunter gets all of my text messages. I don’t want Hunter knowing—that *would* be embarrassing. And I highly doubt Hunter will let me go to Liam’s dorm alone to talk to him.

“Talk to me, Trouble. I can’t fix your problem if I don’t know what it is.”

“It’s not your problem to fix—it’s mine. And it’s not a life or death problem, so don’t even try to say it’s your problem.” I turn and head back into the living room, hoping that Hunter will leave it at that.

Of course he doesn’t.

Hunter follows me into the living room, sitting down right beside me on the couch.

I groan. “Why can’t you just leave this alone?”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “When have you ever known me to back down?”

Ha. Never.

I raise an eyebrow. “When have you ever known me to back down?”

He chuckles. “Only with me.”

Ah, he’s right about that.

But I don’t want to cave on this.

Still, the way Hunter looks at me, daring me to continue arguing. I know he’s not going to give up and I also know he’s not going to let me ditch Harper tomorrow. It’ll be far less embarrassing to tell him now than to wait and tell him when we’re at the checkout counter and I can’t pay for whatever ridiculous dress Harper picked out for me.

I sigh, angling my body toward him. “Look, I know you probably think my life is super glamorous. My stepdad, being who he is. And my dad... well, you know who he was.” I glance away, hating the ache that is in my chest. “But it’s not glamorous. Not at all. In fact, most of the time, my life is pretty crappy. My mom is bitter over the fact that my dad’s will is iron tight. Nobody will get that money but me. She only gets a small check every month to support me—not even enough to buy herself a designer purse. Since she’s mad and since my stepdad hates me, they don’t give me things. The only reason I have any dresses at all is because my grandparents buy them for me. Usually for my birthday, Christmas, or other random holidays. But my life isn’t like everybody else here.”

Hunter nods, realization on his face. “You don’t have money for a dress, do you?”

Tears press against the back of my eyes and I shake my head. I clear my throat before speaking. “And the dresses I have aren’t really good for homecoming anyway. They’re more practical, like the one I wore to the dance we had earlier in the year.”

“Don’t worry about the money. I already planned on buying you your dress anyway.”

My head snaps up at his confession. “What?”

“I already knew all that,” he confesses. “Remember? Spy School knows all.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re *not* buying me a dress. That’s ridiculous.”

“Yes, I am. It’s called a gift.”

“Well, I won’t accept it.” I jut out my chin, ready to fight Hunter to the end on this one. He will *not* win.

“Too bad. Because I *am* buying you a dress.” Hunter narrows his eyes, letting me know he also isn’t going to cave. “I’m paying for everything. Dress, shoes, and whatever else you need to go to homecoming.”

My jaw drops open as I look at him. I don’t know what to say. I didn’t expect this and I honestly don’t want it.

“I’ll pay you back.” I uncross my arms.

Hunter beams at me, realizing he’s won. “No, you won’t, Trouble. It’s called a gift. I would be insulted if you tried to pay me back for it.”

I push a piece of hair behind my ear. “Hunter, you can’t be serious. It’s not even fair. You’ve given up your life to babysit me—”

He cuts me off. “It’s my *job*. And I’m not babysitting you, I’m keeping you alive.”

“Still... it’s a glorified babysitting job.” I raise an eyebrow, daring him to argue.

He smirks. “Then you’re lucky you have the hottest babysitter on the planet.”

I grab the pillow off the couch behind me and throw it in his face. “In your dreams.”

“I know I’m in yours.” He winks at me.

I hate how my stomach flutters when he winks.

Still, I make a big show of rolling my eyes. “Fine. You win. This time. But I’ll find a way to pay you back.”

“Your undying gratitude is enough for me,” he says.

I grab my math book off the table. “Now go away. I have homework.”

He chuckles. “I knew my hotness was distracting you.”

I groan.

What did I do to get stuck with Hunter Duran as my bodyguard?

## Homecoming?

Later that night, I fully plan on going to bed early. I am already dreading going shopping with Harper tomorrow. Something tells me the day is going to be long. But when I get a text from Harper and Griffin, telling me I need to come to the field, going to bed doesn't seem as appealing. I will most likely regret it tomorrow when Harper is dragging me from store to store, but I want to hang out.

Hunter is not happy at all about the fact that I'm forcing him to leave the cabin at ten o'clock at night—something about him needing his beauty sleep. It's laughable, but I keep that opinion to myself. I'm just glad he's willing to come with me.

Hunter grunts every once in a while as we walk to remind me that he's unhappy, but I ignore him. Nothing can wipe the smile from my face. I feel invigorated.

“Since you're making me come all this way, you better ask that boy to homecoming,” Hunter grumbles.

I nearly trip over a twig when he says that.

Oh, right. I almost forgot that I'm supposed to ask Griffin if he will come to homecoming with me. Suddenly, I am nervous, no longer wanting to head to the field.

I fake a yawn, coming to a stop. “You know, maybe we should head back to the cabin. I *am* pretty beat.”

Hunter laughs, pushing me forward. “Oh, no. You’re not getting out of it that easy, Trouble.”

I groan, covering my face with my hands.

“Why are you so scared?” Hunter asks. “You already know that boy is crazy about you. He’s going to say yes.”

I look at Hunter, shocked. “Seriously?”

He shakes his head. “You are so clueless sometimes.”

“And you’re a pain in the butt.” I cross my arms over my chest, stomping ahead of him. I hear him laughing from behind me.

Part of me wishes I could get away from Hunter for a little while. It would do us both some good to take a break from one another, but that just isn’t going to happen. The only time I get away from him is when I’m sleeping, which hardly seems like time away from him at all. His room is right across the hallway from mine. If I so much as sneeze, he knows it. It’s unnerving to have somebody so close by.

I can hear the party long before we get into the clearing. I have no idea how security hasn’t caught onto this, though maybe they do know. Maybe they just don’t care as long as we don’t do anything stupid.

As I step out into the clearing, I scan for Harper, not seeing her anywhere. I’m sure she’s off somewhere with her boyfriend, which is what I expected. I can’t be too mad about it. I didn’t really come to hang out with her anyway—I came for Griffin.

My heart races with nerves as I realize that I’ve got to ask him to homecoming. I’m pretty sure he’ll say yes, but I’m still anxious. There is always a chance he will turn me down.

I don’t see Griffin until he’s already approaching me. He’s got a huge smile on his face, which is contagious.

“Hey.” He raises an eyebrow, glancing behind me. “I see you brought your bodyguard.”



I snort. “If only you knew.”

Because Hunter literally *is* my bodyguard. Griffin just thinks he’s my best friend.

“Want to talk?” Griffin nods his head toward the woods.

“Sure.” I glance behind me, at Hunter. I wave one hand at him, like I’m saying bye. Of course he will follow us, but he’ll at least be sneaky about it. He’ll allude to giving us privacy. But I’ll know—he’ll be there, listening to every single word. Which makes asking Griffin to homecoming that much more embarrassing. Being rejected with a crowd is twice as humiliating. So I hope Hunter is right in saying that Griffin won’t turn me down. I’m not sure my fragile ego can handle public rejection.

Griffin surprises me by grabbing my hand as he pulls me away from the crowd and into the woods. I don’t have a lot of experience with holding hands with a guy. None romantically. I can’t help but notice that my hand fits well in his.

His hands are soft, which is very different than Hunter’s. Hunter has calloused hands. And I hate myself for comparing the two—obviously Hunter has never romantically held my hand. He’s just done it to tug me along somewhere or to keep me close by. But I still can’t help comparing them.

I wonder how my hand feels to Griffin. My hands used to be soft before Hunter started training me. But now they’re starting to get calloused too. Does he think it’s weird I’m not a girly girl?

Griffin guides me until the sounds of the party are barely a low hum. He pulls me toward a large boulder, and I can’t help but think of the time that Preston did something similar. Now I am nervous for an entirely different reason.

I really, really hope Griffin isn’t bringing me out here to kill me. If he is, I’m pretty sure I can never trust another guy as long as I live. I’ll be single forever. I remind myself that Griffin isn’t like Preston. Griffin is a good guy.

“How are you?” Griffin rubs a hand at the back of his neck. “I haven’t talked to you a lot since the whole Anna thing.”

The Anna thing.

My chest clenches when I hear her name.

I clear my throat. “Oh, uh, I’m okay.”

The guilt isn’t as crippling anymore. Mostly because I *know* what happened wasn’t my fault. Whoever put out this hit on my life is the guilty one. I’m just an innocent victim in all of this, just like Anna. But I still feel partly responsible.

He nods. “Good. I’ve been worried.”

That’s sweet of him.

Not wanting to talk about Anna, I angle my body toward him. “How is your little sister doing?”

He raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“You said she got dumped,” I remind him.

He laughs. “Oh. She’s already got another boyfriend. Her ex-boyfriend’s best friend. She says she’s not dating him to get revenge, but her ex is very jealous.”

I grin. “Wow. Your little sister has a better dating life than me.”

He rolls his eyes. “She has a better dating life than me too. I swear my parents had her just to torture me.”

I chew on my lip, wondering how I should ask him to homecoming. I try to pluck up the courage, but every time I try to open my mouth, my heart races faster. Even my palms are sweaty.

“I’m not good at all of this.” Griffin waves a hand between us. “Usually girls ask me out. I’ve never been the one to do the asking before.”

I turn to him, my eyes wide.

Is he going to ask me out?

He clears his throat. “What I’m trying to get the courage to ask you is, will you go to homecoming with me?”

Relief washes over me. “I’ll go with you if you’ll go with me.”

He grins, nodding his head. “Yeah, I think I can do that.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

That was easier than I thought it would be.

“I’m so relieved you said yes,” Griffin tells me. “I really thought you had a crush on that guy you’re always hanging out with.”

I wrinkle my nose. “No way. He’s like a brother to me.”

Lie.

It’s *such* a lie.

But Griffin doesn’t need to know that.

Griffin’s grin widens as he scoots closer to me. “Good. Because, if you couldn’t tell, I kind of have a crush on you.”

I swallow hard at his confession. “You do?”

He nods.

I wish I knew what to do or say. If I were braver, I would close the distance between us and I would kiss him. But I’m not brave—not at all. It doesn’t help that I *know* Hunter is watching from a distance. Having my first kiss with an audience just isn’t something I’m interested in doing. So I scoot away from him slightly, finally able to breathe when there is a little distance between us.

Griffin smirks at my move. “You keep surprising me.”

“How?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Just that you’re this beautiful girl. I fully expect you to act like all the other girls in my school that are beautiful, rich, and snobby.” He shrugs. “But you’re so different.”

I chew on the side of my lip anxiously. “Is different good?”

“Different is wonderful,” he says.

My heart skips a beat.

Griffin isn't like I expected either—but I don't want to tell him *that*. I guess part of me expected that Griffin brought me here to kill me, but not everybody is like Preston Lomax.

“Have you ever had a boyfriend?” Griffin asks.

Is it that obvious that I've never had a boyfriend?

I shake my head. “No.”

My stomach tightens at the thought of Griffin asking me—but it's not with excitement. It's with fear. I don't want Griffin to ask me to be his girlfriend, not yet anyway. I barely even know him.

But thankfully he doesn't do that. Instead, he nods his head toward the party and suggests that we go back. On the walk back, Griffin holds my hand. And while part of me is on cloud nine because I have a date to homecoming, the other part of me is disappointed.

Does going with Griffin mean that I won't get to dance with Hunter?

**Saturday, October 10**

**Flat like a shaken soda.**

I dread today, which probably makes me a bad best friend. Harper is so looking forward to shopping, but all I can think is that I'd rather be at the cabin watching reruns of a show that would inevitably make Hunter roll his eyes at me and constantly remind me that I have horrible taste.

Maybe today will be good. I need to spend less time with Hunter alone. This stupid crush that I'm developing on my bodyguard is not good. Not at all. Griffin is who I should focus my attention on. He's a good guy. He's my age. And, most importantly, he's interested in me. Hunter isn't. Hunter just sees me as his job. And sure, he calls me his friend. Maybe he even *likes* me. But he doesn't like me the same way I like him. So these strong feelings that I have for him? Completely one sided.

I put on a sundress, thinking it will be easier to take on and off while we're trying on homecoming dresses. I do wear a cardigan with it because it's a little cold this morning. I'm sure by noon I'll be ditching the cardigan. It's the time of year when the weather is bipolar—cold in the morning, sweltering by midday. Still, it's my favorite time of the year.

When I walk into the living room, I'm surprised to find Hunter isn't standing there alone. There is a boy with blond hair standing next to him.

I don't know the boy, but I do know he doesn't go to school at West Raven. If he did, I would recognize him.

The guy is very attractive—not as smoldering as Hunter, but gorgeous nonetheless. They both turn to look at me as I enter the room.

“Are you ready?” Hunter asks, not bothering with introductions.

I walk up to the two, ignoring Hunter. “Hey, I’m Cove.”

The other boy nods. “Hey, Cove. I’m Sander.”

Realization dawns. “Ah, the hot dude from East Raven. I’ve heard a lot about you from Harper. She has a huge crush on you.” I reach over and pat his shoulder. “Good luck today. You’re going to need it.”

Sander grins. “I like you already. But your friend knows I have a girlfriend, right?”

“I don’t think she cares.” I turn to Hunter, narrowing my eyes. “Thanks for introducing me to your friend.”

Hunter rolls his eyes. “I was getting to that part. You beat me to it. Now we should go. Your friend is waiting. She’s sent about ten texts in the last three minutes.” His phone chimes. “Make that eleven.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket, seeing the messages.

“Dude, you get her text messages?” Sander asks.

Hunter doesn’t say a word.

“I never did that with Phoenix.” He rubs at the scruff on his jaw. “It probably would’ve made my job a lot easier if I had thought of it.”

I groan. “Don’t encourage him. It’s so bad. He never lets me have any privacy.”

“I let you have privacy with your boyfriend last night.” Hunter raises an eyebrow.

“He’s *not* my boyfriend.”

“I saw how close you were last night.” He smirks at me.

I throw my hands up. “Then you saw I was the one who moved back. I don’t have a boyfriend. I just wanted a date to homecoming, that’s it. Griffin and I are just *friends*.”

“Sure you are.” Hunter slings his arm around my shoulder. “Let’s go, Trouble.”

My cheeks grow warm and he leads me toward the door. I’m not sure if he believes me or not. To be fair, I’m not sure I’d believe me either.

Why is it so important for Hunter to know that Griffin and I are just friends? I already know the answer and I don’t like it.

Maybe I really should date Griffin. If I did, maybe I could get over this massive crush I have on Hunter. Maybe then I could stop obsessing over him.

Hunter opens the back door of the SUV for me. He and Sander get into the front and we head toward the dorms.

As we pull out front, I send a text to Harper, letting her know I’m ‘waiting in the car’ for her. She runs out the front door seconds later. When she gets into the SUV, her jaw drops open as she looks between Hunter, Sander, and me.

Eventually, her gaze lands on Sander. “Hello, hottie.”

I bust out laughing. “He has a girlfriend. And you have a boyfriend.”

She frowns as the car takes off. Now Harper fully focuses her attention on me. “Actually, Finley and I broke up.”

“What?” My eyes widen. “Why? I thought you guys were perfect for one another.”

She shrugs. “I thought so too. We had all this chemistry. But the second we started dating, we fizzled out. Like, flatter than a shaken up soda.”

I frown. “I’m sorry.”

“Eh, it’s okay.” She grins. “I’ve already got another date for homecoming.”

“Who?” I ask.

“Just a friend.” She waves a hand. “But never mind that. I saw you go off with Griffin last night. Tell me *everything*. Did he make a move on you?” She wiggles her eyebrows. “I bet he kissed you.”

“Griffin and I are just friends,” I say, repeating the phrase I’ve said many times. Nobody believes me.

“Keep telling yourself that, Trouble.” Hunter smirks at me through the rearview mirror.

I glare at him, turning to Harper. “But he did ask me to homecoming at East Raven, so I told him I would go with him if he came to homecoming at West Raven with me.”

Harper squeals. “Yes! I knew it! He so has a crush on you!”

I want to deny it, but Griffin himself confessed that he does have a crush on me.

“It doesn’t matter.” I sink further into my seat. “I’m not into Griffin like *that*.”

But I wish I were.

If I had a crush on Griffin, it would be a lot better than having one on Hunter. At least I know Griffin likes me. One day, Hunter is going to disappear from my life and I’m never going to see him again. When that happens, it’s going to break my heart.

“Why don’t you like Griffin like that?” Harper looks at me with her mouth open wide. “Do you even have eyes, woman? Griffin is a complete babe. Only a blind person wouldn’t be attracted to him.”

I shrug, not knowing how to respond.

I get what she’s saying. Griffin *is* attractive. And not just because of the way he looks, though that is great, but he’s attractive because he’s so nice. I’m surprised a guy like him doesn’t have a girlfriend already.



“Why doesn’t Griffin have a girlfriend?” I ask her, chewing on my bottom lip as I wait for a response.

Harper twists a piece of hair around her finger. “I don’t know. I’m sure it’s not from girls’ lack of trying. I think he had a girlfriend during his junior year, but they broke up over spring break. I heard it’s cause she made out with some college guy. He was a surfer. There’s a video online.”

Why am I not surprised Harper knows this? She knows all the gossip.

“Harper, did you ever think Griffin might want to tell Cove these things himself?” Sander turns in his seat to look at my friend. “If he’s interested in her, that’s probably a talk they’ll have.”

She just giggles—probably because Sander is talking to her.

I groan. “Why do I get the feeling that today is going to be a long day?”

Harper squeals. “Are you even a girl? We’re going *shopping*, Cove Lawson. You should be excited.” She holds up her arm to me, rubbing a hand over it. “I’ve got chills just thinking about all the dresses we’re going to try on.”

All of the sudden, I feel nauseous.

Hunter burst out laughing. “Trouble, your face is priceless. You look like somebody kicked your puppy.”

I glare at him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Keep laughing, Hunter. Who do you think is going to carry all our bags through the mall for us.”

He stops laughing.

Yeah, it’s not so funny when you’re the one being tortured.

Harper shakes my shoulder. “How did I get stuck with a girl who hates shopping as my best friend?”

I turn to her, giving her my best smile. “Better luck in college?”

She huffs, sitting back. “You are going to college with me. Who do you think is going to be my roommate? And sophomore year, we’ll be getting our own apartment off campus. Like proper adults.”

That does sound nice—rooming with Harper.

But thinking about college only brings on a load of other thoughts. Like if I’m even going to survive until college, never mind if I actually want to go.

Harper looks in front, toward Hunter. “Hunter, are you coming to college with us?”

While part of me hopes not, part of me hopes he does. I don’t want to be in danger still when I leave for college, but having Hunter by my side *does* sound nice.

“I go where Cove goes,” Hunter says.

Harper turns to me, beaming. “I better be the maid of honor at your wedding.”

I roll my eyes.

Yeah, not happening.

I mean... maybe she’ll be my maid of honor someday, but marrying Hunter? That will never happen. As soon as he and his spy friends figure out *who* put out a hit on me, they’ll take care of the problem. Once I’m safe, Hunter will move on to his next assignment and I’ll be forgotten like yesterday’s breakfast.

That is why I need to get over this stupid crush I have on him. Because Hunter and I? We’re never going to be a thing.

**Nobody should be that excited about a dress.**

Hunter stays very close to me as we're shopping. He's even looking through dresses as I look through them. Harper is absolutely beaming about it, thinking Hunter is invested in looking at dresses with me because he's in love with me, but I know better.

Still, when Hunter tells me that 'blue is my color,' I do start picking out more blue dresses.

Why do I have to have a stupid crush on my bodyguard? It's complicated and messy. Even if Hunter did like me, we couldn't be together. He's here to protect me, not fall in love with me.

Besides that, he doesn't feel the same.

Why would he?

He's nineteen and he lives an exciting life. He's a freaking spy for crying out loud. And me? I'm just a seventeen-year-old high school senior. I have no idea what I want to do with my life and the most exciting thing about me is the hit I have out on my life. I'm ordinary in every single way.

Maybe I should just date Griffin. He has a crush on me. And someday, when Hunter moves on, maybe I could develop feelings for Griffin. I just need to stop comparing him to Hunter.

While Harper slips into the dressing room to try on a dress, Hunter and I look through the rack.

"Why are you being so obsessive today?" I glance from the dresses toward Hunter.

"What do you mean?" He doesn't look up. He just keeps looking through the dresses intently, almost like he's trying to avoid making eye contact with me.

I touch his arm to get his attention. "I know you, Hunter. And I know you're hiding something from me. You might as well tell me the truth now."

He shrugs. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

I roll my eyes.

Sure he doesn't know.

"You're not a very good liar."

He jerks his head up. "I've been trained how to lie."

I cross my arms over my chest. "I'd ask for a refund on that training class."

Before Hunter can say anything else, Harper peeks her head around the corner, asking my opinion on her dress. I give her the same response I have for every dress—that it looks gorgeous on her. But it's the truth—Harper looks gorgeous in everything she tries on. I, on the other hand, haven't looked good in anything yet. I'm hoping one of the dresses waiting for me in the changing room will be good.

"It's your turn." Harper grabs my arm, pulling me toward the changing room.

I walk in, putting on the first blue dress in the pile. I've already decided that I'm getting a blue dress. I just hate that I'm getting a blue dress because Hunter told me I look good in blue.

The dress is gorgeous. Typically, girls wear floor length gowns to homecoming, but I just don't like the idea of wearing a full length gown. Instead, I opt for a shorter, cocktail type dress. It's puffy, like I like. And I'll be able to wear sneakers with it. I'm sure Harper is going to *love* that when she finds out.

I walk out of the room, doing a spin for Harper. "What do you think?"

Her eyes light up. "Oh, my gosh. Cute."

"Should I get it?" I ask.

She rolls her eyes. "Cove, you can't just buy the first dress you try on. It looks good, but what if one of the other dresses looks better?"

I groan.

Of course this isn't going to be as easy as I thought.

I head back into the dressing room to try on the other dresses that are waiting for me.

I knew today was going to be torture.

After trying on a minimum of twenty dresses, Harper finally deems one of them nice enough for me to buy. However, she didn't find 'the one' yet, so we're off to another store to see if she can find something suitable for her. I'm just relieved that I've got my dress.

When Hunter pays for my dress, I give him a grateful smile. I know he said he doesn't want me to pay him back, but I will. There is no way I'm going to let him just *give* me a dress like this. It doesn't feel right, especially not since he's already being forced to babysit me.

Well, okay, maybe not *forced*. He is getting paid. And he constantly reminds me that he volunteered for this assignment.

"Thank you," I tell Hunter, as we pace a good distance behind Harper and Sander. Sander looks over his shoulder at us, giving Hunter a look that I can't read, but it's not hard to guess. I'm sure Harper is driving him crazy.

"It's no problem, Cove. I already told you." Hunter slips his arm behind my back. I raise an eyebrow at him but don't comment on his arm. It tingles as he rests his hand on the small of my back.

Stupid butterflies.

"It must be weird to pretend to be a high school student right after graduating," I say, desperately trying not to think about Hunter's hand that is on me.

I can't fall for my bodyguard.

He shrugs. "It's not so bad. I got lucky with you. You're a pretty good kid. When I took this assignment, I was expecting to be watching over a spoiled brat."

My eyes widen. "And you still volunteered?"

“Of course.” He furrows his brows, looking at me. “It didn’t matter if you’re likable or not. You’re seventeen. I’m not going to let somebody kill you.”

When he puts it like that...

He smirks. “Of course, the fact that you’re not a diva does make my job more enjoyable.”

“Should I start acting like a spoiled rich girl?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Do you even know how to act like a spoiled rich girl?”

I shrug. “I’ve seen enough of Liam’s girlfriends that I’m sure I could imitate one pretty well.”

He shudders. “Uh, please don’t. The girls at your school are bad enough.”

He’s probably right.

The high pitch of a girly squeal has me looking up, my heart racing from the loud shriek.

“Oh, my gosh, Cove! Look at this dress!” Harper yells.

I groan.

“Nobody should be that excited about a dress,” Hunter mumbles under his breath.

I have to agree with him on this one.

I put my hand to my heart, shaking my head as I get closer to Harper. “You scared me half to death. The way you were screaming, I thought somebody was about to shoot you.”

She giggles, waving a hand at me. “Oh, Cove. You’re hilarious.”

Harper grabs onto my arm, pulling me into another store.

I was right. This *is* going to be a long day.

**Shopping is deadly.**

I take my time in the bathroom, checking my phone long after I'm done going pee. Truthfully, I need a break from Harper. I love my friend, but put her in a mall and I see a whole other side of her—a side I didn't know existed.

Harper comes from money, that much has always been obvious. I think everybody at West Raven Academy comes from money, aside from a few scholarship students. But she's never acted like a rich girl. That is, until today. Truthfully, I think she's spent more money today than I ever have in all seventeen years I've been alive.

Stuffing my phone into my pocket, I leave the bathroom stall and wash my hands. I'm dreading heading back to the shoe store.

Today, I realize just how different I am from other girls.

I was raised around money. I lived in a big penthouse. I went on vacation to my stepdad's second home in The Hamptons. But I was always the burden that had to be brought along. I always had just enough clothes, whatever could be bought on sale or thrifted, and nothing more. I had to fight just to get school supplies every year.

And Harper... she has her own credit card. All she has to do is swipe and she can have whatever she wants. She doesn't even act like it has a limit—maybe it doesn't.

I shut off the water, grabbing a towel to dry my hands. Another person comes into the bathroom and I'm about to walk past them when I realize they're coming right toward me.

It's a woman maybe a few years older than me. She looks normal—hair in a messy bun, an oversized hoodie, and jeans. But when she pulls a gun out of her hoodie, aiming it right at me, I realize she's not just a normal girl.

This woman walked right past Hunter, who is waiting outside the door for me. I'm sure he didn't think anything about the fact she was coming in.

Knowing there is a door on the other side too, I take off running, hoping she doesn't have a good aim.

I have no idea where to go. I just take off running realizing after that I should've run in the direction of Hunter. Instead, I ran the opposite way. It's too late to change directions now because of the girl who is running behind me.

Her gun is hidden from view as she chases after me, which makes sense. It's not like she could be waving a gun around in a mall, but something tells me this girl doesn't much care about rules or laws—she just wants me dead and her bank account half a million dollars larger.

My heart is pounding as I race around people in the mall. They give me dirty looks as I weave through them, a few people even yelling at me to slow down. I ignore them because I know they'd be doing the same thing in my position.

Remembering that my phone is in my pocket, I pull it out. I can at least call Hunter and tell him there is a crazy girl chasing me. But it's hard to run and look at my screen at the same time.

As we approach the end of the building, I get onto the escalator, running up. I even have to shove somebody out of my way.

“Sorry,” I yell, but don't stop to check on them.

At this moment, the only thing I care about is getting out of here alive. Apologizes can wait until later.

Looking down at my phone as I run, I pull up Hunter's number and hit call. But before I can even put the phone to my ear, the sound of a gunshot goes off. I duck as I run, just on instinct.

I guess the girl no longer cares about keeping her gun hidden.

I hear screams of terror as everybody else in the mall heard the gunshot. I want to tell them not to worry—this girl doesn't want to hurt them. It's me she wants dead.



Now, I am not the only one running. It's harder to dodge the crowd now, which is probably what the assassin wanted. She wanted to make it harder for me to get away.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see that she's gaining on me now.

The girl looks so innocent—barely older than a teenager. She looks like a college student out for a day trip to the mall. Nobody would ever suspect her.

I look back in front of me, just in time to collide with somebody else. Hands on my shoulders steady me for a moment before I am spun around.

Sander, I realize.

I know that seeing him means that I am safe, but I would feel a lot better if Hunter was here.

Hunter must be freaking out right now. I never came out of the bathroom and he heard gunshots. He's probably running around like a crazy person, trying to find me.

Then I realize—my phone!

I'm about to put it up to my ear when Sander pulls out his own gun. The girl isn't expecting it because her eyes widen a fraction before Sander's gun goes off. It happens faster than I can even process. One second, the girl is reaching for her own gun, the next she is falling backward onto the hard floor. I never even hear the sound of a gun going off and Sander is putting his gun away before anybody even sees that he has one.

I tremble, my legs suddenly feeling very weak. I'm about to fall over when Sander grabs hold of me to stop me from falling.

"Hunter is on his way," Sander assures me.

I nod mindlessly.

Hunter—that is who I need to see. I'll feel better if I can just see his face and know that he's okay.

Everybody in the mall is still running around, screaming. Some people even step on the dead assassin as they race toward the exits. It's every man for himself.

Sander pulls me away from the crowd, toward a bench where nobody is sitting. Well, obviously they're not sitting. They're all running. He tugs on my arm to get me to sit down. My legs feel like noodles as I take a seat, trying to breathe.

"She tried to kill me," I mumble.

He nods. "Are you okay?"

Am I okay?

Physically, I suppose I'm okay.

But mentally? How will I ever be the same?

I rub my hands over my face, just trying to breathe.

A hand on my shoulder makes me flinch. I look up to see Hunter standing there. I jump up from the bench, throwing my arms around him. I realize that *this* is exactly what I needed—a hug from Hunter. He makes me feel better. Only he can make me feel safe.

He pulls back a little, looking at me. "Are you okay?"

"I am," I assure him when I see the panicked look in his eye.

Hunter embraces me again, squeezing me against him. "I was so scared, Cove. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

His words are sweet and make me realize just how much Hunter does care. This is more than just an assignment for him. We've truly become friends and he has grown to care about me.

I relax into his embrace, finally feeling safe. It's not because the assassin is dead, but it's because Hunter is here. I know Hunter will protect me.

“I hate to break up this little love fest.” Sander scoots closer to us. “But unless we want to talk to the cops, we should probably get out of here.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t we talk to the cops?”

Hunter shakes his head. “Too much paperwork. I’d rather not.”

Paperwork?

“Spies have paperwork?” I ask.

Hunter laughs, putting his arm around me. He pushes me toward the exit, Sander following close behind us.

“Hunter, you know that the spy thing is supposed to be a secret, right?”

Hunter looks over his shoulder. “Like you didn’t tell Phoenix?”

Sander doesn’t respond to that.

My phone is vibrating in my pocket and I pull it out, panicking a little when I see Harper’s name on my phone. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to act like nothing happened. Though, I suppose I don’t have to act. She probably knows there was an active shooter in the mall—what she doesn’t know is the shooter was after me.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Cove, oh thank God you’re okay!” She nearly shouts through the phone. “I was so worried. When Hunter heard the gunshot, he took off after you. It was so heroic. Is he there with you? Is everybody okay?”

“We’re all okay,” I assure her, my voice sounding shaky even to my own ears. “That was scary.”

Hunter grabs the phone from me. “Harper, where are you?” He pauses, listening to her answer. “Meet us at the car as fast as you can.”

He abruptly ends the call and hands me back my phone.

“You know that we have a lot to talk about, right?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

He nods. “I know.”

But for now... being safe is enough.

## The truth.

We drop Harper off at the dorms and Sander goes with us to the cabin, where his car is parked. He leaves pretty soon after we get there. I’m pretty sure his girlfriend, Phoenix, is pretty freaked out about everything that happened today. I can’t blame her—I’d be freaked out if Hunter went through that without me. Not that Hunter is my boyfriend, not even close.

Hunter has some explaining to do—first, I need to know why he’s been acting so shady lately. And second, I need to know why somebody chased me through the mall with a gun. I thought I was taken off the hitman list.

Clearly, I was mistaken.

I sit down on the couch beside Hunter, who has taken a sudden interest in his phone. I glance at his screen to see that it’s black. He’s not even looking at anything. He’s just procrastinating whatever he’s about to tell me.

I put a hand over his phone, trying to get his attention. He hesitantly glances up.

“Ready to talk?” I ask.

He sighs. “Not really.”

“That bad?” I chew on the side of my lip anxiously.

He nods. “Maybe even worse than bad.”

I suck in a sharp breath at his admission, my heart racing. “Tell me, Hunter. I need to know.”

His eyes meet mine and he licks his lips. “Trouble, it’s not good.”

“Not good?” I ask, hoping he continues.

He doesn’t say anything.

I clear my throat. “Maybe... is my name back on the hitman websites?”

“Yes,” he nods slowly. “But there is more.”

“More?” I rub a hand at the base of my throat. Whatever he’s about to say is not good.

What could possibly be *worse* than my name being back on the hitman database?

He takes a deep breath, grabbing onto my hand. “Cove, this is probably going to be hard to hear. It’s not the fact that your name is back up on the website that has me worried. It’s the fact that the price of your hit has increased from half a million dollars to one million dollars.”

My ears begin to ring at his confession.

Surely I misunderstood him, right?

“Who would pay a million dollars to kill me?” I shake my head back and forth. “It’s... weird, right? I’m nobody. I’m just Cove.”

He squeezes my hand. “I don’t know why anybody would want to kill you, but that’s what I’m trying to figure out. My team and I are working hard to find out who put out the hit. We’ve been looking into everybody in your family, but so far, everybody is pretty clean, at least when it comes to you. Your stepdad has some shady business deals, but we’re not here to bust him.”

Wouldn’t that be something—if William Bradbury the Third got busted for his shady business deals? It would be the scandal of the century.

“If he’s doing something bad, he probably should be busted,” I say.

Hunter grins. “I thought you’d say that. And he will pay, but not until you graduate from high school. Whatever happens to him now affects you. After you’ve graduated high school, there might be a letter sent to the FBI about him with a lot of proof.”

I laugh but abruptly stop.

Sure, I’m happy that my stepfather is going to have to pay for his crimes, but how can I laugh after what Hunter told me?

“Somebody wants me dead *really* bad.” Tears press against the back of my eyes as I say it.

Half a million dollars was bad enough, but upping the price? It makes my chest ache.

What did I do to deserve this?

“I’m sorry, Cove.” Hunter puts his arm around me and squeezes me against him.

His embrace is more comforting than it should be. I try to tell myself that it’s just comforting because he’s my bodyguard. He’s saved my life more times than I can count. But I can’t fool myself. I know it’s more than that.

“It’s okay.” I chew on my lip harder, trying to distract myself.

“It’s not okay,” Hunter says. “But it will be. I will take care of you, no matter what. Even if I have to take you away from this school and hide you away, I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

My heart swells at his words.

“Until then, you have to live, Cove.” He pulls back, looking me in the eye. “Enjoy these moments—enjoy homecoming and Spirit Week. Enjoy going out on dates and the little things that make life worth living.”

My eyes widen. “Hunter, I *am* trying. The one date I went out on, I almost got killed. And let’s not forget what happened

today when we went dress shopping. Every time I do something normal, somebody tries to murder me.”

“You still have to try,” he says. “I’ll always be there to protect you.”

I nod, knowing he’s right.

“Why don’t you text Griffin and see if he wants to hang out tonight?” Hunter asks. “He’s already made his interest clear by asking you to homecoming. It might do you some good to get out and get your mind off everything.”

I hesitate. “I don’t know.”

Who I really want to go to homecoming with doesn’t like me like that. But I can’t explain that to Hunter seeing as *he* is the one I really want to go with.

Maybe I really *should* ask Griffin to hang out. I should try with him. But if I did, it wouldn’t really be fair to Griffin. My heart already belongs to somebody else. I don’t want to lead him on.

My phone chimes, so I glance down and see a text from Griffin. I look back up and see Hunter smirk as he looks at his own phone.

I guess the choice was made for me.

I roll my eyes at Hunter. “It’s not at all annoying that you get all of my texts.”

“Shut up and text him back,” Hunter teases.

I stick my tongue out before unlocking my phone.

GRIFFIN: *Are you up to hanging out tonight?*

Am I up to it?

Not really, no.

I was chased through the mall today by a girl with a gun. But Hunter is right. I do need to keep living. I also do need to keep my homecoming date because the guy I like doesn't feel the same about me.

ME: *Yes, please.*

He replies right away.

GRIFFIN: *Meet me at East Raven campus around 8? At the docks?*

I look up at Hunter. "Do you know where the docks at East Raven are?"

"Yeah," he answers.

"Thanks," I say, looking back at my phone.

ME: *I'll be there.*

GRIFFIN: *Great! Can't wait to see you! :)*

"He can't wait to see you," Hunter repeats.

Once again, I roll my eyes at him. "You're annoying."

"And you love me."

I don't know about *that*.

But I do like him more than I should.

Boys are complicated.



## It would suck.

As we make our way to the East Raven Academy campus, I can't help but think how easy it is to sneak off West Raven campus. Shouldn't this be harder? Shouldn't our security be better? Then again, maybe I feel that way because I've been nearly killed more times than I care to think about while at this school, though it's not the academy's fault.

Hunter paces beside me as we sneak across the two lane road and over a fence onto the East Raven side of the school. Part of me wonders what Griffin will think when he sees I've brought Hunter with me, but I really have no excuse for it. Hunter *has* to come with me.

I chew on my lip as we make our way toward where Griffin asked me to meet him.

"You okay?" Hunter nudges me with his elbow.

I nod. "Just thinking."

"That can't be good," he teases. "It's never good when a girl starts thinking."

"Truthfully, I'm wondering what Griffin is going to think when he sees that I've brought you with me." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

"Ah," he says, but doesn't offer me any advice or words of encouragement or advice.

I dunk under a tree limb, wondering how much further we have to go.

My stomach is in knots and my heart is racing—not because I'm seeing Griffin, but because I really don't have an excuse for why Hunter is with me. It's not like I can tell Griffin the truth—that Hunter is my bodyguard and that somebody is trying to kill me. Maybe I would tell him if I had stronger feelings for him. If only I didn't have feelings for somebody who is completely and utterly wrong for me.

I'm obviously really bad at picking out guys—first, I had a crush on Preston Lomax, and that ended in the worst possible way. And now, I have a crush on Hunter Duran. At least I know Hunter isn't going to try and kill me, but I have a feeling he will break my heart into a million tiny pieces before this is all over. It's inevitable.

At this rate, I'm never going to have a boyfriend.

Hunter points his finger ahead. "That dock is where we're going."

I look to where he's pointing and I see the lake, the same lake that attaches to our campus. The dock looks old but well maintained. Griffin is standing at the beginning of the dock with his hands in his pockets. He's glancing around, like he's looking for me. And when he sees me coming, his entire face lights up.

I swallow hard, anxiety building in my stomach.

He's grinning because he likes me. And I know, without a doubt, that Griffin likes me way more than I like him. I feel so guilty, like I'm leading him on. The only problem is, I don't know what to do about it.

Griffin glances beside me and frowns as he realizes that I am not alone. He thinks I brought my best friend with me because I'm into him, but little does he know that Hunter is literally here to protect me.

"I'll just wait here," Hunter says, coming to a stop.

I turn to him and see that his brows are furrowed. I imagine he just now noticed Griffin's reaction to him.

I lift up a hand to wave at Hunter. "Wish me luck."

Because I think I'm going to need it.

I walk closer to the dock and Griffin meets me halfway, his hands still stuffed in the front pockets of his jeans.

Griffin's hair is wet, like he just got out of the shower, and he smells good—like soap or cologne. I wonder if he got

cleaned up for me, but the thought only adds to my guilt.

“Hey,” I say, hoping that he doesn’t bring up the guy who is most likely staring at us right now. I’m sure he’ll critique me later on everything I did and give me pointers on how to pick up guys—that’s just Hunter.

Griffin nods his head behind me. “What’s with the bodyguard?”

I flinch, thinking Griffin *knows*. But then I realize... he’s just being sarcastic when he called Hunter my bodyguard.

I push a piece of hair behind my ear, shrugging one shoulder. “Uh, he just wanted to make sure I made it here safely.” I lick my lips, trying to stall so I can come up with an excuse. “I’m, uh, scared of the dark?” I raise my voice at the end, making it sound more like a question than a statement.

I’m not scared of the dark at all, not since I was probably five years old. It’s not best to lie to a guy you’re trying to start dating, but I’m not sure what else to do. It’s not like I can tell him the truth about Hunter.

Griffin’s brows scrunch together. “Huh.”

I fold my hands behind my back. “But he’s not important.”

He looks at me. “Hunter knows that you’re just friends, right?”

I nod enthusiastically. “Trust me, Hunter knows. He’s just a good friend. He doesn’t like me like *that*.”

Nope. I’m the one pathetically pining away over him, but he’s clueless about the truth.

Griffin hmm’s, but he doesn’t comment any further on it. I’m really hoping that this isn’t going to be a huge issue. I just want to hang out with Griffin and try to forget that Hunter is watching us.

“I’m really glad you asked me to hang out.” I rock onto the tips of my toes, looking at Griffin through my lashes. “I’m also really excited about homecoming.”

Eh, maybe excited is an overstatement. But I just want to distract Griffin.

He grins, grabbing my hand. “Come on.”

Griffin pulls me toward the end of the dock. I let him lead me over.

My stomach is in knots, but now it’s because I’m in my own head. The last time a guy pulled me off like this, he wanted to kill me. And I *know* Griffin is nothing like Preston, but the thought still enters my head. Maybe I’m still on edge from today. I *did* get chased by somebody with a gun. All I want is to head back home and hang out with Hunter. But that is dangerous for my heart. This is where I need to be.

At the end of the dock, we sit down, our feet dangling over the water. If I were a little bit taller, I could put my feet in the water, but they don’t quite reach. Griffin, who is taller, takes off his shoes.

I chew on the side of my lip. “I hope you aren’t mad at me for bringing Hunter. He insisted, really.”

Griffin shrugs. “It’s a little weird. Are you sure he doesn’t have a crush on you?”

I giggle, not knowing what else to do. I just feel awkward. “I’m absolutely sure that Hunter’s feelings for me are completely platonic.”

My feelings for him on the other hand... that’s complicated.

“A guy doesn’t walk you through the woods early on a Saturday night to meet up with another guy unless he’s head over heels, Cove. That’s not how it works.” Griffin adjusts his body so that he’s angled toward me. “And I guess the question is, how do *you* feel about *him*?”

I swallow hard, hoping he can’t read the lie I’m about to tell on my face. “Hunter is just a friend to me. You have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Griffin studies my face. “I’m not sure if I believe you, but if you both had feelings for one another, you’d probably be together. So maybe you’re right.”

I nod, hoping he’ll believe it. “He’s not my type anyway.”

Such a lie.

But Griffin doesn’t need to know about the massive crush I have on my bodyguard. Nobody does.

Griffin chuckles, shaking his head. “Well, that’s a relief then. Because it would suck to have a crush on a girl who had already given her heart to somebody else.”

My heart clenches with guilt, but I force myself to fight. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

Although it is a lie, my heart *does* belong to somebody else, at least I know that he won’t have to worry about me breaking things off with him for Hunter. Hunter doesn’t feel the same way as me. He never will.

Griffin’s grin widens at my promise to him.

I bite my lip to hide my frown. I don’t want him to know the truth—that I’m desperately head over heels for a guy who will never feel the same.

Truly, I am pathetic.

**Sunday, October 11**

**Future hubby.**

I did not sleep well last night.

Mostly, I was up thinking about what Griffin said to me—about how it would suck if my heart belonged to somebody else.

It makes me wonder if I should break things off with him. I know we aren't anything yet. We're just friends who are going to homecoming together. But I *know* Griffin wants more. And I know that we're talking and getting to know one another in more than friendly terms.

I'm leading him on.

But is it considered 'leading on' if I fully plan on dating him?

Still, I only plan on dating him to get over my crush on Hunter.

I sigh, staring up at the ceiling in my bedroom.

It's after nine in the morning and I have yet to leave my bed. Mostly because I don't want to face Hunter. He's so good at reading people—at reading *me*. I worry if I go into the other room that he'll be able to know exactly what I'm thinking by the look on my face. And the last thing I want is for him to know about my massive crush on him.

This is going to be a problem, I can already tell. Every single day it gets a little bit harder.

My phone chimes from beside me, so I glance over and see a text from Harper. It goes off a few more times, which makes me grin. She never just sends one text ever.

I sit up, propping my back up on some pillows.

Harper knows exactly what I need—a distraction from Hunter Duran.

I unlock my phone and begin to read her text.

HARPER: *Are you sure you should go to homecoming with Griffin?*

HARPER: *Because, girl... the way Hunter looked at you when he saw you in your homecoming dress!*

HARPER: *He's completely head over heels for you.*

HARPER: *And I see the way you look at him...*

HARPER: *Griffin is nice and hot. But Hunter... he's protective. And he's so in love with you. The kind of love you only get once in a lifetime.*

I groan, covering my face with my hands.

Why did Harper have to say *that* of all things?

I wanted a distraction, but of course I'm not getting one. Harper is just going to shove in my face the very thing I want to ignore. And the worst part is, Hunter got that text too.

*I see the way you look at him.*

She is right. I *do* look at him like that, even though I try desperately hard not to. And it's probably obvious to him. He probably feels sorry for me. Maybe that's why he's pushing me so hard to date Griffin because he thinks that dating Griffin will help me get over my crush on him.

I'm actually pathetic.

ME: *I'm going to homecoming with Griffin, Harp. Sorry to shatter your dreams of being my maid of honor, but I'm seventeen. I'm not looking for true love. I just want a date to homecoming. That is it.*

Her response is immediate.

HARPER: *Fine. But when you guys FINALLY get together, I'm going to give the best maid of honor speech ever about how I always knew you belonged together.*

HARPER: *You should come over. We can practice doing hair for homecoming. I have so many ideas! You're so lucky your hair is long!*

I want to tell her that her hair would be long too if she didn't cut it off.

Harper is always experimenting with her hair. When school started, she had fire red hair that went just below her shoulders. Now, she has baby pink hair that barely goes below her chin. I miss the fire red hair, but the softer color suits her. She's a natural blonde, so the color matches her skin much better. She couldn't pull off the red, but I wouldn't tell her *that*.

My phone goes off again and I look down, expecting to see a text from Harper. Instead, it's Hunter.

HUNTER: *You cannot go hang out in her dorm. Not unless I go too.*

I roll my eyes.

Of course.

I text Hunter.



ME: *Come on. You never let me have a break from you. Please let me hang out with my friend. You can sit outside the dorm or something.*

HUNTER: *I'm not sitting outside the dorm for a few hours while you hang out with your friend. Besides, there is a window in her dorm and I don't have anybody else to help watch you today.*

I frown, realizing that I won't be talking Hunter into it.

I pull up the conversation with Harper.

ME: *Sorry. I can't come hang out today. :(*

HARPER: *Why not?*

Because Hunter is overprotective.

Okay, fine. He's overprotective for a reason. But I still don't like it.

ME: *Hunter is forcing me to hang out with him. He's such a butthead.*

It's not the nicest thing I've ever said, but I want Hunter to know I'm mad at him.

Honestly, he shouldn't be reading my texts anyway. It's a complete invasion of privacy.

HARPER: :) :) :) :)

HARPER: *Maybe you should make your move.*

HARPER: *KISS HIM! KISS HIM! KISS HIM!*

My cheeks grows warm as I read her text.

It's so much worse knowing that Hunter is also reading this.

ME: *I'd rather eat dirt.*

HARPER: *Whatever, liar.*

HARPER: *Have fun with your future hubby. Kisses!*

I roll my eyes, tossing my phone onto the bed next to me.

I can't believe that this is my life. How embarrassing.

There is a knock on the door. "Come on, future wifey. Breakfast is ready."

Hunter Duran is the bane of my existence.

Still, my heart races when he calls me 'future wifey.' The girl who marries him is going to be one lucky woman. Too bad it isn't going to be me.

## Monday, October 12

### Pajama day.

Today is day one of Spirit Week at West Raven Academy. Normally, I would ignore such silliness, but Harper won't let me. She's forcing me to participate and even bought me a few outfits for the occasion.

Today's Spirit Week theme is pajamas—a fact that I'm not upset about. At my old school, they always had pajama day too. I'm pretty sure that the theme was picked just so the teachers could wear pajamas to school.

Looking in the mirror at myself, I feel a little silly.

I put my hair into space buns this morning. I would never sleep with my hair like this, but it looks cute with my pajamas at least. My 'pajamas' are just a pair of leggings and an oversized t-shirt that I've tied up. I still wear my sneakers, like I always do.

When I come out of my room, I find Hunter in the kitchen. He's wearing his school uniform and he's leaned up against the island, eating a bowl of cereal. He looks up when he sees me, his eyebrow raising.

“You got a shower only to put back on your pajamas?”

“It seems silly when you put it like that.” I nod toward his bowl. “You realize we're eating breakfast at school, right?”

It's a much better breakfast than cereal—we get all the bacon we want.

“I’ll eat then too.” He shoves another bite in his mouth.

Of course he’ll eat again.

I swear, Hunter can eat anything he wants and never gain a pound. Though, to be fair, lately I have been losing weight despite the fact that I haven’t changed my diet. If anything, I’ve been eating more than usual. I think it’s all the intense workouts that Hunter has me doing.

“Where are your pajamas?” I slide onto the barstool beside Hunter.

“I don’t wear pajamas,” he says.

I raise an eyebrow. “You don’t wear pajamas? Everybody wears pajamas.”

Hunter smirks. “I sleep naked.”

My face grows warm and I look away. “Oh.”

He chuckles. “Trouble, you’re adorable, you know that?”

Yeah, that’s definitely not helping my warm cheeks.

“Especially with your hair like that.” He pokes at one of my buns. “You usually just wear your hair down, which I like too.”

I shrug. “I’m not good at being a girl, which I figured you knew after the whole shopping trip.”

He furrows his brows. “Yeah, I can’t say I’ve ever met a girl who doesn’t like shopping.”

“Have you had a lot of girlfriends?” I ask.

He fully turns his attention from his bowl toward me. “You’re asking me about my exes?”

I nod.

“It’s a short conversation, Trouble. I’ve never had a girlfriend,” he admits. “There was this one girl I liked for a short time, but it didn’t work out.”

“Why not?” I lean my elbows on the bar, looking at him.

“Because she hit on my older brother.”

My eyes widen. “Seriously?”

“We were only talking, so it’s a good thing I figured it out early on,” he says, shrugging like it’s not a big deal.

“I didn’t even know you had a brother.” I frown. “What’s his name?”

“Jaxon. He’s got a girlfriend, so he wouldn’t be interested in you. Plus, you’re a little young for him.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t want to date your brother. The girl who flirted with your brother was stupid.”

Who would pass up the opportunity to date Hunter? I don’t know his brother, but there is no way that Jaxon holds a candle to Hunter. Hunter is the best looking guy I’ve ever met. Looks aside, he’s also a good guy. A guy like him is rare.

“You haven’t met my brother,” Hunter says. “You might like him more than me.”

“Who said I like you?” I joke.

His lips turn up. “Trouble, what’s not to like?”

He’s not wrong about that.

I put my hands on my hips. “You’re so cocky.”

He shrugs. “If you’ve got it, you’ve got it.”

I shake my head.

Hunter rinses his bowl out in the sink. And even I can appreciate how good he looks in his school uniform. No wonder all the girls at school have a crush on him. Too bad he won’t give them the time of day. I’m sure they, like Harper, think it’s because of me that he’s not interested. I wonder how they don’t see it. Obviously Hunter doesn’t look like the other boys in this school. He’s older.

I think about Sander. He goes to East Raven. I wonder how he passes as a high school student. He looks older too. But then again, I guess people see what they want them to see.

“So why does Sander go to East Raven? Is it because of me?” I ask.

Hunter turns toward me. “No. He got an assignment there last year. But then he fell in love with the girl he was protecting, so he decided to stay until she graduates high school. I’m pretty sure he’d follow her wherever she wanted to go. Lucky for him, she feels the same. So she’s going to be traveling with him on jobs.”

“That’s really sweet.” I want that kind of love. The all-consuming kind that you read about in books or see in movies. I don’t know if it exists in real life, but if it does, I’m going to find it.

“Yeah, they are kind of cute together,” he admits. “But if you tell him I said that, I will deny it.”

Part of me wants to ask Hunter about the girl that he almost dated. I want to know what she looked like—was she blonde? Brunette? What kind of girl is he attracted to? But I’m scared of his answer. What if his type is something completely opposite from what I am? What if he likes girly girls who fix their hair and wear makeup? What if he is only into blondes? And more than that, what if I ask these questions and he realizes that I am into him? That would be incredibly embarrassing.

“What is Sander’s girlfriend like?” I ask.

Hunter rubs a hand at the back of his neck. “Uh, Phoenix? She’s nice.”

“Is she pretty?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why? Are you into Sander? Because I can promise you, he won’t leave his girlfriend.”

I roll my eyes. “Sander isn’t my type. I’m just curious about her. I don’t like guys who are already in a relationship. I’m not like *that*.”

I thought that much would be obvious.

“I don’t pay that much attention to her,” Hunter says. “She has brown hair and she always wears hoodies. I don’t even know what color her eyes are, to be honest. Maybe blue or green.”

Huh.

I close my eyes. “What color are my eyes?”

“Brown.”

I open them again.

“I notice everything about you, Trouble.”

My heart skips a beat.

“You’re my job,” he continues.

I swallow the knot in my throat.

Of course that’s why he notices everything about me—because I’m his ‘job.’ If it weren’t for this assignment, he would never look twice at me.

“Are you ready to head out?” Hunter asks, completely oblivious to the fact that he just crushed my heart.

“Yeah.” My words barely come out as a whisper, so I clear my throat. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Hunter slings his arm around me as we head out the door, but I can’t even grin at his playfulness. My heart feels heavy.

Why do I have to have a crush on a guy who clearly doesn’t like me back? Why can’t I just get over him?

Griffin—I should focus on Griffin. He likes me. He wants to take me to homecoming and I really think he wants to date me. He wouldn’t break my heart, not like Hunter does. But every time I close my eyes, I don’t see Griffin. I see Hunter. Hunter owns my heart. It wouldn’t be fair to lead Griffin on like that.

“You really do look cute today, Trouble,” Hunter says, as he opens the passenger side door of the car for me.

“Thanks.” I dunk my head as I get inside, certain that my cheeks are red.

Hunter winks at me before shutting the door, making my cheeks grow even warmer.

I’m not going to survive my senior year and it has nothing to do with the hit on my life and everything to do with Hunter Duran.

## My next ex-boyfriend.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” Harper beams as she sits down across from me.

I raise an eyebrow, looking at my friend. I’m used to her being hyper, but to be this excited on a *Monday*? Something is up. Unless maybe she’s very excited about Spirit Week, which I doubt.

“Did you put Red Bull in your coffee again, Harpy?” Hunter eyes my pink haired friend.

“Ha ha.” Harper drums her fingers on the table. “Can’t a girl just be happy without an ulterior motive? Maybe I’m just really happy because I’m wearing pajamas. Pink looks good on me.”

She tugs at her top—she’s wearing Hello Kitty pajamas. I must say, they match well with her currently pink hair.

I like pink as much as the next girl, but Harper today is a bit much for my taste. Then again, that’s why we’re friends. She’s the crazy adventurous one and I’m the one that talks her out of doing stupid things. At least, I *try* to talk her out of doing stupid things. Nobody really talks her out of anything she sets her mind to.

“It’s a boy, right?” Hunter turns to me. “Did I miss that Harper got a new boyfriend?”



I shrug.

If Hunter missed it, so did I.

“Why do I have to have a boyfriend to be happy?” Harper asks, rolling her eyes.

Before either of us can answer her question, a tray goes down beside her. I glance over and see a boy sitting down. I recognize him from the football team. I’m pretty sure the guy was friends with her last boyfriend, Finley.

This guy is cute—probably one of the nicer looking guys at our school. I can’t remember what his name is, I’ve never bothered to learn the names of the popular boys.

“You must be Harper’s new boyfriend,” I say to the guy. “I’m Cove, the best friend.”

The guy holds out his hand. “I know who you are. I’m Reed.”

I shake his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Harper groans. “Cove, we’re just friends.”

I don’t believe her.

Reed holds out his hand to Hunter.

“I’m Hunter.” Hunter introduces himself as he shakes hands with Reed.

“And you’re Cove’s boyfriend?” Reed asks.

Harper chuckles.

I glare at her.

“No,” Hunter answers, slipping an arm around me. “We’re just friends.”

“You’re just friends like Reed and I are just friends.” Harper snorts, turning to Reed. “They’re basically in love with one another, but neither wants to admit it.”

Reed turns to me. “Half the guys on the football team are bummed because they think you’re dating Hunter. When I tell

them you're single, a lot of guys are probably going to approach you."

No.

That would be *awful*.

Harper bursts out laughing. "Oh, my gosh, Coco! The look on your face. You look horrified."

"Because I *am* horrified." I groan, hiding my face in my hands.

The last guy I almost dated tried to kill me. The last thing I want is a bunch of guys asking me out.

"Just let them think she's dating me," Hunter says.

"Thank you." My shoulders sag in relief. Not that I want people to think Hunter and I are dating, but I also don't want a bunch of guys asking me out.

Reed looks between Hunter and me. "Are you sure you guys aren't dating?"

I scoot over, putting a little space between Hunter and me. "I'm absolutely certain."

Is it clear to *everybody* that I have feelings for Hunter? This is worse than I thought. Clearly, I am not good at hiding my feelings. I really have got to work on my poker face or Hunter is going to figure it out.

"Yo, Reed!" Somebody shouts from a nearby table.

Reed turns, starting a conversation with a guy about the upcoming football game.

I look at Harper, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugs, whispering to me. "My next ex-boyfriend."

Reed turns away from his friend, toward Harper. "Hey, babe, I'm going to go sit with the guys."

She waves at him with one finger. "Have fun."

He kisses her on the cheek before jumping up from the table, grabbing his food, and running off toward the nearby table.

I wrinkle my nose. “Babe?”

She shrugs. “We’re talking.”

I give her a pointed look. “He kissed you on the cheek in the cafeteria. A guy doesn’t do that unless he wants to make his intentions clear.”

Harper’s cheeks turn as pink as her hair. “I just got out of a relationship. It’s too soon to jump into another one.”

“It was a *one week* relationship,” I remind her. “You and Finley barely dated long enough for you to call him your boyfriend. And it’s clear you like Reed.”

“I can’t just jump into another relationship right away.” She looks at Hunter. “You know dating rules, right? I have to wait a little while first.”

Hunter shrugs. “I’ve never had a girlfriend, but I’m pretty sure there isn’t really a time limit on these things, especially when your last relationship only lasted a week.”

I bite my lip to keep from grinning.

“Okay, fine.” Harper throws her hands up in defeat. “I’m scared to commit. There, I said it.”

I furrow my brows. “What do you mean you’re scared to commit?”

“Because.” She frowns. “I was super into Finley. I thought it was love at first sight and that we’d be together forever. Then we started dating. And within two days after we decided to commit to one another, it grew stale and boring. I just don’t want that to happen with Reed. Because what I felt for Finley is nothing in comparison to Reed.”

Hunter laughs, so I elbow him in the gut, glaring at him. I turn my attention back to Harper. “You can’t let what happened with Finley scare you off from ever committing

again. If you like Reed more, things aren't going to get boring like that."

"What Trouble said." Hunter leans forward. "Finley was exciting because he was your first real boyfriend. He was fun because he paid attention to you. It wasn't real attraction. You like Reed and he likes you. What more is there to think about? Date him already."

Harper tilts her head to the side. "Huh, maybe you're right. Finley *was* the first guy to ever really show interest in me."

"Kind of like how Cove was obsessed with Preston for a while," Hunter says. "Not because she liked him, but because the guy wouldn't leave her alone."

I roll my eyes. "I thought Preston was hot until I really talked to him. Clearly I've matured since then."

Hunter snorts.

"Should we talk about the dead like that?" Harper asks.

I chew on my lip, almost forgetting that Harper doesn't know.

The entire school thinks that Preston Lomax is dead. They think he died in a car accident a few weeks ago, but Hunter and I know the truth. When Preston tried to kill me, Hunter had him taken to a high security prison in Switzerland. At this point, I'm sure he'd rather be dead.

"Dead or alive, the guy was a womanizer." I raise an eyebrow, daring her to argue.

Harper grins. "If he were alive, he'd probably like hearing you call him a womanizer."

She's probably right about that.

What made me think crushing on a guy who convinced five cheerleaders to share him as their date at a dance was a good idea? Clearly, I am as naive and stupid as Hunter most likely thinks I am.

“Harper, maybe you can pick out my next crush. Because, clearly I’m not good at picking guys,” I say.

She puts a hand to her chest. “What makes you think I’m good at picking guys? Or are you forgetting my last boyfriend had that title for a week? And I would’ve dumped him sooner but we didn’t talk for, like, four days.”

How did I miss out on all that? I feel like a bad friend. Then I realize I probably missed it because Preston Lomax tried to kill me and I’ve been dealing with the stress of having a hit out on my life.

Despite that, I really should try to be a better friend.

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out between you and Finley,” I tell her earnestly. “But Reed seems like a really nice guy. He’s also way hotter than Finely.”

“Right?” She beams at me. “Now we just need to get you a boyfriend.” She pauses, looking at Hunter. “Unless you’re sure that you don’t want to date Hunter.”

I groan covering my face with my hands. “I don’t want a boyfriend.”

Because if I did have a boyfriend, how could I explain Hunter to him?

“She’s already sort of dating Griffin,” Hunter says.

Harper gives me a curt nod. “Good. Griffin is hot.”

“Preston was hot too,” I remind her.

She waves a hand. “But Preston was a jerk. Griffin is nice. Have you seen the guy with his little sister?”

I swallow hard, realizing Griffin *is* nice. Too nice for me.

“I’ve decided I’m going to be single until I’m thirty,” I say.

Or until I get over Hunter.

But I won’t be saying *that* out loud.

## A million dollars sounds good.

Before heading to my afternoon lineup of classes, I go to my locker to change out my books.

Most of the students don't use the lockers, they'll just head to their dorms to change out their books. But the cabin is too far away for me to just walk there between classes.

Hunter paces behind me. His locker is right beside mine, and I'm sure that's not a coincidence.

My cheeks are still warm from my conversation with Harper in the dining hall.

I know that Hunter realizes why everybody thinks we're together—it's because we are together all the time. But I still feel like it's obvious to everybody, including him, that I am super into him. It's embarrassing. I just wish I could get over this stupid crush I have on him.

I push the password in on my locker and it swings open. When it does, a paper falls out onto the floor. I ignore it as I grab my books and slam my locker shut. Bending over, I pick up the paper.

"What did your locker do to you?" Hunter asks, shutting his own locker softly.

I shrug. "I am just frustrated today, I guess."

He smirks. "Your friend is certainly outspoken."

She really is. I just wish she wouldn't tease me so much about Hunter. Maybe because it hits a little close to home. And I can't tell her the truth, though I wish I could.

Hunter and I pace beside one another as we head to our next class. As we walk into the room, I grab the paper that fell out of my locker, about to toss it in the trash. I pause as I see my name at the top. I look at the unfamiliar handwriting.

*Cove,*

*A million dollars sounds pretty good right about now.*

My heart races as I read the words.

Whoever this person is, *they know*. And not only do they know about the hit, but they also know about the price increase of the hit.

I look up, seeing Hunter standing by his desk, waiting for me. He glances toward me and I freeze, not knowing what to do. He must see something on my face because he rushes over to me. The final bell rings, but Hunter doesn't care. He just grabs my wrist and pulls me into the hallway, ignoring the teacher that is yelling after us.

Hunter pulls me into a nearby classroom that is unoccupied and shuts the door, locking it behind us.

“What is wrong?” he demands.

I back up slightly, away from him, but my back hits the door. I swallow hard, holding up the piece of paper. He takes it from me, his face paling as he reads the words.

“Where was this?” he asks.

“My locker.” I lick my lips, which are suddenly dry. “It fell out when I opened my locker. I thought it was just garbage. I was going to throw it away when I noticed there was something written on it.”

Hunter takes a deep breath, looking toward the ceiling. After a few seconds, his eyes land back on me. “Okay, we have to leave the school.”

I nod. “Okay, let's head back to the cabin. We can take the day off.”

“No. We need to leave campus,” he says.

But he doesn't explain. He just grabs onto my wrist and pulls me down the hallway, toward the exit. I know better than

to ask questions while we're in the hallway, but there are so many things I'm going to ask him the second we get somewhere private.

Once we head out the door, Hunter is vigilant, looking around as we walk toward the car. He also keeps me pulled closely against him. I try to ignore the butterflies that appear because of his touch—right now is *not* the time to be controlled by my hormones. Somebody wants to kill me.

As we get to the parking lot, Hunter pulls me to a stop. My heart races, wondering if he's seen something. Instead, he pulls out the keys to the car and pushes the remote start. I look over at him with a raised eyebrow, but he just leads me to the car. He opens the passenger side door for me, keeping his hand on the small of my back as I get in. As soon as he shuts my door, he races around the car and gets in his side. The second he's inside, he puts the car in drive and races out of the parking lot.

Okay, *now* I know why he always backs into the spot. I always thought it was a guy thing—Liam also likes to back his car in too. But Hunter does it in case we need to make a quick getaway.

I struggle to put on my seatbelt as he races toward the exit of the school. It's only half a mile from the school to the gate, and my heart races as I realize he's not slowing down for the gates.

At the last moment, the gate opens. We barely have enough room to make it through, but somehow we do.

“How?” I ask.

He holds up his phone. “My friend, Brett, made an app.”

Nice.

I need a friend like his.

“You know that's insane, right?” I ask, shaking my head.

“Your entire world is insane.”

He smirks. “Yeah, I guess it *would* seem that way to you.”



“To everybody,” I correct.

“I grew up in this world,” he says. “And everybody I know is in this world. So it’s not crazy to me. It’s just normal.”

I shake my head, not knowing what to say to that. I guess it would be normal if you’ve never known anything else. What is normal anyway? Normal definitely isn’t having a dad who is a rock star. Normal isn’t having a hit out on my life. But those things are *my* normal right now.

“Why did we leave campus?” I ask.

West Raven Academy is long gone in the rearview mirror and Hunter is headed the opposite way of the city.

Hunter’s knuckles turn white from gripping the steering wheel so tight. “Because somebody threatened you.”

I swallow hard. “Yeah, but couldn’t we have stayed in the cabin?”

“And risk them following us there? No.” He lets out a long breath. “I need to make sure that nobody knows where the cabin is. The best thing I can do is take us away from school for a little while.”

I frown. “How long is a little while?”

“Just for the night. We’ll go back in the morning, as long as it’s safe,” he reassures me.

I let out a sigh of relief. I don’t want to miss school any more than I have to. I don’t *want* this to control my life. Plus, I’m kind of liking Spirit Week.

My eyes widen as I look down. “Hunter, I’m wearing *pajamas*.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “That’s your own fault.”

I groan, sinking further into my seat.

Why is this my life?

This sucks.

“You look cute, even in pajamas.” He glances from the road to me.

My cheeks grow warm when he calls me ‘cute.’ Hunter does that a lot—says things to embarrass me. It’s almost like he does it on purpose.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Well, I guess do whatever you need to do to protect me.”

He hesitates. “About that—there is something else.”

I raise an eyebrow. “What?”

“I’m going to need your phone.” Hunter holds out a hand toward me.

I groan, reaching into my pocket. “Are you serious?”

“Yep.”

I put it in his hand, fully expecting him to power my phone down. What I don’t expect is for him to throw my cellphone from the moving car.

“Why did you do that?” I scream, looking back at my phone that is in pieces on the highway behind us. He does the same with his phone.

“Sorry.” He gives me a sad smile. “I’ll get you a new one before tomorrow.”

I cross my arms over my chest, sighing. “I guess I can go one day without my phone.”

Hunter laughs clearly not caring about my discomfort.

“How did I get stuck with such a cold-hearted bodyguard?”

“At least I’m fun to look at.”

He’s not wrong.

But I will definitely be keeping that thought to myself.

## Tuesday, October 13

### Superhero day.

We get back to campus early on Tuesday morning.

Hunter did replace my phone, as he promised. He even got me a newer model phone than I had previously. The one I had was a hand-me-down from Liam.

Since we stayed away from campus, I get the day off from training. I try my best to look disappointed by it, but I'm pretty sure Hunter knows. I'm not that good of an actress.

Training is important. I know that. It still doesn't make it fun. The intense training Hunter insists on is my idea of torture.

When we get back to the cabin, I quickly get ready for the day.

Today is day two of Spirit Week. As I'm getting ready, I'm glad that Harper forced me to participate. I thought it would be stupid, but it's kind of fun to wear something besides our usual school uniforms. I'm sick of plaid skirts.

It's superhero day, and I'm wondering if Hunter will participate. Something tells me he won't be participating in any of this week's festivities.

I put on a blue t-shirt with a red and yellow Superman logo on it. Harper gave me a red and blue tutu to wear over some leggings, and I tie my shirt up in the front. I put on a pair of red sneakers, which is what I normally wear anyway.

Pulling out my new phone, I snap a picture of myself in the mirror, sending it to Griffin. As soon as I hit send, I regret it. Not just because I feel silly for sending a picture of myself, but also because I remember that Hunter gets all of my texts. He's going to think I'm a silly girl for sending a guy pictures of myself.

My phone vibrates as Griffin responds with a picture of himself. It's a selfie, but I can see his green tie from his school uniform in the picture.

GRIFFIN: *I wish I were at WRA, just so I could stare at you all day. You look beautiful.*

I grin.

Okay, I feel a little less silly now, since Griffin thinks I look 'beautiful.'

Part of me wishes that he went to school here too. It would be nice to have classes with him, and maybe lunch. Maybe then I could get over my crush on Hunter. But then again, if Griffin were here, would he be able to tell that I have a crush on Hunter? I'm not a good actress and I'm pretty sure anybody can tell.

I sigh, backing away from my mirror.

I don't need to think about it anymore, and I definitely don't need to think about Hunter anymore. I just need to focus on other things. Like school. And surviving my senior year. And maybe dating Griffin.

Grabbing my messenger bag from the floor, I head into the living room. I find Hunter in the kitchen, which seems to be the usual. I swear, Hunter Duran can eat more than anybody I've ever met. I don't know where he puts it either because there isn't an ounce of fat on his body. He's all muscle—not that I've looked *that* closely.

Okay, that's a lie. I have looked. A lot.

As I guessed, Hunter is in his school uniform.

I put my hands on my hips as I approach him. “Where is your superhero costume?”

“Why dress like a superhero when I already am one?” He raises an eyebrow.

I roll my eyes.

He’s so arrogant.

But he’s also not wrong—I suppose Hunter *is* sort of a superhero. I won’t tell him that. He doesn’t need a bigger ego than he already has.

“Besides,” Hunter continues, “I would look lame next to you in whatever I wear. Because you’re beautiful.”

I narrow my eyes at him as I realize he’s quoting Griffin’s text. “I really hate that you read all of my texts.”

He grins, revealing his dimples. “He’s right though, you do look beautiful.”

My heart flutters at his words as I slip into a seat at the bar. “Uh, thanks.”

“I like your hair straight.” He cocks his head to the side. “How did you get it straight like that?”

I run my fingers through my hair. “A hair straightener.” I shake my head. “You really haven’t been around a lot of girls, huh?”

“No. Just Serenity, Blue, and Phoenix. And I don’t really notice their hair.” He shrugs. “Well, Blue has blue hair, that’s kind of hard to not notice.”

I lean my elbow on the counter, resting my head on my closed fist. “Who is Serenity?”

Hunter opens a cabinet and grabs out a package of Pop Tarts. “Uh, she’s the director of Spy School’s daughter. She’s on my team, kind of.”

“Kind of?” I glance at him curiously.

“We worked one case together. But I imagine her and her boyfriend will go off on their own team at some point.” He opens the package, getting out his pre-breakfast snack. “They’re sickeningly in love with one another. It’s kind of gross and sweet. I imagine as soon as he gets her father’s approval, he’ll ask her to marry him.”

I grin. “That’s really sweet.”

“You say that because you don’t have to be around them.” He stuffs half a Pop Tart in his mouth.

I wrinkle my nose. “It can’t be any worse than being around you on a daily basis.”

He ignores me.

“Things are changing on my team.” Hunter frowns.

“Changing how?”

He sighs. “Sander is in love with Phoenix. And I get the feeling he’s going to be leaving Spy School soon. Maybe he’ll try and have a normal life. And Brett and Blue are some of the best hackers Spy School has. They’re always busy. I imagine they’ll be too busy for the rest of us soon. And you already know Serenity and Bass are disgustingly in love. I imagine they’ll be on a couple team soon, getting married and having babies. It’s just not the same as it used to be.”

“Sander is allowed to leave Spy School?” My eyes widen. “I thought it would be like the mafia—once you’re in, there is no way out.”

Hunter snorts. “No. There is always a choice. Many people retire from Spy School. I think Sander is just worried about turning out like his parents. He’s in love. Love does weird things to people.”

I suppose it does.

“That is why I’m never going to fall in love.” He stuffs the rest of his Pop Tart in his mouth.

His one sentence breaks my heart.

Hunter will never fall in love with me. I need to accept it and I need to move on.

So why won't my heart listen?

In the end, when all of this is over, I am going to have a shattered heart. I'll be left missing this boy like crazy. And he won't even care about me. He'll just be moving on to his next mission, focusing his attention fully on that.

Hunter nudges me with his elbow. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine." I chew on my lip, wishing that things were different.

"We should head out. I'm starving." He pats his flat stomach.

I roll my eyes. "Your body is a garbage disposal."

He beams. "Thanks, Trouble."

Of course he would take that as a compliment.

I get up from the stool and Hunter takes my bag from me, putting it on his own shoulder. He slips his arm around me, walking me toward the door.

"If you want, I can get you transferred to East Raven so you can be with your boyfriend."

"Griffin isn't my boyfriend. And even if he were, I wouldn't transfer schools for a boy. I wouldn't leave Harper, she's my friend. Or Liam. Griffin is just... a boy in high school that I'll forget by the time I'm twenty."

Does Hunter really think so little of me? Does he think I'm *that* boy crazy?

"It was just an offer." He opens the passenger side door for me. "I figured you'd say no."

I get into the car, Hunter shutting it behind me.

I really wish I liked Griffin—then things would be simple. Or as simple as it could be considering I have a hit on my life.

But *no*. Of course I had to fall for stupid Hunter Duran.

Life is way too complicated.

## Playing hard to get.

Hunter is closer than ever today, and that is saying something considering he never leaves my side. Earlier, he tried to go into the bathroom with me. I compromised by letting him check the bathroom to make sure nobody with a gun was waiting inside for me. He also stood outside the door and wouldn't let anybody else come in. I want to tell him it's a bit of an overkill, but then I remember Laura. Maybe it's not overkill.

Laura was one of the first friends I made at West Raven. We met and became instant friends. Little did I know she was just here to try and get a chance at the half a million dollar reward on my head. Now that the reward has doubled, I'm a little frightened.

Who has that much money and wants me dead? It's something I've thought a lot about. I've considered my stepdad—he is rich and he hates me, but if he wanted me dead, he would've had me killed years ago. He wouldn't wait until now. I'm almost eighteen. He's almost free of me.

I wonder if Hunter found out anything about my paternal grandparents. They're the only ones I could think of that despise the fact that I exist. But Hunter hasn't said anything else about them. I have a feeling it must not be them.

My mom also hates me. She's *always* hated me. But I don't think she hates me enough to have me killed.

I just wish I knew. If I did, all of this would be over.

I swallow hard, realizing that when this is over, Hunter will be gone. And as horrible as it sounds, I'm not ready for



this to be over just because I don't want to say goodbye to Hunter yet.

After washing my hands, I head out of the bathroom. The door nearly hits Hunter because he's standing so close to it.

Hunter grabs onto my hand and tugs me toward the dining hall.

"No wonder everybody thinks we're dating." I motion my head toward our intertwined hands.

He shrugs. "Since when do you care what everybody thinks?"

"I don't."

I never have cared what anybody thinks of me.

Back home, I didn't have any friends—not really. People talked to me simply because Liam is my stepbrother, but that's about it. Liam always told me it's because I didn't put myself out there, but I never wanted to put myself out there. It's not like I could invite any friends over to the house. I was embarrassed about my room and about the way Mom and William treat me. That isn't anybody's business.

"I didn't think so." He opens the door, waiting for me to walk in first. "It's one of the things I like about you—you're wise beyond your years. When I was in school, I cared a lot about what everybody thought of me. I felt like I had to prove myself."

"I bet everybody loved you." Because Hunter is a very likable guy.

He smirks. "Yeah, pretty much. But even then, I always lived in the shadow of my older brother. You should meet him—he's the charismatic one. And he can cook."

"I do love food, but I doubt I'd like your brother more than you."

We get into line and Hunter lets go of my hand, putting his hand on the small of my back. I hate how much I love his hand

there. It gives me butterflies.

We get our food and head to our usual table. Harper isn't there yet, but she should be soon.

A few seconds later, I spot Harper and Reed, her next ex-boyfriend as she dubs him, coming toward our table. Harper has a huge grin on her face and the two of them are holding hands.

I raise an eyebrow at her as she sits down, hoping she knows what I am asking. I want to know if the two of them are 'official' yet. She gives me a slight shake of the head.

Of course they're not official yet—I'm sure that's more on her part than Reed's. He looks at Harper like she's the most beautiful girl in the world. It's really sweet.

Seeing Harper and Reed together makes me think maybe I should just date Griffin. Hunter is never going to like me and it would be nice to have a boyfriend for my senior year—somebody I can go to homecoming and prom with. Griffin is already going to homecoming with me. It would be more fun if we were officially dating.

The image of Hunter following Harper, Reed, Griffin, and me on a double date shatters the fun thoughts I had in my head. It would be absolutely horrible.

Harper giggles, pulling me out of my strange daydream. I look up and see that she is beaming at Reed in a similar way as he is her.

My stomach churns at how sweet they are. No longer feeling hungry, I push my tray of chicken strips and fries away. Hunter, seeing me push away my food, grabs a piece of chicken.

Hunter *tries* to eat healthily. Kale shots, smoothies, salads, and protein bars. Then I'll find him eating an entire box of cereal in one setting or he'll steal my leftover food. It always makes me laugh.

“You should just get what you like instead of whatever that is.” I wrinkle my nose, looking at his bowl. It’s full of different kinds of lettuce, vegetables, rice, and steak.

“Don’t knock it till you try it.” He pats his stomach. “I’m a growing boy.”

I roll my eyes.

Hunter doesn’t need to do any more growing. He’s tall enough. And it doesn’t matter how much he eats, he never gets fat.

Harper squeals and I look up, seeing Reed kissing her neck.

Oh, gross.

Harper smacks Reed. “No kissing me in front of everybody.”

“I have to do something to let all the guys know you’re off limits,” Reed says. “You keep telling me no when I ask you to be my girlfriend.”

“She likes playing hard to get,” I tell him. I figure I owe Harper some teasing for all that she’s done to me.

“I hear you do too.” Reed turns to me, smirking.

“Me?” I put a hand to my chest.

He nods his head toward Hunter. “When are you going to give the poor guy a break? Everybody can clearly see that the two of you are head over heels for one another. A lot of guys on the football team want to ask you out, but none of them think they’ve got a shot.”

I swallow hard, my jaw dropping open at his confession.

He’s certainly lying, right? Just saying that to make me feel better.

“I told you, Coco.” Harper smirks. “Guys like you.”

I shake my head. “You’re insane.”

Hunter's hand goes down on my back. "Are we going to have to start making out in the dining hall so all the boys know you're off limits?"

He's joking, but his words still give me butterflies.

My cheeks grow warm as I smack his arm away. "That's why everybody thinks we're together. You can't joke about it."

Plus, my heart can't handle him joking about it. I like it way too much.

"You're adorable when you blush," Hunter teases.

I roll my eyes.

"Ahhh," Harper says. "You guys are so cute."

I groan, hoping the subject is changed soon. I'm not sure how much more of this cute talk I can handle.

Hunter and I aren't a couple. We aren't anything. And I wish people would stop thinking we're together.

Hunter slips his arm back behind my back, but thankfully Reed distracts Harper again.

"You want to head out?" Hunter asks.

I nod, not wanting to see the two of them basically making out. "Please."

We get up, heading toward our lockers to change our books. I'm glad to find there is no note waiting inside for me today. Hunter and I head to class early, and thankfully Hunter doesn't tease me anymore.

## **A superhero party.**

"Coco, wait up!"

I glance back and see Liam running toward me.

Since we arrived at West Raven Academy, my brother and I haven't had a lot of time to hang out with one another. He's always busy with his friends, girls, and football. Usually, he would make time for me, but I am also busy. I have Harper now. And, of course, there is the whole hit thing. I'm always with Hunter. I'm always training or I'm the one who is busy. I feel guilty that now I'm the one blowing him off.

"Liam, hey." I lift up my hand and wave at him as he approaches me.

Hunter touches my arm. "I'm going to go sit by the fountain while you talk to your brother."

"Thank you." I smile to let him know I'm grateful for the privacy.

I miss Liam. He and I have always been close. No matter what is going on in his life, he always seems to make time for me. Even at home, where he had tons of friends, he still hung out with me every single day. It's weird not seeing him that much now.

Hunter sits down at the fountain. I'm sure he'll keep a close eye on me.

When Liam reaches me, he grabs me, lifts me up, and spins me. I squeal, yelling at him to put me down. He just laughs.

"You're light, Coco," Liam says as he puts me on the ground.

"Or you're strong," I counter.

He cocks his head to the side, studying me. "You've lost weight. Not that you had any to lose."

I roll my eyes. "I have plenty to lose."

"That's such a girl thing to say." He shakes his head.

"Well, I *am* a girl."

He gasps. "What? Since when?"

I put my hands on my hips. “Number Four, I swear you’re a pain in the butt.”

“Not as much as you.” He reaches a hand over, rubbing my head.

“Don’t mess up my hair.” I reach my hand up, trying to flatten it back out.

Liam smirks. “Scared your little bodyguard will see you with messy hair?”

I huff, crossing my arms over my chest. “I don’t care what Hunter thinks of my hair.”

It’s so a lie, but Liam doesn’t need to know that. *Nobody* needs to know that. I’d rather the crush that I have on my bodyguard remain a secret.

“Sure you don’t.” Liam wiggles his eyebrows. “By the way, like the Superman outfit. Very cute.”

“Thanks.” I grin. “Harper forced me to participate in Spirit Week. Though, I’m certain your costume has got a lot more attention than mine.”

Liam is dressed as Captain America—tight pants and all.

His smile widens. “What can I say? If you’ve got it, you’ve got it. And I, little sister, have *got* it.”

I shove at him. “I will never understand what girls see in you.”

He just shrugs. “You should hear the way the guys on the football team talk about you. They are always asking me if Hunter is your boyfriend.”

My cheeks grow warm. “No, they don’t.”

He nods. “Yep.”

I groan, covering my face with my hands.

“I always tell them that the two of you are dating,” Liam says.

I look at him between my fingers. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

The last thing I need is attention from guys. Especially with Hunter getting all of my text messages. I’m not sure I could handle the embarrassment.

“Trust me, Coco. I didn’t do it for you.” He slings his arm around me. “I don’t want to see all my friends hitting on my baby sister. It would be weird.”

I sling his arm off me. “Whatever. I still think you’re lying.”

But didn’t Reed say something similar to me at lunch? Maybe he really is telling the truth.

It’s weird to think that guys would be interested in me. At my old school, boys never noticed me—ever. Maybe they only notice me here because of Hunter. Don’t boys want what others have? Or at least what they think they have. Hunter and I aren’t dating, but I’m sure a lot of people think we are since we’re always hanging out with one another. If only they knew the truth—that Hunter is my bodyguard because I have a hit out on my life. I wonder what they’d think then. Truthfully, they’d probably stay far away from me, not wanting to get in the middle of my drama. Or they’d take a shot at the million dollar reward. Both are equally terrifying.

“I’m not lying.” He shakes his head. “You just need some confidence in yourself.”

That I know. And I’m working on it. It’s just hard to believe in myself when I’ve heard my whole life how ugly I am from my own mother. I shouldn’t believe her vile words, but part of me does.

“Are you going to homecoming?” Liam shifts his weight from one leg to the other.

“Yeah.” I chew on the side of my lip. “Actually, my friend Griffin is bringing me.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Griffin?”

“He goes to East Raven,” I explain. “He’s nice. Even Hunter likes him.”

“I guess if Hunter likes him that is good enough for me.” Liam nods approvingly. “I’d like to meet him still.”

“You did. Briefly. At a party.” I wave a hand. “But that’s not important. Because I don’t meet half of the girls you date, so you don’t need to really meet Griffin.”

He laughs. “Yeah, but I don’t date girls longer than a weekend usually. So it’s not the same. I want to meet him. Bring him to the party tonight.”

“Party?” I ask.

“It’s Spirit Week—there’s a party every night this week.” Liam smirks. “And wear your costume. It’s a superhero party.”

Of course there is a party every night this week. I didn’t know about the one last night. Not that I could’ve gone anyway—Hunter and I weren’t even on campus.

“I’ll be there,” I promise him, knowing I need to make up for not spending much time with him.

He grabs the end of my hair, tossing it up. “Good. And you better bring the boyfriend.”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

But Liam is already sauntering off, making his way toward three cheerleaders who are talking a ways off. I shake my head as I watch him.

My brother really is a player.

I pull out my phone, remembering that Liam wants me to invite Griffin tonight. I haven’t really got to talk to him much the past two days, so it would be nice to hang out anyway.

ME: *Want to come to a superhero party?*

He replies instantly.



GRIFFIN: *I want to see you. So, YES.*

ME: *Good. I'll be the one dressed as Superman. See you tonight at 8 on WRA campus? Usual spot.*

GRIFFIN: *I'll be there.*

As I'm putting my phone into my pocket, Hunter walks up, looking at his own phone.

I groan. "Do you have to read everything?"

"Yep." He stuffs his phone into his pocket. "I've got to make sure you're not planning to sneak off without me."

I cross my arms over my chest. "That's not annoying at all."

He just grins. "So, we're going to a party tonight, huh?"

I nod and we walk toward the parking lot. "Apparently there is a party every night this week. Liam just told me about it."

"Are we going every night?" Hunter asks. I can hear the dread in his voice.

I laugh. "Probably not. Parties aren't really my thing. But Liam really wants me to go tonight, so I will."

When we get to the SUV, Hunter opens the passenger side door for me. "I don't have to dress up, do I?"

I shake my head but grin.

Tonight should be interesting.

**Thor's hammer.**

I chew on my fingernail as I pace the living room.

My heart won't stop racing as I think about what I'll be doing tonight.

Meeting Griffin feels like a really bad idea. It *is* a bad idea. Mostly because, while Griffin has genuine feelings for me, I'm busy crushing on my bodyguard. Aren't I leading him on? And what if Griffin tries to kiss me? He got close last time we hung out, but I backed away from him. How many times will I back away before Griffin catches on? Or, worse, before Hunter catches on?

Romance in high school is way too complicated, especially when I consider the fact that I have other things to worry about. Like the hit on my life. This shouldn't even be a thought.

"Out with it." Hunter shuts the lid on his computer, turning his full attention to me.

"Out with what?" I ask, feigning innocence.

He relaxes back onto the couch. "You've been pacing the floors for ten minutes straight. And you're chewing on your fingernail, which you only do when you're really nervous about something. Talk to me, Trouble."

I cross my arms over my chest. "Maybe it's none of your business what I'm nervous about. It doesn't have anything to do with hitmen or Spy School."

He pats the spot on the couch beside him.

Hesitantly, I walk over, taking a seat beside him. He angles his body toward me.

"Please talk to me, Cove. What has you so nervous?"

I let out a breath. "I don't want to kiss Griffin."

I can't believe I just admitted that out loud to Hunter, but it's too late to take it back now.

Besides, I *know* Hunter. He would bug me about this until I eventually spill the truth. It's better to just admit it now and get it over with.

Hunter furrows his brows. "I thought you liked Griffin."

"I did. I *do*. I just think that maybe I don't like him as much as he likes me." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, looking away from Hunter. "And I don't like him like a girl should like a boy that she's talking to. I don't want him to be my boyfriend."

It's embarrassing to have this conversation with Hunter. This is a conversation I should be having with Harper. And I would, except Hunter won't let me go hang out with her by myself. And if I text her, Hunter will read the entire conversation anyway.

Hunter puts a hand on my arm so I do look up, my heart skipping a beat as I look into his green eyes.

He's so gorgeous. It's not even fair that he's my bodyguard. How can I notice any other guy when I spend all my time with *the* perfect guy?

Life is so unfair.

"You don't want to date Griffin?" Hunter asks.

I shake my head. "I don't *think* so." I pause, taking a deep breath. "No. Definitely not. I don't want to."

He doesn't say anything. He just looks at me.

Part of me wants to date Griffin, but it's not for the right reasons. I want to date him so I can get over Hunter. And that wouldn't be fair to anybody.

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear, angling my body toward him. "I like Griffin, don't get me wrong. He's a sweet guy. And I don't mind him coming to homecoming with me. I just get the feeling that he likes me a lot. It's not fair to him that I don't feel the same."

“You just met the guy. You have to give these things time,” Hunter says.

“I do?”

He nods. “You’re attracted to him, right?”

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess. He’s cute.”

And Griffin *is* cute. He’s just... not Hunter Duran. To be fair, nobody will ever live up to Hunter.

“Just give the guy a shot. If he tries to kiss you, just be honest with him and tell him you’re not ready.”

I take a deep breath, slowly letting it out. “Yeah, okay. I guess you’re right. Maybe I just need more time.”

Somehow, I don’t think that’s the answer, but maybe Hunter knows better than I do about these kinds of things.

He stands up from the couch, holding out a hand toward me. “We should probably head that way. Griffin said he was on his way about five minutes ago.”

“He did?” I let Hunter pull me up from the couch. A quick glance at my phone reveals he’s right—Griffin did text me. I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn’t hear my phone go off.

Griffin: *I’m on my way. I can’t wait to see you.*

My stomach feels like it’s in knots.

He can’t wait to see me.

I’m such a bad person.

I swallow hard, shoving my phone back into my pocket.

Maybe I can talk to Harper about this tonight. She will know what to do. Only... I can’t tell her about my massive crush on Hunter. If I did, she will tease me about it, even if it is via text message. And since I can’t tell her Hunter gets all my texts...

I'm doomed.

Hunter puts his hand on the small of my back as he leads me toward the front door. My skin tingles and butterflies fill my stomach at his touch.

I glance over at him and find him watching me.

"Are you okay, Trouble? You look a little pale," Hunter says.

I nod. "I'm totally fine."

He raises an eyebrow, calling my bluff.

I press my lips firmly together, admitting nothing to him.

"I will give you time with Griffin, but I will be sticking very close by tonight," Hunter tells me. "After that note, I don't feel comfortable being far away."

Right. Because I wasn't nervous enough about the night as it is.

"Just don't let Griffin see you. He already thinks we're into each other as more than friends. I don't want him to get the wrong idea." My cheeks grow warm as I admit it to Hunter.

Hunter smirks. "It's for the best if he thinks I'm into you."

I roll my eyes. "No, it's not. Because last time I hung out with him, I spent half the night convincing him I'm not in love with you."

He turns toward me. "He will think that regardless. Everybody at West Raven thinks I'm into you. He will hear rumors. And you can't tell him otherwise."

"I know."

"Sorry. It's just the way it has to be."

I shrug one shoulder. "It's not a big deal."

I hate how much I mean the words. Griffin deserves a great girl. I just don't think I can be that girl for him. Besides, it is safer for him if I don't date him. I don't want him mixed up in all of this.

When we reach the party, I look around for Griffin. As it turns out, I don't have to look for him because he finds me first. He walks up to me with a huge smile on his face, but it falters slightly when he sees the boy walking beside me.

"Brought your bodyguard again, I see," Griffin says, keeping his tone light. But his eyes do shift to Hunter and I can see something—annoyance, maybe?

Yeah, join the club.

I can't go anywhere without Hunter and it is annoying. But Hunter has saved my life more times than I can count. If having him with me twenty four seven saves my life, I'm okay with that.

Hunter puts a hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to give you two some privacy."

And by privacy, he means he will stalk me from a distance.

I smile at Griffin, hoping he will drop the subject of Hunter.

"Nice costume." Griffin looks at my outfit.

I feel a little ridiculous next to him. He's got on a nice pair of jeans and a t-shirt. But practically everybody has on their superhero costumes, so I fit in just fine.

"It was Harper's idea." I shrug my shoulders, like that explains it.

Griffin's grin widens. "I wish I went to West Raven. I *need* a picture of you every single morning. But a picture just doesn't do you justice. You're gorgeous, Cove."

My cheeks grow warm. "Thanks."

He holds out his hand toward me. "Can we talk a walk?"

I grab his hand. "Sure."

It feels strange to hold his hand. I keep telling myself not to compare him to Hunter, but I don't see how that's possible. Hunter is the guy I spend all of my time with. And the guy

I've slowly developed a crush on. But Griffin is a good guy. A really good guy. He's sweet, kind, and good looking. He also doesn't want to kill me, which is surprisingly hard to find in a crush.

Maybe Hunter is right. Maybe I should give Griffin a chance. Maybe I *could* develop feelings for him over time.

"What is Spirit Day tomorrow?" Griffin asks.

"Ancient Greece," I answer.

"You've already got the whole Aphrodite thing going on, so that should be easy for you."

I glance over at him. "What?"

"In Ancient Greece. She's the goddess of beauty. Or love. Or maybe both. I don't know. Or maybe she's a Roman goddess? I'm not sure. They're all basically the same with different names." He shrugs. "But she's really beautiful. I just can't seem to get my words to come out right around you. What I said was supposed to be flirty. But I'm not good at all of this."

We stop at the edge of the trees and I turn to face him. "I'm not good at this either. I've never had a boyfriend. And the one and only date I went on I had Hunter pick me up early from."

Because my date tried to kill me.

But Griffin doesn't need to know that.

"Who did you go on a date with?" Griffin asks.

I lower my head, groaning. "Please do not think any less of me when I tell you. I know it was a poor choice, Hunter reminds me all the time. I only went out with him because Hunter told me not to."

He chuckles. "Okay, now I'm really curious."

"It was Preston Lomax." I cringe as I admit it.

Griffin stays quiet for a minute, then nods. "Don't feel bad. Lots of girls fell for his charms."

“I didn’t fall for his charms. Not really. I mean, I thought he was cute when we first met. But then he opened his mouth and ruined it. After I ditched him, within five minutes I might add, he texted me almost every day for two months straight. He can’t handle the word no.”

But now he’s locked up in some kind of super secure Spy School prison. To the rest of the world, he’s dead.

“I don’t get it,” Griffin says.

“Get what?”

He looks at me, shaking his head. “You’re just this perfect girl. And you’re seriously gorgeous. How do you not have a boyfriend?”

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “I’m not perfect.”

“You should see yourself from my perspective. Because in my eyes, you’re as close to perfect as it gets.” He shakes his head.

I have no idea what to say to *that*.

Does Griffin really think that highly of me?

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Griffin asks.

I shake my head. “Before I came to West Raven, boys never noticed me. My life is complicated. I don’t exactly have the best home life.”

“A lot of kids at school don’t. It’s *boarding school*. Good parents don’t typically send their kids away for high school,” he says. “The school year is a vacation for most parents.”

“What about you?”

“I’m the exception. My parents are pretty awesome.”

I’m jealous.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “My mom had me when she was sixteen. She claims I ruined her life. And my dad never wanted anything to do with me, and he died when I was young. My stepdad... well, he almost hates me as much as



my mother. So I don't understand what you see in me. I'm not perfect, Griffin. Far from it. I'm complicated and way more work than I'm worth. If you understood that, you wouldn't like me."

He doesn't say anything for quite a few seconds. But then he looks at me, shaking his head. "Whoever told you you're not worth it lied."

My heart skips a beat.

Griffin is a good guy.

Way too good for me to mess with his feelings.

"I think I'm going to head back to my dorm. I'm not feeling that good," I tell Griffin.

"Do you need me to walk you back?" he asks.

I shake my head. "No. I'll be fine. I want to be alone for a minute anyway."

He nods, but watches me warily, like he wants to object.

I should tell him not to worry—Hunter won't be far behind me. But Griffin doesn't know anything about my crazy life. And I don't want him to. He's too good to know anything about hitmen and spies. I want to protect him as much as I possibly can.

He needs to be as far away from me as he possibly can.

"Just don't push me away, Cove." Griffin backs away slightly. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Please send me another picture."

I nod, letting him know I will.

I take off toward my dorm, knowing that Hunter will be following. As soon as Griffin is gone, he'll probably come walk with me. He'll be curious about the conversation I had with Griffin. I hope he wasn't close enough to hear it.

I hear feet shuffling in the leaves behind me. I turn, expecting to see Hunter running toward me. Instead, I see a

blonde guy running toward me wearing a Thor costume—hammer and all.

My eyes widen for a split second before I take off running away from the guy.

Is that hammer real? And if it is, how can I protect myself against something like that? Hunter's taught me how to disarm somebody with a gun or a knife—but Thor's hammer? That's a new one.

I glance over my shoulder.

Where is Hunter?

Thankfully, Thor doesn't seem to be as fast as I am—probably something to do with the very large hammer he's holding. Somebody should tell him that's not a good weapon for a hitman.

I look straight ahead and see a blur coming toward me. I start to veer off to the left, thinking a second assassin is chasing me, but then I see that the second person is Hunter.

Finally.

Took him long enough.

I turn around as he runs straight for Thor, tackling him to the ground. The hammer goes rolling away from them as Hunter holds the guy down. Thor doesn't even attempt to fight.

“Who are you?” Hunter asks. “And why are you chasing Cove?”

I walk closer to them, knowing Hunter will protect me.

I kick the hammer, letting out a breath slowly. “It's fake.”

“Dude, some guy in a hoodie paid me fifty bucks to scare the chick in a Superman costume,” the guy says. “Can you please let me up now?”

Hunter does let the guy go, but only after punching him in the nose. I watch as blood trickles down the guy's face.

Ignoring the guy, Hunter walks toward me. He puts his arm around my shoulders and leads me quickly toward the cabin.

We are almost back before either of us says a word.

“Did I seriously just get chased by a guy carrying Thor’s hammer?” I think I’m in shock.

I expect Hunter to laugh, smile, or *something*. But he just keeps a stoic expression on his face.

“No more going off without me, even with your boyfriend,” he says. “And we are going to be training more.”

I swallow hard. “Oh.”

“Whoever is after you has managed to get on campus twice. And they haven’t come after you yet—they’re playing mind games. This is more than just a low level hitman. This person is a psychopath. They don’t just kill for money, they kill for pleasure.” Hunter stops, turning to face me. “Cove, I will protect you. But be prepared. I will take you out of here if I need to.”

I nod slowly. “Okay.”

He pulls me into his arms, wrapping me in a tight hug. It’s then that I realize just how worried about me he is. I hug him back. I need this embrace just as much as he does.

He pulls back, his green eyes piercing into me. “I promise you, I will not let you die.”

I believe him.

Whoever is after me messed with the wrong girl. I’ve got Hunter Duran protecting me.

He pulls me into his arms one last time, giving me a bone crushing hug.

“Let’s get you home,” he says, as he pulls back.

Home.

I like the sound of that.

**Wednesday, October 14**

**Ancient Greece.**

I adjust the gold, floral crown on my head, feeling a little ridiculous.

Why did I let Harper talk me into participating in Spirit Week?

Today is Ancient Greece day. Whoever came up with the Spirit Week themes should be fired because this is so stupid.

I have on a flowly white dress with a gold belt around my waist. The dress is way too formal to ever wear to school. It's Wednesday for goodness sake. Nobody should be this dressed up on a Wednesday.

I put on the gold sandals that Harper let me borrow. It ties the whole ridiculous outfit together.

Hunter knocks on my door. "Trouble, it's about time to leave."

Meaning it's definitely too late to change my outfit.

Hunter is so going to laugh at me.

I stomp over to my door and sling it open. I cross my arms over my chest and wait for the teasing to begin. When Hunter doesn't say anything, I look up.

Hunter has a pop tart halfway to his mouth, but he has frozen, his mouth open and his eyes wide. I watch his Adam's apple bob as he looks at me.

“Griffin was right. You do look like Aphrodite.”

I groan, resisting the urge to hide my face. “You were *listening?*”

He shrugs, not looking ashamed at all.

“I look ridiculous.” I frown, looking down at my way-too-formal dress.

“You look gorgeous,” Hunter says.

I suck in a sharp breath.

His words sound so sincere. I almost believe him.

“Are you going to send a picture to Griffin?”

I shake my head. “I look stupid. I don’t want him to see this.”

Hunter ignores me, grabbing my phone from my hand. “Smile, Trouble. Trust me when I tell you, you’re beautiful. He will want to see you.”

Even though I try not to smile, I can’t help it.

Hunter called me beautiful.

My heart races entirely too fast.

Hunter pushes a few buttons on my phone and then hands it back to me.

“I already sent it because I know you probably wouldn’t do it,” he says.

I narrow my eyes. “How do you even know the passcode for my phone?”

He grins. “I know everything about you. Including the fact that you self sabotage everything good in your life.”

“I do not.”

He raises an eyebrow, calling my bluff.

My phone vibrates in my hand, so I look at it. Griffin sends quite a few texts in a row, including about fifty eye heart

emojis.

GRIFFIN: *WOW.*

GRIFFIN: *Stunning, Cove!*

GRIFFIN: *Is it too late to transfer to West Raven?*

Hunter chuckles. "Told you."

I ignore him and text Griffin back.

ME: *I look ridiculous.*

His response is immediate.

GRIFFIN: *You look HOT.*

GRIFFIN: *Who took the picture?*

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

"Tell him Harper did it," Hunter says.

But I won't lie to Griffin.

ME: *Hunter did.*

I see three dots, letting me know Griffin is typing his response.

"You shouldn't have told him that," Hunter says. "He's jealous. He thinks I'm into you."

"I'm lying to him a lot already, Hunter. I'm not going to lie about little things like who took my picture. I just can't." I feel

icky for all the lying I've been doing as it is. Griffin deserves the truth. He's a good guy.

Hunter puts his hands on my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Cove. I know all of this sucks, but your life will be back to normal soon. The organization that I work for is really, really good. We get things done. After this is over, you can tell Griffin the truth. I'm sure he will forgive you."

"I don't really care." I look up, meeting Hunter's green eyes. Looking at him hurts my chest. Nobody should be as beautiful as he is. "When all this is over, what will you do?"

He steps back, letting his arms fall. "I don't know. I guess I'll go to a new assignment."

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I don't want Hunter to know how much his words hurt me.

He will move on. He'll forget about me. And I'll be that silly high school girl that he protected one time. He probably won't even remember my name. But I'll never forget him. I worry that I'll never get over him.

"This dress really does look fantastic on you. You should wear it again, even if it's not Ancient Greece dress up time," Hunter says.

I dare to open my eyes. I expect to see a smirk that says he's teasing, but there isn't one. He looks sincere.

"What about the flower crown?" I point at my head.

He grins. "While it is cute for today, I don't think it would work for an average day."

I laugh.

Okay, maybe the dress isn't *so* bad.

He slings his arm around me. "Let's go get breakfast. I'm starving."

"What? No pre-breakfast bowl of cereal?" I tease.

"I had that already," he admits.

Of course he did.

When we reach the front door, Hunter pauses for a moment.

“Will you stay here for a minute?” Hunter asks.

I nod, wondering what he’s doing.

He goes out the front door and I stand there, waiting. A minute later, he sticks his head through the doorframe.

“You can come now,” he says.

I follow him out the door, shooting him a curious look.

“I was just checking the perimeter before you came out.” He opens the passenger side door for me. “I wanted to make sure that it’s safe.”

My heart swells.

He’s protecting me, of course.

But then I realize it’s his job. *I* am his job. And all that he’s doing for me he will be doing for somebody else soon.

I get in the car and he shuts the door. As he walks around, I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

Why am I so obsessed with Hunter? He’s really not *that* great. But even in my head, I can’t believe the lie. I look up and see that he’s looking around. He’s always vigilant. His dirty blond hair looks lighter in the sun, but it suits him.

Hunter is a very good looking man.

Too good looking for me.

I fold my hands in my lap, trying not to look at him anymore. It’s depressing when I think about how perfect he is.

When Hunter opens the door, I glance at my phone, wanting something to do. I’m surprised that Griffin didn’t text me back earlier, but he’s probably heading to breakfast and hanging out with friends. I’m sure he’ll text me later.



Hunter starts the car, but he doesn't take off right away. I turn toward him and see that he's looking at me.

"What?" I ask him.

He grins, shaking his head. "Nothing. You're just really pretty."

My cheeks grow warm at his compliment.

He pulls onto the gravel driveway and my heart races.

"I'm going to miss having you around after you catch the bad guy," I tell him, but wonder if I should've admitted it.

He doesn't say anything. He just reaches over the center console and grabs onto my hand. I'd like to think that's his way of saying he'll miss me too.

When we pull into the parking lot at school, I'm not surprised to see a lot of white dresses and guys wearing togas.

Hunter laughs.

"I guess I don't look as ridiculous as I thought," I comment.

He turns to me. "You make these other kids look like they're playing dress up. You look like the real thing, Cove."

Hunter gets out of the car and I breathe for a second while he walks around the car. I know better than to get out before he opens the door for me. He stands by my door, looking around for a moment before opening it. He extends his arm for me and I loop my arm through his.

"Maybe I should've worn a toga," Hunter says.

I bust out laughing.

The thought of him in a toga is hilarious.

"What? How else am I supposed to be the Hephaestus to your Aphrodites?" Hunter asks.

"Who?"

"Her husband in Greek mythology," he clarifies.

“She had a husband?” I ask. “I thought she kind of dated around.”

Hunter laughs. “Yeah, okay. The Greeks were weird.”

I nod, agreeing with his statement.

“But I still like the dress. Aphrodite can’t hold a candle to you.”

I roll my eyes.

Hunter calls me trouble, but if anybody is trouble, it’s him.

## The thing.

I try to walk into the bathroom later that morning, but Hunter puts a hand on my arm, stopping me. I am confused when he walks in first. I follow him and watch him lean against the wall.

“Uh, what are you doing?” I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Waiting for you,” he answers.

“I am not going to pee with you in the room.” I throw my hands up, giving him a perplexed look.

“I can’t leave you alone,” he says.

I cross my arms over my chest, staring him down.

There is no way he will win this argument. I cross the line at him waiting *in* the bathroom while I use it. Even if there are stalls, that isn’t enough privacy for me.

“Check the bathroom if you must,” I tell him. “But I am *not* going pee with you listening. It’s *weird*.”

Hunter rolls his eyes dramatically and then carefully checks each stall. He turns to point a finger at me. “You’ve got two minutes. One second longer and I am coming through that door.”

The second he's out the door, I don't waste one second of time. I think he was serious about his threat.

He's been on edge ever since I found that note in my locker. Now that the guy chased me with his fake hammer, he's definitely not going to ease up. If I thought Hunter Duran was a tyrant before, it's nothing compared to now.

I wash my hands and am about to open the door when it abruptly opens.

"Times up," Hunter says.

I throw the paper towel in the garbage. "I was done anyway."

"Can I go in now?" I hear some girl ask Hunter.

I shake my head when I see a freshman girl standing outside the door, waiting to come in. She walks in as I walk out and I shoot a glare at Hunter.

"What?" he asks.

"That girl is probably thirteen. She's *not* an assassin." I look at him, daring him to argue.

"I'm not seventeen, but none of the idiots in this school know it. And your friend, Laura, the one who tried to kill you, she was twenty three and she passed for seventeen. Looks can be deceiving."

I flinch at the harshness of his voice.

He's right. I know he is.

"Thanks. Now I'm going to have nightmares tonight." I roll my eyes at him as I walk by.

It's going to be a very, very long day.

Hunter, of course, follows me, pacing right beside me.

No wonder everybody thinks we're dating.

"I'm sorry, Trouble," Hunter says. "I will not compromise when it comes to your safety."

I sigh. “I know. I’m sorry too.”

Hunter and I grab food and meet Harper and her not-boyfriend, Reed, at the lunchroom table. They’re both sitting very close to one another and I see Harper laugh at something he said.

She likes him. A lot.

Yes, she liked Finley, but it’s different with Reed. I can see that. Finley was exciting because he was her first boyfriend. He flirted with her and paid a lot of attention to her. But with Reed, she has genuine feelings. I’m glad that he appears to feel the same.

I sit down across from Harper.

“Are you coming tonight?” Harper’s light blue eyes sparkle as she looks at me.

“Coming where?” I raise an eyebrow.

She tucks a piece of pink hair behind her ear. “To the toga party tonight.”

Hunter snorts. “Toga party?”

“I hate to admit it, but I’m with Hunter on this one.” I cringe. “A *toga* party.”

She giggles, looking at Reed. “Cause all the guys are wearing togas.”

“I’m not,” Hunter mumbles.

“This is the first I’m hearing about a toga party,” I tell her, then take a bite of my fries.

“It’s part of the Spirit Week parties.” Reed takes a drink from his bottle of water.

Ah, right.

The ‘week’ of parties.

“We’re not going,” Hunter tells them.

I turn to him, narrowing my eyes.

*We aren't going?*

"I might want to go," I counter.

Hunter turns his green eyes toward me. "Well, you can't. Not tonight."

"Coco can do whatever she wants to do, Hunter." Harper sits up straighter, narrowing her eyes at my bodyguard.

"We have something else to do tonight." He nudges me with his elbow.

I nod. "Right. Of course. I forgot. The *thing*."

"The thing?" Harper looks between us. "Please tell me the thing is you two going on a date. Because I can forgive you if you two have *finally* stopped with the whole we're only friends lie."

Hunter slings his arm around me.

I glare at him.

He better not even try it.

He smirks. "She's still breaking my heart and telling me no."

I rub at my head, willing the Hunter induced headache to go away.

How am I going to survive high school with Hunter Duran as my bodyguard?

Harper pouts. "Ah, I really want you two to be happy. Like Reed and me."

Reed beams at her. "Nobody can be as happy as us."

It's sweet but also kind of gross.

I groan. "It sucks watching somebody with a boyfriend when I'm single."

Harper smirks. "He's not my boyfriend."

"Yet," Reed says.

“*Yet,*” she agrees, her grin widening at him. She glances at me. “But you could have a boyfriend. You have two boys vying for your attention.”

I wouldn’t say Griffin is vying for my attention. In fact, he hasn’t texted me since earlier this morning. He will eventually get tired of chasing me. Honestly, it’s probably better that way anyway.

“I don’t want a boyfriend,” I mumble.

Boyfriends are complicated. My life has enough drama without adding to it. Besides, how can I explain Hunter to any guy? I’m seeing that now with Griffin.

“How is it going with Griffin, by the way?” Harper asks, then glances at Hunter. “I’m still team Hunter.”

Hunter winks at her. “Thanks, Harpy.”

I roll my eyes.

The two of them are annoying.

But I still love them.

“Not so good,” I tell her. “I just am not sure how I feel about him. I don’t like him as much as I probably should considering he wants a relationship with me.”

She nods, a smile playing at her lips. “Because you have feelings for somebody else, you just don’t want to admit it.

I keep my lips pressed firmly together, admitting nothing.

She’s right, of course. But I can’t tell her that in front of Hunter. And in Harper’s mind, Hunter is in love with me. She’s wrong.

I want to tell her the truth so bad. But how can I? Hunter won’t let me hang out with her unless he’s there and any text I send, he gets. So even if I told her that Hunter is my bodyguard, I can’t tell her about how complicated things are.

“I’m trying to force myself to like Griffin,” I admit. “He’s a really nice guy and he’s cute, but he doesn’t...” I trail off,

not knowing what to say.

“Give you butterflies?” Harper asks.

I nod.

She frowns. “Yeah, I get that. I never felt that way about Finley either. I thought I did, but it just wasn’t there. You have to have chemistry.”

Harper and Reed share a look that I am envious of.

They have chemistry.

The problem with my crush on Hunter is that he makes me have butterflies and he makes my heart race, but I don’t do the same for him. It’s all completely one sided and it sucks.

After lunch, Hunter and I walk beside each other, heading to our next class.

“Are you sure I can’t go tonight?” I ask him. “I am tired of staying at home. I want to live my life and not be scared all the time.”

“No can do, Trouble. Sorry.” He smirks at me, like he’s not at all sorry.

I frown.

It’s not that I actually wanted to go tonight, I just don’t want to stay home with Hunter all night. It hurts too much.

Hunter put a hand on my arm, so I turn around to face him.

“Do you really want to go?” he asks.

I shrug, not answering either way.

“You realize that you were chased by a guy with a hammer last night, right?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “It was a *fake* hammer. And besides, you were there to protect me.”

He’s always there.

Always.

Which is the problem.

It's also the reason I'm alive.

Hunter smiles at me, but I can tell it's forced. "I'm sorry. I know you want to be a normal teenager, but you can't."

I nod, letting him know that I understand.

"Do you really not want to date Griffin?" Hunter asks.

"Not really, no." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

It hurts to admit that to Hunter, but it's the truth. I'm not sure if I would feel different about Griffin if I had never met Hunter. But the truth is, I don't think I'll ever have feelings this strong for anybody else.

Hunter Duran completely owns my heart.

"Let's get to class," Hunter says.

Training. Class. Our little safe house. This is all I'll ever have with Hunter.

He's not into me.

Now, I just have to get over him.

## Consequences.

I pace my bedroom that night.

Mostly, I'm trying to avoid Hunter. I've spent far too much time with him already and it's bad for my heart. My heart is in way too deep with him already. And the more time I spend with him, the more I fall for him.

My phone chimes. I grab it from my desk reading the text.

Griffin: *I'm at WRA. I want to hang out. Are you coming to the toga party?*



My heart sinks.

I can't go tonight. Hunter made that very clear. And things with Griffin are already so fragile. He thinks I have feelings for Hunter—and he's right, I do. But I still want to hang out with Griffin. I do like him. He's a nice guy.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth as I send him a text back.

*Me: I'm not coming tonight. I'm not feeling very well. :( Bad headache.*

He texts back right away.

*Griffin: I'm so sorry. :( Do you need anything?*

*Me: Just rest.*

I hate lying. It seems like all I do lately is lie to my friends, but I can't exactly tell him the truth. I don't want him involved in all of this.

If I did tell Griffin, he would understand. I don't think he would run or even be scared. He's a good guy. Which is why I should run far, far away from him.

A knock on my door interrupts my thoughts. I look up and see Hunter poke his head through the doorframe.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

Does he *know* that I'm hiding out in my room to avoid him? Does he know how I feel about him?

My heart races faster.

He holds up his phone. “I saw that Griffin texted.”

I push a piece of hair behind my ear. “Oh, that. I’m fine.”

He gives me a look like he’s not sure if he believes me.

“Griffin really likes you,” Hunter says.

I nod, not knowing what to say to that. Hunter already knows where I stand with Griffin. I don’t want anything more than friendship. I do hope I can tell Griffin that soon. The last thing I want is to break his heart, so the sooner the better.

“Griffin is a good guy,” I finally say.

“You deserve to be happy.” Hunter’s green eyes lock onto mine. “I really do think you should give Griffin a chance.”

Tears press against the back of my eyes.

Is he saying that because he knows that I have feelings for him? Is he trying to let me down easy?

I clear my throat. “Will you shut the door on your way out?”

He frowns, but nods. “Night, Cove.”

“Night,” I say.

Finally, he disappears, shutting the door. Tears roll down my cheeks and I wipe them away quickly.

Why am I sitting in this house, pining away over a guy that isn’t into me? I should go hang out with my friends. It’s my senior year. And Griffin came all this way to hang out with me. I should make an attempt.

Maybe Hunter is right. Maybe I *should* give Griffin a chance. But how can I give him one when I can’t even hang out with him? And when we do hang out, Hunter is always there—listening and watching.

I stop pacing and listen for any signs of Hunter. I hear him walking around in the kitchen. He won’t be checking in on me anymore tonight.

Maybe I could sneak out and go hang out with my friends.

I pull my hair into a single braid—I never wear my hair like this. And I put on a Beanie to help conceal it. Instead of wearing my white dress from earlier, I put on an oversized hoodie. I never wear this hoodie out—it’s one of Liam’s old ones. I mostly just wear it when I’m hanging around the house.

Nobody will even know it’s me.

I look in the mirror.

It’s not my cutest look, but it’ll do for the night. Besides, Griffin already thinks I’m sick. I’ll just play it up a little.

I slide open my window and look down. It’s a little high, but I’m not worried about the jump down—I’m worried about how I’m going to get back in.

I’ll worry about that later.

I sit on the ledge of the window and jump onto the ground.

No turning back now.

The moment I walk into the woods, I second guess myself. Do I really need to be doing this? But if I try to sneak back in now, Hunter will know. Then I really will be in trouble.

I’ll just be careful. Tonight will be fine.

My stomach is in knots as I keep walking forward. I think of all the time I’ve almost died and Hunter has been there to save me. But he doesn’t even know I’ve left the house tonight. He won’t be here if something goes wrong.

I hear something move in the leaves behind me. My heart jumps out of my chest as I reach for the phone in my pocket. I turn around, ready to fight if I need to. I squeal as a big, black eyes stare up at me.

I put a hand to my chest. “Oh, my gosh. It’s a squirrel. I’m scared of a freaking squirrel.”

And now I’m talking to myself. Great. I’m losing my sanity along with my freedom.

I'm being stupid. Why am I even putting myself through this? I should be at home, safe in my bed. I don't even care if Hunter gets onto me, I'm heading back home.

Turning around, I walk back toward the cabin at a quick pace. I just want to be back there, safe with Hunter.

Hunter does mean safety. He's comfort. He's... the guy that I can't help falling for. It was always inevitable. Too bad for me, he doesn't feel the same about me. I'm just the girl he's protecting. I'm his job. But I know he cares a lot about me.

“Cove!”

I almost take off running when I hear my name called, but the voice sounds familiar. I turn around in time to see Finley run up beside me.

Why is Finley wanting to talk to me? He and Harper barely dated before they broke up. I couldn't have said more than a few sentences to the guy.

“Hey, Finley.” I shift uncomfortably. “What's up?”

He chuckles. “It doesn't have to be weird between us, just because Harper and I broke up. We're still friends, right?”

Friends?

Is he serious?

“Uh, I guess.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “Is there something you wanted to talk about?”

“You're a hard girl to get alone.”

My heart races. “Why do you need to get me alone?”

He smirks, shaking his head. “Cove Lawson. You know, I don't get it. Why would somebody put a hit out on you? I came because I was curious. Half a million dollars wasn't enough for me to take your life. But a million... I could do a lot with that.”

I take a step back away from him. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re not that naive. I know that you know about the hit on your life.” Finley cocks his head to the side, studying me. “I get it. You have a large trust fund coming to you. Your dad was... very wealthy when he was alive, but in death he became even more famous. You’ll never have to work a day in your life. Not like me. I have to work hard to provide for my family.”

I hold up both of my hands. “I don’t have any money right now. I don’t get that until I’m eighteen.”

How does he even know who my dad was?

He motions his hands around us. “Look around, Cove. This school. Your stepdad. Your life. It’s glamorous.”

The irony of his words isn’t lost on me.

I get why he thinks I’ve lived a glamorous life, but that couldn’t be any further from the truth.

Finley reaches into his pocket and pulls out a gun. He’s got a silencer on the end of it. The gun won’t even make a sound when he pulls the trigger.

Hunter doesn’t know that I’m out of my room tonight. He thinks I’m safely tucked away. Little does he know the danger I’m in. He’s not going to save me tonight. If I am going to survive this, I have to save myself.

Why did I leave the safety of the cabin? That was a stupid decision. My actions have consequences and I hope my own stupidity doesn’t cost me my life.

“You don’t want to do this. A million dollars isn’t worth it,” I say, trying to talk him down.

“I think it is worth it,” he says, cocking the gun.

“Hunter will find you.”

Finley smirks. “I know all about Spy School. But Hunter isn’t the only one who has been trained. I welcome him to try

and come after me. I'll put a bullet through his skull too."

As he talks, I inch closer to him, keeping my hands up. I just need to keep him talking. I need to stall him. I have to make my move at the perfect time.

"What is Spy School?" I ask, feigning innocence.

He snorts. "Don't pretend like you don't know. I know your boyfriend told you."

"Hunter isn't my boyfriend." Now isn't the time to argue, but I've got to keep him talking.

"You have to know he's into you." He pauses. "I almost forgot that you're a teenage girl. Now you've got me feeling guilty about killing you."

He relaxes his stance. Just a little, but enough.

Before he can even realize what I'm doing, I grab the gun out of his hands. He goes to fight me, but he's too late. I have the gun in my hands and I point it directly at him.

"Whoa, hey." Finley holds up both hands. "Where did you learn to do that?"

I need to just pull the trigger.

But my hands shake.

Can I really do this? I know he was about to kill me, but can I really take a life?

I hear somebody run up behind me. I remain still, hoping a second assassin isn't about to jump out and kill me. Most assassins aren't as chatty as Finley. He gave me ample opportunity to disarm him.

"Give me the gun, Cove."

Hunter.

Oh, thank God.

I relinquish the gun to him and nearly fall over with relief.

"Look away," he commands me.

I do as he says and close my eyes.

Finely starts to say something, but his words are cut short. I hear something thump against the ground and I flinch at the sound.

“Cove, are you okay?” Hunter asks softly.

I nod, keeping my eyes shut.

“Let’s go home, okay?”

Somehow, I manage to mutter, “Okay,” to him.

My voice sounds shaky and my entire body is trembling.

I’ve never been so scared in my life.

Hunter grabs onto my hand and tugs me along beside him. My legs feel like noodles, like they could give out from under me at any moment.

Hunter stops walking and he turns toward me. Green eyes lock onto mine.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod, pushing my hair from my face.

I expect him to start walking again and tug me behind him, but instead he lifts me from the ground and starts to carry me. It’s then that I realize he’s not wearing a shirt, which makes my cheeks grow warm.

What can I say to him about what happened tonight? How can I explain when the reasoning behind me taking off was *him*?

“Hunter—”

He cuts me off. “We’ll talk when we get back.”

That frightens me.

Hunter just saved me. Again. But he saved me because I messed up. I am going to be in so much trouble.

When we get to the cabin, Hunter deposits me onto the couch and storms off toward his room. A few moments later,

he comes out wearing a t-shirt. I expect an angry scowl, but instead I just see relief on his face.

My stomach knots up with guilt.

I scared Hunter tonight. And I'm not sure how to make things better. I messed up really bad and he's not going to let me forget this blunder. And the worst part is, I can't blame him. If our roles were reversed, I'd probably be furious.

I sit up straighter, looking him directly in the eyes. "Hunter —"

Once again, he cuts me off. "I don't know what you were thinking tonight. I was worried sick about you. But when I saw you disarm Finley, I have never felt more proud."

My eyes widen. "Really?"

He nods, keeping his face completely neutral. "You're good. With a little more training, you could join Spy School."

I smile, but it quickly fades. "There is something you should know—about what Finley said tonight."

He takes a seat beside me. "First, I want to know why you snuck out. What made you think that you couldn't come to me? If you wanted to go that bad, I would have gone with you."

I'm not sure about *that*. He was so adamant today that we weren't going. But right now isn't the time to argue that.

"To be honest, I'm not sure what I was thinking." I push a piece of hair behind my ear. "I just wanted a moment to myself. I didn't even get halfway there before I realized it was a stupid idea. I turned around and headed back to the cabin. And that's when..." my voice trails off.

"Finley."

I nod. "How many people in this school are assassins?"

Because it seems to me like there are a *lot* of assassins. First Laura. And then Preston, though he wasn't really an assassin. He just wanted the money. And now Finley...



After a lot of hesitation, Hunter answers, “I don’t know.”

I look up into his eyes. “Since you’re proud of me, does that mean I’m not in trouble for sneaking out?”

He smirks. “Nice try. I won’t be letting you out of my sight again. I’m even considering removing the door to your room so I can keep an eye on you.”

I frown. “Please, don’t.”

“I won’t.” He takes a step closer to me. “But, Cove, you can’t do that again. This is serious. It’s life and death.”

I nod. “I know. I’m sorry, Hunter.”

He surprises me by pulling me into his arms. He gives me a bone crushing hug, which is exactly what I need. I relax into his embrace, squeezing him back.

“By tomorrow, you’ll have a new window in your room. One that doesn’t open,” Hunter says as he pulls back. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just you’re a teenage girl that sometimes acts irrationally.”

I can’t argue that. I did act irrationally tonight. I reacted because I was sad. It was completely stupid.

“Thank you for saving me. Again.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “You saved yourself, Trouble.”

But we both know he did the saving. I might’ve gotten the gun from Finley, but there is no way I could’ve pulled that trigger.

“Thank you for not yelling at me.”

He grins. “Remember this when I wake you up at four in the morning for training.”

“Four?” My eyes widen as I glance at the clock on the wall. “Hunter, it’s nearly midnight.”

“Then I guess you better get some sleep. Because four AM is our new training time.”

I should’ve known I wouldn’t get off that easy.

Still, I don't argue.

"Fine. I'll see you at four."

There are worst things than waking up at four in the morning. And it's probably what I deserve after what I did. Besides, seeing Hunter first thing really is the best way to start the day.

After that, I head to my room. Hunter walks me there, requesting that I sleep with my door open tonight.

I'm surprised by how tired I am. I figured I wouldn't be able to sleep with what happened, but I feel so safe having Hunter close by. He leaves the door to his room open too. And just knowing he's there if I need him, I find myself relaxing. I fall asleep almost the moment my head hits the pillow.

## Thursday, October 15

### Twin day.

I am dead on my feet as I get ready for the day.

Hunter was serious about training at four in the morning. We got our day started with the longest run I've ever been on in my life and our training only got more intense after that.

Today is a day I've dreaded all week. Spirit Week has been a blast. But today is twin day. And since I'm 'twinning' with Harper, she chose our outfit.

I look in the mirror and shake my head.

I look ridiculous.

It's the dress, really. Yellow is *not* my color.

I'm wearing a sunflower print skater dress. And instead of my normal sneakers, I'm wearing a pair of yellow sandals. My hair is in two fishtail braids.

Why do I let Harper talk me into these things? Hunter is so going to laugh when he sees me.

I step away from my mirror and head out of the room. I may as well get this over with.

Hunter, as always, is in the kitchen. He's got on his usual school uniform and has a bowl of cereal on the counter. He pauses, turning to look at me. He cocks his head to the side as he studies me.

"Is it flower day?" he asks.

I groan, closing my eyes.

It's worse than I thought.

"I do like the hair," he adds.

I open one eye to look at him. "I look ridiculous."

"What day is today?" he asks.

"You'll see when we get to school."

He shrugs, accepting my vague response. "Do you want to send a picture to Griffin?"

I roll my eyes and walk toward the door. "Come on. Let's go."

He shoves the last of his cereal in his mouth and runs to follow me.

Part of me expected Hunter to be mad at me this morning because of what happened last night, but I'm glad to see that's not the case.

When we get in the car, I wait for Hunter to take off. Instead, he turns and looks at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing. Just that dress." The chuckles, shaking his head. "It's not you."

"I know." I cover my face with my hands. "Yellow looks horrible on me."

"Nah. You look good in everything." He starts the car.

My stomach tightens at his compliment. If he knew how much the things he said affects me, he wouldn't say them.

Why couldn't Spy School haven't sent somebody else to protect me? I couldn't help but fall for him. It hardly seems fair.

"Thanks," I mumble, sinking further into my seat.

I have a feeling that today is going to be a long day.

We head to the dining hall to have breakfast. When Hunter sees Harper, he looks at me.

“Ah, I get it now,” he says. “She should’ve let you choose the outfit.”

“Right?” I say, as we sit down at the table across from Harper.

Hunter laughs.

Harper raises an eyebrow. “What’s funny?”

“Nothing.” I wave a hand at her. “Good morning.”

She grins. “You look cute.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Yellow really isn’t my color.”

“Harper needs a picture of you two together to send to Griffin,” Hunter says, then takes a huge bite of his sandwich.

I roll my eyes. “I really don’t.”

I doubt that Griffin wants pictures of me anymore. He’s convinced that I’m into Hunter and I can’t even deny it because I am.

“He came to the party last night looking for you.” Harper wiggles her eyebrows. “He left after he figured out you weren’t there. He looked pretty bummed out.”

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

What am I supposed to tell him? I can’t have a ‘headache’ every time he wants to hang out. And I should tell him the truth—that I’ve fallen for Hunter, but Hunter doesn’t feel the same.

Harper gasps, slapping her hands down on the table. “Oh, my gosh. I almost forgot to tell you!”

I look up and see her eyes wide as she bounces up and down in her seat.

I raise an eyebrow. “You and Reed made things official?”

She rolls her eyes, waving a hand. “Not yet. It’s something far more exciting.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“Finley switched schools.” She grins widely as she says it. “I have a feeling it was because of me. The break up was probably super hard on him. He probably hated seeing me with Reed.”

My heart aches at her words as I remember the previous night.

Finley didn’t switch schools. He’s dead. And he came really close to killing me.

We finish eating our breakfast and thankfully all mention of Finley is long forgotten. As we’re about to head to class, Hunter insists on taking a picture of Harper and me together. He sends the picture to Griffin before handing my phone back to me.

Griffin stays quiet, never responding to the text.

## **East Raven.**

Later that evening, I sit on the living room floor to do my homework. I’ve changed out of the ridiculous yellow dress that I will never wear again and am instead wearing a comfortable hoodie that I stole from Hunter. The thing is long enough to be a dress on me, but it’s so comfortable.

Hunter shakes his head at me when he walks into the living room and sees me. “You realize you could sit on the couch. Or the dining room table. Or at the desk in your room.”

I don’t bother looking up from my book. “I like the floor.”

“You’re weird.” He sits down on the couch, looking at his phone. “You have a text from the boyfriend.”

I roll my eyes at him. “I don’t have a boyfriend—just an annoying bodyguard who wants to micromanage my non-existent social life.”

“If I let you decide, you’d never leave the house.” He gives me a pointed look.

“And what’s wrong with that?” I ask, genuinely curious.

He ignores my question. “Are you going to text Griffin back?”

I pull my phone out, curious about what he said.

Griffin didn’t respond to the text Hunter sent from my phone this morning. In fact, he’s been pretty quiet. I’m pretty sure that Griffin thinks I’m into Hunter—he would be correct about that. But what he doesn’t understand is that Hunter doesn’t like me back. He thinks he’s always around because he’s in love with me. If he knew the truth, about the hit, my bodyguard, and how many times I’ve been almost killed, he’d probably run far, far away. I wouldn’t blame him if he did. Sometimes I wish I could run away from this hit.

GRIFFIN: *Want to hang out at East Raven tonight?*

“What should I feign tonight? A sprained ankle?” I try to keep my tone light, but I am a little bummed. Not about missing the hang out—I would, in fact, rather stay home tonight. But I am tired of lying.

“We can go,” Hunter says.

I look up, my eyes wide in surprise. “What?”

He puts his phone down, looking at me. “I don’t know for certain, but I imagine that Finley was the one who left the notes.”

Right.

I hadn’t thought about that.

“But what if I don’t want to go?” I ask.

He stands up from the couch. “Too bad you don’t have a choice. You, Cove Lawson, need to get out of this cabin. And, as Harper always says, you desperately need a boyfriend.”

“I do *not*.” My face grows warm, so I lower my head, letting my hair cover my cheeks. “I’m only seventeen. I have plenty of time for boys when I’m older.”

That or I’ll die without ever being kissed.

Wow. That’s a depressing thought.

Hunter holds out a hand to help me up. I accept his help, even though I’m not completely sold on going tonight.

“Just humor me, Trouble.”

One look into his green eyes and I know I’ll agree to anything he asks.

“Fine. Let’s go.” I throw my hands up in defeat.

He grins. “Text Griffin back and tell him you’re on your way.”

“You mean *we* are on our way,” I correct, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

“Maybe leave me out of it,” he suggests.

I nod, thinking he’s probably right. But it’s not like he won’t figure it out when we get there. Something for me to look forward to.

ME: *On my way.*

I shove my phone back into my pocket and smile at Hunter. “Now we can go.”

Hunter and I walk through a familiar path in the woods. He grabs onto my hand and tugs me along with him, making sure to keep me close. I know he’s only holding my hand because



he wants to be sure that I stay with him, but my heart is beating like crazy from the contact.

Hunter walks like he knows exactly where he's going.

"You're scary good at sneaking off campus. Is this something you did often at Spy School?" I ask.

"I helped Sander out when he was protecting Phoenix last year. We were on and off campus all the time," he explains, not answering my question about him sneaking off when he was in Spy School.

"Are they going to be here tonight?" I quicken my pace, a little excited at the prospect of meeting Phoenix. I met Sander last weekend. He was really nice. And attractive. Phoenix must be beautiful.

"Maybe," he answers simply.

"What about your other spy friends?" I ask. "Do I get to meet any of them?"

"Not tonight. They're all scattered around the globe."

I frown. "It must suck to be in Massachusetts with me when you could be somewhere nice."

Hunter puts his arm around me, pulling me closer to him. "Ah, Trouble, there is nowhere in the world I'd rather be than with you."

My stomach clenches at his words.

Doesn't he know that saying stuff like this only makes it harder? I so badly want him to mean the words.

"You don't believe me," Hunter says.

I shake my head.

"It's true. I like you a lot, Cove. If I could go back in time, I'd always choose to be here with you right now." He moves his arm off my shoulder. I expect him to grab onto my hand, but he doesn't. I'm disappointed until a moment later when I hear voices.

We walk into a clearing by the lake. There are only a handful of people hanging out. I spot Griffin right away. He smiles at me, but only barely. I see him glance at Hunter.

Hunter nudges me forward. “Go talk to him.”

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, wanting to object. I’d much rather stay with Hunter. But we came so I could talk with Griffin.

I walk forward, thinking how strange it is to not have Hunter follow. Before I reach Griffin, I look behind me and see Hunter standing back. He’s watching me with his hands in his front pockets.

“You brought Hunter, I see,” Griffin says in greeting.

Yikes.

So tonight definitely isn’t going to end well.

“It’s more like he brought me,” I admit, though wonder if I should have said that. “He thinks I’m boring and need a social life or something.”

Griffin nods his head, saying nothing.

“It’s good to see you,” I tell him.

His eyes meet mine. “Do you want to talk on the dock?”

I let out a breath, thankful that he’s going to at least attempt to talk to me. “Sure.”

Griffin doesn’t try to hold my hand as we walk to the dock. We take a seat at the end of the dock, dangling our feet over the side. I notice that he doesn’t try to scoot close to me which probably isn’t a good sign for a guy that’s pursuing a girl he likes.

Does he not like me anymore?

I feel relieved at the thought.

Maybe Griffin and I could be friends.

“Are you feeling better?” Griffin asks.

I raise an eyebrow. “Better?”

He clears his throat. “Your, uh, headache.”

Dread fills my stomach. “Oh, yeah. I’m fine.”

Griffin takes a deep breath, turning his full attention to me. “You know, I came by your dorm last night. I thought that maybe I could cheer you up, or at least get you some medicine or something. But you weren’t there.”

I swallow hard. “I, uh, well...” I pause, taking a deep breath as I try to lie my way out of the situation.

Lying is hard. Especially when you get caught. One lie can turn into many lies very quickly. It’s hard to keep up.

I lick my lips, which suddenly feel dry. “I was at Hunter’s dorm. I didn’t feel good, so he was looking after me. I didn’t want to tell you because I feel like you don’t like Hunter very much.”

“I like Hunter.” Griffin sighs, glancing behind us for a second. His eyes quickly land back on me. “What I don’t like is that he can’t take his eyes off of you. Even now, he’s watching us. He’s in love with you. And I get the feeling that you feel the same way about him.”

I close my eyes, trying to regain my composure. I open them again and boldly look Griffin in the eyes. “Hunter doesn’t like me like that, Griffin. Trust me when I tell you this, it’s not at all what you think. Hunter is... intense. And a bit protective, but he has reasons to be. My life isn’t like the other kids in our schools. They live these fairytale lives, but mine is a nightmare for reasons I can’t get into right now. But Hunter takes care of me. I’m only sorry that you don’t believe me.”

“You lie a lot,” Griffin says.

I nod. “I do.”

“So how can I believe anything you say?” he asks.

I shrug one shoulder. “Maybe you just have to trust that I only lie when I have to. And I don’t lie about the important

stuff. I don't lie about who I am."

He shakes his head. "Don't you see how completely messed up that is, Cove?"

"I *know* how messed up it is. It's my *life*. My whole life is completely messed up." I slap my hand down on the board out of frustration. "And I can't tell you anything."

"Can't or won't?" he asks.

I pause. "Won't. Because I barely know you. You're just a guy I started talking to. I haven't even told Harper the truth. The only people who know are my brother and—"

Griffin cuts me off. "And Hunter. I know. Which is the problem."

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath.

I get why he's upset. The girl that he's into doesn't trust him. But he doesn't understand that it's not just a little thing I'm trying to keep from him. It's a matter of life and death. And I can't explain that to him.

"I'm sorry, Griffin," I say, my voice much softer than before. "I want to be able to give you something more, but I can't right now. I hope that you can understand and we can be friends."

"Friends?" He flinches. "I was trying to make you my girlfriend, Cove. I wanted way more than friendship."

I knew that he did. But hearing him say it hurts my heart.

Why can't I like Griffin the way he likes me? I *want* to, but I can't. I can't give him my heart when it already belongs to somebody else. Maybe if I had met him before Hunter. Maybe if things were different. But they're not. This is my life.

"I think I'm going to head back to my dorm for the night. I have some homework to finish up anyway." Griffin moves to get up, but he pauses to look at me. "I guess I'll see you Saturday?"

I nod, letting him know we are still on for homecoming. It's better to go with him as friends than to go alone. Hunter thinks I'm pathetic enough as it is.

"Goodnight, Cove," he says, then walks off, leaving me on the edge of the dock alone.

## Phoenix and Sander.

I hear footsteps behind me. I don't have to look to know it's Hunter. I look out at the dark water for a moment before I push myself up from the deck, meeting Hunter half way.

"Where did Griffin go?" he asks.

I put my hands into the pocket of my hoodie. "He has some homework to do."

Hunter huffs. "Then why did he invite you here in the first place? You guys barely hung out."

I shrug, not bothering with a response.

I don't want Hunter to know what happened with Griffin. Mostly because we talked about what we *always* talk about—Hunter. The last thing I want is for Hunter to realize that there is some truth to what Griffin is saying. I will never like Griffin like I do Hunter.

"Since we're here, there is somebody I want you to meet." His face lights up and he grins widely.

"Okay." I smile, excited for him to introduce me to some of his friends.

Hunter's whole life is revolved around me. He's in my world, but I barely ever get a glimpse of his world. It's nice to feel like he wants to introduce me to his world.

Hunter holds on a hand toward me and I pull my hand from my pocket, letting him hold my hand.

“Your hands are cold,” he says.

It is getting pretty cold already. Maybe too cold for just a hoodie. Soon, I’ll need to bring a heavier jacket to hang out like this. Or maybe we will just have to hang out somewhere other than the clearing.

Hunter leads me toward a couple that is standing at the edge of the clearing. I recognize the first person right away as Sander, but I don’t know the girl standing next to him.

The girl is about my height with long brown hair. It’s wavy and beautiful. The girl is beautiful, actually. Her bright blue eyes sparkle as she looks at Sander.

This must be Phoenix, the girl Hunter helped protect last year. It gives me hope. This worked out for her, so maybe it will for me. But I’m nowhere near as pretty as her.

She and Sander both look at us as we approach.

Hunter puts his arm around my shoulder. “This is Cove. Cove this is Phoenix.”

“Hi.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear, feeling a little nervous. I really want Hunter’s friends to like me.

“Hey.” She grins widely. “It’s really nice to meet you.”

Sander grabs onto her hand. “You two haven’t killed each other yet.”

Yet being the keyword.

“Don’t listen to Sander.” Phoenix glares at Sander before turning to me. “Hunter is really sweet.”

I’m not sure I would use the words ‘Hunter’ and ‘sweet’ in the same sentence, so I just give her a curious look.

“Did he tell you about the time he got his toenails—”

Hunter cuts her off. “Hey, hey, hey. Now, there is no need to bring up things from the past.”

I share a grin with Phoenix. “I’d like to hear the story.”

“It’s a long story, but to make it short, Hunter got his toenails painted hot pink to cheer me up,” Phoenix says.

I look at Hunter, raising an eyebrow.

He shrugs. “I’m not good with girls crying.”

“That’s all it takes?” I ask.

He groans. “I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“I don’t really cry,” I reassure him.

Really, I haven’t cried that much in my life. It’s probably not good to hold my emotions in, but it’s better than to have my mom laugh at my tears.

“I know.” He frowns, looking at me.

I wish I knew what he was thinking. His face is so expressive, but I can never get a read on him.

Hunter turns toward Sander and Phoenix. “Cove and I should head back. I don’t like being away from the car like this.”

“Understood.” Sander nods at Hunter. “Protect her.”

“I will.” Hunter puts his hand on the small of my back. I wave bye to Hunter’s friends as he leads me through the woods, toward the West Raven campus. He’s quiet on the walk back, not giving me any insight into what he’s thinking.

As we walk back, I can’t help but think about my conversation with Griffin. Homecoming is going to be so awkward now. I never admitted to anything in regards to my feelings for Hunter, but Griffin’s got to know. I’m pretty easy to read about these things.

Does Hunter know? Is that why he keeps pushing me toward Griffin so hard despite the fact that I’ve told him that I don’t have feelings for Griffin? Is this way of him trying to let me down easy?

My heart breaks at the thought. It’s probably true, but I can’t help what my heart wants.

I'm in way over my head when it comes to Hunter Duran. Heartbreak is inevitable at this point, but he's so worth it.

When we get to the cabin, I start to head toward my room to get ready for bed. It's just after nine and I still have to get up early for training. But Hunter stops me before I can make it far.

"Cove, we need to talk," he says.

My heart stops.

Nothing good can come after the phrase 'we need to talk.' So many thoughts enter my head about what could be wrong.

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear and turn to give Hunter my full attention. "What is it?"

"Let's sit." He takes a seat on the couch and pats the spot beside him. I move to where he's directed me and angle my body toward his.

Hunter's body is stiff and he avoids making eye contact.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

He sighs, turning to face me. "What happened with you and Griffin tonight?"

*That* is what he wanted to ask me? About Griffin? I thought it was something serious.

I chew on my bottom lip as I look into his green eyes. "Nothing happened. We just talked. And he headed back to his dorm to do homework."

"You two looked like you were fighting," Hunter says, not accepting my response.

I shrug one shoulder. "Griffin doesn't like you very much."

"Me?" Hunter's eyes widen in shock.

"You already knew that." I raise an eyebrow at him. "You've read the texts he's sent me. He's, like, super jealous of you. He doesn't know that you're my bodyguard. He thinks you're into me."



Hunter nods. "So why don't you tell him the truth?"

"Because I don't want to," I admit. "It's a lot. I haven't even told Harper yet and she's my best friend."

"Yeah, but isn't Griffin trying to be your boyfriend? That's something you should tell him if things get serious."

I let out a breath. "Yeah, but I already told you that I don't want Griffin to be my boyfriend. I don't like him like *that*."

"He likes you like that," Hunter says.

My face grows warm. "Yeah, I know."

He nods. "Ah, I get it now. Griffin admitted his feelings for you and you told him you don't feel the same."

That's not exactly what happened, but I'm not about to admit anything to Hunter.

I press my lips firmly together.

"Does that mean you and Griffin are done?" Hunter asks.

I shrug. "I don't know. I think we're still going to homecoming together, but only as friends."

Hunter narrows his eyes. "Is that a good idea?"

"It's that or I can go alone. I don't want to go at all, but Harper..." I let my voice trail off, knowing that's the only explanation needed.

"Harper," he agrees. "Whatever you want, I will support you. I just know that Griffin really likes you and he's a good guy. A lot better than that Preston guy."

I roll my eyes. "I make one poor dating choice and you're going to hold it against me for the rest of my life."

He grins. "Absolutely I will. You dated a guy who tried to kill you, Cove."

Yeah, okay, he's got a point.

Still, I sit up straighter. "He was cute in a bad boy kind of way. But I wasn't really going to date him. I only agreed to the

one date because you made me mad.”

He chuckles. “Are you always going to remind me that?”

“Yep.” I bite my lip to hide my grin.

I like these moments with Hunter. The moments when we’re alone and can just goof off. It’s when I feel the most at ease. He makes me comfortable and I can be myself. I’ve never felt like this with anybody else.

“Maybe tomorrow night we can just stay here.” I dare to look into his green eyes. “I don’t really like hanging out with everybody.”

He grins. “That sounds nice.”

It really, really does.

“You should get some rest, Trouble. Training continues at four in the morning,” he warns.

Four in the morning really isn’t so bad when it’s with Hunter.

I really *do* have it bad.

## Friday, October 16

### School spirit day.

Hunter cocks his head to the side and studies me as I walk into the kitchen that morning. I wonder what he's thinking, but I have a feeling he's going to tell me. He's had something to say about all my outfits this week.

“What is today's theme?” Hunter asks.

“School spirit day.”

He nods. “You look cute.”

Cute? That's all he has to say?

Still, that one word has my stomach full of butterflies.

Today, I'm wearing a West Raven Academy t-shirt that I tied up with a black and red tutu that Harper made for me. She's actually crazy when it comes to these kinds of things. I'm also wearing some red sneakers and my hair is in a high ponytail with a red ribbon tied around it.

“I look like a cheerleader,” I complain.

“I like your hair like that.” Hunter walks closer, using his hand to swish the end of my ponytail.

I shiver from the close contact.

If he notices, he doesn't say anything.

“I know I said blue is your color, but so is red.”

I look at him for any tell that he's teasing me, but his face is completely neutral.

I swallow hard. “Thanks.”

Hunter swipes my phone from my hand and holds it up. “Smile.”

I do smile. I can’t help but smile after what Hunter said. He does something on my phone and then hands it back to me.

I frown when I see that he sent the picture to Griffin. “Why did you send it to him?”

Hunter raises an eyebrow. “I thought you were still going to homecoming together.”

I sigh, not knowing what to say to that.

My phone vibrates before I can think of a proper response. Hunter pulls his out to read it before I do. I roll my eyes, grabbing my own phone.

GRIFFIN: *You’d look better in green. Which are East Raven colors, if you didn’t know ;)*

Hunter snorts. “I don’t think he got the ‘just friends’ memo.”

But he *did*. I know he did. I didn’t have to say anything for Griffin to know that I’m into Hunter. But I can’t say that to Hunter.

Hunter frowns as he shoves his phone back into his pocket. I wish I knew what he was thinking. Does he think that Griffin and I are going to date? Is he frowning because he’s jealous?

No, that would be ridiculous. Hunter Duran is so far out of my league that it isn’t funny. There is no way he’s jealous. If he liked me like that, he would tell me. He has to know I’d say yes to him.

“We should head out,” Hunter says. “I’m starving.”

I laugh, knowing he’s probably already ate a large bowl of cereal this morning. “Okay, let’s go.”

Being alone with Hunter in this small cabin is getting to me. We need to leave before I do something crazy, like confess my feelings for him. Now *that* would be a tragedy. Because he would most definitely turn me down and then my heart would have to accept the fact that he doesn't feel the same. At least now I can fantasize and have a little hope in my wildest dreams.

"Are you going to text Griffin back?" Hunter asks, as he starts the car.

I shrug. "I didn't plan on texting him at all, so probably not."

Hunter doesn't respond, he just looks forward, both hands on the wheel. He usually only drives with one hand.

I wish I knew what he was thinking, but I doubt I'll ever know what's going on in his head. He's a complicated guy. And I'm just the teenage girl he's being paid to protect. I know he says he likes me, but if the organization he worked for decided to give him a new assignment, I'm sure he'd jump at the chance to do something else. Being with me has to be boring.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth as I look out the side window.

I wish it were next week. I want homecoming to be over with. Next week will be better—it has to be.

When Hunter pulls the SUV into a spot, I'm surprised to see Liam heading toward the breakfast hall. Usually, my stepbrother sleeps until the last possible moment, even if it means skipping breakfast. I jump out of the car when I see him, not waiting for Hunter.

"Liam!" I yell, running toward him.

He stops walking and turns toward me. Instantly, his face lights up and he grins widely.

"Coco, hey!"

I throw my arms around him. “I’ve missed you, Number Four.”

He chuckles, embracing me back. “You too, Coco. You’re always busy. I hardly ever get to see you.”

“Want to eat breakfast with me?” I ask.

He glances over as Hunter joins us, but looks back at me. “Uh, sure.”

I walk beside Liam as we head into the dining hall. Hunter stays right on our heels, never letting me forget that he’s there. It’s equally a comfort and an annoyance.

Once we have our breakfast, we go sit down at the table. Harper isn’t in the cafeteria yet, so Liam catches me up on what he’s been up to. Basically, he’s had a few girls ask him to homecoming and he has to choose just one today.

“You’re hardly giving those other girls time to find another date,” I say, scolding him.

He shrugs, a huge grin on his face. “What can I say? The ladies love me.”

I roll my eyes at his cockiness. “How would you feel if some guy did that to me?”

He pauses with a bite halfway to his mouth, as if he’s just now considering it. “I wouldn’t let a guy treat you like that, Coco.”

I start to argue why he would do that to the other girls, but I realize it’s pointless.

When I spot pink hair walking into the cafeteria, I glance over and see Harper walk in with Reed. The two of them are holding hands. She sees me looking at her and I raise an eyebrow.

Is she seriously going to keep denying that Reed is her boyfriend? Because everybody already assumes they’re together—me included.

Liam turns to see who I'm looking at. He turns back to me. "I hate to ditch early, but I've got to go gently let down one of those girls I told you about."

I shake my head at him. "Good luck."

"Thanks." He jumps up from the table.

I turn to Hunter, who is looking at Liam walk away.

"You two are like night and day," Hunter says.

I shrug one shoulder, not denying it. "One of us got a credit card with no limit, and an expensive car. One of us got a closet for a bedroom, whatever could be thrifted, and a monthly pass for public transportation."

Hunter looks horrified. "Your parents let a teenage girl take public transportation *alone* in New York City?"

I don't know what to say to that. Nobody has ever cared before. Seeing Hunter care has taken me off guard. Even Liam didn't have much to say about me taking the subway.

Tears press against the back of my eyes and I glance away from Hunter, not wanting him to see the emotion that is there. Before I can do something stupid, like confess my love to him, two trays go onto the table across from Hunter and me. I look up to see Harper and Reed sit down.

Harper is grinning from ear to ear. I cock my head to the side, waiting for whatever she's about to tell me that's made her so happy.

"So, Reed and I decided to make things official." Harper lets out a girly sigh. "But we don't have to make a big deal out of it."

"Congratulations," Hunter says, giving them each a nod of the head.

I mumble a "Congratulations" to them, but give Harper a look that says she better share the juicy details of how it happened later.

"The outfit is totally cute," Harper tells me.

I frown, looking down at my clothes. “I look like a cheerleader.”

She waves a hand. “You do *not*.”

About the time she denies, a couple cheerleaders walk past our table. Their wearing nearly identical tutus to mine, and their hair is exactly the same.

I raise an eyebrow at Harper.

“Fine. Maybe you look a little like a cheerleader, but showing school spirit is never a bad thing,” she says.

I’m not so sure about that, but I’m not going to argue. Not today. Especially not when I see how happy she is. She and Reed are so adorable together. And Harper lives for Spirit Week, so I’m not going to burst her bubble.

I glance over at Hunter and see him watching me. I’d give anything to know what he’s thinking at the moment. But I doubt I will ever understand Hunter Duran.

## **Your time is limited.**

Hunter paces quietly beside me as I head to my locker to get my books for my morning classes. He’s often quiet and I’m always wondering what he’s thinking. He must be bored, going to high school classes with me. To be fair, I get bored in class too.

When I open my locker, I start to reach for my books when I notice a folded note on top of my books. Hunter notices too. He reaches a hand in and snatched it before I get a chance.

I look over his shoulder, trying to get a glimpse.

*Not even Spy School can protect you from the inevitable.*

*Your time is limited.*



My heart races as I read the words.

Hunter slams my locker door shut and grabs onto my wrist, pulling me along with him. We've been through this enough times for me to know that we're leaving school. Maybe we're even leaving campus, I'm not sure. Suddenly, I find myself sad that I won't be in class today.

As boring as normal is, sometimes I crave it. Normal has to be better than running for my life, right?

But if things were normal...

I wouldn't have met Hunter. And I wouldn't change that for anything. I'm pretty sure meeting him has been the highlight of my life.

Hunter leads me to the SUV, opening the passenger side door for me. Once I'm inside, he shuts the door and quickly runs around to the driver's side. He takes off before I even have a chance to buckle my seatbelt.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To the cabin," he answers.

I raise an eyebrow. "I figured we'd leave campus."

He shakes his head. "I need time to think. Leaving campus won't help this situation."

I wonder why it won't help.

What is going on in Hunter's head right now? I wish I knew what he was thinking.

"Am I safe?" I worry my bottom lip between my teeth as I watch him, hoping that I can read something in his expression.

Hunter doesn't answer my question. He just looks forward, driving. It isn't until we pull into the cabin that he finally turns to look at me.

"I will protect you." Hunter runs his fingers through his hair. "So, yes. You are safe. But you're also never safe while

you have a million dollar hit on your life. Until we figure this out, we have to be cautious.”

I nod, not knowing what to say.

Hunter gets out of the car and I sit there for a moment longer, soaking in his words.

I’m safe with Hunter. And I feel safe with Hunter. But am I really? This is scary and dangerous.

When my door opens, I jump. I look over and see Hunter standing there, waiting for me to get out.

“You scared me.” I get out of the car, grabbing my bag from the floor board. Before I can sling it over my shoulder, Hunter grabs it, carrying it for me. I shut my door and follow him toward the small cabin that we currently call ‘home.’

It’s weird that this cabin feels more like home than New York City ever did.

When all this is over, I think I’ll move to the middle of nowhere, far away from the city. I could live on the other side of the planet and be happy—hopefully I never have to see my mom or stepdad again.

The day passes quickly. Hunter spends most of the day pacing the living room and looking out the windows. I watch some videos and try to get some studying done.

I dread the upcoming weekend. I don’t want to go to homecoming. I like Griffin, but he’s not who I want to go to the dance with. I can’t tell Hunter that without revealing who I actually want to go with. I feel pathetic enough as it is without Hunter knowing about my massive crush on him.

My phone goes off. I expect it to be Harper. She hasn’t texted me all day to ask where I am and I figure she’s curious. But when I glance down, I’m surprised to see a text from Griffin. I didn’t expect him to talk to me much after our conversation last night.

GRIFFIN: *Can we meet up?*

ME: *I'm sorry, I can't.*

I don't bother coming up with an excuse today. I'm not going to lie and that's as good of a response as any.

GRIFFIN: *I'm coming to your dorm.*

Hunter grunts. "This boy is getting on my nerves."

"I'll tell him that I won't be there," I say, unlocking my phone.

"No," he says. "I'll take you to your old dorm so he can talk to you."

I raise an eyebrow, looking at Hunter. "And what about you?"

He grins. "I'll be hiding in your closet."

My eyes widen. "Seriously?"

"Let's get this over with." He holds out a hand to help me up from the couch.

I grab his hand, letting him pull me up. "We don't have to do this. I don't actually want to hang out with Griffin right now."

Hunter doesn't drop my hand as he pulls me toward the door. "So, tell him. Break up with him or whatever."

I roll my eyes. "We're not dating for me to break up with him. And I was honest with him last night."

Hunter pauses at the door, turning to face me. "With things like this, you can't be subtle. Be confident in what you're saying and just tell him you don't want to date him."

I sigh. “It’s your fault anyway. You’re the one who practically forced him to ask for my number.”

He grunts, but doesn’t say anything as he pulls me behind him.

He knows I’m right.

Hunter doesn’t say a word as we get in the car and head toward campus. It feels strange to be heading there this late in the afternoon.

Once we park the car, Hunter walks me to my old dorm room at a quick pace. He opens the door for me, motioning for me to walk inside.

It’s weird to be back in my room. I haven’t been in here since the morning an assassin broke in and tried to kill me. Hunter saved me, like always. I barely spent any time in here at all.

We barely get the door shut before there is a knock on the door.

My heart races.

Hunter gives me an encouraging smile as he heads to my closet. I feel weird about him hiding inside there while he waits. I’m also aware that he will hear every awkward word of the conversation Griffin and I are about to have.

I take a deep breath before opening the door.

Griffin is standing on the other side. He’s wearing a pair of jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers. He looks a lot like he did the day I met him. He’s cute. I’ve always thought so. It’s just...

He’s not Hunter.

“You want to come in?” I ask him.

He nods.

I open my door wider, inviting him in. I shut the door behind him and turn around to face him. He looks around my dorm room with his eyebrows drawn together.

“Uh, where is your stuff?” he asks.

“My... stuff?”

He turns to face me. “You know... pictures. A comforter that isn’t the standard white one the schools provide. Anything at all.”

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth, trying to figure out what to say to him. “Look, Griffin, not everybody that goes to our schools have amazing lives. Some of us have nothing.”

“But you’re a Bradbury,” he says, like that should mean something. And it would mean something if I weren’t the unwanted stepchild.

I shrug. “Not really. I’m Cove Lawson. My mom just happens to be married to William Bradbury.”

He furrows his brows. “I’ve seen the kind of car your stepbrother drives, Cove. You’re telling me they give him the world and you get nothing?”

I press my lips firmly together.

This is why I don’t usually let people get close to me. I hate when they question why things are the way they are. It sucks, but it’s my life.

“You’re kind of making me feel bad for what I’m about to say.” Griffin rubs a hand at the back of his neck, not making eye contact.

My heart races.

What if he mentions the crush he thinks I have on Hunter? He’s *right*, but I don’t want Hunter to know.

“I don’t think I should go to homecoming with you,” he says.

I let out a breath in relief. “Oh, yeah, totally.”

Griffin chuckles. “You look relieved. I thought you’d be a little bummed out.”

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “Well...”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I know you’d rather go with Hunter.”

I shake my head, venomously denying. “No. Why would you think that?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Because I see the way you look at him. And I see the way he looks at you. You’re trying to deny it, for whatever reason, but it’s clear that the two of you belong together.”

I don’t know about *that*.

“Hunter doesn’t like me like that,” I tell him.

“He does, Cove.”

I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything at all.

“And I know you love him,” Griffin says. “And if you deny it, you’re only lying to yourself.”

I resist the urge to cover my face. I want to tell Griffin to stop talking, that Hunter is in the closet, listening to our every word. But I can’t.

“Go to homecoming with him, Cove. You’ll have more fun than you would have with me,” he insists. “If you kiss him, he will kiss you back. I know you don’t have confidence in yourself, but you’re quite the catch.”

I glance over toward the closet, the back at Griffin.

“I’m going to go back to East Raven. But we can still be friends. I’d like that, actually,” he says.

I nod. “Sure.”

But all I can think about is how humiliated I am about what he’s saying.

“I’ll walk with you. I’m heading to Harper’s dorm anyway,” I tell him, knowing that if I wait, Hunter will tell me no.

I need to not be around Hunter right now. After what he heard, I can only imagine what he’s thinking. I hope he doesn’t

think it's true. But what if he does? How will I ever face him again if he knows the truth?

Griffin and I walk through the hall together. He doesn't say anything and I wonder what he's thinking. We part ways as I stop by Harper's room.

He waves at me. "I'll see you around, Cove."

"Bye."

## Pathetic.

As I knock on Harper's door, all I can think is that Hunter is going to kill me. My hope is that he'll be so distracted by the fact that I left the room without him that he won't even think about the things Griffin said.

I will pretend that conversation never happened.

Before Harper can open the door, Hunter comes up behind me. Wanting to avoid him, I try to open Harper's door, but it won't turn. It's locked, so she must not be here.

Hunter starts to say something, so I take off running down the stairs. Maybe I'm acting completely mental, but I don't care. I don't want to hear how pathetic my crush on him is—I already know that he is way out of my league.

I run toward the boys' dormitory and straight for Liam's room. I don't knock, I just twist the handle. It's also locked. I knock on the door, hoping that he's inside.

"Are you looking for Liam?" A boy asks, as he's walking by.

I nod.

"He's at football practice," he informs me.

Of course he is. I completely forgot about that.

"Thanks," I tell him.

Moments later, Hunter joins me. His eyes are narrowed and he looks angry.

Good. I want him to be angry.

I run past him once more, barely missing him grabbing my arm. I run down the stairs and out of the building. Not having anywhere else to go, I head back to our cabin. Usually we drive the half mile, but Hunter has the keys. Instead of driving, I run.

Running is never something I thought I would do. I've never been athletic, but it's one of the things Hunter has forced me to do. Running with him has made my legs stronger. I'm surprised by how easy this run is. When I get to the cabin, I'm not even winded.

I hear footsteps behind me and I know it's Hunter. When I get inside, I head straight for my room, locking the door behind me. Hunter follows. I hear him try to open my door. He knocks on it, but when I don't answer he surprisingly walks away, leaving me to myself. I didn't expect that.

Tears fill my eyes as the adrenaline from the run leaves my body. I feel completely exhausted.

I'm so pathetic. Hunter certainly sees that. It was obvious to Griffin how into Hunter I am, so certain Hunter knows too, right?

Hunter trained at Spy School in Switzerland. He can probably read people very easily, not that it would be hard to read me. I'm an open book, clear for anybody to read.

I groan covering my face with my hands. Will he get somebody else to protect me now? The thought makes my stomach ache.

How will I face him now? I feel so... pathetic. I'm just a pathetic kid who has a crush on her bodyguard.

I sob into my pillow, wondering what I'm supposed to do now. I can't hide in my room forever. I'll have to face him eventually.



Why couldn't Liam have been in his dorm? I need to talk with my brother right now. Or even Harper...

She's probably at football practice, watching Reed. I don't blame her for going. It's not like I'm ever around to hang out with her. I'm such a bad friend.

But then I remember, I *can't* be a good friend right now. I have to protect those that I love. If I'm around Harper or Liam, it puts them at risk. I can't be out of this cabin often because somebody is trying to kill me.

Which means I'm stuck here.

With Hunter.

With no escape.

What did I do to deserve this? Why does somebody want to *kill* me? I haven't done anything to anybody. At my old school, I barely even talked to anybody. Yet, somebody wants me dead so bad that they're willing to pay one million dollars for somebody to do the job.

My stomach aches.

Maybe what Hunter is doing is futile. This person isn't backing down.

I'm just fighting fate by staying alive. My days are numbered and there is nothing anybody can do to save me.

## How does he not know?

As I cry into my pillow, I hear something at my door. I look up just in time to see Hunter walk through.

I'm not surprised that he *could* come in, but I am surprised that he *did*. I figured he would give me some privacy after what he heard. It's mortifying.

“Do you really think a locked door can keep a Spy School agent out?” he asks, a smile on his face. His smile fades as he looks at me. “You’re crying. Why are you crying?”

I don’t say anything, I just wipe at the tears on my face. I must look like a complete mess.

Hunter walks over to the bed, sitting down. He turns so that he’s facing me. “Are you crying because Griffin broke up with you?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t like Griffin like *that*. I told you that.”

“Then why are you so upset? I came in here to scold you for running away from me. I never expected to find you crying.” His green eyes scan my face, making me want to hide. “What has you upset?”

Is he seriously asking that?

“Did you not hear what Griffin said?” I ask, sitting up straighter.

“Which part?” He cocks his head to the side.

I throw my hands up. “All of it. Take your pick.”

He furrows his brows. “Uh, he said he can’t take you to homecoming. Which, I agree with what he said. You *did* look relieved when he said that.” Hunter chuckles. “I shouldn’t laugh. The guy was crazy about you, but it was kind of funny.”

I narrow my eyes.

He stops laughing. “You’re upset.”

Obviously.

I was upset because I was worried what Hunter would think about what Griffin said. But now I’m upset because I realize Hunter *doesn’t* see me as anything but a friend. I’m just his job.

He’s being paid to be with me right now.

“How much do you get paid to babysit me?” I ask him.

Hunter's eyes widen a fraction. "Cove, why are you asking this?"

"Because I feel pathetic," I admit.

I'm just a young girl that has a crush on an older guy. Not that Hunter is *that* much older than me. He's nineteen. I'm seventeen, soon to be eighteen. But he still sees me as a kid.

Hunter Duran will never like me the same way I like him. It's something I need to accept.

Hunter opens his mouth to say something, so I cut him off, not wanting to hear his sympathy.

"Why couldn't I like Griffin?" I ask Hunter. "He was nice."

Hunter shrugs. "I don't know. I don't think it's always about how nice or even how attractive somebody is. Sometimes, you just don't have chemistry. I can't explain it."

I frown.

Why do I have to have so much chemistry for Hunter? And how does he have none for me?

"Cove, you are not pathetic," Hunter says, his green eyes never breaking eye contact. "You're smart and way more mature than your peers. In just a few short months, you've picked up things in training it takes others year to learn. When you give people a chance to get to know you, they like you. You just keep everybody at arm's length."

He's right about the last part, but I don't know about the rest.

Hunter pauses to take a breath. "You're also the most beautiful woman I've ever met in my life. You don't even realize how stunning you are, and that only makes me like you more."

My heart races.

He thinks I'm beautiful.

“If you’re upset about what Griffin said about you having feelings for me, don’t be. He only sees what he wants to see. It’s easy for people to think that because we’re always together,” he says. “But I know where I stand with you. You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

He doesn’t know? How can he not see? Or is he only saying that to make me feel better?

Or...

Maybe he’s saying that because he wants to avoid having an awkward conversation—one where he lets me know that my feelings definitely aren’t reciprocated.

I decide to change the subject, not wanting to talk about that awkward conversation anymore. “So, uh, if I act super heartbroken, do you think Harper would let me skip homecoming?”

Hunter smirks. “Ah, Trouble, I’m not letting you get out of it that easily. Besides, you look incredible in your homecoming dress. You deserve to be seen. All the guys in the school will realize they were idiots for not asking you.”

I frown. “I don’t *want* any guy in this school to ask me to homecoming.”

Because what if they turn out like Preston? And besides, it’s not like any guy in this school could compare to my feelings for Hunter anyway. My heart is very, very taken.

Hunter nods. “I don’t blame you. The guys here are kind of immature.”

“All high school boys are immature,” I counter.

“Maybe,” he says. “I could get a guy from my team to take you. Sander and Brett have girlfriends. But maybe Gage could... eh, but he’s out of the country. Maybe Nolan...” he pauses, shaking his head. “No, he’s way too intense for you.” He looks at me, cocking his head to the side. “You know, I’m not sure who your type would be. You’re hard to get a read on.”

He thinks *I'm* hard to read?

“I don’t want a *pity* date.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Do they not teach you how to talk to girls at that school of yours?”

He smirks. “Well, I did take Flirting 101 my freshman year.”

Flirting 101? Is he serious?

“You’re joking, right?” I ask.

“Not joking,” he answers. “If you don’t want to go with a friend of mine, I could always take you. I’m going to be there anyway, so we may as well go together. I’m sure it would make Harper very happy.”

I don’t respond because I don’t know what to say. Hunter is exactly who I want taking me. But I don’t want him taking me out of convenience. And I definitely don’t want him taking me because he feels sorry for me.

“We’re friends, right?” Hunter asks.

I nod, trying not to think about how much his ‘friends’ comment hurts.

“We can go as friends,” he offers.

“It’s still a pity date,” I say, knowing he can’t really argue the point. Because a pity date is exactly what it is.

“It’s *not* a pity date. It actually would help a lot if we went together. I don’t want everybody in this school to think I’m your creepy stalker.”

I smirk. “That’s not far from the truth.”

Hunter narrows his eyes, but doesn’t comment on what I said. “It’s not a pity date. If Spy School had a prom, you’re exactly the kind of girl I’d want to take.”

My stomach flutters.

Why does he have to say things like *that*? Things that give me hope and make me believe that *maybe* he could like me the

same way I like him.

But I know he doesn't.

I lower my head. "I don't know, Hunter."

"Why not?" he asks.

I still don't look up. "I don't know." I shrug. "I just think maybe it would mean more to me than it would to you. I feel pathetic having you take me. Because I know that you'd never *really* take me, even if you say you would. I know you only said that to make me feel better."

"Cove, look at me," Hunter instructs.

I look up, my brown eyes meeting his green ones. My heart skips a beat.

"We really have to work on your confidence," he says. "Because, wow, Cove. You're beautiful. A girl like you is completely out of my league, and I know that. I don't want to take you because I feel sorry for you or because I pity you. Truly, it would be an honor to take you. I like hanging out with you. You're more than just a job for me. Even if Spy School tried to reassign me and I had to take time off to be here, I would. So don't ever say that I would take you out of pity. That's simply not true."

I lick my lips, which suddenly feel dry.

What am I supposed to say to something like *that*?

Hunter grins. "So, Cove Lawson, will you please help me make all the boys at West Raven Academy jealous by going to homecoming with me?"

Against my better judgment, I nod. "I would like that."

Even though we're still just going together as 'friends,' my heart still races at the thought of going with him.

Does Hunter really not know how I feel? Does he not see how much it's going to hurt to say goodbye once he does leave?

Forget the assassins—I'm not going to survive Hunter Duran.

**Saturday, October 17**

**West Raven vs. East Raven.**

As it turns out, homecoming is a lot more than just a dance.

It starts out early on Saturday with a football game. Our team plays against East Raven. It's all in good fun, but when I arrive at the football field, everybody is wearing school colors. I have on a West Raven Academy hoodie that Harper gave me. It's cool outside today and even with the hoodie on, I'm shivering.

Hunter shakes his head, smirking. "You wouldn't last a day in Switzerland. This is not cold."

I look over at him, wondering how he can stand to wear a short sleeved shirt. "Is that where you grew up?"

"No. I was mostly raised in London," he says, as we take a seat in the stands.

My jaw drops open. "What? You sound American."

He shrugs. "I started school in Switzerland at fourteen and all my friends were American. I naturally lost the accent. And I don't live there now."

"Where do you live?" I ask.

"Right now, I live in Massachusetts. With you."

I roll my eyes. "I mean when you're not here. Like, when you're not working a case."



“I have an apartment in Arizona,” he says. “But I only stayed there for a week about two years ago and haven’t been back.”

“You pay rent for an apartment you don’t even live in?”

“Spy School pays for it,” he says.

Right.

“So it’s not *really* home.” I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “If you could choose, where would you want to live?”

His green eyes pierce into mine. “I don’t know. I don’t really have a life outside of my job. Someday I will. Maybe then I will buy a house.”

“A house is a lot of commitment,” I tease.

He smirks. “I want a life. A home. A wife. Kids. You know, what everybody wants.”

“Not everybody,” I mumble, thinking of my mother.

“Is that not what you want?” he asks.

“It is,” I say. “It’s just not what my mother wanted.”

The smirk falls from his face. “Your mom was a teenager when she had you, right?”

I nod. “She says I ruined her body.”

Hunter huffs. “Your mother is an idiot.”

I don’t have an argument against what he’s saying, so I keep my lips pressed together. He is right. She *is* an idiot.

Before the football game begins, the dance team performs. I can’t bother to pay attention to their routine. Instead, I’m imagining what a future with Hunter would look like. It’s a dangerous game to play, but sometimes I wonder. I’m so lost in my thoughts that I don’t notice somebody walk up and sit down on the other side of me.

“Cove, hey.”

I look over and see Griffin take a seat. I furrow my brows, confused why he's sitting by me. I thought we had left things pretty clear yesterday afternoon.

"Hey," I say.

Hunter grunts. I look over and see him glaring at Griffin.

"Hey, Hunter," Griffin nods at him.

Hunter doesn't respond to Griffin, which surprises me. Maybe he's mad at him for what happened yesterday. He is really protective of me and he doesn't get that it wasn't Griffin that made me cry, but I can't explain that to him.

"What's up?" I ask, turning back to Griffin.

He shrugs. "I just kind of felt bad about ditching you the day before homecoming without a date, so I wanted to come apologize. And if you really need a date, we can go as friends."

Hunter turns to him. "I'm taking her, so don't worry about it. Go sit with your East Raven friends."

Griffin smirks, not at all put off by Hunter's attitude toward him.

"I guess I'll see you around, Cove." Griffin smiles widely at me as he walks off.

He thinks he was right, but he couldn't have been further from the truth. Hunter doesn't like me, not at all.

When my phone vibrates a few seconds after he walks off, I already know it's going to be Griffin. When I see Hunter pull his phone out, I want to snatch it from his hand before he can read it.

Hunter snorts. "That guy is annoying."

I pull out my phone to see what he said.

*GRIFFIN: Now you get to go to homecoming with who you want to go with.*

I frown.

Why do people keep saying that? Eventually Hunter is going to figure out the truth and that is going to be really embarrassing. I don't want him thinking I have a crush on him, even though I *do*.

“Don't worry about it, Trouble. You and I know the truth.” He slips his arm around the seat behind me.

Before I can respond, I see pink hair coming toward us. I sigh in relief when I see Harper. She will be a good buffer.

Harper is all decked out with a school jersey on—one of Reed's, if I'm not mistaken. Her hair is pulled back with a big, red scrunchie, and she even has her face panted.

She grins widely as she takes the seat Griffin just vacated. “Sorry I'm late. I was giving Reed a pep talk before the same.”

I raise an eyebrow at her, calling her bluff. “Right. And you two didn't make out at all.”

Her cheeks turn pink. “Okay, maybe I gave him one good luck kiss, but that's it. I swear.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I think it's cute.”

Her grin widens. “Reed and I *are* cute together. I'm so ready for the dance tonight.”

I frown at the mention of the dance. I'm not exactly looking forward to it, though I am slightly more excited now that I'm going with Hunter instead of Griffin.

Harper narrows her eyes. “You're not still trying to get out of coming, are you?”

“No, she's not.” Hunter squeezes me against his side. “Cove has agreed to go with me.”

Harper squeals so loudly that people around us turn to look.

My cheeks grow warm at the attention.

“Finally,” she gushes, clapping her hands. “Oh, I knew you two would someday realize you are perfect for one another. Just think of all the double dates we can go on. Senior year is going to be so much fun now.”

I turn to Hunter, raising an eyebrow.

He’s the one who made this mess, now he gets to explain it away.

He doesn’t though. He just pulls me closer to his side.

I remove his arm from around me, even though it kills me to do so. “Harp, we’re going as friends. He’s just doing it as a favor because Griffin ditched me last minute.”

“Oh.” The smile slips from her face and she slowly narrows her eyes. “Griffin ditched you?”

“He’s lucky I didn’t punch him,” Hunter says.

Once again, Harper grins. “Maybe there is hope yet for you two.”

Yeah, right. If anything, Hunter is just mad at Griffin because now he has to be my date for homecoming. It’s nothing but an inconvenience for him.

The crowd cheers, so I look out and see the football players running out onto the field. Harper stands and cheers loudly for Reed.

I rub at my temples, willing the oncoming headache to cease.

Today is going to be a really long day, I can already tell.

**Because you’re an idiot.**

Harper tried to talk me into getting my hair done with her, but there is no way I can afford to pay somebody to do my hair. I think I may have ten bucks and some change. And I

didn't want to ask Liam for money or let Hunter know. The last thing I want is for Hunter to insist on paying for more things for me.

I'm making a list in my head of everything I owe him. At this point, the large trust fund I'm getting isn't nearly enough. He's saved my life more times than I can count. And I know he says I don't owe him anything, but I feel like I do. He's given up his life to be here to help me.

I sigh, looking in the mirror at myself. I have no idea how to fix my hair. There is a reason I always just leave it down. Down is easy. But I can't just wear my hair like I always do, especially after Hunter spent all that money on my dress.

There is a knock on my door moments before it opens up. Hunter pokes his head in.

"You doing okay?"

I shrug. "I'm not good at being a girl."

He walks inside. "Do you need help with your hair?"

I turn fully toward him. "You know how to fix hair?"

"Yes." He pats the chair. "Sit down."

I do sit down, partly out of shock. "How did you learn to fix hair?"

"I have—had—a younger sister. And my parents were gone a lot with work. My older brother learned how to cook and I took care of my little sister," he explains.

Had?

Does that mean she passed away?

I want to ask, but I don't want to bring it up if it's nothing something he wants to talk about.

"The year I started Spy School, my parents were on a dangerous mission. My little sister was with them and she got caught in the crossfire. My dad was the only one to make it out alive," he tells me. "After that, he retired. I don't hear from

him much. I think he blames himself for not being able to save my mom and sister.”

My chest aches for him. “Hunter, I’m sorry.”

He shrugs. “That’s what this life is like. We all know the risk when we take the job. That’s why a lot of people retire once they have kids.”

He talks so nonchalantly about it, but I know it bothers him more than he’s letting on. I can’t imagine how hard that must’ve been on him at fourteen.

“Do you want your hair up or down?” Hunter asks.

“Down?” I say, but I raise my voice at the end, making it sound more like a question.

I really have no idea what to do with my hair. If I would’ve had the money, I’d be with Harper right now and she’d be the one to decide.

He nods. “You look good with your hair down. Maybe I’ll pull back a little out of your face.”

“Okay.” I worry my bottom lip between my teeth.

It’s so strange to have somebody else do my hair for me, but definitely strange that it’s Hunter doing it for me. I’m just so shocked that he knows how to even fix hair. I want to ask him more questions about it, but I don’t want to bring up his dead sister or mother anymore.

“You said your brother cooks,” I say, hoping he will talk more about his mysterious Spy School brother.

“Uh, yeah. He does. Jax is his name. Jaxon. He’s a couple years older than me, but we’ve always been close. Sometimes we work cases together,” Hunter explains. “But right now, my brother is on an assignment. I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Do you miss him?” I ask.

It’s a stupid question—of course he misses him. I just want him to keep talking.

“Yeah,” Hunter answers. “But, like I said before, I’m used to this life. Our parents would be gone for months at a time on missions when we were kids. This has just always been our lives.”

“Will you get to see him at Christmas?” I ask.

Hunter’s green eyes meet mine in the mirror. “I don’t know. I’ll probably be with you at Christmas.”

With... *me*?

Why hadn’t I thought of that? Of course he can’t leave before the case is over. He’ll have to stay with me until I’m safe. It’s not like assassins are just going to take a break for Christmas.

“Oh,” I manage to say. “My stepdad likes to do Christmas in The Hamptons. I only am invited because Liam refuses to go without me. But I’ll probably be in my room the entire time. I’m never invited to their parties or anything.”

“You’re not going home for Christmas,” Hunter says, not leaving any room to negotiate. “I don’t know what we’re doing yet, but I don’t plan on you ever going anywhere near your mother and stepfather ever again.”

My heart races. “You can do that?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Cove, I’m Spy School. I can do anything I want.”

Right.

I put a hand to the base of my throat. “I just thought I’d be forced to go home is all. As soon as I turn eighteen and get my trust fund, I planned on leaving. I hate New York City. I want to live somewhere in the country, as far away from the city as I can.”

As far away from my family as I can.

Liam will just have to come visit me. Because I won’t even be going back to the city to see him.

“I’ve seen how much money you’re getting—it’s a lot, Cove. More than enough to last multiple lifetimes,” Hunter says.

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “It must be a lot if somebody is willing to kill me for it. I don’t want it. I just need enough to get away from my mother and stepfather. I could save that person a lot of time and money.”

“That money is yours. Your father left it to you. He left some to his parents, but most of his fortune is left to you in his will.”

I glance at Hunter. “Seriously?”

I had no idea that Chris Lawson even knew my name. I never met him, though I always wanted to.

He nods. “He had a pretty iron tight will. Your mom was only able to get enough money for your essentials growing up.”

I grin. “I know. She hates me for it. When he died, my mom was so happy. I think she thought she was going to be very rich. Right after that, once she realized she wasn’t getting anything, she met my stepfather.”

“Your stepfather.” Hunter shakes his head. “He’s a pretty shady guy. We’ve been investigating him. Honestly, I don’t know how he hasn’t got on Spy School radar before. The FBI has investigated him a lot, but they always get paid off.”

“The FBI can be paid off?” I ask.

He nods. “They’re not a good organization, Cove. It’s why Spy School is independent—we don’t answer to any country. We can’t be bought.”

That’s a scary thought—that the people who are supposed to protect us can be paid off. Good thing Spy School does exist. I can’t imagine the mess our world would be in without them.

Hunter shuts off the curling iron. “I’m going to leave you to get dressed.”



“Thank you.”

I look in the mirror as Hunter leaves my room, surprised that my hair looks so good. How is Hunter better at fixing hair than I am? I might have to hire him to fix my hair every morning. Had I only known...

I put on the dress that Harper picked out for me, trying to be careful not to mess up my hair. I'm glad that I put my foot down and told Harper I wouldn't be wearing heels, but I'm also glad she wouldn't let me wear sneakers with my dress. The white sandals finish off the look.

When I look in the mirror, I can barely recognize myself. I almost look... pretty.

My heart is racing as I head out of my room and down the hallway. I'm so glad that Griffin couldn't come because I'd much rather be going with Hunter anyway.

When I walk into the living room, Hunter's eyes widen as he looks at me. I see his Adam's apple bob up and down slowly.

“Wow,” he says.

My cheeks grow warm. “Thanks for the hair. And the dress. And shoes. And being my date.”

Pretty much, everything about tonight is thanks to Hunter. Without him, there is no way I could've gotten a dress and shoes. And I don't know how I could've done my hair.

“Can I have your phone?” Hunter asks.

“Uh, sure.” I pass it over to him.

He holds it up. “Smile.”

He snaps the picture and then does something else with my phone. I'm curious what he's doing. When he hands it back, I groan as I realize he texted Griffin from my phone. He texted him the picture, along with the caption, “This is Hunter. See what you missed out on because you're an idiot.”

“Hunter!”

He grins. “I am not going to apologize for saying the truth. But it’s okay. His loss is my gain.”

## **I shouldn’t have done that.**

I don’t know what I expected out of homecoming—maybe balloons, paper streamers, and a DJ playing popular music that I’m just not into. But I guess I shouldn’t have expected that out of a school like West Raven Academy. This school doesn’t cheap out on anything, even silly high school dances.

The school got a band to play, not a DJ. And the band actually isn’t bad. And there are no balloons or streamers. Of course, the dance is being held in the school’s ballroom. What other occasion would a school need a ballroom for?

Harper looks beautiful in her pink dress. Her hair is partly up and partly down. Her date, Reed, hasn’t left her side all evening. It’s really sweet to see the two of them together. I’m glad that my friend is happy. She deserves it. Reed is a much better pick than Finley. Though, to be fair, Finley was an assassin who only dated her to get close to me. I’m just glad she never found out the truth.

Hunter stays by my side, which is exactly what I expected out of the night. But he is being sweet and dancing with me. He’s a surprisingly good dancer, though I don’t know why I’m surprised. Hunter is good at everything he does.

Once again, I’m glad that Griffin decided to back out last minute. If he hadn’t, I’m sure Hunter would’ve tried to get me another date. I only wanted to go with him.

After a little while, Hunter leads me onto a balcony, away from the crowds. I lean over the rail, looking over the campus. West Raven is an immaculate school, one I don’t fit in at. I feel like an imposter here.

“You look beautiful tonight,” Hunter says, stepping up beside me.

I glance over at him, grinning. “Like anybody is looking at me when I’m standing next to you.”

My cheeks grow warm as I realize what I just said.

Hunter is aware that he’s a good looking guy, he has to be. But I don’t want him to suspect that I’m attracted to him. If he does and he realizes the extent of my feelings, things would get very awkward.

Then again, maybe he should know. Maybe if he knows the truth he can gently let me down and maybe I could get over him.

This crush is very unrequited. I know that. But I still hold a little hope that maybe he could feel the same.

“Is that what you think?” Hunter smirks, shaking his head. “Cove, I went to Spy School. I was surrounded by beautiful, intelligent women, but trust me when I tell you that none of those women can hold a candle to you.”

I suck in a sharp breath, not knowing what to say or think about what he’s saying. Could it be possible that he feels the same as I do?

No. There is no way.

But... his words feel like there’s hope.

“You don’t look like you believe me.” Hunter focuses his green eyes on me.

I shake my head slightly. “I don’t. There is no way a guy like you feels that way about me. I’m nothing.”

Hunter’s jaw drops open and he looks at me for a few moments, not saying a word.

I wonder what he’s thinking. He has to know that I’m right.

He shakes his head back and forth, his green eyes focused solely on me. “Cove Lawson, you can’t possibly believe that.”

I open my mouth to respond, but I don’t know what to say.

Hunter takes a step closer to me. “If you understood how stunning you are...” his words trail off and he takes a deep breath. “Sometimes I don’t think it’s fair that I got you as an assignment. How can I possibly focus on my job when all I want to do is kiss you?”

My heart races.

Hunter wants to kiss *me*?

Certainly I heard him wrong.

Still, I find myself taking a step closer to him. “There is no way you feel that way, Hunter. I’m just the girl you were forced to babysit that one time. I’m an assignment you’ll forget about.”

“I could never forget you.” Hunter closes the distance between us, gently pressing his lips against mine.

I’m only shocked for a second before I kiss him back.

My first kiss. With the only guy I’ve wanted to kiss. And it’s absolutely perfect.

I tangle my fingers in his hair. Hunter puts his hand on the small of my back, pulling me further into him.

While Hunter’s hands are calloused, his lips are soft. He’s so gentle with me, like he thinks I could break. But the only thing that could break me right now is if he stopped kissing me.

Is this really happening? Is Hunter really kissing me right now?

Too quickly, the kiss ends. Hunter pulls back, his green eyes piercing into mine. He runs his fingers through his hair, backing away from me.

“Oh, Cove, I’m sorry,” he says.

He's sorry? That was the best experience of my life and he's *sorry*?

"I shouldn't have done that," he continues. "You're my assignment. I can't... we can't..."

We can't.

I should have known it was too good to be true. Guys like Hunter don't like girls like me. I only wish he would've figured that out *before* he kissed me.

Tears press against the back of my eyes.

"I'm sorry," Hunter says. "We just—"

I don't want to hear anymore. Hearing his reasonings won't change anything. He's made his decision and I have to live with it.

Not wanting Hunter to see my tears, I turn my back toward him. But it's not enough. I need to get *away* from him. I can't be around him right now. I don't want him to realize just how much his words hurt me. I can't let him know how deep my feelings for him are.

I take off running toward the stairs. Hunter yells after me, but I have a bit of a head start on him. I think me running took him by surprise. He definitely wasn't expecting it.

Maybe I'm stupid to run away from somebody who is trying to protect me, but my heart can't take it. Hunter doesn't even realize how deep my feelings for him are. It was so easy for him to kiss me and to go back to normal. But I can't do that. I can never go back from that.

I run to the side of the dance floor, weaving my way between the crowds of people. When I see a staircase to the left, I run down, hoping Hunter doesn't see me.

The staircase leads to a dark and dusty basement. There are a bunch of boxes stacked up. I find a little nook that's well hidden and I sit down on the floor, not even caring if I ruin my dress.

Tonight is the worst night of my life.

I hide my face in my hands and I sob into them.

I should've just begged Griffin to take me. If I had gone with him, I wouldn't be in this situation.

I'm so pathetic to pine away after Hunter. And now, Hunter is going to know. There is no way I can hide my feelings after that. He has to know just how deeply he hurt me.

I knew coming to homecoming was a bad idea. I can't believe I let Harper talk me into this. She's just hanging out with Reed anyway. And I'm so, so glad she's happy, but she didn't need me tonight.

I would go find her or Liam, but then I'd most likely run into Hunter and I can't deal with that right now. I just need him to leave me alone.

How did I end up here?

Crying.

Alone.

In a dirty basement.

## **Just the girl.**

The tears roll down my cheeks and fall onto my dress, which only makes me cry more.

This stupid dress. I never should've let Hunter buy it for me. And I definitely shouldn't have let Hunter bring me tonight. I should've put my foot down and said I wasn't going to come. I've made a big mess of things now.

How can I ever face Hunter again?

I stiffen when I hear footsteps on the stairs. I should've known Hunter would easily find me. When I see a shadow, I

try to make myself smaller, hoping he won't see me. But when a face appears, I jump when I see that it's not Hunter.

"Cove Lawson, just the girl I was looking for," the man says.

He's older, probably in his forties. He's got a gun in his hand and he points it directly at me.

"All I'd have to do is pull this trigger and I'd be a million dollars richer." His smile widens, but he lowers his gun. "But I've got something else in mind for you."

The tears have now ceased and instead of praying Hunter doesn't find me, I'm praying he does find me.

Hunter will find me. He always does.

"Get up. You're coming with me," the guy orders. He grabs onto my arm and pulls me up from the floor.

With a gun pressed into my side, he leads me from the basement. We don't go up the same stairs that I came down. Instead, we head up a set of stairs that lead directly outside.

Nobody is around back where we are. Which means that Hunter also isn't around.

I think about running, but if I do this guy will pull the trigger.

"What are you going to do with me?" I ask, wondering why he hasn't pulled the trigger yet.

"Keep your mouth shut," he says, shoving the gun harder against my side.

That's definitely going to leave a bruise.

He leads me toward a side road where there is a car waiting. Another man is sitting in the driver's seat.

I abruptly stop, shaking my head at the guy. "Shoot me now. I am not getting in that car."

The guy doesn't listen. He simply picks me up. I fight against him, but he's strong—a lot stronger than I am. I kick

and scream, swinging my arms. The guy in the car jumps out. He grabs onto my legs to stop the motion as the two of them shove me into the backseat of the car. It's then that I realize I'm in trouble.

I'm not being killed. I'm being kidnapped.

I don't have my phone, so there is no way that Hunter can track me down. And if these guys get me off campus, there is no saving me. But the first guy, who is now wearing a mask over his face, has a gun pointed directly at me.

What am I going to do now?

I force myself to remain calm.

What would Hunter do? He would likely fight. He definitely wouldn't let two men kidnap him, though I doubt these two guys would've got Hunter in the car. But I'm not as strong as Hunter is. I haven't had as much training.

"What do you want with me? I'm not worth anything alive," I say, though I'm not sure why I'm trying to convince them to kill me for. I need to stall them.

The driver takes off.

I'm in trouble.

The guy cocks his gun. "Keep your mouth shut, kid."

I tremble, falling back against my seat.

I have two options—fight or be kidnapped. It's going to be hard to fight when I have a gun pointed directly at my head. But if they get me out of the gates of this school, who knows if Hunter will even be able to find me.

Going through moves in my head, I try to figure out what my best choice is. How do I get the gun from the guy without him pulling the trigger?

"We've got company," the driver says, looking in the rearview mirror.

The guy in the passenger seat curses.



I turn around, seeing a red sports car chasing us. It *has* to be Hunter. He's going to save me.

My heart soars.

I'm going to be all right.

The guy moves the gun away from me and points it out the window, aiming at Hunter. Since neither of them are focused on me, I make my move. I grab the steering wheel. The guy fights me as the car swerves back and forth over the road.

"Stop doing that," he yells.

But the guy in the passenger seat is focused on shooting at Hunter's car. I used my right arm to knock the guy in the head. I do it a couple of times until he passes out.

I'm going to have to thank Hunter for showing me how to knock somebody out later.

But the car doesn't slow down as we approach the closed gates of the school. I pull on the steering wheel hard to the left, running us off into the ditch.

I feel a sense of weightlessness as the car topples over. I try to hold onto the seat, but I am tossed around the car. I hit something, maybe the roof, then immediately hit something else, possibly the floorboard. This happens a couple of times before the car comes to an abrupt halt. When the car stops, my head hits the window hard and the world fades for a second. I force myself to open my eyes. I cannot pass out right now.

I hear one of the guys grunt from the front seat. A moment later, I hear gunshots. Not knowing what to do, I climb to the door, forcing it open. It's then that I realize the car is upside down. I crawl out onto the ground, feeling disoriented from the crash.

I take a deep breath through my nose.

I'm on the ground and I'm right side up now.

Forcing myself to stand, I try to take off running but I end up stumbling onto my knees.

Maybe I should just crawl.

On my hands and knees, I crawl as fast as I can, trying to get away. But before I make it far, I see a pair of shoes directly in front of my path.

“Cove.”

It’s Hunter.

I look up, letting out a sigh of relief.

“Are you okay?” Hunter lifts me from the ground and begins to carry me. “I need to get you to a hospital.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him. I close my eyes, feeling dizzy from the movement of him carrying me toward his car. “What about the guys who tried to kidnap me?”

“They’re dead. I have a cleanup crew on their way to take care of the mess,” Hunter tells me. He opens the passenger side door of the red sports car and puts me inside. “You’re not fine. You’re bleeding from the head.”

“I am?” I put a hand up to my throbbing head and am shocked when I see red on my hand. “I feel fine. Just dizzy from the crash.”

“Or dizzy from a concussion.” He shuts the door, rushing around to the driver’s side.

I buckle my seatbelt as he takes off. The gates open for him. Once on the road, he drives way too fast. I close my eyes.

“You should slow down. I don’t want to puke,” I tell him.

“Cove, are you okay?” Hunter asks.

I open my eyes and see him glancing between the road and me. “I’m fine, Hunter. Just have a headache, but that’s it.”

He snorts, shaking his head. “Just a headache.”

“Won’t they ask questions at the hospital?” I ask. “I can’t just walk in with a head wound.”

“The local hospital has a Spy School doctor on staff. He’ll take care of everything for us.”

“A Spy School *doctor*?” I ask, not sure why I’m surprised.

“There are a lot of them,” Hunter explains. “Just doctors who are employed by Spy School. Always the best ones. You’ll be taken care of.”

He reaches a hand over and grabs onto mine.

I furrow my brows, looking at our intertwined fingers.

This is the reason I ran from Hunter to begin with. He kissed me and then reminded me that I’m just his ‘job.’ We can’t be together.

Still, I don’t want to pull away from him. I need to hold onto him and be reminded that I’m safe. Nobody will hurt me as long as Hunter is around. It’s a double edged sword—he’ll protect me, but he hurts me deeply.

I chew on my bottom lip as I look out the side window.

“Everything is going to be all right, Cove. I promise.” Hunter squeezes my hand.

I turn to look at him. He’s watching the road, but I can see the worry on his face. He’s scared.

“Why do you think those guys tried to kidnap me? Why didn’t they just kill me and get the million dollars?” I ask. “He said he had something else in mind for me.”

Hunter’s entire body tenses. “I don’t know, Cove. But I promise you, I will figure it out.”

I know he will. Hunter always does.

## **I shouldn’t have kissed you.**

I end up getting three stitches right at the edge of my hairline. The doctor tells me that it won’t leave a scar, but I’m not worried about that. I’m just glad to be alive. I also have a mild concussion, but I should be okay in a few days, after I get

some rest. Within an hour, I am discharged and we're on our way back to campus.

"That didn't take long," I comment, as Hunter pulls out of our parking spot.

"Spy School perks," he says, grinning. "A visit like that would take most people four or five hours."

That doesn't seem fair to everybody else, but I'm not going to complain. I'm exhausted and ready to get some sleep.

"About tonight," Hunter says.

I take a deep breath, ready for him to talk about the guys who kidnapped me. I imagine he'll want to know a rundown of every detail that happened.

"I shouldn't have kissed you," he says.

My heart sinks.

I wish it had been him asking about details on almost getting kidnapped.

I'm so not ready for this conversation yet. He hurt me deeply tonight and it's not something I want him to know. I feel like it's so obvious how I feel about him. And now I know how he feels about me.

I'm his job. Period. I don't mean anything else to him. I'm just the girl he's paid to watch. And maybe he's grown close to me during this time, but once this 'assignment' is over, he will be gone.

Not knowing how to respond, I decide not to. Hunter remains quiet, like he's waiting for me to say something. I chew on my bottom lip, glancing at the street as he pulls out, trying not to feel awkward.

But this *is* awkward. It's so awkward.

Hunter clears his throat. "I, um, am sorry that I kissed you."

I press my lips firmly together, looking at anything that I can to avoid seeing his expression. I make sure to keep my head turned away from him so he can't see the tears that are forming.

"You're a nice girl, Cove. You deserve the best," he says. "And I know that someday you'll find a guy who is worthy of you."

Really? *That's* what he has to say? That I'll find somebody else.

I roll my eyes, turning to him. "It doesn't matter, Hunter. I don't want to talk about it."

"Are you mad at me?" he asks.

Keeping my head turned away, I wipe at a tear under my eye. "No, I'm not mad at you."

"Are you sure?"

I let out a long breath, turning to face him. "It's just been a long night. I'm tired. I feel like I could sleep for the next week."

"It's the concussion." He glances over, slowing the car down slightly. "Are you hurting? Do we need to go back to the hospital?"

I furrow my brows. "I'm fine. I don't feel anything. They gave me some strong medicine. I feel kind of loopy from it."

"Then why were you crying?"

Of course he's noticed. I can't seem to hide anything from him, which makes me feel even more pathetic.

"Tonight was rough," I say, hoping he won't ask any more questions about it.

Will he make me admit my feelings for him? Certainly he wouldn't do that, right? That would be mortifying.

"Ah, Cove, I'm sorry. We don't have to talk about this right now," he says. "We'll talk when you feel better."

We will?

No. This isn't what I wanted either.

I sigh, angling my body toward him. "We don't need to talk about it at all, Hunter. I know where I stand with you. You've made it very clear. So, we'll just forget it ever happened and go back to the way things were."

How could they go back to the way they were? I can never forget that kiss.

Still, I know it's what Hunter needs to hear. If I don't convince him, he won't let this go and I can't keep talking about it. I want to quietly have a broken heart and never let him know the truth.

"Right." Hunter puts both hands on the steering wheel. "So that means we're cool, right?"

"Yeah." I turn and look back out the window, wondering how things can go on from here.

One thing is certain, I will never forget that kiss. How can any kiss in the future compare to that?

Hunter has ruined my lips.

I look at Hunter and see him carefully watching the road, with both hands on the steering wheel. His body is tense, like he wants to say something.

"What do you want to say?" I ask him, wanting this conversation *over*. I never want to bring up that kiss again. It's too painful. We have to move on.

"I just wanted to ask you something, but it feels pointless now," he says.

"Now you have to ask me or it will drive me crazy."

He chuckles. "Okay, fine. I just wanted to ask you if tonight was your first kiss."

My heart races. "Why do you ask?"

Was I a bad kisser? What if the kiss sucked for him? I'm not sure I could handle it if he didn't enjoy it as much as I did.

"Because I will feel really bad if I took your first kiss from you," he says.

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. "Oh. Yeah, don't worry about that."

"So it wasn't your first kiss?" He frowns.

"No, it was," I say. "I just am glad it was you. So don't be worried about me regretting it or something. I just thought you could tell it was my first kiss because I was bad or something."

"No." He shakes his head. "It was a good kiss. The best kiss I've ever had."

My heart flutters. I force myself not to smile, though I'm pretty sure it's obvious.

"So, no regrets," he says.

I shake my head. "Absolutely none."

Except maybe I regret what happened after. Him telling me it was a mistake. And me running was definitely a mistake because I almost got kidnapped and ended up with a concussion.

"Are we still friends?" Hunter asks.

I frown. "Yeah. Of course."

Friends.

I hate that word.

Can Hunter not see that I want so much more than friendship from him?

He visibly relaxes. I can see he was worried.

He must know how I feel. That's why he's so relieved.

My heart breaks as I realize that this is all I will ever have from Hunter. He's my bodyguard. He keeps me alive. He

trains me. And we're *sort of* friends, but there will never be anything more.

The one kiss we shared will live forever in my memories. I only regret that it'll never happen again.

I should've known. A guy like Hunter could never like somebody like me.

Hunter reaches his hand over and grabs onto mine again. I look down at our hands, wondering what Hunter is thinking. He has to know that this means so much more to me than it does to him, right?

"So, what happens now?" I ask.

Hunter lets out a long breath. "Now, we go back to our cabin. I'm going to figure out what those guys wanted. We're going to train harder, at least once you've recovered. And I'm going to keep you alive."

"I like being alive."

He chuckles. "Don't worry, Trouble. I'll always be here to protect you."

But who is going to protect my heart from Hunter?



## Sunday, October 18

### The plan.

On Sunday afternoon, I get a text from Griffin. I'm surprised when I see his name pop up on my screen.

Hunter grunts, clearly unhappy to see Griffin text me.

I ignore him and unlock my phone.

GRIFFIN: *Can we meet to talk? WITHOUT your boyfriend...*

My cheeks grow warm, knowing Hunter is reading the text.

"This boy ditched you for homecoming and now he wants to meet up with you." Hunter frowns.

I look at him, raising an eyebrow. "He's still my friend."

"If he's looking for just friendship, why does he want to meet you without me?" Hunter counters.

I don't know how to respond. "Am I allowed to go?"

He sighs. "Whatever you want."

I text back Griffin, telling him where to meet me, then I look up at Hunter. "You're letting me go without you?"

He snorts. "I'll be there, just in case. I don't trust Griffin."

I know that's not true. If he didn't trust Griffin, he wouldn't let me go at all. He's just upset about Griffin ditching me at homecoming. I don't care about that. The truth is, I went with who I wanted to go with. Griffin did me a favor. Not that I'll be admitting that to Hunter anytime soon.

I get up from the couch, my head spinning from the movement.

Hunter steps up beside me, putting his hand on my arm. "Are you okay?"

"Just stood up too quick." I put a hand to my temple, hoping the spinning stops.

"I'm not sure you should go. You have a concussion." Hunter studies me carefully, like he's waiting for me to fall over.

"I'm fine," I say, reassuring him. "It's a *mild* concussion."

"Still, you have a brain injury."

I roll my eyes. "Barely."

"Let's just get this over with." Hunter steps away from me.

I grin at him, shaking my head.

After the conversation we had last night about us just being 'friends,' I didn't think he would care if I went to meet with Griffin.

I really want to go because I don't like how we left things. I know Griffin feels guilty about ditching me last minute. I just want to make sure that he knows we're cool and that I still do want to be friends with him.

Hunter and I head toward our meeting spot in the woods. He stays close to me and even scouts the area before he goes to hide in the tree line. He's close enough to see me, but not close enough to hear what I'm saying. It's the only privacy I'm going to get from him, so I don't argue.

A few minutes later, Griffin shows up. His hair is wet, like he just got out of the shower. He's got on an East Raven

Academy hoodie and a pair of jeans. He looks good.

Griffin is very attractive. If it weren't for Hunter, maybe I could see him as something more than a friend. But the truth is, I'm not sure I'll ever see anybody in that way.

"Hey." He stuffs his hands in the front pocket of his jeans. "I kind of expected you to ditch me."

I grin, shaking my head. "I would never do that."

"I know." He frowns. "But I did do it to you."

I shrug one shoulder. "It's okay. I had a backup date."

"How did it go?" Griffin asks.

I frown.

"You didn't kiss him?"

"No, we did kiss." I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. "Well, *he* kissed me."

"How was it?" Griffin raises an eyebrow, waiting for me to tell him everything.

This is so weird. I shouldn't be talking to Griffin about my crush on Hunter. It's just... wrong.

Still, he's asking.

"It was everything I ever dreamt of. Until after, when he said it was a mistake and made sure that I knew we're just friends."

Griffin frowns. "He's an idiot."

I want to argue in Hunter's defense, but what could I say? Griffin doesn't know everything that's happened. And I can't tell him.

"What happened to your head?" Griffin pushes my hair back, looking at the stitches. "Wow. That looks bad."

"It's nothing." I back up slightly.

He drops my hair. "Sorry, I didn't mean to pry. That just looks back."

“I hit my head and got a concussion.” I frown. “Last night was kind of a rough night.”

“I don’t understand,” Griffin says. “Hunter really likes you. Why would he kiss you and then push you away?”

I shrug, not knowing how to respond.

I’m sure Griffin does think that Hunter has feelings for me, but he doesn’t.

Does it?

He did kiss me.

But then he made sure I knew we could only be friends.

Still... he *did* make the first move and kiss me. He has to feel something, right?

“I have an idea.” Griffin grins widely.

I look warily at him. “Why does that sound ominous?”

He chuckles. “Well, I was thinking that you and I should make Hunter jealous.”

“How would we do that?” I ask.

“We should date,” he answers.

I shake my head. “That wouldn’t be fair to you when you know how I feel about Hunter.”

“It wouldn’t be real. We’d fake date. Hunter would be none the wiser,” Griffin explains.

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Hunter is in love with you,” Griffin says. “It’s plain for everybody to see. I don’t know why he’s pushing you away, but if you make him jealous, he’s going to have to admit how he feels.”

“Maybe.” I chew on my bottom lip, considering his plan.

Hunter *did* seem kind of jealous when I said I wanted to come meet with Griffin.

“But you know that Hunter reads all of my texts,” I tell him. “So we’d have to pretend it’s real, even via text. Even if you don’t think Hunter is with me, he probably is. Even in the middle of the night.”

Griffin raises an eyebrow at me. “He reads all your texts?”

I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear. “It sounds bad when you say it like that.” And it *is* bad. “But I read his text too.”

I lie to make it seem better.

He wouldn’t understand that Hunter reads my text for my safety. At least that’s what Hunter tells me.

Griffin nods. “Right. So we will always fake it then. You and I will know the truth, but Hunter won’t.”

“Right.” I grin.

“What do you think Hunter will say when he finds out we’re dating?”

My stomach churns.

Will Hunter even believe me? He knows how I feel about Griffin. Then again, things are different since the kiss we shared.

“He’ll probably be mad,” I admit.

“Then he needs to do something about it.” Griffin smiles at me. “The guy is crazy about you. He just needs a little push.”

Maybe he’s right.

I *hope* he is.

“So we’re really doing this?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah. I think so.”

I’m fake dating Griffin to make Hunter jealous. What could possibly go wrong?

**The end.**

**Wasting Away, book 3, is coming!**

## Letter from Scarlett

I am so glad to have book 2 of Cove and Hunter's story out! I love writing these two snarky characters so much. They never cease to make me laugh. I love their easy banter and their chemistry. It makes me so excited about their future.

Did you enjoy the cameo of Sander and Phoenix? MY HEART. Seriously, I missed these characters so much. I'm glad that we got to see them again. Maybe that's why I have so many spin-offs of the same world—because I want to write these characters FOREVER. I adore them.

Cove and Hunter's story is not over yet. We've still got 2 books with them—I can't believe this book means we're HALF WAY DONE. But I'm so excited to see how their story concludes and I hope you are too!

If you did enjoy this book, it would mean a lot to me if you left a review wherever you picked this up. Or a rating :). Anything helps! You might not know, but it takes ten 5 star ratings to negate one 1 star rating. (Which I know makes no sense, but it's true! I was astonished when I found out!) So I would appreciate it a lot.

—Scarlett Haven

Additional note: I know that a lot of you have been waiting a long time for this book. I appreciate your patience with me.

Life doesn't always go as we plan. And since February of 2020, my life has been crazy for a lot of reasons. I simply didn't WANT to write for a long time. So I didn't. I hope that the non-cliffhanger ending makes up for the cliffhanger book one had. Sorry about that. :) I'm trying not to write cliffhanger endings anymore. Life is too unpredictable for them. Which is insane for me. If you've read any of my other books, you know I used to always end books on a cliffhanger. So I hope this is a change you're all okay with.

Thank you for loving Spy School as much as I do. I'm excited to see what the future brings for these characters!

<3



## **More books by Scarlett**

### **Shifter Academy: Corrupted**

The Unwanted Student (Book 1)

The Forgotten Princess (Book 2—coming soon!)

The Unexpected Ally (Book 3—coming soon!)

### **Spy Academy: The Royals**

The Unwanted Spy (Book 1)

The Cruel World (Book 2)

The Perfect Lie (Book 3)

The High Life (Book 4)

The Ugly Truth (Book 5—coming soon!)

### **West Raven Academy:**

Losing Grip (Book 1)

Fighting Fate (Book 2)

Wasting Away (Book 3—coming soon!)

Taking Risk (Book 4—coming soon!)

### **Stand alone Spy School books:**

The Princess of Spy School

Hacked

**East Raven Academy:**

Ever After (Book 1)

Never Ever (Book 2)

Never Say Never (Book 3)

For Ever (Book 4)

\*This is a completed series!

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