

GAME OVER

Boys

LOST DAUGHTER OF A
SERIAL KILLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

Finding out your serial killer dad wants *you* to un-alive your
boyfriends ... Well, it sucks.

Even worse if one of those guys is lying when he says he loves
you.

The worst when two of them are lying to your face. If all three of
them do it ... game over.

I might be known as Gamer Girl, but I wasn't prepared for this.
Choice and betrayal. Romance and death. Mostly, consequences
and hard truths.

Coming out of this alive will be a miracle; surviving with my heart
intact is impossible.

Oh, and my summer vacation? Total disaster. The beginning of
junior year? Complete nightmare.

My wedding ... it's a bloodbath.

Maxx, Parrish, Chasm: I thought you guys had my back?!

Whatever.

Romance is so overrated.

Fresh graves will be dug in Medina; the body count will be high.
New players will enter the game as the stakes rise, a crescendo of
opulence and violence. There are actions I'll take that I should've
taken from the beginning, actions that will turn out differently than
I ever could've imagined.

Who wants to help me catch a serial killer?

Checkmate, Dad.

It's game over.

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*you lose 100% of the battles you don't fight.
this book is dedicated to raising the sword.*



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Things are not always what they seem ...

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There's always a sense of dread in me when I think about the hunt.

I try not to think of the hunt very often.

There I stand, dressed in a red wool hunting jacket, breeches, and boots, rifle strapped to my shoulder, revolver in the holster at my waist. Dressed to kill—literally.

There I stand, in the woods, in the dark, holding a note that's written in human blood.

It's a simple, uncomplicated read. The handwriting is exquisite. My father may not have written it personally—surely this flowing cursive belongs to his henchman, Amin Volli—but the words are most assuredly from his lips. *“It's game over, boys.”*

The Seattle Slayer is calling the game before I've even made my move.

I drop the page by my side, breathing in the scent of pine needles and wet earth. It's been said that scent-memory is a thing, that smells stick with us and bring back old memories that might otherwise have been forgotten.

Like Tess' perfume. Like Justin's aftershave.

I didn't think I remembered my parents, but I did. A fragment of memory tied to such innocuous scents. It's the same with the boys. Clean linen for Parrish. Dark chocolate for Chasm. The scent of summer for—

“Load the gun, Dakota. I'm sorry, but you have to.” Delphine Prior doesn't

sound sorry. She's holding a rifle, too, like she's poised to use it on me if necessary. Surely I have enough sisters in my life, but somehow I feel let down by Delphine anyway. I wanted to like her. *Did* like her, despite my reservations. "If you don't load the gun, you'll lose them all. You know that he's watching."

I load the weapon with fumbling hands, hands that were never meant to draw blood. *A killer's hands. I have a killer's hands now. Just like Daddy Dearest.* Those red-stained hands finish their task and return the gun to its proper place at my side.

Yeah, I know. It's weird. Dakota Banks is not an urban fantasy character with a huge chip off her shoulder. I don't walk around toting guns. I don't walk around shooting people. Only ... I'm definitely going to shoot somebody tonight. Or somebody is going to shoot me. Is it totally fucked that I find that latter thing *more* acceptable?

"I'm disappointed in you." I tell Delphine the truth, and she cringes, as if she, too, is ashamed of what we've both become. Corrupted sisters. Justin's daughters. The children of the Seattle Slayer.

She leaves me to my morbid task as I trudge through the last of the woods by myself.

Alone.

I've felt so alone lately.

It's not a new emotion—it's part of growing up, I think—but that doesn't mean it hurts any less. I was lonely when I came to Medina. I was lonely when I moved in with Justin. I was lonely when Maxx told me that he didn't love me.

I stumble on an exposed tree root, a theatrical fall meant for a K-drama or a romance novel.

Especially since *he* is the one who catches me.

It's just his fingers on my elbow, but the touch is enough to steady me. Steady me and absolutely *destroy* my heart. It's beating a strange song in my chest, an echoing call that I wonder if Maxim Wright feels when he looks at me. It's absolutely begging him to answer. It's pleading on its goddamn knees.

Our eyes meet and something strange happens in that moon-drenched glade.

I know that he knows.

Someone has inserted their very last quarter into this metaphorical arcade machine. There's only one *Press Start to Continue* left in our world. If we don't summon a miracle here, it really *is* game over for one of us.

Maxx knows that; I know that.

"You know." I repeat it aloud even though I shouldn't. The words are a strange breath, almost a gasp. This guy though? He's an *incredible* actor. He knows how to show the whole world he's in love even if all of that love is bullshit. X blinks at me like I've lost my mind. He's been looking at me like that a lot lately. *The smell of summer, of drinks by the pool, of flowering plants in the sun, of warm hands rubbing in lotion on the beach.* That's him.

I'll never be able to smell any of those things without thinking of this man.

He doesn't answer me, doesn't even let on that he heard me. Those eyes of his, they're jewels in the harsh, handsome lines of his face. His mouth is nothing but an annoyed line.

"Did you guys get it taken care of?" I ask this next question loudly, my voice echoing in the clearing we're both standing in. In the distance, I hear gunshots. A lot of fucking gunshots. Doesn't matter.

I'm just stalling for time here.

I need a plan and—for once in my life—I don't have one.

Not a good one. Not a bad one. No plan at all.

"We took care of it." X's hand lingers on the elbow of my jacket, but I can't decide if he's savoring the feel of me through the fabric or if he's stalling for time, too. He takes his hand away and drops it harmlessly by his side. "What's up?"

Why ... why the fuck would he ask me that when he *knows*?!

Chasm and Parrish are waiting just behind him, calm enough that I know they're both oblivious. Only Maxx and I would handle an order like this without showing a lick of emotion. Chas is righteous; Parrish is vengeance. Maxim is too practical for his own good. Solid and serious. Does what needs to be done.

"*Pick a boy, shoot him, or they all die. This is a consequence of your combined actions. Oh, and when you get there—look up.*" Justin didn't leave me just one note tonight; he left a trail of breadcrumbs through the woods. I thought the red ink he used was tacky until I saw the one written in the judge's humors. *Look up, huh?*

I do.

Amin Volli is situated in the boughs of a large pine tree, using a flashlight to signal his position to me. In the flash of brightness, I can see the stag mask on his face. I can see the rifle in his hands. I can see that hideous *smile*.

My own rifle is an antique. Can't shoot anyone with it. My revolver? I can't hit Mr. Volli from here. I'm not a great shot (unless it's on a video game), and correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't believe revolvers have much in the way of range. *What if the bullets are hollow? What if they're rubber? What if the gun doesn't work and this is all another test put forth by my father?*

I can't afford to fail another of his tests.

I barely survived it the last time around.

The wind picks up the tails of my jacket, the scent of wildflowers mixing with the tang of blood. *Because the boys buried another body. Because somebody died tonight.* That seems so unimportant in the face of this newest task.

The Seattle Slayer has stumped me this time.

"You have to make a choice," Parrish explains, finally deigning to join us. He's as cavalier as always, unaware of how bad things are tonight. How they're *the* worst, and how they'll remain the worst until the day of the wedding. Then the tragedies get debatable.

"It's time, Naekkeo. Pick one of us," Chas tells me from his spot atop a moss-covered fence, gesturing absently in the direction of my engagement ring. He's acting like this is nothing, like I'm supposed to choose a boy to love at Justin's behest. Shouldn't matter. It's not like we'd listen to such a stupid directive anyway. Not in our hearts where it really counts.

Only it's not that. It's a choice not to love but to die. It shouldn't be a hard choice, right?

Because Maxx already made it for me.

"Kota, this doesn't even deserve a discussion: choose me." X smirks, like he thinks I'd believe his lies ever again. No chance in hell. He wants to be a martyr tonight? Too damn bad.

Rage gets the better of me, and I yank the revolver free—for Mr. Volli not for X.

Maxx and I lock eyes, the smell of blood and flowers accompanying our final moment together. Did he anticipate that? That I'd smell violets forever after that night and feel sick to my stomach. That sometimes I'd even throw

up.

“Listen to me,” I tell X, the gun tucked firmly in my right hand. I’m making this shit up as I go. It’s all I’ve got. We could all die here tonight, but it’s a risk I have to take. Better we die together than someone dies alone. “I know you know.”

“If you know why we’re here, don’t fuck around.” Maxx—ever the bossy alpha asshole—closes the distance between us, grabs me around the waist with one arm, and then uses his opposite hand to clamp down on my wrist.

He forces the gun barrel to his chest.

Violets. I’m choking on the smell of violets and blood. Of my youth dissipating on an August wind, the summer before my junior year. Yes. Scent is a powerful marker of time, and it will never allow me to forget the day I shot my ex-boyfriend through the heart.

It will never allow me to forget the smell, heat, or taste of his blood.

Maxx’s lips—lips that I’ve kissed, that’ve kissed me—they brush against my ear.

I’m ashamed at the reaction I have to that touch. It’s romantic and wild and not at all appropriate to the situation. I need adrenaline. I need super strength. I don’t need ... well, *need*. Or love. I definitely don’t need that. It’s cutting me again, that stupid double-edged sword.

“Don’t you *dare* cry over this,” X commands as I struggle, as he forces my own finger against the trigger, as he makes the decision for all of us without ever asking what his death might do to those he’s planning to leave behind.

The ruined scent of violets.

With the same strength he used to pick me up when we were lovers, he wields it now against me.

“I love you; this will ruin me!” I’m screaming now, but though Maxx falters, he doesn’t stop.

The weapon goes off. My ears ring. Blood splatters my face and clothes, gets inside my parted lips and onto my tongue.

When Maxx hits the ground at my feet, I know that he’s done it. Achieved his goal. Protected his girl.

Broken my heart for the second time.

Because that bullet didn’t just go through his heart—it went straight through mine.



One Month Earlier ...

The serial killer's daughter blinks back at me with doe eyes, the lenses of her glasses spattered with a substance that could be mud. Could also be blood. Either way, I'm not surprised. What I am is devastated. My heart is broken into so many pieces, I'm not sure if I could stuff them back inside my chest. All the glue in the world wouldn't hold these splinters together. What I'd end up with is a bleeding mess, haphazard and wrapped in tape, liable to fall apart in the slightest breeze.

"Baby sister." Delphine's voice is soft as she whispers a nickname that doesn't belong to her. In her right hand, she clutches a pair of shiny scissors. As soon as she was sure I wouldn't scream, she drew her left hand away from my lips and dipped it into the pocket of her oversized wool jacket. It's brown and dowdy and nothing like the clothes of the heiress I thought she so desperately wanted to be.

Delphine withdraws that hand now, fingers curled into a fist, as if she's clinging to something precious.

I am, too. Clinging to something precious, I mean. It isn't corporeal, but it's more important than any physical object that exists in this world.

My hope.

For myself. For Maxx. For ... everything.

A hitch catches in my throat, and I shove my own fist between my teeth, biting down on my knuckles so hard that I wince but don't stop.

The day I discovered that I was a lost daughter, my soul fractured in a way I was sure could never be repaired. Then, when Parrish went missing, that softly healing part of me ruptured all over again. Finding out that I shared blood with a serial killer? It was as if Justin were plunging a knife into that sore wound.

But this?

I can't seem to catch my breath. I may very well suffocate from the shock. As Delphine watches on with sympathy—feigned or otherwise—I crouch down in the bushes, listening to the echoing calls of both Chasm and Parrish. It isn't fair for me to make them worry; I can't stay in here long.

I just ... need a minute to myself.

"Make her fall for you. I don't care how you do it. I don't care what it takes. Just think of it as a good deed: Maxine Banks will be safe."

My father's words pummel my fragile heart, and I let out a small, frustrated sound. A casual onlooker would be forgiven for thinking it was pain. There's some of that, too, but there's a lot of anger. More than I care to admit to. The fingers of my left hand dig into the dirt, imagining Justin's face, wishing I could rake my nails down it.

Nevaeh is dead. My childhood friend is dead for no other reason than a *checkmate*. Justin wanted to prove himself to me. Well, he's done it. I believe him. I believe that he's the monster he so desperately wants to be.

I force my tired body to stand back up, dropping my hands to my sides. My heart is beating so quickly that I feel dizzy, the world tilting and turning around me. I make myself look at Delphine, *really* look at her.

"What are you doing here?" My voice sounds disconnected, a red balloon that's escaped a clutched hand, twirling and dancing into the impossibly blue sky, never to be seen or heard from again. That's me. A lost balloon. All I need is for someone or something to pop me.

Delphine inhales sharply, the sound catching in a way that makes me wonder. Her gaze slips to the side, as if she tried and failed to keep hold of it—the gaze and the balloon both. She stares at the pathway through the bushes, as if she can see Chasm and Parrish out there, racing around, their calls rapidly ascending into high-pitched shouts. If I stay here too long,

they'll end up drawing Tess from the house.

I don't want to worry anyone *unnecessarily*.

After what I've just decided to do, they'll have plenty of necessary things to worry about.

"I—" Delphine starts and stops, looking down at the clenched fist by her side. Carefully, almost reverently, she lifts it up and opens her fingers, presenting something to me. At first glance, it seems to be a clump of hair. At second glance, it *is* a clump of hair.

My mouth goes dry. Violence surges up inside of me, an eruption that eases my breathing into this slow but erratic beat. *So Delphine really is in on all of this?* How could I have expected otherwise? She helped Justin drug me, kidnap me in the middle of the night, washed my pajamas, and played a terrible prank on me. She hates Maxine. She doesn't like the boys. She defended Justin even knowing that he'd hit me.

How could she ever be a big sister to me, in any capacity? I don't care if we share blood. Clearly, that doesn't matter. Also, it matters too much. I'm conflicted, confused. I hate everything and everyone right now, and that isn't fair.

Later, I'll realize my emotions were muddied with shame. It's a powerful tool, one that can be used to control someone from afar, can push them to do strange and unusual things. It can make them hate *themselves* which is the worst possible monster, one that you can't hide from because it *is* you. You are your own monster.

I am my own monster. Focus, Dakota. Focus. This is what he wants. But ...

Did Maxx really kiss Maxine just now? All I saw was him putting a hand on her shoulder, leaning in as if he planned on it. But would my sister let him? The one part of me that remains solid and immovable is this: Maxine Banks is not in on any of this. She loves me. She will always put me first.

I can hold onto that to ground myself, even if everything else remains unsure, a cluster of question marks on an otherwise empty page.

Maxim Wright wasn't the only boy who climbed out of bed and disappeared the other night: Chasm did, too. What if ... The thought trails off into oblivion where it belongs. Maxx's words rise to take its place.

"Dakota, do not ever lie to me again. You have to trust me. You have to trust us. If we do this thing, what I need from you is pure honesty at all times. Unless Justin has a gun to your head or the head of somebody you love, talk

to us.”

A gun to my head or the head of somebody I love ...

“Delphine, what the fuck is that?” I ask, suddenly desperate to find Maxx.

I know better than anyone else that Justin Prior is full of shit.

Delphine looks at me imploringly, as if begging me to dig beneath the surface of her words. As if begging me not to judge her for holding out a clump of recognizable hair. There’s no mistaking the auburn curls, as familiar to me as anything in this world. *Maxine*.

“If there was a choice between two people you cared about ...” Delphine begins, placing the hair into my hand and closing my fingers around it. Once it’s secured, she takes a step back, lifting up the scissors and giving them a few air snips, just so the sound of grinding metal will echo in the enclosed darkness of the hedges. It’s strangely beautiful in here, sunlight filtering through the branches, dappling my sister’s face. “Who would you choose to save? Personally, I wouldn’t have picked the one who’s lying to my face.” She shrugs, as if I should know what she’s talking about.

I stare down at the hair and then look back up at her.

“I’m sorry, what?” My words are as faint as the sound of the whispering leaves around us, nearly lost to nature’s sovereign hand.

“It was Nevaeh or Maxine; I made the choice like I thought you’d want it made.” A faint smile, tinged with bitterness. “It was a long flight, to and from New York, but fortunately for us, Daddy has a private jet. When the truth is all out there, remember who your real sister is.” Delphine turns, slipping the scissors into her pocket as she moves silently through the foliage in the direction of the fence.

She’s in on it. Delphine is in on it. Extortion or amenability, the result is the same.

Betrayal coils around my insides like a constrictor, tightening its sinuous length until my breathing is labored, until my head spins. *It was a long flight, to and from New York*. While Delphine’s admission is a huge blow, it’s not surprising.

Maxx, on the other hand ...

I turn and dig my way out of the hedges, like I’m swimming in a pool, arms parting the green leaves like water. I stumble onto the path in front of Chasm. He comes up short, swearing in Korean, his hot hands grasping my arms, altering my sense of immediacy. As soon as I see his handsome face, I

forget for a few brief seconds what I'm doing and where I'm going.

This is the man I'm supposed to find. That's what my body—and my heart—tell me anyway.

And *oh ...* while I'm not pleased that Chasm is so angry, the violent storm of that emotion shines through his brilliant eyes, enhances their sharp focus, highlights the fullness of his mouth when he scowls. He does me the courtesy of looking away first, as if he knows we need to unplug from one another.

"Where's Maxx?" I ask, clutching the hair, aware of how fucked-up it is that one of my sisters would present the hair of the other in an undeniable show of aggression. Unable to process it. Not yet. First, I need to deal with the Maxx situation.

If I'd known the Delphine situation was as bad as it was, maybe I'd have elevated her as a priority. Maybe. It's hard to say, clouded by the clarity of hindsight.

"Maxx?" Chasm repeats, reaching up to shove his yellow streaked bangs off his sweaty forehead. He looks terrified, wide-eyed and drowning in disbelief. X's betrayal didn't simply strike me through the heart: he hurt his friends, too.

"Unless Justin has a gun to your head or the head of somebody you love, talk to us."

What if Maxx can't tell the truth? What if Justin put him up to this? I have to believe that there's an ulterior motive here.

I fully expect Chasm to tell me that he left already, that he took off as soon as I did. But then Maxx comes careening around the corner of the hedges, skidding to a stop as soon as he sees me. Our eyes lock. I squeeze the clump of hair even more tightly in my fist when Maxine appears just behind him. She doesn't stop soon enough, stumbling and snatching onto the back of Maxx's hoodie with two hands before she extricates herself from him, cursing wildly under her breath.

"Kota," she begins, basically shoving Maxx aside to get to me. I quickly tuck the hair into my pocket before she can see it. If she does, what would she think? And is it really still possible for me to keep her safe from all of this by keeping her ignorant? I just ... I don't know. I have no fucking clue. "You scared us." My sister throws a deadly glare over her shoulder in X's direction, face reddening, the skin around her eyes tightening with the stress of betrayal.

I recognize this look on her. I've only seen it a handful of times before, but I know what it means. This is the look my sister would get every time she put her trust in Saffron and, in turn, found that trust completely and utterly betrayed. A birthday party never attended. A planned outing that didn't come to fruition. An early pick-up day at school where Saffron didn't show.

"Why are you even still here?" Maxine demands as the sound of footsteps draws my attention in the opposite direction. Parrish has just appeared, Lumen on his heels. They're both panting, red in the face, tired from running around the garden.

Parrish locks onto me with hazel eyes, sharp tongue swiping his lower lip. He dashes sweat from his forehead like a king, each footfall as he approaches me a declaration of his intent. He slides a hand across the back of my neck, igniting a spirit that's already in flames. It's hard to say if the burn is good, or if it hurts. *Nah, that's easy: it's both.*

"Shit, Gamer Girl. You scared the crap out of me." Parrish leans down and nips my ear before releasing me. "You'll pay for that later," he whispers, ignoring Lumen as she tries to find her place in the tense quiet of our impromptu gathering. She ends up standing just behind and to the right of me like an honor guard. Parrish rises to his full height, eyes flicking up and down Maxim's body in a crudely dismissive once-over. "What happened?"

"I want to speak to Maxx alone," I whisper. Collective outrage follows.

"Oh, fuck that," Chasm breathes with a harsh laugh, raking his fingers through his hair. He hazards a glance at Maxx, curling his lip in disgust. "*Gae-sae-kki-ya.*" I have no idea what that means, but I don't need to understand it to take in the context—*son of a bitch.*

"Kota, maybe it's better if he leaves?" Maxine turns fully around, blocking me from the intense green of Maxx's eyes. I move to step around her when Parrish grabs onto my upper arm and Lumen mumbles something like, '*dysfunctional relationship, much?*'

My eyes meet Parrish's, but whatever he sees in them convinces him to let me go with a curse. Chasm gapes as I stride past him and right up to Maxx. He doesn't move, doesn't say anything, but his gaze shifts to one side, like he's embarrassed.

He should be.

This is a scheme—it has to be—but it's one that comes at the expense of all that lies between us. And what lies between me and Maxim, it's a lot. We

belong to one another in a way that's difficult to understand, even for me. His eyes are meant to meet mine, unfailingly and with love. His arms are meant to hold me, his hands to touch me, his mouth to kiss mine. Even the sweep of dark hair across his forehead is a vista meant for my gaze.

There is no way I'm the only one feeling the tension between us now. It's romantic. It's sexual. It's a basic need, for the two of us to be together. I cannot be the only person who stood in line at that coffee shop and wondered, *what if?* I wasn't the only person in bed that first fraught night, or in the arcade when we descended into those basic needs, in the woods when he made a promise.

"You said I'd always have a place to call home with you," I whisper, wishing I could grab onto his sweatshirt and press my forehead to his chest. I reach out to grab his chin, to turn his face back to mine, but he snatches my wrist in tight fingers and keeps me from touching him.

When he looks back, his gaze is empty.

"Was that a lie?" I query, wishing I could be alone with him. Knowing that Parrish and Chasm will fight me on it. Maxx, too. I don't think he'd allow me to be alone with him right now. The look on his face is fucking devastating; he truly looks apologetic. Before he can answer, I lean up on my tiptoes and put my lips to his ear. "Is there a gun to your head?"

I expect I'm being clever, right? As in, Maxim Wright would never betray me, so I should believe and trust in him. But instead of giving me some sort of secret signal—a wink, a nod, a hitched breath—he reaches down and gently uncurls my fingers from his hoodie.

"Please don't make this harder than it has to be." His voice is dead. It's a corpse risen from the grave and shambling. I don't understand it; I end up standing there in the zombie's path. "I don't want to be touched."

There's something unspoken hanging in the air there: *by you*. I don't want to be touched *by you*.

I take an uneasy step back, Parrish's fingers closing over my elbow. My gaze slides right off of Maxx, as if he's slippery, impossible to keep in view. I end up staring at Parrish instead, at the noble lines of his face, the cold, cruel way he holds his mouth.

"I don't know why you're doing this, but it doesn't matter. I know you far too well to believe any of this crap." Parrish makes his stand, attention riveted on Maxx. He isn't fooled; he isn't tricked.

So why am I falling for this? Because my childhood bestie died last night. Because my father is a serial killer. Because he's been grooming and tormenting and breaking me for months. Because I hurt all over in my heart, in my head, in the stardust of my soul.

Maxx offers up the softest, saddest smile I've ever seen in my life. He looks like he's saying goodbye to everyone and everything he's known and loved; that's what his face is telling me.

Clue number one: Maxx's goodbye. I'll collect these clues over time; I'll think myself clever for doing so. A regular ol' gumshoe. A sassy gamer girl poised to rule the internet. A future maybe-author.

And then it'll all come to a head one night at Camp Kellogg, the night my life changes forever.

"Parrish, wouldn't you have done the same for Dakota? Pretended to like Maxine or Lumen?" X drops his chin down, closes his eyes. When he looks back up at his friend, Parrish stiffens even further. He's tense, almost anticipatory. "Don't answer me with a lie: you know that you would have. That you would even still. You'd start that shit tomorrow if you thought it would save her life."

Maxx turns, as if to address Maxine, but my sister shakes her head vehemently, taking my other arm.

"It's time for you to go." She has her big sister voice on now, threaded through with a blade of steel. I've heard her use this before: on a boy that made me cry, on a girl that bullied me. On Saffron for breaking my young heart. "I don't know what you mean by 'protect me' but whatever it is, you can stop doing it. I'll take care of myself *and* my little sister."

"If you only could," X replies, and then he offers up the softest laugh, reaching up to ruffle his dark hair. "I'll leave, but if you need me—"

"Get the fuck out of here." Chasm storms past me, blocking my view of Maxx. "If you're in love with Maxine and telling the truth, screw you." Chas takes another step forward, toe-to-toe with X now. "If you're in love with Dakota and bullshitting us to save her life, also screw you. How could you hurt her like that? As if there aren't ways around his shitty rules."

"Chasm, if I were you, I'd watch my mouth." Maxx's voice is a growl, sharp and sneering. I can imagine the ugly look on his face because I've seen it before: when he suspected me of having something to do with Parrish's disappearance. Or at the very least, of knowing where Parrish was and

keeping it to myself. Maxx holds up his phone; I can see it over Chasm's shoulder, screen dark. "Your future father-in-law might be listening."

"Get wrecked." Chasm is quivering with frustration right now. The look he throws over his shoulder at me is both tender and angry. He changes his scowl to a soft frown to mollify his expression then turns back to watch Maxx go.

X tucks his phone in his pocket, chin held high. There's a regal bearing to him, a shine of moral superiority in his gaze. Whatever he's doing, he believes it's the right thing to do. In order for me to sway him, I'd have to switch the direction of his self-righteous compass.

We zone into one another, and I know he can see my broken heart. He sees it, and a shadow crosses his gaze, a cloud blocking his integrity and his honor. He blinks it away with impossibly thick lashes, curls the edge of his lip in a half-growl, and whispers something that nobody can hear.

"Be a good girl, Kota," he adds as a final parting shot, voice toothsome and low. He takes off, broad shoulders and long legs, that single hand still tucked into his pocket. The walk becomes a swagger, as if he's summoning control over himself with every step, as if he's strengthening his resolve.

I fully expect him to look back at me. He doesn't, but he does pause about halfway to the back doors, holding his position before he angrily swipes both hands down the front of his sweater and keeps going. He slams the door on his way inside, and the pressure in the air changes, like a storm has passed.

Or like I'm caught in its eye.

"What a prick. Could he have picked a worse day to be the asshole we already knew he was?" Lumen scoffs as she moves up behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder. Chasm sees and offers her a look of thunderous warning. *Hands off my girl.* When she ignores him, he walks over and swats her away. She grits her teeth but chooses not to acknowledge him. "What do you think he'd have done with me if he'd caught me?"

I don't know how to answer that question—don't think that I would even if I could—and offer a slight shake of my head.

Nevaeh is dead; Agent Murphy is dead; Mr. Parker (that teacher who gave me a B) is dead.

Who else?

I need to see the complete list.

And remember that Delphine might've put Maxine on it. I dig the lock of

hair from my pocket, opening my fingers and watching as the red-brown strands are caught in the wind.

“What is that?” Maxine asks, sounding wary. As she should. Why is her little sister holding a clump of her hair in a sweaty palm? I lift my gaze up to hers, swallowing down the pain. I’ve been doing that a lot lately, but it’s okay: all of my pain has found a leak.

The leak is anger. As all my hurt filters through the box where I’ve been stuffing my feelings, it comes out as rage. It drip-drip-drips into my heart and poisons it. So what if I keep swallowing sadness and consuming betrayal and internalizing disappointment? It’s found a way out of me now. It doesn’t have to stay inside.

I look her in the eyes and lie.

“It’s nothing.” I walk over to my broken phone (honestly hoping it doesn’t work anymore) and then carefully set it down on a nearby bistro table, beautifully weatherworn and happy in its permanent location in Laverne’s sprawling garden. The others do the same, following me deeper into the foliage, into a place where a weeping willow shadows the mossy stones from the sun.

Chasm turns to Lumen immediately, eyes on fire. He steps close, so close that it almost looks like they’re having an intimate moment. If they are, it’s one crafted of pure rage. Chas is tense, shoulders stiff, spine straight.

“*Ga.*” He waves his hand in Lumen’s direction. “Go. Get. We don’t want you here.”

“Me?” Lumen appears shocked by the statement. “I’m not the one who ran a girl down, who—”

“I don’t care what you say or how innocent you act; I don’t trust you and I never will. Get out of here before I drag you out.” Chasm grabs onto her arm, but she jerks back, scowling at him.

“Fine. You don’t want my help? Deal with the Slayer bullshit on your own then.” She gives me a last, pleading look, but I don’t respond. I can’t. Not right now. If Chasm doesn’t want her here, fine. He’s probably right anyway. If Maxx could ... if he could betray me, anyone might. Especially Lumen Hearst. “Fuck you, Kwang-seon.”

She takes off, and he follows her, and he doesn’t come back for several minutes of tense silence. When he does, he looks exasperated and harried and upset.

“I don’t like her, never have,” Chasm asserts again, crossing his strong arms over his chest. His entire stance reads aggression. Parrish glances over his shoulder, as if he’s looking for Maxx. When he realizes X isn’t secretly making his way back to spill the truth, his hands clench in frustration in the fabric of his sky-blue t-shirt. With the light-colored jeans and matching pale blue sneakers he’s got on, Parrish is a preppy dream.

Not dreamy enough to break the clouds of this nightmare, I’m afraid.

Chas makes a quick sweep with a bug detector that, sadly, he was likely given by X. When he nods that I’ve got the all-clear, he and Parrish exchange a look of silent distress before turning those penetrating gazes of theirs back to me. I feel like squirming under the heat, but I hold my ground, using my anger to bolster me.

“Kota?” Maxie asks again, her back to the pond, to the old statue spouting clear water from its—oh, it’s a cupid and water is coming out of his ... you know. I turn to Maxine and correct my lie, holding up one last strand of auburn before I let the wind take it.

“This is your hair, Maxine,” I tell her, and I hear both Parrish and Chasm swear. “And Justin Prior, he’s the Seattle Slayer.”



CHAPTER 2

“I know you don’t want to talk to anyone right now,” Parrish begins, voice hesitant in a way I’ve never heard before. He’s hovering in the doorway to my bedroom. Chasm is just outside of it and to the left, back leaned up against the wall, arms folded tightly.

“I need to see the list,” I murmur, more to myself than to him. He’s right: I don’t want to talk to anyone right now. I settle on the edge of my borrowed bed, sliding my phone from my pocket, complete with freshly cracked screen and ruined case. Sigh. I only wish it had self-destructed and turned to ash.

Seattle Slayer murders. Those are the only search terms I need; it pops right up. I scroll frantically down to the list of victims. As I read through the names, I offer up a sigh of relief that immediately feels disrespectful. I’m relieved because I don’t know anyone else on this list, but that doesn’t mean these people aren’t beloved friends, siblings, children, parents. Doesn’t mean they aren’t people, period.

I drop my phone to my lap as Parrish wanders in to stand in front of me, hands on his hips. I’d honestly expected Chasm to burst in here, pacing and pissed-off and cursing in Korean. Instead, he stays in the hall while Parrish kneels down in front of me.

“My grandparents are on their way over,” I explain, tapping a finger on the back of my phone. Maxine is already downstairs waiting for them. To her credit, she didn’t flip out when I revealed the truth about Justin. She blinked

at me a few times, nodded, and pulled in a deep breath.

“*Okay, clearly we need to talk,*” is what she said, holding out her pinky finger so she could swear herself to secrecy, like we were both kids again, promising not to tell on one another for sneaking some of our grandfather’s homemade truffles. He makes good ones, too, with a smooth pumpkin ganache on the inside.

They were Nevaeh’s favorite.

Fuck.

“Right.” Parrish rubs his chin with inked fingers, looking up at me like he doesn’t believe me or my devil-may-care attitude for shit. He shouldn’t: I’m full of it. I feel anything *but* blasé right now.

I’m going to kill Justin and end this.

I pick up my phone, intending on texting my father back and asking when he’ll be in town again. Parrish covers my hand with one of his, giving it a squeeze. Despite my crappy mood, his touch tingles.

“Tess incoming,” Chasm murmurs, swinging around the doorway and into the room just before she shows up. I can barely look at her, afraid that all my secrets will show on my face. Even if only one secret—Maxim Wright—gets revealed, what will I do? I can’t handle Tess on full-blast right now.

“I just heard about your friend, Nevaeh.” Tess’ face is soft, understanding. All that despite the predicament with her husband. Paul isn’t going to look less guilty for having been behind bars during the attacks: he’s going to look like the mastermind.

If I had to say something nice about my father, he’s a goddamn genius.

“Thanks.” It’s all I can manage. Tess seems to interpret my brusqueness as grief. I mean, it *is* a result of grief, but it’s not just about Nevaeh. Maxx is ... was ... is my rock. From the very beginning, he had my back. He was kind to me in the coffee shop. He was dedicated to finding Parrish. He called me by my real name, was the only person in Medina who used my nickname.

I end up with my face in my hands, and I’m not even sure how I got like that.

“Oh, honey, you can’t catch a break,” Tess whispers, her voice laden with guilt. She feels responsible somehow for the mess my life has become. In a way, I suppose she is. If she hadn’t tried so hard to look for me, if she’d left me alone ... but that isn’t true, and it isn’t fair.

Justin would’ve found me eventually; there’s no event but for his death

that might've stymied that. I drop my hands to my lap, just so that I don't accidentally dig my nails into my own skin. I'm liable to leave welts. Instead, I curl those angry hands of mine into the blankets as Tess moves up in front of me, squatting down and putting a hand on my knee.

Parrish stands up to give us some space.

"Why don't you put some comfy pajamas on, and I'll bring you something to eat?" She reaches up to brush hair back from my face, and I allow it. I like it. Despite myself, I like *Tess*. She's making an effort here. After last night's slaughter, I'm sure Paul's case has gotten even more complicated. Tess' life is falling apart around her, but she's still trying. "You can rest in here all day if that's what you need."

Tess rises to her feet, throwing an apologetic look to Parrish.

"If I could get you downstairs for a minute ..." Tess' words taper off as I rise to my feet, and she lifts a single brow in question.

"I'm assuming this is a meeting about Paul?" I ask, and Tess hesitates, a strange reaction for someone as resolute as her. "I'd like to be involved."

I move past her before she can say a word, ignoring the dual stares of Parrish and Chasm.

Don't lose it, Dakota. Not now. Not after everything you've been through. I reach up, wiping away tears I didn't even realize were on my cheeks.

My grandparents are having coffee at the breakfast table in the kitchen nook, politely ignoring a very tense Laverne across the room. She's glaring at them with narrowed eyes, as if the Banks are personally responsible for what's happening to Paul. When I step into the room, her rabid attention swivels to me and I freeze.

I know that a person cannot and should not be held responsible for the actions of someone else simply because they share a bloodline, but it's hard to remember that with the way Laverne is glaring at me. If Tess had never gotten pregnant with me, maybe she could've escaped Justin sooner? Maybe none of us would be sitting here right now, hurting and confused and scrambling for a response clever enough to counter Justin's last move.

Checkmate is what he told me via text this morning.

In advanced or even intermediate chess, there's no reason to call check or checkmate: it should be obvious to both players when such a play occurs.

This is not that.

Justin Prior is counting his chickens before they hatch or—as Chasm likes

to say—he’s *drinking the kimchi soup before being offered a rice cake*.

I crack my knuckles, and I *smile* at Laverne. She recoils like I’ve slapped her. There’s nothing better than being nice to someone and watching it annoy the fuck out of them. I’m done with Laverne’s rudeness.

“Good morning, Grandma *Laverne*,” I chirp cheerily, reaching up to rub at the redness surrounding my eyes. Everyone will assume I’m upset over Nevaeh—and I am. But Maxx ... how is it possible that his betrayal hurts nearly as much as my friend’s death?

Because this is *exactly* the sort of situation I need Maxx for. I want him to hold me the way he did after the incident with the crooked cop, draw me into his arms, rest his chin on the top of my head. Because he’s not here when he should be, Nevaeh’s death hurts all the worse.

Parrish sweeps into the kitchen beside me, his unerring presence blocking whatever statement of irritation might be resting on Laverne’s filler-plumped lips. They look much fuller today than yesterday, making me wonder if she didn’t just get them done. Isn’t that an odd thing to do when one’s only son is in police custody?

“Baby sister.” This time, it’s Maxine delivering the nickname and not Delphine. *Delphine*. I’m not sure how to feel about Delphine right now. I’m not sure how to feel about anything.

“Grandma.” Parrish says the word, almost an admonishment, his meadowfoam honey eyes on Laverne. “Good morning.” He turns to the Banks next, offering up a slight dip of his chin.

“*Annyeonghaseyo*,” Chasm greets, offering a bow as he enters the kitchen. When he stands up straight, his gaze is locked on mine like a blade. I can feel it cutting into the thick calloused skin that’s covering up the squishy softness of the feelings beneath.

“Oh, honey.” Carmen taps the empty chair situated between her and my grandfather. I take it, relishing the one-armed hugs I get from either side. Maxine watches on, lips pursed, brown eyes bright with both curiosity and empathy. I look back at her, forcing another smile that’s only skin-deep.

I have a lot of practice with those, remember?

I’m not angry with Maxine, not at all, but I can’t help wondering if Maxx is telling the truth. Maybe, all along, I was simply too dense to see it? If he really was protecting my sister from the get-go, what right do I have to be angry?

Only I do. Because of the arcade. Because of the woods. Because of the things he said.

“You’re my first real girlfriend, my first kiss ... My first—and hopefully only—sexual partner.”

Ugh.

I dig my nails into my denim-clad thighs.

When I push memories of Maxx to the side, they’re replaced by images of Nevaeh. I remember sitting between her and Sally, all of us blowing warm breath on the tall windows of her Manhattan apartment, using our fingers to draw shapes, ignoring her mother as she softly rebuked us and her father laughed and said, *“don’t worry, the maid will take care of that”* as if all people have maids and as if maids aren’t people.

I close my eyes.

A cup of coffee clinks on the table in front of me, presented by Parrish. It’s done up exactly the way I like it, with fresh cream stirred in. *The way Maxx used to make it for me that last week of finals, when he’d cook breakfast and send me off to school.* I curl my hands around the warmth of the mug, noting that it’s one of a half-dozen identical mugs which are already set out in front of the other chairs at the table.

Imagine that, having identical mugs. Aren’t mugs supposed to be not-so-subtle chips off a person’s soul? A collection of mugs from places traveled. Mugs that proclaim love of coffee, hatred of pineapple on pizza, blessing messes or cursing family, black mugs with skulls, well-loved white mugs with chipped images that say *Talk to Me Before Coffee and Die*. Stuff like that.

All of Laverne’s mugs are free of chips and coffee stains. There are none with glued-on handles or funny stories or even just scrounged from a clearance aisle with the faintest whisper of a red sticker on the bottom proclaiming a deep price cut.

I take a sip as Laverne stares at me before moving her attention over to Tess.

My biological mother takes a seat, Parrish and Chasm on either side of her, claiming the last of the mugs. With a sniff and a huff, Laverne leaves the room without a word, kitten heels clacking. So ... this isn’t a meeting about Paul?

Of course it’s not.

It's about me.

"On top of last night's tragedy ..." Carmen begins, shaking her head. She's missing her signature red lipstick today, a sign of how truly stressed she is. "Oh, Dakota, you haven't had an easy year, have you?"

Tess stiffens up across the table from me, mechanically lifting her coffee mug to her lips.

"Can I go back to October?" I murmur, looking down at my hands wrapped around my coffee instead of at anyone's face. "To Maxine walking in the door, surprising me by coming home early." My lips almost form a real smile, but it's lost just as quickly. More dandelion fluff in the wind. Nevaeh and Sally came over for dinner that evening, and we played some VR game until the sun came up outside.

Ouch.

I put my hand to my chest and rub at it, like I might erase the pain in my heart if I press hard enough.

"You—" Tess coughs and clears her throat, adjusting herself in the chair as both Chasm and Parrish study her sudden nervousness with matching expressions of curiosity. There's something *extra* about Tess this morning, something that I can't put my finger on.

The very air around her feels different.

"Are there any stories about Nevaeh that you'd like to share?" Tess probes gently, and all I can think is *I wish you'd asked me that question when she was still alive*. Still, I'll take progress where I can get it.

"Later, but not now," I explain as my grandpa puts one of his hands on my arm.

"Sally's been trying to reach you, Kota." He mentions this as gently as possible. I already know. I should call Sally, shouldn't I? Who knows if she might be next?

But how can I warn her? There's no way. I can't text or call or even email her without Justin knowing.

"I'm glad you're all here, but I ... I don't have much to say right now." My voice is stable enough, but that's because I haven't processed it all yet. I've still got a cloud of anger around my heart, blocking the worst of my emotions. *I can't wait to kill Justin. How should I do it? Stab him like the character in Tess' book?*

Some part of me thinks it would be cathartic, to make Justin bleed at the

end of a blade.

“Whatever you need,” Maxine adds, leaning around Grandpa to peer at me with unfaltering love and loyalty. I don’t deserve her, do I? “Do you want some space?”

I nod, shoving up from the table, suddenly unable to bear the combined expressions of sympathy. Instead of going back to my room—it’s not really mine at all, and it doesn’t do much to comfort me—I head back outside and sit in the sun.

First, I debate whether or not to make a phone call to Nevaeh’s parents but decide it’s too soon.

With a shaking hand, I ignore the cracks in my phone screen, and find Sally’s number in my contacts.

“Dakota,” she wails, her voice choked with sobs. I feel bad that I’m too empty to cry right now. I’m not sure if I’ll ever be able to cry again. “I should’ve stayed at the party with her!”

I stay on the line with her for an hour, phone pressed to my ear, eyes closed as she cries and laments and hiccups. I absorb all of her pain, and I tuck it back into the leaking box, the one that’s converting it all to pure, unfiltered rage.

I can’t tell Sally that staying with Nevaeh would’ve changed nothing, that Justin would’ve found a way to get to her regardless. If not that night, then the next or the next or the next. Maybe, after I kill him, I can tell her that, so she doesn’t feel guilty.

It isn’t until I hang up the call that I open my eyes to see both boys waiting for me.

The sight of the tattoos on their arms makes me remember mine—and that my grandparents and sister don’t know about it just yet. That should be fine. Along with the funerals and fakeries, I get to have a totally normal but deathly mortifying teen moment.

“I’m worried about you and X,” Chasm repeats, coming over to stand beside me. When he puts a hand on my shoulder, I almost break. He’s that good. I trust him that much. *Just like I trusted Maxx.* My thoughts go there unbidden.

What have I been telling myself? *I have this romance thing in the bag; even if everything else hurts, at least I found long-lasting love.* Yikes. Naïve Gamer Girl, much?

“Don’t be,” I tell them, wondering if I couldn’t and shouldn’t take Tess’ offer to stay in my room for the rest of the day. Yes, I think I’ll do that. “There are more important things to worry about than whether or not Maxim Wright lied to me.”

I say that, wishing I believed it, not sure if I do.

No, no, certain that I *don’t*.

“Something is going on with Maxx,” Parrish declares, folding his arms, his stare resolute. He *knows* it, even if he doesn’t know anything at all. That’s just the sort of person that Parrish Vanguard is. “That’s our first priority: figure out what metaphorical gun is pointed at X’s head.”

“I know I keep saying this, but these guys are Whitehall through and through. Just like I am. Even Maxx—especially Maxx.” Lumen warned me on more than one occasion. Chasm warned me. Maxx himself warned me.

“It’s possible that he *is* telling us the truth,” I argue, unsure why I’m arguing a point that fills me with such dreadful misery. But I know why: hope can be a wonderful thing. It can also be a thorn of pain driven into a desperate heart. I don’t want to hope that Maxx is part of some intricate plot to save me by hurting me because if I’m wrong about that, and he truly is in love with Maxine, it’s easier to accept it now. “That the con here isn’t him falling for Maxine ... that the con here is him falling for *me*.”

Neither Parrish nor Chasm gets the chance to speak, both of them turning to look at Tess as she steps onto the patio. Her smile is soft, but there’s a hard glint in her gaze that rings all the alarm bells in my head.

“Dakota,” she begins, pushing that smile wider. It’s a forced smile, like the millions of others she and I have shared since the first day I arrived in Medina. But there’s something more to it, a genuine warmth that I’m convinced wasn’t there before.

Tess might not feel like smiling in this exact moment, but her affection for me isn’t faked. Maybe it never was, and she’s just recently allowed herself the space to explore it without judgment? I know that’s the case for me.

“Yeah?” I ask, my voice pitched low, husky with grief and confusion. Underlined with anger. Because no matter what anyone says to me, no matter how well they comfort me, how much they care ... I’m never going to forgive Justin. Not after Nevaeh. Not after Maxx.

“I know you’re struggling with a lot right now, but I don’t think this is a conversation that can wait.” Tess keeps that fixed smile in place, her gaze

slipping past me to linger on her son before she turns it to Chasm and then looks back to me again. “The Banks have gone back to the B&B to get their things.”

“Their things?” I ask, rising to my feet. *Are they leaving? Are they going back to New York?* That might’ve been something I supported, but not anymore. Not after Nevaeh. Flying across the country won’t save them from Justin. I need them here, where I can protect them as best as I can.

“I invited them to stay here until the house is ready. They can stay with us for the rest of the summer.” Tess turns and leaves, letting the French door swing shut behind her.

A sense of unease filters through me.

“Why would Tess invite the Banks to stay here?” Chasm asks, voicing the very question I was thinking aloud.

Oh fuck.

I don’t answer—I don’t have an answer, only a nagging suspicion—so I follow after Tess, finding her alone at the kitchen table. Her hands are wrapped around the spotless mug, her expression distant and shadowed. She lifts her face up and gestures for me to have a seat.

“More coffee?” she asks, and then, as if she’s just now realized it, allows her pretty mouth to twist into a frown. “I made some tea for Maxx, but I didn’t see him earlier?” It’s a question directed at me, but it’s Parrish who answers.

“He went to pick some stuff up for Dakota,” Parrish explains, which is a very clever lie. *Even now, he’s helping Maxx, helping him save face in front of Tess.* Because what sort of boyfriend would X be if he took off on me the day I found out my childhood friend died?

Parrish’s lie might help Tess feel better, but it makes me feel a little bit like throwing up again.

Chasm takes a seat and Parrish follows. They leave an empty spot between them, and my heart warms a little as I, too, sit down.

“Are you sure you don’t want any more coffee?” Tess asks, a hint of nervousness in her voice. She glances in the direction of the coffee maker before turning to me again. I’m already shaking my head.

“No, I’m okay.” I look at Tess, our conversation from the woods filtering into my brain.

It’s all him, isn’t it? The engagement, your behavior in court ... your

behavior in general. The typewriter. I may not know you as well as a mother should know her daughter, but there were so many things about that scenario that struck me as odd. You didn't know the significance of that typewriter; Justin did. How could you unknowingly recreate a scenario from the past like that?"

I fidget in discomfort, folding my hands on the table, not liking the way it feels, putting them in my lap. The boys are both peering at me from either side, but I don't think they've come to the same conclusion that I have just yet.

Please no. Or yes. Or no. God, I don't know if I want this to be what I think it might be.

"Do you have your phone on you?" Tess asks, smiling prettily, and I shake my head. I hate my phone now. I despise my phone. It's nothing but a spy cam. She looks to the boys next, but they both respond in the negative. "Okay." Tess reaches down to a bag on the seat next to her, withdrawing what looks to be a bug detector.

Um.

"This is a signal jammer," she explains, patting it affectionately. "It blocks Wi-Fi, cell signals, all that good stuff." She pushes it into the center of the table, her expression shifting in such a way that panic infuses my chest. Raw, unfiltered panic.

I don't know what to do or say, so I just stare at her.

Chasm and Parrish, too, apparently. Nobody speaks for several minutes, and Tess picks up her mug, sipping her coffee like she's in no hurry.

"Are you sure you're up to talk right now, Dakota? I didn't come outside to lure you in here." Tess looks genuinely worried as she studies me from across the table. "We could save this for tomorrow."

"Mom," Parrish begins, leaning forward and resting his palms on the table's surface. "Why would you need a signal jammer?"

Tess takes her time setting her mug down, closing her eyes, inhaling a deep breath. When she opens them, there's a seriousness to her expression that scares me. Why is she using a signal jammer? What is it that she wants to talk to me about?

"Because I don't want Justin to hear when I ask this question." Tess pushes her coffee to the side and then locks gazes with me. "This has been bothering me for a while." She looks out the window. Well, at the window. The shades

are drawn, but sunlight does its utmost to filter between them. “There are all of these clues, staring me straight in the face. My son’s kidnapping; Justin’s sudden return to Medina society; Parrish’s *heroic* rescue via Justin’s own app.” Tess laughs dryly. “Chasm’s proposal using my ring, the typewriter, the bruises on your arms. Paul was arrested, framed. Last night ...” Tess trails off, and my worst fear—that she might recognize Justin for who he is—becomes a sudden and impossible reality.

“Tess, don’t—” I start, but she’s staring right at me, her expression one of steel. She won’t be dissuaded from this path. I stand up, willing to run in order to avoid whatever it is that she plans on saying.

Tess stands up, too, like if I ran, she’d catch me. Parrish stands up. Chasm joins us.

“Is Justin involved with the Seattle Slayer?” And here Tess pauses to catch her breath. “Is Justin the Seattle Slayer?”

I stumble back into my chair, probably would’ve fallen if Parrish and Chasm didn’t each grab onto one of my elbows.

“What ...” I start, and then I have to stop to clear my throat. “What the hell sort of question is that?” A strangled laugh escapes me, and I realize that I’m not doing myself any favors here. I don’t look at the boys; I *force* myself to stare at Tess. “Are you saying that to upset me? Because you’re angry about Paul’s arrest? Is that it?”

My brain is one long word: *fuuuuuuuuuuuuuck*.

“After last night, I can only assume that Paul wasn’t framed by accident or convenience: he was framed on purpose. That means whoever is framing him not only has a motive but also knows the workings of the Slayer well enough to orchestrate said framing.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” I whisper back, tearing my arms from the boys’ grips. Tess tries to follow me when I take off, but I’m too quick, heading up the stairs and into my room. I slam the door behind me, locking it, and putting my back to it.

Somehow, I expect Tess to follow, to bang on the door, to shout.

She does none of those things. I end up sliding to the floor, face in my hands, struggling to catch my breath.

Tess knows. And if Tess knows, she won’t keep quiet. And if she doesn’t keep quiet, people I love are going to die.

People I love are *already* dying.

Justin told me I needed to know when to make a sacrifice, and how to make it.

This is the time: *I* am the sacrifice.

And as soon as I see him again, I'm going to make it.



CHAPTER 3

I sit in my room for several hours, researching the victims from last night's massacre. I must be a masochist because I even give in and listen to the absolutely *dreadful* Emerald City Murder Podcast. In the end, biting my lip and digging into the bowels of the internet doesn't do me much good. So what if I know that Savannah Shelby, age twenty-three, was found murdered in her Bellevue home late last night? So what if I know that she's a veterinary assistant with a nice smile and a hobby of making custom gaming computers in her basement?

I worry my lip until it bleeds, and then and only then I remember that I picked up the lip biting habit from Maxx. With a series of violent curses, I take the new lime green headset that Tess bought me and jam it onto my head.

Then I log into my gaming channel and sit there with the cursor hovering over the *Live* button.

Tess knows.

Tess fucking knows.

It was only a matter of time until she figured it out. She's too smart not to. I've known this was coming all along. I'm going to head this monster off before the hydra grows more heads. I'm still figuring out how, exactly, I'm going to be the hero today when I decide that, screw it, I'll do better under pressure.

I hit the *Live* button, and my computer goes dead.

Um.

Footsteps behind me draw my attention around. I spin in my chair to find Amin Volli appearing in the doorway to my bathroom. He walks over to my nightstand, picks up the TV remote, and turns the noise on—cranking the volume up—before he moves over to my side of the bed and takes a seat.

I almost scream, but what good would that do? If Mr. Volli is here to kill me ... I reach my hand back, searching for the scissors that came pre-stocked in the desk drawer of my borrowed bedroom. When my fingers hit cool metal, I curl them around the handle. *Just like the scissors Delphine could've killed Maxie with. Wonderful.*

“This is a lovely home, isn't it?” he asks, reaching up to adjust his glasses with two fingers. He has a purple bow tie on today. He's dressed like Mr. Rogers in a cardigan over a white button-up, gray slacks, and tennis shoes.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, keeping my voice even. If the boys think that I'm in danger, they'll break down the goddamn door. I draw the scissors down by my side. Mr. Volli watches the move, offers up a slight half-smile, but doesn't comment. Instead, he crosses his arms and gives me a pointed look.

“Are you a dictionary, Dakota?” he asks me, and I blink back at him in confusion.

“A ... what?” I ask, my tense stance loosening a bit. There's something disturbingly unthreatening about Amin Volli, as in, he's so passive as to be obscene. Nobody is this calm all the time without suffering from a personality disorder. I adjust my fingers to get a better grip on the scissors, and I'm not shy about it.

Amin smiles at me, crossing his legs and resting his hands on the knees of his trousers.

“Do you write with a thesaurus open on a browser tab, hmm?”

“You're ... asking about my writing?” I query, another sharp slice of rage cutting through my chest. “My childhood friend was murdered last night.”

Amin is already shaking his head, as if this simply isn't true.

“Wrong: your friend drank herself into a stupor and nobody helped her when she was suffering from alcohol poisoning. No action was required: she chose her own fate.”

My eyes widen at the audacity of his words. How *dare* he talk about

Nevaeh like that? I almost stab him. I do. For real, this time. I very nearly throw myself on Amin Volli with the scissors held high. *The strange feel of a blade puncturing flesh, the hot rush of blood, a man shuddering and going still on the forest floor.*

The memory of what I did to Heath Cousins—the crooked cop—hangs heavy in my mind and while I don't drop the scissors, I don't exactly make a move either. I'm going to have to get over this hang-up around killing people, seeing as I sort of need to murder my dad.

“For you to know all of those things about Nevaeh, you'd have to have someone on the ground watching her. Don't act like her death was entirely accidental.” I'm panting now, huffing and shaking, on the verge of a total breakdown.

No, on the verge of a violent mental snap.

Is this what Justin has been grooming me for all along? If so, good job: it's working splendidly. Homicide has never tasted so good on my tongue. *Would Mr. Volli scream if I stabbed him? Beg for his life?* Somehow, I don't think so.

I think he'd kill me first.

No, I'm sure of it.

“So, do you?” he repeats, and it takes me several seconds to remember what he's asking. “Your audience—meaning myself—gets it, Miss Prior: you know a lot of big words. You don't need to beat us over the head with that knowledge.”

“Eat a bag of dicks.” The words come out in a growl, my fingers tightening around the scissors again. They hurt with the force of my grip. “How's that for vocabulary? Why are you here?”

“Despite some critical elementary flaws, you're a talented writer, Miss Prior.” Mr. Volli rises to his feet, standing in front of me while tucking one hand in the pocket of his slacks. “Your father wants to ensure that you'll continue your work while he's on his honeymoon.” Amin smiles at me, nodding in the direction of the new laptop that Tess got for me. It's silver; I'm beyond relieved that it isn't bubblegum pink like the one Justin picked out. “He also wanted me to personally check on you, just to make sure you weren't having an overly emotional reaction.”

“I don't care how you got in here, but you better get the hell out. I *never* promised Justin that I wouldn't kill his pawns.” I stare pointedly at the still-

healing bruises on Mr. Volli's face, courtesy of Saffron. *Go Mom!* She's more of a badass than I ever knew. My heart swells with sudden pride.

Saffron might've flaked out on me a lot as a child, but she's here for me now, when I need her most. She might be my kidnapper, but she's still a mom to me, isn't she?

Mr. Volli notices me looking, reaching up to rub at the side of his face.

"Saffron caught me off-guard the last time; I won't make that mistake again." Mr. Volli chuckles, as if there's something funny about that. He moves over to the bedroom door, opening it up as if there isn't any good reason that he shouldn't. He strolls right out of the room and down the stairs in time to see Chasm and Parrish come around the corner of the kitchen.

"What the fuck?" Chasm chokes out as Parrish steps in front of Mr. Volli, blocking him from continuing the rest of the way down the stairs. The boys both look up to see me as I step into the hallway, their eyes asking a silent question that I answer with a shake of my head.

Did he hurt you? Not this time.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?" Parrish grinds out just as Laverne appears from the direction of the living room. She's wearing a gray pantsuit, her filler-plumped lips pressed into a tight line, hair freshly colored a honey-flecked brown.

"Oh, stop that, Parrish. Don't be so hostile." Laverne forces a smile as she looks past Parrish to Amin. He inclines his chin at her before offering up a hesitant smile in return. "My apologies, Ms. Vanguard. Your house is charming but labyrinthine; I seem to have forgotten the way to your office."

"This way, darling," Laverne schmoozes, widening her already disturbed smile. "Come with me." She gestures for Amin to follow along with her, and he tips his head in farewell to the three of us before sauntering through the living room and down the hallway where both Parrish's and Laverne's bedrooms are.

"What the fuck is that man doing here?" Chasm hisses, just before Maxine appears in the doorway behind him. Her eyes meet mine, and I swallow hard against the emotion I see in hers. We need to talk—desperately—but we can't do it here.

"Should we take another walk in the backyard?" I hear myself offering, and my sister gives a single nod. I tuck the scissors into my pocket before coming down the stairs, pausing two steps up so I can look Parrish and

Chasm in their concerned faces. “He showed up in my bedroom to warn me against making any emotionally charged moves.”

Hah. Justin wants to make sure I’m not having an ‘overly emotional reaction’?

Nevaeh is dead. Maxx is either in danger or else he’s not in love with me. I’m frustrated with myself for not being able to discern which scenario is worse. Mostly, I’m having disturbed fantasies about watching Justin Prior die.

“We’ll give you some space,” Parrish offers, but when Chasm whips a hard look in his direction, he recants his story a bit. “*Some* space. We’ll follow at a distance.”

I nod and finish coming down the last few steps, pausing between the pair of them.

“It’ll be okay,” Parrish assures me, while Chasm says nothing. It’s not that I think Parrish has more faith in Maxx than Chas does, but clearly, Chasm needs more time to work past the hurt. Pretty sure we’re in the same boat there.

I nod again, moving past them both and only stopping when I feel Parrish’s fingers on my wrist. The heat of his body envelops me from behind as he rests his chin on my shoulder and wraps his arms around my waist. My stomach knots with needs that make me wonder how easy it would be to get lost in both boys for the rest of the day. Would they do it if I extended the invitation?

Would they care if I was trying to wash my feelings away?

“We need to have faith in him,” Parrish whispers, “the same way you had faith in me when I was kidnapped. It was obvious that I needed someone to save me then; it might not be so obvious now but think of Maxx in that way.” He squeezes me a little harder, just in time for Tess to move into the living room via one of the myriad entrances.

She notices us standing the way we are, and the neutral line of her lips turns into a frown.

“Is there something else going on that I need to know about?” she whispers, holding up the signal jammer. Her brows lift, but I don’t know how to warn her that she shouldn’t use that while not inadvertently giving away more information than I intend.

“I’m going to walk the garden with Maxine.” I untangle myself from

Parrish's arms, instantly regretting the loss of his warmth. I end up stumbling into Chasm, hands fisted in the front of his beige hoodie. It's a good look, with the olive-green jacket and the dog tags around his neck. He rests his hands lightly on my hips as we stare at each other. It takes all of my available willpower to turn my attention over to Tess again. "The boys are going to escort us."

I take off before Tess can do or say anything else; I need a minute. Chasm and Parrish let me go, but they follow. I walk as slowly as I can, hoping to buy myself time to get my shit together.

Maxine is too smart for me, turning around suddenly and planting her hands on her hips until I shuffle into arm's-reach. She turns and takes my elbow in hers, dragging me along the white gravel paths and past the hedges where the morning's drama unfolded.

"I'm so sorry about Nevaeh, Kota," she whispers, and my entire persona cracks in half. I turn and throw myself into her arms, allowing her to rub my back and offer me the comfort I've been seeking for so long, from way back when, a time when I was Dakota Banks and nobody else.

That's not the case anymore: I'm not just quirky ol' Dakota Banks. I'm Mia Patterson. I'm Mia Prior. I'm a whole new version of myself, but I can't decide if this new person is stronger than before, weaker than before, or just ... adaptable to change.

Regardless, I lean shamelessly into my sister's emotional strength, letting my old self breathe for just a moment, just long enough for me to remember what I liked about myself back then. Reminding me what I should hang onto now and what's okay to let go of.

When we separate, I look up through teary eyes, wiping away the droplets with an arm. Maxine digs into the pocket of her overalls and hands me a packet of tissues patterned with butterflies. I have the best big sister in the world.

My hands freeze midway through opening the tissue packet when I remember Delphine and her whispered warning. The image of Maxine's hair blowing away in the breeze fills me with an icy terror.

It's not that the game wasn't real before—I never had a chance of pretending it was, seeing as we began with Parrish's kidnapping—but somehow, it snaps into even harsher focus.

"I'm not sure Nevaeh's death is hitting me fully," I admit, both wanting

and dreading my next conversation with Sally. I extract a tissue and blot at my eyes and nose with it, gaze firmly fixed to the ground in front of my feet. “We hadn’t been talking much recently, and I was actually angry with ...” I can’t make myself finish the sentence. It seems unnecessarily cruel to be angry with a dead person.

Ouch.

“Grief hits in different ways.” Maxine stuffs her hands in her own pockets, following my gaze to the ground. A spiky caterpillar inches between us, its blue and red body like something off an alien world. I squat down to look more closely at it, and Maxie does the same.

“Spongy moth caterpillar.” I worry my lip again, curse myself out for doing it, and then find my mouth tingling in desperation to do it again. Nervous habits—even borrowed ones—are hard to kick. “Pretty sure they’re invasive.” My eyes lift up to meet Maxine’s. “Should we kill it?”

“I don’t think I can,” she replies, looking back down at the creature. I’m not sure that I can either, which makes me wonder how I think I’m going to be able to kill my own flesh-and-blood father.

The Heath Cousins thing was an accident, and the guy was a piece of shit. Yet, it still haunts me.

We both stand up together, but when Maxine tries to catch my attention again, I pretend not to notice. She keeps pace with me, glancing back at the boys and pursing her lips. After a sly narrowing of the eyes, she reaches down to grab my hand and takes off running.

I’m dragged along at first, stumbling and struggling to keep up as she steers us into the bushes, past the fountain, ducking into the shade of some bushes near the back wall. I’m reminded of Saffron all over again, and the note I keep forgetting to give to Maxine. I keep it on me most days; it’s the safest place for it.

I reach into my pocket and pull it out, handing it over to her before she can say a word.

Maxine frowns as she unfolds the paper, blinking rapidly as she reads it, as if it’s not at all what she expected. “*I love you and your sister. I’m always watching over you, even if you can’t see me. Love you fierce.*” Her eyes swing up to mine, and I swallow back the guilt.

Maxine’s mother is on the lam and in harm’s way because of me. My sister could lose her mother, and it’s all my fault. I take a shuddering breath. *If I*

were Maxx, I wouldn't be interested in me either. I banish the pathetic thought as soon as it comes, but I can't seem to help myself. *You're the only ass attending this pity party; wake up!* I scream the words at myself inside my head, but no matter how true I know them to be, I can't make myself comply with such good self-advice.

"Mom?" Maxie whispers, eyes getting teary as she looks down at the note and then back up at me. "Where did you get this?" I sniffle, unsure where to go from here, what to say. It was selfish of me not to tell Maxie about Saffron sooner.

"M—" I almost say mom. Then I can't decide if I should say that word at all. Is it now reserved for Tess? No, nothing that shallow. Is it hard to say because I feel ashamed? I've been seeing more of Maxie's mom than she has. "Saffron's been by to see me a few times."

I start to drop my gaze again in shame, but Maxine catches my chin with her fingers, making me look at her. Now that I'm really looking, I can see the shape of Saffron in her mouth the way I see Tess in mine. But in the eyes? That expression of warmth and home and family, that's in mine, too. That's what I got from the Banks.

"What's going on, Kota? You can't keep all this weight on your shoulders; it isn't fair. You should share the burden." She tucks the note away and exhales, shaking out her hands. "I bet you're wondering about the kiss," she offers this up softly, almost hesitantly, and my eyes go wide.

"What kiss?" I whisper huskily, as if I don't know. As if I didn't see Maxx lean down like he was going to kiss her. I turned away before I had to see it. But ... is she confirming that he kissed her? I wasn't sure if he'd gone through with it.

I'd hoped like hell he hadn't.

"Exactly." Maxine crosses her arms and gives me a harsh look. "What kiss? He didn't kiss me, Dakota. You know what he did? He whispered in my ear."

Oh, Maxx.

"What did he say?" I demand, hoping that this is it, the big moment where it's revealed that Maxx is still on my side, that he told Maxine to play along and that he'd apologize to me later, that ...

"He told me that he was sorry for all the lies," she explains softly, likely thinking this will help mollify my feelings. Only, I know X far too well for

that. He'd apologize to my sister whether he was telling the truth today or not. Either way, he's a liar. "That's it. Now that you've told me about the Seattle Slayer ..." She lets her voice trail off and shakes her head.

"The woman he mentioned"—I can't make myself say *ratted out*, which is more accurate—"was Saffron. With the U of O t-shirt and the New York license plate." I gesture randomly at the sweatshirt I'm wearing and shake my head. "She's been helping me. She knows Justin can track people with tech, so she's staying off the grid. Thus, the note. Thus, why I haven't been able to tell you until just now."

My sister stares me down like she isn't sure where to go from here.

"We can't go to the authorities, can we?" she asks, but like she already knows the answer to that. I give her a look, trying not to choke on the words. I won't miss Agent Murphy, but she certainly didn't deserve to die.

"He had an FBI agent killed last night, Maxie. He had Nevaeh killed in New York. He murdered my computer science teacher for giving me a B." I whisper this last part, but even though I try, I can't get my volume up any further than that. "So, no." I shake my head again, hating what I'm going to have to say but which has to come out anyway. I make sure Maxine is locked-on and fully engaged; I'm only going to be able to say this once. "I need you to pretend like ..." Here I struggle to catch my breath. "Pretend you're interested in dating Maxx, even if you're not."

"Even if I'm not?" Maxine queries back, like I've lost my mind. She's giving me a funny look, one that I recognize, but am having trouble parsing out. *Like she's guilty about something*. My mind drifts to what Delphine said in the hedges, about Maxie lying to my face.

Doesn't matter.

I trust my sister. As Delphine stated, I *do* remember who my 'real sister' is.

"Pretend like you would," I push back, eyes widening, hoping she can see the real, true fear behind them. "Pretend like your life depends on it."



CHAPTER 4

I plan to spend the night alone, but only after asking Tess to borrow some sleeping pills. She grudgingly offers them up, giving me a stern look as she places the pills into my palm. I squint my eyes at them and then look past her to the nightstand.

“This is melatonin,” I murmur, feeling irritation prickle my skin. Parrish told me about Tess and her sleeping pills. Our plan for Veronica *hinges* on her having sleeping pills, so what gives? “I was hoping for like Ambien or Lunesta or something.”

“Yes, it is. Since you’re under eighteen and don’t have a prescription, this is all I can give you.” She tries to smile to soften the rebuke, and I stare at her. She might be making efforts to get along with me, but she is still very much Tess Vanguard.

I withdraw my hand, clutching the melatonin pills and turning toward the door.

“Dakota,” she calls out, and I feel her take a step closer. I turn to look over my shoulder, unwilling to face her directly. If I turn fully around, that could very well signal that I’m open to having a conversation right now. I’m decidedly not.

Even though I told myself not to do it, I texted Maxx a few hours ago. Just one word: *why?* All he sent back was *I’m sorry, Kota.*

Gah!

“Yeah?” I ask, forcing out what’s likely an obviously fake yawn. I even go so far as to stretch my arms over my head. Tess folds her arms and stares me down until, eventually, I’m forced—via a sore neck—to turn and look at her. I hope my stare appears to be a challenge.

I sincerely hope she doesn’t take me up on that challenge. *I’m so damn tired, Tess, please.*

“We need to talk about Justin.” She points at her bed, but I back up a step instead. “I have the signal jammer on.” She gestures at it, but I just shake my head. What can I say to get out of this? I have a feeling that Tess won’t be swayed by simple denial. What if it’s best to convince her to stay quiet instead?

I open my mouth, but no words will come out. I close it.

“You told me I could have the week,” I whisper, and her eyes widen, as if that statement is an admission of guilt. “If you keep using the signal jammer, he’s going to know you’ve caught onto him.” I sigh and pop the melatonin into my mouth, realizing too late that I’m not cool enough to take pills dry and desperately need a drink.

Tess picks up a water glass from her nightstand and offers it out to me; I take it gratefully and drink half in one go.

“Do you know something about Justin and the Slayer?” she asks me again, tilting her head slightly to one side. “You can deny it all you want; I’m going to report my feelings to Agent Takahashi.” Tess turns as if to pull down her blankets.

“Why would you think he’s the Slayer?” I ask, crossing my own arms. My turn to look obstinate and annoyed. “Because he *must* be the person who framed Paul? He hates him that much?”

Tess looks at me over her shoulder for a minute—much the same way I just did—but then, it must be in our shared DNA to get neck cricks easily because she stands up straight and turns fully around. The rumpled blankets on her bed seem almost accusatory, as if I’m keeping their mistress from her rightful sleep.

“Yes, Dakota. He hates Paul *that much*. All this time, I’ve been wondering why you couldn’t see it.” Tess smiles, but it’s wry and cracked at the edges. Why shouldn’t it be? Her husband’s been arrested on suspicion of being a serial killer. I’m surprised she can even offer up this much. “I thought to myself, *she’s a smart girl, my Dakota. How can she not see what a monster*

this man is?" Tess' use of my real name is overshadowed by the way she stalks toward me, circling like a shark. "But you know what?"

I don't respond; the question is rhetorical.

"Once I really sat and wrote it all down"—Tess points over at the typewriter, the one that was delivered when we were touring the torched ice palace—"I started to see that wasn't the case at all. You've known all along, and you've been afraid of him." Here Tess pauses, nostrils flaring. "Threatened by him. You forget, I was once *married* to the man; I know how horrible he can be."

I say nothing, standing there and wondering if Tess hates me—even if just a little—because of who my father is. If I'd never been born, would he still have pursued her so aggressively? I can't decide. My gut tells me he would have, but the Dakota who's still throwing that pity party wants to believe otherwise, just so I can remain a martyr.

"It all makes sense now." Tess drops her hand and then moves over to the typewriter. For whatever reason, I follow, accepting a stack that she hands me.

I stare down at the thick, dark print, almost accusatory in its boldness.

When my daughter's lips parted for the first time around his name, I was dumbstruck. I was angry. With her. With myself. With the man whose name she was uttering. Why would she come to me in my bleakest hour and demand to know about a boogeyman best left in the shadows beneath the bed? Why drag him into the light?

Later, in the quiet breath between morning and night, I wrote it all down and I knew.

She asked because he made her ask. How else would she have known that name?

Justin Prior.

I stop reading, looking up to see Tess watching me.

"It's written like a book," I say, almost in awe, liking the way her cheeks flush.

"Well, it's just ... easier for me that way. I don't ... Dakota, I'm not sure how else to communicate if it isn't in the written word." Her voice drops sharply, and I wonder if all writers are like her, screaming into the void with the barest hope that someone, anyone will listen.

That's what a book is: a quiet conversation between writer and reader.

My throat gets tight as I tuck the bundle of papers to my chest.

“You’re going to tell Agent Takahashi what?” I inquire as politely as I can. “That you suspect Justin because I’m too dense to realize what a creep he is? Doesn’t that seem like a flimsy reason to start an investigation into someone?”

“Like I said, it’s okay if you can’t talk to me: I understand.” Tess turns to me again, leaning back against this odd half-wall that cordons off the desk. It has dirt in it, a sea of live flowers growing in a wooden box. I hand the pages back to her. “Whatever he’s done to you, your tongue is tied.”

Is she purposely trying to antagonize me? I wonder, staring back at Tess and marveling in all the best ways how she and Justin are alike. They’re alike in the ways that align with me, as if our shared history binds us. *I can’t let this keep going; I need to change the narrative.*

My eyes alight on the signal jammer, and I realize that getting rid of it myself is the only way. But I need a plausible reason other than Justin being the Slayer to do it. My hands rub nervously at the soft fabric of my nightgown.

“Some might accuse you of trying to get rid of your ex to save your husband’s ass.” I force myself to meet Tess’ eyes, but she doesn’t back down or get angry. Instead, she smiles at me again. It’s just loving enough that I’m suddenly sure she *isn’t* picking at me; she’s serious. This isn’t a reverse psychology technique to get me to admit the truth about Justin: I’m proving it right now with my actions.

In which case ... I storm over to the signal jammer, hefting it up and lifting it over my head. Tess doesn’t so much as blink as I prepare myself to throw it, meeting her eyes from across the room. She stands up straight and turns to face me, but not much else.

With a steadying breath, I turn back to the wall and I chuck the signal jammer as hard as I can at an ugly piece of framed art. The image features a man and his daughter strolling beside a lily pond *smiling*. I hate it instantly; I’m glad to have destroyed it.

Panting now, I pick up the signal jammer, see that it’s still functioning and turn to the doorway of Tess’ massive ensuite bathroom. This time, when I throw the device at the marble floor, it shatters. I’m shaking now, staring at the scattered pieces, when Tess moves up to stand beside me.

I’m angry. I’m so fucking angry. I’ve *been* so fucking angry for a long

time, ever since my grandparents forced me to call that hotline number when I didn't want to. Ever since Tess flew in overnight and tried to become my mother. Before that, all the way back to when Saffron promised to visit us kids regularly and never did.

Yes, I've been angry for a while.

I draw my phone from my nightgown pocket and Tess frowns slightly.

I need her to wonder, at the very least, if the Slayer and I are connected, if taking him down might drag me along with him. It's the only way. I offer up an ugly, smirking smile, reaching up to tuck some loose strands of hair behind my ear.

"You trying to pin Justin as the Slayer," I snort as I look fully at Tess, our eyes locking, "it only makes you more pathetic." I storm past her, heading to the door with my heart beating so rapidly that I can't seem to breathe. It feels like I'm suffocating.

"You only think you swayed me just now," she calls out, but I ignore her, yanking the door open so hard I tweak my shoulder before I slam it violently behind me. "You just confirmed it instead."

I swear I hear that last part, but I want to pretend that I didn't.

Two sides of me are warring.

I clutch at the front of my nightgown, twisting the fabric as I crouch down in the hallway. I'm aware that someone might stumble on me like this, but I can't help it. The thought of Tess knowing, of understanding where I was coming from while I was acting like an ass, it fills me with so much relief that I can't breathe.

But that's selfish. Because if Tess knows, and Justin knows she knows ... It's just better if she doesn't.

Only ... only ... I want her to so goddamn badly. I want this to be over. I want to be a normal teenager in a world where nothing is normal anymore. That's all I want. Peace. To be free from violence. To be able to learn. *To love those boys.*

"Dakota?" I look up, expecting to see Parrish and instead finding myself facing off against Maxx. I shove up to my feet, standing with them shoulder-width apart, like I'm in some sort of fighting stance. I force my arms to stay by my sides.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him, hating how steady my voice sounds. If it sounds steady, he'll think I'm okay when I'm anything but. Somehow, I

hold my ground anyway.

“Parrish invited me to spend the night ...” Maxx begins and then pauses, his gaze moving to the wall instead of my face. “I’m not exactly welcome at Chasm’s place anymore.” He lets out a wry, grating laugh, still staring at the wall. Why he won’t look at me, I don’t understand. I take a step forward and his gaze whips in my direction. He looks, of all things, *annoyed*.

As in, how fucking dare he think he has a right to be annoyed!

I curl my lip at him, and I’d swear he almost smiled if he wasn’t scowling so hard.

Clue number two: almost-smile.

“Why are you standing in the hallway in the dark, stalking me?” I grind out, and he tilts his head to the side curiously.

“You’re standing right in front of Parrish’s bedroom.” Maxx lifts up his bag in the direction of the door and, as if on cue, Parrish comes out of it, frowning.

“You two are so loud I heard you through my music and the spray of the shower.” I notice belatedly that his hair is wet and dripping, his chest bare and steaming. Once I catch sight of that, my attention is drawn down to his sagging sweatpants. There’s a lot of flat sexy midsection on display.

My attention shifts to the floor and stays there.

“You invited Maxx to spend the night?” I ask, a strange sensation digging into me. What if ... what if the boys are closer to each other than they are with me? They’ve been friends for years. Bros over ... well, fuck that stupid phrase. I lift my gaze suddenly to look at them both, standing too close and staring at me. “Chicks over dicks.”

It just comes out; I can’t help it.

I clamp a hand over my mouth, face flaming red as Parrish blinks at me in surprise.

“Huh?” he asks, crossing his arms and looking at me sternly. “You know that Maxx is clearly faking all this to save your ass, right? I hope you’d think that. In fact, I don’t expect you to *think* it at all; I expect you to *know* it.” Parrish glances sidelong at Maxx. “No matter what stupid shit you say.”

“First off, you should look for cameras and mics before you talk,” Maxx hisses, narrowing his eyes right back on Parrish. I’m surprised they get along at all without Chasm’s interference; there’s a lot of tension there. “Second, I’m ... I’m so fucking sorry.” X reaches up to scrub at his face. “I knew what

I was going to do even before the scene at the barcade. Having sex with you more than once, that was wrong.”

“I want to hit you so damn badly,” Parrish whispers, voice husky with violence as he looks over at me. I’m just standing there in my fighting position. I see now why I took it; it feels like I’m guarding against attack. It was prudent for me to stand this way.

“*I expect you to know it.*” Parrish is right. He’s so fucking right. I ... I should believe in X. The way he’s looking at me now though, like something to be pitied, makes it incredibly hard to trust him.

“That was on me.” He puts his palm flat to his chest. “Sometimes physical wants are hard to resist.” A pause as he turns his head to the side. “Like in the woods.”

Parrish grabs X by the shoulder, but I don’t see what happens after that because I sprint to my room, slamming the door shut behind me. I pace around a bit before changing my clothes to black sweatpants and a matching hoodie, and then I sneak out of the house through the front door.

I walk quickly down the gravel drive until I hit the road, turning in the vague direction of Chasm’s house. If I were at Justin’s, the walk would be a quick skip and a jump. From here? Uhh.

I look around before pulling out my phone. I get directions to the house that I think is Chasm’s, based on the satellite view, and then groan at the idea of a twenty-minute walk. I was having trouble sleeping before. Now? Not so much. My lids feel heavy. Maybe the melatonin is kicking in?

It feels as if I’m being watched, but a quick look around reveals nothing. Waiting in place to listen, I strain my ears, but all I hear is a gentle rustle of leaves, a chattering squirrel. If someone *is* watching me, they’re not about to reveal themselves. I start down the road at a brisk pace.

I’ve only taken a handful of steps before a vintage yellow Porsche pulls up beside me, and Chasm is rolling down the passenger side window.

“Please tell me you’re not out here all alone,” he warns as I yank the door open. I look across at him, pretty face lit up from the light of his phone screen. It’s tucked into a cupholder and playing a song at low volume.

I pick it up and then deposit his phone and mine inside a decorative stone flowerpot filled with roses. One of the thorns scratches me, but I pretend like I don’t believe in metaphors and shit.

“Drive.” I pause and then slide in before adding, “to the screaming/silence

cabin.”

Chasm hesitates slightly and then quirks an adorably cocky little smile.

“The screaming/silence cabin? Damn, you’re a cutie.” He gives this low, masculine chuckle of appreciation before nodding, yanking on the gear shift and speeding off into the night.

I settle in, folding my arms and staring out the windshield.

My mind tempts me with images of riding in Nevaeh’s new car on her sixteenth birthday, head hanging out the window, hair blowing in the wind. I wasn’t sure if I was going to have the greatest night of my life or if I was going to die, and I honestly didn’t care.

I put my head in my hand, squeezing my eyes shut to push back the memories.

“Parrish thinks I should believe in Maxx. He asked him to stay the night—at least. Maybe longer. Probably longer. Maxx sort of implied that you kicked him out?” Chasm doesn’t respond to my question, but his hands on the wheel squeak, as if he’s squeezing too hard.

“Well, I don’t care if he thinks he’s protecting you by being a dick. There are ways around Justin’s bullshit. He could’ve found a spare moment to tell you the truth.” Chasm mumbles something in Korean that ends with *sarang-haess-eo*. Love? Or ... loved? I wish I understood more, but I’m not in the mood to ask just now.

Even though I’m the one that brought up the subject, I decide I’m done with it already. I reach out to play with the stereo—it’s a vintage car, so we’re relegated to the radio—and stumble on a local K-pop station. I crank the volume up. BLACKPINK’s “*Pink Venom*” just so happens to be on. The song suits my mood as we rocket into the darkness.

It isn’t difficult to see that Chasm is just as pissed at Maxx as I am.

So, what if Parrish’s bond with Maxx is stronger than his bond with me? And what if Chasm’s isn’t? And I break the boys up without meaning to? *No! Stop that, Kota. How could I even think some overdone, misogynistic trope was in the cards for my guys? As if liking the same girl would break up their friendship. We are all friends; I’m included in that part of the equation, too.*

We listen to music for the majority of the forty-five-minute drive. I see Chas reach for the volume a few times, like maybe he wants to talk to me, but he draws his hand back each time and forcefully puts it into his lap. That makes me smile, but I don’t turn the volume down or shut the music off

myself.

The more times he goes for it and doesn't do it, the higher the tension between us rises until it's almost uncomfortable in that car. Also, he keeps staring at me from the corner of his eye, but I pretend not to notice. When I reach out and put my hand on his knee, he jumps and lets out a string of growly, sexy curses in his native tongue.

"Yes, whatever you just said, we'll do that later," I tell him between songs, and he clamps his hand down over mine for the remainder of the drive.

We pull into the gravel parking area shortly after, reluctantly untangling our hands, and then climb out together into the still-warm darkness. It's far too hot to be this late at night in the Pacific Northwest.

"Remember how I made you promise never to drive to such a remote place with a boy you don't know?" Chasm asks as he follows me up the stairs, and the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. This is what I get for encouraging this coiled need between us, for fanning these flames. "This would be the perfect time and place for me to reveal to you that I've been working with Justin, too, that I know whose blood was on that dress."

I spin around suddenly at the top of the stairs, but Chasm is already surging forward, knocking my back into the wall and putting his hands on either side of me. He leans in, smiling harshly.

"Weren't you warned about me, Little Sister? Weren't you warned against *all* of us?"

"Why were you sneaking around the other night?" I challenge him, aware that he's trying to teach me a lesson—a surprisingly good one—and finding myself annoyed at him for it anyway. What can I say? I *want* to be able to trust people at their word. It's a shame that that's a lost art. Why does it make someone stupid for trusting others? Is the world so fucked-up that we just can't do that anymore? "I woke up twice during the night: the first time, it was *you* who was gone. The second time, it was Maxx."

I stop talking, almost holding my breath. Chasm is frowning now, staring off to one side and giving me the chance to duck under his arm and spring for the door. I forget for a second that it's locked, and I need Chas to input the code for me.

I freeze there with my hands on the doorknob, and Chasm reaches past me, keying in the door code and giving me enough time to rush in and slam it in his face if I really wanted to.

“If you’re lying to me, too, then there’s no point in worrying about any of it. If I can’t trust you, who can I trust?” I look over my shoulder at Chasm in the dark, and he sighs, reaching out to flick on a light. The cabin is flooded with warmth as he yanks the door shut behind him. It feels suddenly less scary and much scarier all at once.

Scarier in a good way, I mean.

I turn around, resting my butt against the countertop as Chasm comes in and yanks the fridge open, cursing when he notices several bottles of soju.

“Shit. Fuck.” He turns back to me suddenly, putting his hands on my shoulders. “Get down and stay quiet.” He pushes me to my knees, and there’s a moment there where I’m not sure if he’s playing some sort of sick game with me or if he’s serious. “*Appa*,” Chasm greets, bowing at the waist as footsteps enter the room. “I didn’t know you were here; the lights were off. And your car ...”

“Why are you out so late?” Seamus asks, making a sound of disgust in the back of his throat. “No matter how hard I try with you, you don’t listen to a damn thing I say.”

I put my hand over my mouth, squeezing hard to keep back all the horrible things I want to tell Seamus in Chas’ place.

“I sometimes drive out here to think, when I need some space,” Chasm replies, voice even, as if his father didn’t just bite his head off. “*Which you’d know if you ever paid any attention to me.*” That last part’s unspoken, but I understand it implicitly. It’s insane that I’ve only known Chas a few months, and I get it, but his father doesn’t. Seamus ignores Chasm’s statement, his footsteps heading in the direction of the hallway and the back door that leads to the deck.

This seems to be our moment to escape, but Chasm ends up curling his hands into fists and following after his father. As I peek over the edge of the countertop, I can see the two of them as shadows outside on the dark deck.

“You know that Justin offered me a deal?” Chasm bites out, surprising the hell out of me. Justin ... offered him a deal? And he hadn’t thought to mention this to me at all? What sort of deal? I stay where I am, crouched low, fingers curled around the edge of the countertop, watching out the window.

“A deal?” Seamus asks, his voice laced with annoyance. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Chasm tucks his hands in his pockets, dropping his face toward the ground.

I can't see his eyes, but I imagine they're closed. He stays that way for some time, so long that Seamus turns away and starts down the steps toward the yard. In the dark. At one in the morning. What the hell is he up to out here?

"Justin wants me to marry Dakota and take over his company," Chasm continues, studying his father's shoulders as Seamus pauses, a tension in his upper back that's obvious even while he's entirely in shadow. "He wants me to take over other things, too." Chas moves over to the railing, folding his arms on it, and looking sideways at his father. He rests his head against his folded arms, and even if I can't see the wicked smile on his face, I can hear it in his words. "He says if I do all that, then he doesn't need you."

Seamus doesn't react. Instead, he continues on down the stairs like his son doesn't even exist. If he caught the implications in Chasm's statement—as in, *Justin wants me to kill, and maybe he wants me to kill you*—then he doesn't let on.

Chas stands up straight, turning and stomping back into the house. He moves over to me and snatches my wrist in his hand, yanking me up to my feet, our faces far too close. I can't quite make out the expression in his amber eyes.

"Come on." He pulls me to the door and outside, taking the steps far too quickly and dragging me along behind him. I'm out of breath when he opens the passenger door for me, gesturing for me to get in. When I hesitate, he gives me a look. "That's what I was doing out of bed that night, talking to Justin." He indicates the seat again with a wave of his hand. "Hurry up. Get in so we can go before he realizes what I've just said."

Our eyes meet.

I climb in and Chas shuts the door, moving over to the driver's side and mumbling nonsensically in Korean. "*Eotteohke?*" he's muttering as he starts the car.

"That doesn't mean *goodnight*, does it?" I ask, trying to be cheeky. It almost works. He stops at the edge of the driveway to stare at me, and then gives a laugh so forced that it makes me cringe. "What? Did you want me to suspect you? No matter how weird you act, it isn't going to work."

"I'm not trying to make you suspect anything; I'm checking to see if you do. You don't. Which means you probably still trust Maxx." Chasm turns to me, one hand on the wheel, idling in the dark driveway. "I don't care what Parrish says: don't trust a fucking thing X says from now on."

Chasm takes off as I sit there thinking about what he just said to his father.

“Did you get out of bed to see Justin of your own accord, or did he come and get you?” I ask, wanting to clarify. I look over at Chas, wondering where he might be taking me now.

“He woke me up to discuss my hacking efforts,” Chasm tells me, but he could as easily be lying as he is telling the truth. He looks over at me, as if to say *don’t believe a damn word that’s coming out of my mouth either*. “And then he offered me a job at Milk Carton.” Chasm swears again, hands sliding down to rest at the bottom of the steering wheel. “He offered me a chance to *inherit it*.”

“Justin wants me to write; he wants you to take over Milk Carton. He’s crafting a new story for him and Tess.” I reach up to rub at my forehead, closing my eyes against an impending headache. “*Pop two of my mom’s Vicodin; she’ll never notice*.” That’s what Nevaeh always used to say when one of us complained about a headache. I noticed that whenever Sally agreed, Nevaeh would mysteriously be unable to find her mom’s stash; I figured out pretty quickly she didn’t even know if her mom had a stash. She just wanted to seem interesting, a little rebellious. Poor Nevaeh.

“I kept meaning to mention it, but we’ve had a lot going on.” Chasm jerks the wheel suddenly and sends us flying off the main road onto some bumpy dirt mess that I don’t think this car is equipped to handle. It’s a new-old car, like clearly vintage. I’m assuming Seamus bought it for him to replace the one he lost in the fire.

“Where are we going?” I ask, but Chasm just shakes his head.

He doesn’t know either.

We drive onward, headlights slicing the darkness in half, until we come to a stop at the edge of a small pond. Chas gets out and moves around the front of the car, hoisting himself up to sit on the hood. I join him, and we sit there in silence for several minutes. I didn’t bring my phone—obviously—so the longer I’m gone, the worse shape I might be in when I get back. Hopefully Tess won’t notice I’m missing.

Missing.

The operative word here. Only, if Saffron hadn’t stolen me away, where would I be now? *Who* would I be now? I plant my chin in my hand, staring at the still, dark surface of the water.

“Do you know what pond this is?” I ask as Chasm removes a pack of

cigarettes and stares at them for an inordinate amount of time. He scoffs and shakes his head, scooting forward and hopping off the hood. He takes the cigarettes to a trash can and with a mumbled phrase that could either be a curse or a prayer, dumps them into it. Chas throws his arms wide, a shadow against the murky silhouette of night.

“I quit for good! You hear that, universe? Fuck you, and I *quit*.”

He turns back around and comes to stand in front of me, hands on his slender hips. His gaze is on his sneakers, their white leather toes a bright splotch in the darkness. I’m sure these, too, are designer, but who knows? Who cares, more accurately.

“I’m really regretting throwing those smokes in the trash.” He rubs at the back of his head as I stare at him, waiting for him to lift that beautiful gaze of his up to mine. “Would I look completely pathetic if I went over there and dug them out?”

I give a theatrical look around our parking spot, some picnic area with a table, a rusted grill, and a sad-looking tree. It’s more branches than leaves at this point, as if it sniffs autumn around the corner. Or ... if it’s dying.

“Out here?” I ask, turning back to Chasm and trying to force a smile. It doesn’t work. I think I’m officially out of them. I never thought I’d see the day but here we are: there are no more forced smiles left. “This seems like a hookup spot.” I mean to say a whole lot more, but that’s the only part that comes out. In the dark, in the quiet, emotions amped up and promises broken and feelings hurt ... it becomes a come-on that I didn’t intend.

Chasm’s lips twitch as he leans in, putting a hand on the hood on either side of my body.

“Was that a suggestion, Naekkeo?” he asks me, cocking his head to the side as he peers up at me, using his tongue to play with one of his lip rings so that it clacks against his teeth.

“I bet there are used condoms galore in that trash,” I continue, choking on the words. “How worth it do those cigarettes seem now? That’s the suggestion I was trying to make: don’t dig through the garbage to get them back.”

Chas huffs out a breath and leans in, putting his forehead up against my shoulder.

“I should be happy that Maxx deflected, shouldn’t I?” he whispers back. “I mean, he’s still on our side, but if he wants to be with Maxine ...” Chasm

lifts his head up again to look at me, our mouths close enough to kiss. “That leaves more room for me, doesn’t it? So why the fuck does it feel like we both had our hearts broken?”

“He’s your best friend. It makes sense that you’d be hurt. If he’s telling the truth, then he lied to you. If he isn’t telling the truth, then Justin has a literal or figurative gun to his head.” I frown, looking up at the creaky branches above us. As they’re tousled by the breeze, the wood groans in protest against the movement. It’s eerie. We could be in a horror movie right now. A slasher film. A thriller.

A true crime documentary.

I look back at Chasm to see him staring off to one side, his lightning bolt hair glowing faintly in the dark. He stays where he is, hands on either side of me, mulling over what I’ve said.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” he adds, letting his gaze swing back to mine. My eyes get hot and itchy, but I blink the tears away. I’d imagined introducing Nevaeh and Chasm to one another. He’d be polite, at first, but inevitably, she’d say something that would tick him off, just the way Lumen does. They’d bicker, but they’d try to get along for my sake. It’d be fun, to introduce my new life to my old life until everything was mixed together and it just became my life, period.

“Tess grilled me so hard tonight,” I whisper, clutching at Chasm’s sweatshirt. His eyes widen as I spill everything that happened in her room, everything she said, everything I did. “She tricked me,” I finish, still clutching onto Chasm like a lifeline. “And she’s claiming she’ll go to the FBI tomorrow. What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

Chasm’s face is a study in perfection, a nice wide mouth, full lips, his eyes like sideways teardrops. But it’s a face set in hard lines, held in open contempt of the world around him, a shield propped up in defense of those he loves. His expression rarely softens, but when it does ... like right now ...

He slides his right hand along the side of my jaw, tangling his fingers in my hair. His mouth closes over mine, stealing the rush of words that are threatening to tumble out. He breaks away, the space of a breath, just enough to speak. I close my eyes, so I can better feel the movement of his lips.

“You can’t control everything, Little Sister. I know it feels like you can, but this was all going to come to a head one way or another. Tess isn’t just a bloodhound following a scent trail; she’s a shark tracking blood in the water.”

My eyes crack slightly so that I can stare at Chasm's handsome face. "If she's locked onto her prey, you won't be able to stop her from tracking it. The best you can do at this point is convince her that she shouldn't bite down. You know what I mean?"

"I'm always down for a good metaphor." The words are soft, blanketed by a chill of unease. Chasm nods, as if that's an acceptable or reasonable response to what he just said. He puts his other hand on the opposite side of my face, kissing me again.

The branches creak overhead, and we both freeze at the sound of a twig snapping in the shadows. Sometimes, with Justin on our asses, I forget that the world isn't solely populated by one monster. There are thousands. Maybe millions. Probably millions.

Chasm glances over his shoulder, searching the shadows, as if it's possible to see anything at all. We both jump as a deer stumbles out of the brush, staring at us like we're the intruders. Err, I guess we are? It takes off at the sight of us, bounding back into the night.

"If that's not a sign ..." Chasm turns back to me, standing up straight, his olive-green jacket rustling. He's still got that hoodie on underneath, a pair of jeans cupping his tight ass, those designer kicks. "We should probably—"

I grab onto his shoulders, lifting up to press a kiss to his mouth. He resists me for all of ten seconds before he's wrapping me in his arms, smelling like chocolate and mint. Body hot. Tongue hotter. My hands knead his shoulders, and he groans into my mouth.

"Oh, I like that." Chas pulls back only slightly, quirking the edge of his lip into a torrid smile. "If only we were naked with a few spare hours and some massage oil." He stands up straight, releasing me just long enough to shrug off his jacket. His arms go around me again, pulling me close, his teeth grazing the curve of my ear. "Are you sure you want to do this out here in the middle of nowhere? What if a serial killer gets us?" Chasm exhales a soft laugh, and my skin ripples with goose bumps. "This is teen slasher movie 101: sex in the woods at an abandoned campsite. Nobody knows where we are."

"That last part, that's what makes it perfect." I cup his face between my hands, kissing his bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth, and smiling when he offers up a sound of satisfaction in response. "No Justin. No Mr. Volli. No Tess. No cameras." *So far as we know.* I mean, Justin isn't a god; he can't

have hidden cameras everywhere.

I'm not nearly as assured by that assessment as I should be.

"Sure you don't want to run off tonight and never come back?" Chasm asks, but he knows that I won't. I know that he won't either. But the fantasy is there.

"Let's move to Jeju Island and eat Jeju mandarins and take pictures together next to the *dol hareubang* statues," I mumble, referring to a place in South Korea that I saw in a drama. Chas laughs again, but it's a much sadder sound this time.

"*Eojjeomyeon*," he murmurs, shaking his head and then pulling me even closer. I can feel everything now—the rapid pumping of his heart, the firmness behind his dark jeans, his heat. "Maybe. Perhaps. Probably." He leans back from me, telling me all sorts of things in Korean—*Hangug-eo*—as I study his face, the meaning clear in his expression.

There's a lot of love there, but underneath it all is a creeping. I'm not sure if that dark emotion in his gaze is fear, if it's anger, if it's both. But it's clear to me that Kwang-seon McKenna thinks something bad is coming.

He's right, I mean, but it's hard to see him like this.

I'm about to say something when he threads his fingers in my hair, massaging my scalp with his fingers as he kisses me again. Chasm kisses like he's offering a fervent, ardent blessing, like he's praying with his mouth, like he's worshipping.

I relax into it, letting him take over, his left arm circling my waist and holding on tight. Our heartbeats race to match one another, bodies melding. I wiggle closer to the edge of the hood, a smile breaking across my lips as he kisses me.

"That's when it tastes best," he mutters, licking my bottom lip. "You, smiling."

"Shut up." I push back at his chest, but he only moves back enough to look at our, um, situation. I'm wearing sweatpants, a hoodie, and mismatched Chucks (new ones that Maxine brought for me when she came to stay at the house).

"Haven't I warned you about wearing pants?" he asks wryly, raising a brow. My night vision allows me to see just the barest whisper of his face in the moon-kissed shadows. "Or was this your 'sneak around in the middle of the night alone' outfit?"

“I was on my way to see you.” I reach my fingers under his hoodie and t-shirt, searching for the warmth of his stomach. He lets me touch him, hissing a bit at my cold fingers on his hot skin. The air is cooling rapidly as it gets later, a breeze off the water behind him chilling us even further.

“Liar.” Chasm’s voice is a dark purr of pleasure as he waits for my hands to dip a bit lower, going for the button on his jeans.

“And where were you off to?” I ask, already knowing the answer to that question. He was at Laverne’s gate, so it’s pretty obvious. Still, I want to hear him say it.

“I was on my way to see you.” He recycles my words just before pulling me close for another kiss. It’s so intense, that hot lick of fire on my lips, that I fumble a bit when trying to undo his pants. Chas’ warm fingers slide between us, gently pushing my hand away.

I’m only disappointed until he slips that same hand into my sweatpants, burning my mouth with his as those perfect fingers stroke flames on the outside of my panties. If we’re both lucky, maybe they’ll turn to ash? When he works his thumb against my clit, I suck in a sharp breath of surprise. How does it feel so good so fast?

“For what it’s worth, I’m on your side.” Chasm says those words against my mouth, but I don’t know how to process them right now. I’m so ridiculously grateful to hear that, but it’s sad, too. If X really was playing my heart all along, will Chas ever forgive him? Or will their friendship be obliterated?

I allow that rage that’s leaking through my box of shadow emotions to take over me, like lighter fluid being poured onto an open flame. My teeth graze Chas’ lower lip and my hands yank and jerk at his pants until I’m in.

He curses prettily at me as I find his hardness, wrapping my fingers tight around the base.

In retaliation, he slides his own fingers beneath my panties, stroking and summoning wetness with confident but excited motions. I mimic his intensity, letting him set the pace. While my right hand explores his most sensitive parts, I use the other to brush hair from his forehead, stroking his head and tilting my own to accept the depth of his kisses.

The way that tongue of his strokes my own makes me fidgety, my hips rocking into his hand even as he denies me any sort of penetration. With a gentle breeze tousling the naked limbs of the tree above us, a distant splash of

something small in the dark, and no souls but the stars to watch over us, we ride a frenzy together.

There's a lot of lust there, a healthy dose of hormones, but it feels so much better because there's love, too. I'm not sure I could ever be a casual sex person. I hope I never need to find out. Justin might've forced my hand when it came to Chasm and Maxx, but I loved them both enough that there are no scars from our romance.

Even ... even if X was faking it all along.

I push on Chasm's wrist, encouraging him to take things further. He draws back from kissing me, lips shiny, and locks eyes with me as he slips two fingers in at once. I'm breathing hard, my own hands going limp as he very slowly and very purposefully pushes in and draws out again.

"Relax, *Naekkeo*." He uses his free hand to push mine away from his dick, his jeans and boxers sagging so that he's baring it all to the night. Either he doesn't notice or he doesn't care, watching me as he uses his thumb and fingers to bring all my nerve endings to life. I lean close in the hope of another kiss, but he doesn't give me the satisfaction. I'm able to get just near enough to snag one of his lip rings between my teeth, giving it a tug.

That does it. He can't resist kissing me again, stepping in close enough that I'm able to find his erection and wrap my hand around it again. His hips move fiercely into my grip even as he keeps the pace of his own excruciatingly slow.

"Condom?" I ask, voice breathless and airy. I sound like I'm high. I feel better than if I were high.

"Mm." Chasm shakes his head, putting his mouth to my neck and giving me a gentle bite that has me shuddering. "Why don't we see what we can do like this?"

"You totally forgot them," I assert, just before he does something with his hand that has me melting.

"So antagonistic," he teases, but I know for a fact that I'm right. That's okay. There's more than one way to have good sex. Chasm proves that as he adds a third finger, offering my exposed throat fervent and worshipful attention. By comparison, my own movements feel clumsy and unsure.

I can't be all that bad though because he ends up cursing and grabbing my wrist to stop me. Our eyes meet.

"I'm there," he breathes harshly, searching my expression for something.

“Let me focus on you for a minute.”

I start to protest, but then he’s pushing up my hoodie to find that I’ve completely forgone a bra. His hand cups my right breast first, kneading and lifting and rolling until my stomach muscles are tight and I feel almost dizzy from the sensation. When he adds his mouth to my cold, hard nipple? It’s game over for me.

Or is that a terrible pun to use?

My sweatpants are yanked down next, giving Chas more room to maneuver. That hand of his starts to speed up in time with my body’s responses, slamming fast and hard into me until I’m digging my nails into his strong shoulders, head falling back, lips parted.

I’m staring at the cloud covered moon as I come on Chasm’s hand, my body sagging against his as he catches me with his left arm. He removes his right hand from my sweatpants as I struggle to catch my breath, helping me to yank them back up.

“Wanna watch?” he asks, flashing this cocky half-smile. Chasm takes a small step back as I release his shoulders, putting my palms on the hood of the Porsche to steady myself. With my eyes half-lidded, but my attention on full-blast, I watch him take his dick in his right hand and stroke it. I’m memorizing the movements he’s making, the way he swipes his thumb over the tip. *He’s using the same hand he used on me.* The idea is as thrilling as the sight.

He drops his head back the same way I did, working himself up with a satisfied sigh that comes from deep in his chest before dropping into more of a groan. I hop off the hood, stumbling a bit before I get my shaky legs to obey me, and then I’m there, resting my left hand on the back of his neck and taking over.

Chasm guides me for the first few strokes, and then releases himself, letting me have complete control. I take him all the way to the edge and over the side, plunging him into a climax that ends up getting ... a little messy.

“Our hoodies ...” Chasm trails off with a slight cringe, but he can’t hide the pleased flush on his face. He strips his sweatshirt off, but I’m not wearing anything under mine ... “Here.” Chas takes his t-shirt off and gives it to me.

It’s the BTS shirt that I gifted to him.

I smile as I slip it on, happy to see that he’s actually wearing it. More than that, I’m smiling because it’s warm from his body and it smells like him.

Mostly, I'm smiling because he's shirtless and I can see all of Parrish's beautiful artwork on his body.

Oh. Parrish. Shit.

This whole situation reminds me of our first time in Laverne's basement (complete with ruined hoodies), and I feel suddenly ashamed that I didn't let him know that I was going out. What if he's worried about me? What if I've sent Tess into another full-blown PTSD attack?

As upset as I am about Nevaeh, about ... *Him* ... I shouldn't have run out like that.

"We should go, huh?" Chas asks, still catching his breath, a satisfied smile on his mouth that I can't resist kissing. His hands find my waist again, and it's just, like, way too much. "Shit, stop that."

"You're the one doing it," I accuse, but I'm laughing as he carefully unhooks my hands from his naked body and moves over to the passenger side door to open it.

I hesitate for a moment, even as I'm panicking a bit about needing to go back. Sitting here in the dark (doing other things in the dark most especially) was a nice reprieve from the shitstorm of the day. As soon as I go back, I'm walking right back into a metaphorical deluge of BS.

Chasm seems to notice the shift in my mood. He helps me get settled in the front seat, draping his jacket over me before closing my door and moving around to the driver's side to climb in. His face is flushed and pretty when he starts the car, pausing to look over at me.

"What year is this car?" I ask, putting a fist up to my mouth so I can pretend to cough. Really, I'm just trying to break Chas' stare.

"Sixty-nine." He grins at me then, but I pretend not to get the joke, and he ends up offering a soft frown instead. "I just wanted a car that wasn't a computer, you know?" Chasm starts the vehicle with the sweet purr of a powerful engine (that sound would have Maxine doing happy jumping jacks), and then we're winding our way back to the soaring mansions of Medina.

Chasm turns his headlights off before we start down Laverne's road, pulling the car to a stop outside the gate. He shuts the ignition off, and we sit there in silence together for a few minutes.

"You're not coming in?" I gesture uselessly at the gate, looking through the velvety shadows to see if I can't get a read on his expression.

"I want to see if I can't figure out what my dad is up to at the cabin."

Chasm exhales, looking at the looming bulk of Laverne's gothic manor as if he's reconsidering. Once the silence has stretched on long enough, I get that he's not going to change his mind. Whatever Seamus is doing, it could be important. Hell, it could be *vital*.

"You didn't need Maxx to bow out to win, you know?" I offer up finally, taking off my seat belt and leaning over to press a kiss to his cheek. He turns at the last second, and our lips meet in a rush of heat. I move to return his jacket, and he shakes his head, tucking his fingers beneath my chin so that he can look me in the eyes.

"You can't say that shit to me right before I drop you off. I'll be thinking about it all night, you know?"

That makes me smile. For real smile. Because if we waited until the perfect moment to smile every time, most of us would spend our lives frowning. I might be out of forced smiles, but it seems I've got real ones tucked inside my heart.

"*Annyeonghi jumuseyo, oppa,*" I murmur, stumbling over the words.

"*Sleep peacefully?* But I'm not going to sleep just yet." Chas' brow goes up, but I'm already scrambling out of the car before he can correct my pronunciation. I won't lie: it's atrocious. "You've been practicing!" he calls out to me, leaning over the passenger seat just before I slam the door shut. As always, on a night when I really needed a knight to rescue me, he was there on his yellow Porsche steed. *My dark knight*. "Don't be so formal with me, Naekkeo. *Jal ja.*" He offers up another wave as I shut the door, tucking his jacket close around me as I walk down the extensive drive.

The wind whispers its secrets to me as my shoes crunch across the gravel. I swear that I hear footsteps, pausing to look over my shoulder. Chasm's car is still here; he's clearly waiting for me to get inside before he leaves. I want him to stay, but I can understand why he feels the need to investigate.

Anyway, I'm just glad that he came to see me.

Something skitters in the bushes, and I freeze until I see a squirrel darting across the driveway. It hits the trunk of a tree and goes right up, like gravity isn't an issue it has to contend with. I keep going, past the fountain that I thought was a whale but upon closer inspection see is actually a muscular Poseidon-type lying on his belly.

This time, I'm sure I hear footsteps.

When I turn around, I see a man standing under the trees at the edge of the

driveway.

It's Amin fucking Volli.

I offer him up a tight smile and a mocking salute that he returns with a casual wave, and then into the house I go. *As if I needed a reminder that I'm being watched at all times, that the Banks aren't safe even here. Nobody is safe.*

I detour into the kitchen. Not only is it a faster route to the staircase that leads up to my room, but my rendezvous with Chasm has made me hungry.

Fuck my entire life to pieces because Tess is *waiting right there for me.*

She's sitting in the dark, too, perched at the kitchen table with a mug in her hands.

"I'm going to assume all the secrecy and the sneaking around have to do with Justin?" It's phrased like a question, a lilt at the end of her words that indicates she's giving me the opportunity to answer before making assumptions.

"I ..." Words fail as my eyes adjust to the shadows, and we lock gazes in the dark. I don't know where all the cameras are in this house, but we're going to need to figure that out sooner rather than later. You know, so we can plan to *kidnap* one of our classmates.

I wish Veronica had died instead of Nevaeh. It's an ugly thought, but an understandable one. Nevaeh. I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. If I'd handled Justin sooner, if I hadn't been such a coward ...

"Chasm and I hooked up." I yank the sides of his jacket closed, storming across the kitchen toward the door that lets out closest to the stairs.

"Dakota," Tess says, but she doesn't stop me. Doesn't beg or plead. She lets me go, and that's the scariest part of the entire scenario.

Tess knows.

The question now is this: what is Justin going to do when he knows that Tess knows?

It's only a matter of time.

And he'll be back from his honeymoon on Sunday. I have until then to figure out how the hell I'm going to do this, how I'm going to kill my own father.

Congratulations, Justin. You've gotten exactly what you wanted in the end, didn't you?

I slam my borrowed bedroom door so hard that if Laverne's gothic

mansion were haunted, I'd have surely woken all the ghosts.

The title 'CHAPTER 5' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '5' is in a vibrant pink. The text is set against a background of dark, gnarled tree branches and a large, dark green heart shape. The overall aesthetic is dark and moody, with a pinkish-purple gradient at the bottom.

CHAPTER 5

There's a list written on the page in front of me, a catalogue of all the known players in the game and whose side they're on. Of course, Justin, Caroline, Raúl, and Mr. Volli are on one side. Parrish, Chasm, and I are on the other. People like Tess, like Delphine, they're wild cards. I can't say for sure what they're going to do so I write their names in a separate column.

Maxim Wright is in that same column.

"I'm still on your side, you know," a voice says from behind me. I don't have to look up to know it's him. My ears know the sound of his voice. My entire body knows, breaking out in goose bumps. My heart knows, breaking all over again. "Keeping Maxine safe is as important to you as it is to me."

I clench the pencil so hard between my fingers that I imagine it could break. It feels like it could. I *want* it to break. The damn thing doesn't budge, so I take it in two hands, attempting to snap it. Doesn't work.

X reaches down to extract it from my fingers, breaking it in half like it's a dry, flimsy twig. He hands the two pieces back to me, but I refuse to take them, slamming the cover of my notebook shut. When I look up at him, he isn't smiling. He's dead serious about breaking my pencil for me and giving it back.

I stand up and he scoots back an entire step.

God. That's the worst part. I reach up a hand and fist it in the front of my t-shirt. I'm wearing Chasm's jacket over the top; that's what gives me strength.

But this feeling of lost intimacy? It's the worst.

"I've never broken up with anyone before," I whisper, certain that there are Egyptian priests preparing to turn me into a mummy, removing my organs and putting them in jars, dragging my heart out through my nose. That's what it feels like. I can't seem to catch my breath; I can't seem to figure out why I'm telling X how I feel, of all people.

He seems sympathetic to my plight but doesn't make any move to comfort me.

It's strange how someone can be so close to you one minute, and a perfect stranger the next. How could we have shared secrets, shared kisses, shared bodies, and now we're not allowed to do that anymore?

This hurts worse than the hour I spent scrolling through all of Nevaeh's social media this morning on the laptop upstairs, looking at old pictures and videos of me and her and Sally. *This* hurts worse, and I'm angry with myself for letting it be that way.

I finally look up to see X staring at me with those beautiful green eyes of his. I recognize that we weren't together very long, that in the pool of life, this is but a drop of time. Only ... only ... my heart doesn't accept that.

"It gets easier over time," X supplies, as if he's some sort of expert in the matter. That infuriates me. How dare he stand there in a green *Wright Family Racing* hoodie with his dark hair tousled and his eyes heavy with sleep, looking at me like I'm just another person and not someone he held in the dark, confessed his fears to, showed his true self to.

Then again, that could all have been bullshit.

"Where does the truth end and the lies begin?" I ask him, dropping my arm to my side, even as my heart continues to thunder. Why does he have to be here? Why couldn't he have broken up with me and disappeared? Why does he have to be standing right in front of me? "Or was there any truth at all? The way you're talking to me now, it's like you've been here, done this before."

"I've never done anything like this before." He holds his hands out to the sides, palms up, as if trying to indicate the whole tangled mess of the situation. An FBI agent is dead. My childhood friend is dead. And on the day Justin's hammer comes down in a big way, X destroys me. Why? Because Justin told him to, that's why. But did Justin tell him to tell the truth or tell a lie?

“Obviously not.” I take a step toward him, but this time, he doesn’t back up. He just stays put and stares at me. “You said you’d only ever had three girlfriends, but that the first two were ... nothing.” The word comes out in a whisper. Maybe because I’m thinking of myself, of being one of X’s nothings. “But you know all about the pain of a breakup?” I grab at my shirt again, twisting it and yanking on the fabric. “What the *hell* would you know about any of it?”

“I’m here, too, remember? I’m breaking up, too, remember?” He points at himself, swallowing as if to choke down words that he wants to say but won’t. Or can’t. Maxx’s pretty mouth tightens into a thin line and he turns away from me, as if to head into the kitchen, when I reach out and snatch his sleeve.

“Was I really your first ...?” I can’t make myself finish the sentence. Am I trying to ask about kissing? No. I’m asking about sex. “*You’re my first real girlfriend, my first kiss, my first—and hopefully only—sexual partner.*” Maxx’s words couldn’t be any louder than if he were speaking them right now, and not just echoing them in my memory.

He ignores me, turning away regardless, but I chase after him, slamming my palm into the wall in front of him. In an effort to avoid touching me, Maxx turns so that his back is to the wall instead. I get in close, pinning him there with, if not by my overwhelming physical strength, than with the force of my anger.

He looks pissed, to be honest. With me? He better not be.

“I’ve got a date with Maxine today,” he tells me, which is quite like getting punched in the jaw. I press in harder, and he closes his eyes tight. “Please don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what?” I query back, the sound of footsteps drawing my attention over to Parrish. He’s stopped in the hallway beside us, wearing slippers and pajama pants but no shirt. It’s slung over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed to slits, his mouth in a definitive frown. I turn back to Maxx. “Don’t do what?” I repeat.

“Don’t put me in an uncomfortable position. I don’t want to have to turn you down like this.” X reaches out like he’s going to move my arm aside. I take the opportunity to push forward, crushing my mouth to his. A bit of a dick move, I’ll admit, but I’m upset and I have no idea what to do with all of this anger.

Strong hands grip my shoulders, pushing me back a step. This time, it's X who plans to pin me to the wall. He walks me back several steps and then holds me against the opposite wall, staring down at me with a complex frown marring his handsome features.

"No means no, Dakota." Maxx releases me suddenly and takes off for the kitchen, leaving me red-faced and embarrassed behind him. My eyes seem to be glued to the carpet.

"Once he's made up his mind about something, he's impossible to sway," Parrish tells me, pausing in front of me. I feel too ashamed to look up at him, but he lifts my face with gentle fingers anyway. "Stay strong, Gamer Girl. If you break now, you're giving Justin exactly what he wants." I start to move away when Parrish snatches the sleeve of Chasm's jacket. His breath stirs my hair as he gets in close to whisper. "I'd also *love* to know where you went last night and why you've got my best friend's jacket on. But you can fill me in later."

I nod, exhaling as I follow Parrish into the kitchen. He deigns to slip into the t-shirt then, but only because we're living at Laverne's place and if she sees him without one, she pitches a fit. Her fits are far less cute than Tess', and Tess' weren't all that cute to begin with.

"I told Maxine to date you," I tell Maxx as he fills up the kettle and puts it on the stove, presumably to make tea. He looks up at me. "I don't care if Justin knows. He's the one that asked for you and Maxine to date, for Parrish and Lumen to date. I'm just letting you know that my sister isn't a creep: she would never date a guy who slept with her little sister."

"Even if she isn't interested in me, that doesn't matter. In the end, as long as she's safe, that's what counts." X pauses as Tess enters the room dressed in a robe and slippers that seem to match Parrish's. Um. He has matching slippers to his mom?

I give him a look, and he drags his feet under the table so I can't get a clear view. Maybe they just look similar? No, definitely not. He's clearly blushing.

"As long as who's safe?" Tess inquires, quite glibly I'll have you know. "Something I should know about?"

"Nobody's safe with the Seattle Slayer around," Parrish offers, which is at least a partial truth. I mean, well, it's a whole truth, but vague enough to pass Justin's scrutiny. At this point, I'm not even sure what happened to my phone last night. Probably it's still in the flowerpot outside. Not that it matters: the

screen is shattered from when I threw it. I'm going to need a new one. Need? Do I *really* need a phone though? Couldn't I just get settled in a log cabin in the middle of the woods? I'd be fine as a hermit, really. *Sure, Gamer Girl, keep telling yourself that.*

"Where are you off to today, Maxim?" Tess asks politely, pouring herself a cup of coffee. From the looks of it, it must be her second cup at least. Probably third or fourth. She has huge purple circles under her eyes that seem at odds with the sharp resolution on her face.

"I'm ..."

He pauses when the kettle whistles. *Saved by the bell, huh, Maxim? Why not just tell Tess we aren't together anymore?* Because he wants to reconcile with me later and can't bear to spoil Tess' feelings toward him over a lie? My heart soars at this tiny scrap of possibility, but it's short-lived. "Taking Maxine out on a date."

Tess pauses and turns to look at X like he's an alien creature from another planet. To his credit, X appears not to notice, putting a tea bag into a mug—one of those same white mugs, like a clone of the others—and pours hot water over it.

"Maxine Banks?" Tess asks, as if there could be any other. "I don't understand."

"Dakota is engaged to Chasm now; it's time for me to move on." Maxx takes his tea and beats a hasty retreat for the exit. "I've got just enough time to shower. Thank you for letting me stay the night." He lifts his mug in salute and then disappears.

Tess turns oh so slowly to stare at me as I use Parrish's tall, muscular form as a shield of sorts. I feel like a ship on the ocean, a tumultuous gale tossing me to-and-fro. Parrish is my anchor. He was the first person in Washington to make me feel connected to a sense of home and peace. He's my first love.

I look his way to see him staring at Tess, waiting in anticipation for her reaction. Probably he's also waiting for her to ask him about our relationship.

"We're still solid." Parrish supplies that without being asked, pulling out the chair beside him so that I can sit down. I do. More accurately, I flop into it, speechless. All my lies are coming unraveled, and I'm having trouble remembering what goes where. "Dakota and I, we're nowhere near to breaking up."

Tess doesn't comment, settling herself into the chair opposite me. When she finally looks at me, her eyes take in Chasm's jacket before shifting over

to Parrish. He stares right back at her, shoulders stiff, as if he's ready to wage war. Tess knows as little as he does about my activities last night, but I doubt she's forgotten that I waltzed in after dark wearing my boyfriend's clothes. Well, one of my boyfriends' clothes.

As if in silent response to that, Tess reaches down and picks up a new signal jammer, setting it purposefully on the table. It looks a bit like a wireless router or something, a black box with a bunch of thick antennae sticking up. She makes a show of switching it on.

If Justin hasn't already clocked us, he will. He'll know once he realizes how much Tess is messing with him.

"Mom ..." Parrish begins, eyeing the device with a pale face, fingers tense on the table. He knows as well as I do how much trouble this could get us in. The night before last, Justin was ensuring my friend met a sad, lonely death in the arms of alcohol. He took out an FBI agent who was just trying to do her job. He destroyed a teacher who had the audacity to give me a B on my report card.

What's he going to do if he believes his secret is at risk of being uncovered?

My stomach churns at the thought. All this time, all the sacrifices the boys and I have made, it can't end like this.

"I've been thinking." Tess pushes her coffee to the side and folds her hands together on the tabletop. "For you all to be so scared, there must be a lot at stake. You believe that if you talk to me, Justin will retaliate."

Silence.

Neither Parrish nor I know quite what to say.

"What? Do you want to smash this again? By all means, you must be angry. I would be, if I were you." Tess pushes the signal jammer toward me, and Parrish hooks a curious glance in my direction. His right hand reaches down, twining inked fingers through my shaking ones. He squeezes hard, snapping me back to life.

"Tess questioned me about the Slayer thing last night; she's still stuck on the thought that he could be Justin," I explain, and Parrish's hand goes stiff over mine.

"It's not that I think it: I know it," she corrects, sighing and sitting up straight. She pulls her dark hair over one shoulder and proceeds to comb through it with her fingers. "I have to shower soon, too, and get ready to meet

with Paul's lawyer." Tess turns her dark eyes—the same color as my eyes—to Parrish. "I was planning on meeting with Agent Takahashi this morning to share my thoughts, but I called to cancel. If either of you can give me a legitimate reason not to reach out to her, I'd love to hear it. Otherwise, I'm going after Justin with everything I have."

More silence. It's thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Anyone care to tell me why Maxx would suddenly dump Dakota and start dating Maxine? That seems strange. Or why you disappeared last night with Kwang-seon?" There's a long pause here where Parrish or I are meant to start talking. Neither of us does. "This is all related back to Justin, I'm sure of it. Now that I've started making connections, I can't stop."

Tess looks me dead in the face.

This is it. I'm trembling so hard that Parrish turns to stare at me, studying me briefly before yanking me into his lap. It's hard for me to explain how it feels to be held by him, like coming home. *If Maxx could betray me, so could Chasm or Parrish. So could Maxine. If I can't trust Maxx, I can't trust anyone.* So what does that mean?

Good ol' Dad, he certainly made a strategic move on the board. Maybe he really did checkmate my king? But you know what? Life isn't a turn-based chess game. Tess, Parrish, Chasm, Maxx, Maxine, Saffron, Delphine, even Caroline, Mr. Volli ... we're people, not chess pieces. These are independent people making their own decisions because *people are not fucking chess pieces!*

I suck in a sharp breath.

It's poignant, that moment. We can all think of scenarios in our life that become lynchpins, locking parts and elements of the past into the new version of our future. This is a defining moment for me, one that I'll be able to call up in my brain years from now.

Tess was my mother. It was an undeniable fact. She carried me, birthed me, protected me, searched for me. How could I hold her mistakes against her? We all make them. I'd made many up until that point, and I would make many more before the day was done.

Looking back, it was that Tuesday morning, sitting at Laverne Vanguard's kitchen table, when she truly became my mom, as fierce as she was calm. There was nothing in her expression that gave it away, just a distant glimmer in her eyes that caught and held.

She was willing to do battle with Justin—no matter the stakes.

“If you go to the FBI now, he’ll start killing people I love.”

There. It’s out. I said it. It’s too late.

I’m going to be sick.

“Gamer Girl,” Parrish whispers fiercely, but this is between Tess and me. Besides, once that first sentence comes out, it’s like a dam’s been blown. I can feel the rushing river of veracity cascading through me.

“I take it that I’m right: Justin was involved in Parrish’s kidnapping.” Tess looks down at her hands, and I can see the strain in her face when she looks back up. I’m not the only person in that room with murderous intent toward Justin Prior. “I thought ... I mean, it occurred to me that he might pull a publicity stunt like that to peddle his fucking app ...” Tess’ voice hardens, sharpens on the word *app*, comes out like a knife. She hooks me with her millionaire true crime author stare.

“I can’t believe I’m sitting here and telling you all this.” My voice is nothing short of wondrous, tinged with awe and cloaking the endless sea of my fear. I pull in a strong breath, shaking my hands out, like I’ve stayed up too long writing and ended up with sore fingers. It’s happened a few times at Justin’s. “Justin Prior is the Seattle Slayer.” Tears come then, and I don’t stop them. I just let them fall. I’ve been holding in so much emotion; the box I’ve shoved it all into is not just cracked but disintegrated to nothing.

My feelings all just come pouring out.

Parrish’s arms tighten around me, his chin resting on my shoulder. His smell mixes with the strong scent of Tess’ coffee and Chasm’s mint ice cream smell that’s embedded in the very fibers of his jacket.

“Not just him though,” I add before Tess can say anything else. “He has plenty of people working for him. How many, I don’t know.” Tess and I are looking at each other right now, and it might be the most honest look we’ve ever shared. But how far can I really take this truth? If I tell Tess that I’m planning on taking care of Justin myself, what then? “If you go to the FBI, he’ll send someone to kill Maxine. My grandparents. Kimber. Sally. Danyella. You.”

I cut myself off there. Tess gets the idea, I’m sure. I’ve always taken her to be the self-righteous type, the one who just has to ‘do the right thing’ even if ‘doing the right thing’ is more about upholding rigid social rules or personal morality than helping people. Maybe I was wrong. I can hope that I was

wrong, can't I?

"Who are his accomplices?" Tess asks me, looking hungry. No, not just hungry, *starved*. She drums her nails on the table, taking in this information in a much different way than I'd imagined. Parrish and I exchange a long look before he turns his gaze to her.

"What are you planning on doing with this? If you make the wrong move, he'll bury us, Mom." Parrish sits up a little straighter, peering at Tess over my shoulder.

"How long has he been blackmailing you?" Tess asks, directing her question to me. I notice that she didn't answer Parrish's.

"Since ... well, it's been a long time in the making." I consider the question. "But I suppose it was the day Parrish went missing. He sent me a video of Parrish bound and gagged with explicit instructions not to tell you or the authorities. That was when I first learned about Justin Prior." I exhale, a strange sensation sweeping over me.

This is either the best decision I've ever made ... or my worst mistake.

"That was how it started," Parrish clarifies for me. "Justin challenged Dakota to find me. If she didn't follow his instructions, he was willing to kill me. If she didn't find me, I would've died eventually."

"Wait. *You* found Parrish?" Tess clarifies, pointing at me. I nod, swallowing a hard lump of emotion. As soon as I do that, swallow it down and push it aside, I regret it. I can't keep doing that. I don't have it in me to take any more repressed feelings.

"We did." I lift my chin proudly. "Me and Chasm and Maxx. We did it together." My lips are pursed tight. I don't let myself think about Maxx in any other way than as a friend. A good friend. A great friend. "Tess, you can't go to the FBI. You ... you can't do anything right now. You have to let me handle this."

She just stares at me. I'm sure it seems absurd, for her teenage daughter to demand the right to handle a deranged serial killer on her own, but I know this for a fact: Justin is too good to let anyone but his daughter get close enough to harm him.

"I'll be honest with you, Dakota," Tess whispers, her voice husky and strange and distant. "I can't do that." My heart drops, and I shove up to my feet, Parrish following and standing guard beside me. "But I'm not going to rush into anything either." She adds this part, rising from her chair and facing

off against us.

I have never seen her look so determined—and I’ve seen her *very* determined. I’m her lost baby, remember?

“I ... thank you for telling me this.” She looks at me and Parrish with such tenderness that it almost breaks me completely. “I knew it. I knew he was scum. I knew I wasn’t crazy. I knew ... I knew you sensed it, too. All those times you defended him, that you made such irrational decisions ... I’m so sorry, Dakota.” She turns to Parrish next, eyes wet. “And oh Parrish, how could you ever forgive me? It’s my bad taste in men that’s brought us to this point. I dragged you into something you should never have been a part of.”

“Some people blame the victim of a con, others blame the con artist.” Parrish exhales and moves around the table, grabbing my hand and pulling me along behind him. “Tess, it’s not your fault that Justin is a scumbag.” He puts one of his arms around her, the other around me, and he pulls us into a surreal group hug, one that Tess returns with a shuddering sigh.

She holds us both so tight and so close that I almost believe everything is going to be okay.

When we separate, Parrish looks to me and then back to Tess, as if he’s steeling himself for something.

“And I’d be involved in this either way: Caroline is one of Justin’s accomplices.” Parrish drops that bomb just before one of the staff members moves into the kitchen, head down, acting for all the world as if he’s invisible. But Parrish and I, we know better.

We’ve been quiet in here for too long: Justin’s pet staff member has come to check on us.

All this time, I’ve been worrying about the tech: how could I have forgotten good old-fashioned sleuthing? How long has this man been waiting out in the hall, listening in? Maxx follows in close behind the guy, eyes on the man’s back. X’s lids are hooded with the hunt, his right hand clenched into a fist. With the other, he holds his tea in an effortless, casual way. *He’s stalking this dude!*

Maxx moves with coiled grace, a panther on silent paws, and then he slams his mug down on the counter, causing the employee to jump. I bite my lip in response, and Maxx picks up on it somehow, like there are pheromones in the air that he can’t resist—even if resisting them would better fit his narrative.

Maxim looks at me like he wants to ... gulp ... *fuck me* ... and then Parrish

notices him noticing, and then Tess notices us all noticing each other ... oh, God. X closes his eyes like he's in pain, but he doesn't leave. He opens them again and leisurely goes about making a cup of tea so that he can monitor the silent employee.

Still stalking through the jungle. And look at how he towers over that guy. And his hands, there's just something about the hands of a one Maxim Wright — Focus, Kota! I need to put on a show for this employee.

I shake my hand at the signal jammer, as if the hunk of black plastic is the source of all our problems.

“If Justin had anything to do with Paul's arrest, I'd be the first one to tell you.” I clamp a hand over my chest, looking back at Tess with all the anger and resentment and frustration I've felt for her since the beginning. This is me, letting go. I don't feel any of those things anymore. While I'm not praising Tess as a saint with a golden halo, she's not a bad person.

If anything, she's just a person. That's it. Sometimes, there aren't easy good guys and bad guys but a spectrum of gray we have to filter through. Justin has plenty of good qualities. He isn't a faceless monster lurking in the shadows. Unfortunately, he hurts people. He isn't going to stop hurting people.

The line must be drawn somewhere.

Tears steal away down my face, runaway cars for the bank robbers holding my true emotions hostage. It isn't Tess who's in the wrong: it's Justin.

“If you ask about the bruises on my arms when we're in court, I'll lie.” It's a line I've used before (give or take a few words), and I hope it's enough to get my silent message across to Tess. Her attention shifts to the man in the kitchen, taking his time preparing a breakfast tray for Laverne.

He never looks up. In many ways, he's the perfect plant: silent, perfunctory, and unassuming. The ideal spy. At least now we know who it is, the plant (or one of many plants) in Laverne's house. I memorize the guy's face. Maxx hunts him, intimidates him through the ancient art of matcha tea preparation. *That's way sexier than it ought to be.*

“Leave Justin alone and turn off the signal jammer. You say it's because of his stupid Milk Carton app? You wouldn't have your son back without that app.” I turn and head for the kitchen door, swiping the tears as soon as I've stepped into the hallway.

My face falls into a neutral glaze.

“I have to get ready for Paul’s arraignment, but we’ll talk when I get back,” I hear Tess tell Parrish. He shuffles out of the kitchen behind me, and I turn to see him staring down at his screen. As soon as the signal jammer is shut off, he turns it around so that I can see he has both Wi-Fi and phone service back.

Surely, there’ll be a message waiting on my phone for me.

Surely.

I can’t bear to look, like staring into Nevaeh’s accusing eyes from beyond the grave. I close my own, reaching up to press the heels of my hands into my shuttered lids.

“Don’t do that,” Parrish whispers, drawing them down so that he can look at me.

“Do what?” I ask, but as I said, I’m out of forced smiles. I can’t even get my lips to form a grimace. They’re frozen in place, pasted on the way the fragments of my heart are pasted together. Big globs of white, smelling like Elmer’s glue and broken Popsicle sticks. It’s a school project that I’ve utterly fucked up.

I clutch at my shirt again, choking on it all. *Tess knows. Tess knows. Tess knows.* The thought is as comforting as it is unsettling.

“I know it’s as bad as it’s ever been, but you cannot let him break you. Stay you, Dakota. That’s the most important part of all this. If you can do that, if you keep hold of who you are, then he’ll never win.” I stare at Parrish; he’s panting and alternately squeezing and releasing his free hand. The other remains inextricably locked around his phone, as if he’s strangling Justin with those taut fingers. “I ...”

Now here’s something new, a hesitancy that I swear I’ve never seen on Parrish Vanguard.

He steps close to me, leaning down to whisper in my ear.

“I’m going to sneak out today, go on a double date with Maxx; I need you to stay here.”

“I need to stay here so you can go out on a date with another girl?” I whisper back, aware that Justin is listening, hopeful that Tess is not. I’m not stupid: Parrish is going out with Lumen, with X and Maxine, that they’re very-probably going to do some very-probably good things for me.

It’s hard not to be upset anyway.

Parrish turns his sharp face to mine, every square inch of it painted like an

angry aristocrat.

“You dare doubt me?” he breathes, but I don’t. I don’t. I swear that I don’t. He leans in, using that violent mouth of his to press a bruising kiss to my lips, one that rakes my heart across the coals. Just when it seems that the flame has gone out, there’s a spark.

My arms twine his neck, my body holds to his. I can’t help it if his eyes are a feast, their colors so startlingly familiar—like the woods in autumn, strung with honey, buzzing with lazy bees—and yet so different from any other person’s. Parrish tucks my head against his chest, and then he holds me like that for a long while. Ten minutes maybe. Or twenty. He strokes my hair, kisses my temple, and then we’re kissing on the lips again. The vibe changes in an instant.

His hands make their way over the curves of my waist to my—

A throat clearing draws our attention over to Tess, now wearing a pantsuit and coiffed hair, as if she simply shook a magic quill pen in the air and transformed from cool, sleuth-y true crime author to power bitch lawyer mode. She’s even holding a briefcase.

“Please ...” she starts, but her voice is hard. Tess makes herself pause and pulls in a deep breath, walking toward us with her heels clacking in a strong, steady rhythm. She looked just like this the day she showed up in court against the Banks—against me, really. Just like this. “Make smart choices while I’m gone and *do not leave this house*.” She raises her brows and looks between the two of us. I believe the first part of that statement is related to sex while the second pertains to Justin. Just my assumption anyway. “The European boarding school option is still available.”

“Would it have stone walls and English ivy and hidden gardens? If so, it’s not a bad deal.” I don’t know why I say that, but it makes Tess smile. Just a little. Amongst this mess, it’s all she has room for, surely.

She points at me, the diamond tennis bracelet on her wrist making me wonder what ultimately happened to mine. It was in my room when the fire hit, but I have no idea if something like that is savable.

“If either of you leaves this house, it’ll be homeschool with me every day.” The faint whisper of a smile on her face fades away as quickly as it came, and she sighs heavily, looking at the pair of us like she wants to take us with her. Her sympathy for me and the loss of Nevaeh seems to be the mitigating factor here. “I’ll call and text to check in as often as I can. If I didn’t have to

go right now, I wouldn't. We are far from finished with our conversation."

"Okay, Mom," Parrish replies, still clinging to me. Tess gives us another once-over, shakes her head, and moves around the corner toward the foyer. "Apparently, teen pregnancy is way less of a big deal than—"

"Teen *what?*" Tess chokes out, reappearing suddenly, fingers curled around the wall like some sort of movie monster. Her nails are cracking the plaster, I swear. Oh, and the expression on her face? It's pure terror.

Parrish's eyes are wide now, his mouth slightly parted as he struggles and fails to come up with a response.

"I was ... just fucking around. Dakota isn't ... she's not ..." Parrish stumbles over the word, floundering and failing to summon back his Sloth King crown. Instead, he truly looks seventeen-going-on-eighteen and completely chagrined. "I just meant ... it's less important than—" But he still can't say whatever he was going to say. *It's way less important than a serial killer.*

There's no way in hell that after having a signal jammer wielded against him, Justin won't be listening in now.

"I'm taking you both out to get birth control this week. Clear your busy schedules." Tess' face is flushed as she withdraws and Parrish sags, releasing me so that he can slump back against the wall.

"Pray tell where you plan on wooing Lumen?" I quip, pausing again when Maxx comes out of the kitchen, freshly showered and dressed to kill in a slick tracksuit with a white t-shirt underneath. His hair is mussed up but styled, his demeanor nervous as he rubs at the back of his neck.

I've never seen him look nervous like this. It almost makes me believe he really is excited to see Maxine, that he really is in love with her. He must be unless ... I've taken note before of what a good actor Maxx is. As I study him, he ignores me, looking at Parrish instead.

"If you don't get ready soon, we'll be late. I can't blow this, man." X sighs and closes his eyes, shaking his head before he opens them again. He spares an extra glance for me as I cross my arms and smirk at him.

"You're going on a double date?" I clarify, pointing at him with an accusatory finger.

"Kota, don't do this." Maxx grits his teeth in frustration. Wow. That innocuous question got to him quick, didn't it? Or else something nefarious is going on behind the scenes. *Clue number three: Maxx is Godzilla-level*

cranky.

“And Parrish is going with Lumen?” Another question. I step forward but X doesn’t budge. He can’t stand the thought of backing down to me—even to play pretend. “Weren’t you chasing after Lumen just yesterday? What would you have done if you’d caught up to her?”

“Done with her? What sort of monster do you think I am?” X asks that completely deadpan. He’s not even gritting his teeth now. He looks cold, frigid, annoyed. His imperious gaze sweeps over me with this weird possessive heat. *Clue number four: weird, possessive heat.* That counts, right? “Has Maxine come down yet?”

That’s what he asks, almost like he’s bringing her up on purpose.

“Evade my questions all you want; I’m not buying what you’re selling.” I’m *furious* with him—either for lying to me and loving Maxine or for lying to me and pretending he loves Maxine. No matter what the truth is, it hurts so damn bad. I start to turn away when he laughs and I pause, looking back at him.

Parrish hasn’t said a word, looking between us like he isn’t sure what to make of this interaction. Neither am I. Except for one weird thing: the less I should want X, the more my body reacts to him.

“I’m not one of your mysteries to be solved, Dakota.” Maxx shakes his head, reaching up to run his fingers through his thick hair. “And I’m not Parrish to be saved. Stop looking for a reason to be my hero; I don’t need or want your help.”

Ouch.

I stare at him with wide, wide eyes.

“You said I’d always have a place to call home with you.” I know I’m repeating my own, tired mantra from yesterday, but I can’t help it. That memory stings so bad that I don’t know how to move past it without getting angry. And I’m already so fucking angry all the time. “Why would you even say that? You already had my heart then, since way before that. Maybe even since the day I saw you in the coffee shop. Come to think of it, you were lying to me then, too, right?” I’m quivering now, and I want to hit something—or someone—but I just squeeze my hands into the long sleeves of Chas’ jacket instead.

Maxx is just staring at me blankly, blinking his long, dark lashes.

“Come with me.” He snatches my wrist, dragging me away from the living

room and down the few carpeted steps to the gaming area where I accidentally shoved Parrish, right before he kissed me in front of the whole family for the first time.

There's no audience today: Ben, Amelia, and Henry are still asleep. Kimber's probably seeking some sun to worship outside (if she can find any seeing as we *are* still in Washington state).

I yank my hand from Maxx's grip, rubbing at my sore wrist as he turns around to stare at me. I make the move first, closing the distance between us. He reaches out to grab my forearms.

"Dakota." My name is meant to be a warning, I think. I lay my hands flat on his belly.

"You're telling me that if I offered to ..." I just let the words fade. He can fill in whatever he wants there. "Right now. Anything. I *am* offering you that. Are you going to turn that down?" My hands trail a bit lower, but X doesn't do a thing to stop me.

What are you doing, Kota?! I ask myself. I'm testing him, right? This is just a test in order to find the truth. I'd never actually sleep with my sister's boyfriend, but she isn't dating him (according to her). Maxx wouldn't dare touch me again if he were—

He slides his hands down to my wrists, gripping hard, and then pushes them to the fly of his jeans. He's looking at me like ... like he expects me to ... do something. Anything. Have sex with him. Give him oral. I don't know.

"What if I said yes? Would you tell Maxine?" he asks, mocking me, taunting me. I jerk back from him, stumbling a few steps. The vintage Ms. Pac-Man machine glows in the corner. The room is quiet. Parrish comes down the stairs, breaking the strange spell. "Please don't leave while we're gone."

That's how Maxx finishes that conversation.

I manage a smile at that one. Seriously?

It is a fucking *hideous* expression.

"You no longer get to advise me on *shit*."

X licks his lower lip. And then he turns and punches the wall, puts a hole right there in the drywall before he knocks Parrish out of the way in his hurry to escape.

Clue number five: whatever the hell this was.

Parrish and I exchange a look before I follow X's path up the stairs, finding

him waiting with Maxine in the living room. I just stop there and stare for a minute, watching my sister tuck her hair behind her ear, shift a little on her feet. Their body language is just so natural together, the two Maxes.

Ugh.

The two Maxes? Gross. I slide a hand down my face.

“Baby sister,” Maxie says, like she didn’t quite see me standing there. My sister is honest to a fault—unless a lie would save my life. I remember once, after being told not to play with a tennis ball inside, I broke one of the old windows at the back of the house. Maxine lied and took the heat. I should keep that in mind as she approaches me now. “Are you okay?” She reaches out, like she might touch my forehead, but I gently push her hand away and smile.

“Just fine. Enjoy your date.” I don’t mean it to sound that way; I know they’re scheming. If they don’t feel like it’s safe to tell me, that’s okay. I just feel so out of the damn loop. “I’m going upstairs to work on some stuff.” *Like the list of people owed thank you notes.* “I’ll probably be asleep when you get back; I’m still exhausted.”

I head up to my room, locking the door behind me.

I don’t come out for the rest of the night.



CHAPTER 6

I'm wearing purple bags under my eyes when I slog downstairs the next morning, walking into the kitchen in a pair of jean shorts with Clefairy on the right front leg. And yeah, Clefairy is another Pokémon. And yeah, all three boys are sitting at the breakfast table.

I pause suddenly, my matching Clefairy sneakers squeaking on the floor. These items were in the pile of clothes Maxine brought for me the day before yesterday. I feel like I can breathe slightly better in them, like wearing some Japanese anime characters on my clothes is a layer of protection against the absurdity that my life has become.

Dressed like this, I am Catskills Dakota. Dressed like this, I am a member of the Banks family coming down to pour myself a quick bowl of cereal before class. Dressed like this, my biggest problem is trying to figure out which midnight game release I should stay up for—or if I should just forgo sleep for the rest of the school week. Or maybe I'd be worried about what I'm going to wear to the party on Friday.

What party, you might ask.

Well, of course, it's *that* party, the one where I'm supposed to commit my first Justin-sanctioned assassination. Execution? Hit? Murder? Dispatch? It's like a 'choose your own adventure' book for young murderers.

You walk into a high school party, pretty smirk on your face, knife burning a hole in your back pocket. Oh yeah. Someone's going to die tonight. Her.

She is going to die. Veronica Fisher. Do you:

1. *Tell your biological mother you're supposed to murder a girl under threat of being murdered yourself (or having your family executed) (turn to page fourteen)*
2. *Call Agent Takahashi and rat out Dad, knowing Itsumi might be a double agent or might not believe you or even if she does, can't do a thing about it due to lack of evidence (turn to page sixty-nine)*
3. *Stage an elaborate kidnapping wherein you keep said Veronica Fisher in a secret underground money vault at your ultrarich boyfriend's billionaire grandmother's house (turn to ... oh screw this overly long metaphor)*

There's a party happening at the infamous Camp Kellogg on Friday wherein we're going to go with option three and stage a felony kidnapping and false imprisonment scheme. Good to know how the Payback Princess is going to take care of the first perpetrator on Justin's list.

Thank you notes. My list. The people I'm supposed to punish for Justin.

I have the list in the back pocket of my shorts, haphazardly folded and sticking out like a handkerchief in a man's suit pocket. The guests at Justin's twisted party (the one with the risotto quenelle LOL) are listed by family. I've taken the liberty of making the connection between them and Justin.

The Fishers – the lawyer (Veronica)

The Deveraux Family – the psychologist (Philippa)

The Hearsts – the software developer (Lumen)

The Malones – the banker (Gavin)

The Rossi Family – the judge (Antonio)

The Banks – because of Saffron

The Vanguard's – so obvious I don't need to write it down

There it is, my list. There were more people who attended the party than that (and more who were invited and didn't show, like Martina Cortez), and yet, these are the only ones I'm supposed to write *thank you* notes to (which I've done, grudgingly and with dripping disdain).

If we begin with my supposed murder of Veronica Fisher, what's going to happen when we reach the bottom of the list? There's no doubt in my mind that the Banks and the Vanguard's are still on that list. Nor is there any doubt

that Justin will ask me to do something that could destroy both families completely.

“Morning.” It’s best the word comes from me first, my lips forming a small smile for Chasm and Parrish. I move to the fridge, intent on grabbing something and disappearing. I can’t deal with boys today. I stayed up way too late working on both the list and also scrolling Justin’s summer itinerary email. There are events on there that I didn’t pay much attention to until last night.

An ice cream social? An opera? A ‘hunt’? That last one doesn’t sound very appealing considering the circumstances. Who will I be hunting? A person, surely.

I’m honestly shocked that Tess and/or the boys didn’t come wake me up. Either they’re trying to be respectful and give me time to grieve, or they’re all scheming. The latter seems the more likely option.

“Crime is terribly revealing. Try and vary your methods as you will, your tastes, your habits, your attitude of mind, and your soul is revealed by your actions.” Agatha Christie wrote that. I think it holds true here.

“Where do you think you’re running off to?” Chasm whispers, catching me by the arm as I retreat with a small carton of chocolate milk in hand. He’s waiting right there as I turn around. “We need to plan the ... we need to finalize our party plans.”

“Subtle, Chas,” I murmur, turning to face him and leaning back against the fridge with the chocolate milk clutched to my chest like a shield. Chas gets in close, putting his arms on either side of me. My body warms immediately in response to his nearness, and I regret not reaching out to him yesterday. He texted me, but I think if I’d asked, he would’ve come over here and even stayed the night.

“I’m not just talking about Friday.” He leans in and kisses my mouth in such a way that I end up drawn to it, pushing myself forward as he draws back and somehow ending up in his arms. Dickhead. “Nice Pokémon shoes, by the way. I get the idea that this is something you’re never going to grow out of.”

“You remembered the itinerary, too?” I ask dryly. I’d forgotten it until last night when I got around to working on the notes/kill list.

Ice Cream Social (how delightful!) at the Fishers’ residence. Seven-thirty. Dress code: warm weather evening chic.

That's tonight, by the way. Tonight. Two days after losing my childhood friend (and Maxx). I'm making him parenthetical out of sheer necessity.

I can feel Parrish's attention like a hot spotlight, but Maxx isn't looking this way at all, barely seems to notice me. Doesn't that seem theatrical, like way too OTT? He's trying too hard.

Clue number six: ridiculous apathy.

"There's an ice cream social tonight," I announce, reluctantly untangling myself from Chasm's arms. I approach the dining table, pausing and tapping the toe of my tennis shoe against the floor in annoyance. X is staring at his phone, but the intensity in which he's doing so increased with each step I took in his direction. My gaze drifts to his lap. Crude, I know, but—

X drags his attention up to me, discovers where *my* attention is, and then shoves his phone violently into his pocket. He works his jaw and then leans back shamelessly in the chair, like he doesn't care if I'm peeking to see if he's aroused by the sight of me. I can feel him in a way that's palpable.

"Whether your body notices me or not, mine notices yours," I whisper, and Parrish sighs dramatically. At least he and Chas pretend not to hear such an embarrassing statement. Maxx whips that tempestuous gaze to mine.

"Oh, he notices, Kota. He just isn't going to *do* anything about it." X purrs those words at me with venom in his voice, a clear warning.

"Can we focus please?" Parrish growls, losing his patience with the two of us and rapping his knuckles on the table. "Veronica's family has been throwing these summer ice cream socials since she turned, like, twelve. It's sort of tradition for Whitehall students at this point." Parrish looks over at me, a question in his eyes that I refuse to answer. I don't care about their fake double date yesterday. I care so little about it that there's no way I was pretending to be asleep when Parrish came into my room after and crawled into bed next to me.

No way. I was totally asleep. For real.

"You're going to hate it," Chasm teases, coming up to stand beside me with his hands tucked into the pockets of his sweatpants. They're rolled up to midcalf, black with an all-over red pattern. It takes serious squinting to see it's just repeated lines of the word *fuck*. He glances down to see what I'm looking at, and then offers a wry smile in response. "My dad told me to get the hell out of his house and not to come back until I learned to dress right."

"Just this morning?" I ask, looking up to see that Chasm is still watching

me. He nods before swiping his hand over his face.

“Just this morning.” He points over at a duffel bag on the floor near the entrance to the kitchen.

“Looks like you’ll have all of your boyfriends under the same roof again,” Parrish quips, lifting his coffee to his lips with both hands. Meanwhile, his gaze is stuck to X who doesn’t react, just draws his phone from his pocket and sets it facedown on the table. He purposefully folds his hands together, like he might grab someone—*me*—if he doesn’t keep them carefully controlled.

“I’m not one of her boyfriends.” X stares right back at Parrish, but the latter simply waves his hand around dismissively.

“Peddle your bullshit elsewhere; I’m not listening.” Parrish turns to me, the tight ribbed tank he’s wearing reflective of the crazy heat outside. We’re having some sort of once-in-a-decade heatwave today. Fun times. “And Chas is right: you’re going to *despise* this event.”

“It’s not like I have a choice on whether or not I attend.” I sip my milk and then take a seat beside Parrish, ears perked for the sound of Tess’ heels. Or the shuffle of her slippers, depending on her mood. She tried to come and see me yesterday, but I was, um, also asleep then. No, I’m not using sleep as an excuse to avoid people. No, I didn’t put the song “*Chameleon*” by King Gnu on repeat for hours while I laid in bed, staring at dead people’s social media accounts. Not even close. “Prepare me for this nightmare.”

“For what nightmare?” Tess asks, and I actually scream, sloshing chocolate milk all over the surface of the table. Shit! What happened to my perked ears? I didn’t even hear her coming. She waltzes right over to stand beside Chasm, smiling at me. “What am I missing out on here?”

“Dakota’s afraid of her junior year at Whitehall—I told her she should be.” Parrish reaches out for a muffin on the table, taking a bite as he eyes Tess warily. I’m basically frozen in place, wearing more of my chocolate milk than I’ve managed to drink. Last time I spilled a drink on myself, X was right there, helping me clean up.

I miss that.

An ache builds behind my eyes that I ignore, heading for the paper towels and the sink.

“Mm.” Tess’ response which isn’t really a response at all. I can tell she wants to talk but isn’t sure how to engage me right now. She looks over at

Chasm's duffel bag before turning to him. "I take it you're moving in, too?" But there's a slight smile when she asks that. It's tense though, a tad brittle. A lot brittle. "You're always welcome wherever we are, you know that, right?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Vanguard," Chasm chokes out. He only ever calls her that when he's trying to appease her. He, too, can sense the danger in the air. Even X shifts strangely in his chair.

But then Kimber is sauntering into the kitchen wearing cut-off pink jean shorts and a white camisole.

"The ice cream social is tonight," she announces to the entire room, and I cringe. Great. Bring it up so that it's harder for me to get out of here. *Damn you, Kimber Celeste.* I try to summon up one of Maxine's big sister glares, and I toss it hard in her direction. She catches it and furrows her brow back at me before looking at Tess. "If we all go together, can we go?"

"You're not going to the ice cream social." Tess' words are as sharp as a knife, slicing right into Kimber's good mood. She clenches her fists, curling her lip slightly and reminding me that she's still only fourteen. Not that I'm much older, but there's a big difference between our maturity levels.

"Dad's been arrested as a murderer; I'm a fucking pariah."

"Use the F-word again and escort yourself back to your room," Tess bites out, skipping the annoyed mom routine and going straight to cold-hearted authoress. Guess finding out that her ex-husband is not only a serial killer but also blackmailing her kids has sort of shaken the woman up. I'm only shocked she hasn't gone to the police. *That can only mean she's plotting something.* Really. The only explanation.

"Parrish says *fuck* like a hundred times a day and he never gets in trouble," Kimber hisses back, eyes narrowing. "Because he's your fave, right? Don't deny it: you even admitted it when he was missing."

"I'm your favorite, and you admitted it?" Parrish asks, sounding delighted by the idea. Tess throws a warning look his way before turning back to her daughter.

"Digression, Kim. The answer is still no."

"The least you can do is let me go to that stupid party!" Kimber whines, pointing at the four of us. "What if we all go together? I'm sure they want to go, too." She whips around to look at us, her blond hair slapping her in the face with the speed of the movement. "You guys are dying here, too, aren't you? This whole house smells like old people and sadness."

“Kimber.” This time, Tess is giving her daughter a warning. “You’re not going anywhere until we sort out what’s happening with your father. Do *not* ask me again.”

Kimber’s espresso eyes blaze, and she spins on her heel, storming off down the hallway. Tess looks back at us, like she’s about to bring Justin up again, but then Ben is there. He creeps into the kitchen with a book tucked into his arms, offering me a shy smile when I try to see what it is that he’s reading. A Christopher Pike book. Wow. Level-up, little bro.

Pretty sure Amelia and Henry are playing *Hogwarts Legacy* in the living room. Video games and books, maybe I am related to these people? Well, maybe not Kimber.

Maxine comes in as Ben is on his way out, and Tess sighs heavily. The busy interaction that is the Vanguard kitchen isn’t the place to continue our conversation about Justin. Thank God. I don’t know what Tess is waiting for, why she hasn’t grilled us harder, but I smell a plot.

“Um.” Maxie stops with her hands on her hips, wearing a pair of overall-shorts (or whatever they’re called) and brown and green hiking boots. She points at my leg, and I freeze. Oh yeah. Oops. “Do you want grandma and grandpa to see that right now or ... because they’re on their way downstairs for breakfast?”

With a small sound, I toss the chocolate milk carton into the trash as Tess’ raptor-like gaze traces my quick sprint out of the kitchen. My grandparents’ room is two doors down from mine; Maxine’s is literally next-door. I’m neighbors with the Banks family. In any other world or circumstance, I’d be thrilled.

When they brought their things over the other day (including tons of new clothes for yours truly, all perfectly aligned with my style and preferences), I pretended to be asleep. I know. I admit it: I pretended to sleep all day yesterday, too. I’m processing, and when I talk to the people I love, I want to break down and just spill all my secrets. Revealing the truth to Tess has left me with this ache to do it again, to tell the world everything.

It’s a dangerous temptation.

After I change and head back downstairs, I find myself plagued by the feeling of being stalked. *Maxx*? I wonder with false hope. But no. It’s an uneasy sensation, a disturbed haunting that curls my spine.

There’s a creepy painting on the wall beside the staircase. It’s of some old

dude—remember that rich people love oil paintings of old people—that looks like it’s watching me. I could swear that the eyes are real, and my entire body breaks out in goose bumps. Gross.

I shake the Agatha-Christie-inspired feeling away and flee to the kitchen where I find my grandparents seated at the table with Tess, the boys, and Maxine.

Everyone *stares* at me as I come in, joining them and piling my plate high with food that I think stupid X cooked. I pick at it with a fork, wondering how I’m supposed to plan a great escape tonight with Tess on alert, my family staying here, an ex-boyfriend who might not actually be an ex-boyfriend, and a serial killer dad who will probably murder one of them if I don’t go to a friggin’ ice cream party.

I stab my omelet with far more aggression than necessary.

“Gamer Girl, do you need a timeout?” Parrish whispers, squeezing my knee under the table. I ignore him.

“Maybe you could show us around town today?” Carmen suggests, smiling softly as she rests her elbows on the edge of the table, hands clasped. “I hear there are boats you can rent to take into Puget Sound.” The suggestion makes me think of Justin, and I blanch. Tess notices, homing in with a slight narrowing of her eyes. “What do you think, Kota? Are you up to it?”

“We could even stay in and cook,” Walter offers up as an alternative. I snatch onto the idea. I bet anything that Tess would try to stop us if we went out, and how would she explain that, and I just really don’t need my grandparents involved in any further capacity ... “Make some tamales or something?”

“I’m down for staying in.” I sit up straight, my smile strained. “I’d love it if we just hung out here all day. I mean, there *is* a pool.” My words sound hollow to me, but I hope nobody else notices.

Maxine, of course, does.

She catches me as soon as I flee the kitchen, gentle fingers snagging my arm at the base of the stairs. When I turn around, she wraps me up in a tight Banks style hug. I go still for the briefest of seconds before hugging her back.

My entire universe is based around this: Maxine is on my side. No matter what, she loves me and she has my back. Just goes to show that even having one person you can count on makes a universe of difference.

“Is there anything I can do to make this better?” she asks softly. “Anything

at all?” Her voice might hold infinite gentleness, but when we pull apart, I see that her eyes tell a different story. There’s a strength in her stare, one that looks remarkably similar to someone else that I know. *Tess*. And that look in Maxine does the same thing to me: fortifies and frightens me. It’s both things, and I know why.

Maxine and Tess are weirdly similar underneath their very different exteriors.

Stubborn. Righteous. Loyal.

Damn it, Tess, but I can’t find it in my heart to hate you anymore. And I don’t. I think that I’m ... I’m almost glad that she’s my mom.

“I need to get out of the house tonight,” I whisper, just before I hear the sound of someone ringing the buzzer at the gate. Maxine and I exchange looks, and I head back into the kitchen, heart in my throat. At this point in my life, company is not generally welcome. Usually, it has something to do with Justin.

I’m not wrong there as Tess allows a delivery driver through and finds herself staring at a package with a familiar theme. *Mia Prior*. Not Dakota Prior this time, like it was on the package I got before prom. Worse. Way worse.

“There is no Mia Prior at this address,” Tess explains to the befuddled looking delivery woman. She closes the door with no explanation and walks back in my direction, pausing beside me. I sense a conversation coming on and bolt before she can say anything, taking Maxine’s arm and pulling her back in the direction of the stairs.

“What was in that?” she asks me, but even if I don’t know, I know.

My clothes for tonight’s event.

“A dress, I think.” I guide my sister into my room, elbows still locked, and grab my phone off the desk.

Lo and behold, when I check for a message from Justin, I find one.

Your mother’s sent away the beautiful dress I’ve chosen for you. However do you plan on attending the party tonight? I’m curious to see your ingenuity at work.

I sigh and toss the phone back on the desk, rubbing at my face with both hands. He hasn’t said a word about Tess and the Slayer thing which freaks me out. Surely, he knows. He knows that Tess suspects him, and he hasn’t mentioned it. He knows about the signal jammers, and he hasn’t mentioned

those either.

I am not looking forward to seeing that man on Monday morning.

“A dress for tonight?” she asks me, trying to clarify.

“There’s a party that I want to go to, but Tess won’t let me out of the house, so I’m going to have to make a jailbreak.” I stare at her, unwilling to let Justin know that I’ve added her as a pawn. He might find out on his own, but there’s no point in hastening the revelation. “And I really want to avoid Tess for the rest of the day today.” I fake a laugh. “I am so over hearing her accuse Justin of being the Slayer. Paul’s obviously guilty: he offered me a nose job for my birthday.”

Maxine stares at me.

“Wait, *what?*” She laughs at that, and then I laugh at that, and even if everything in my life is twisted and strange, this part is perfectly normal. My sister is truly my anchor. “Who offers a teenager cosmetic surgery as a gift? That’s gross.” Another pause where she realizes she needs to say something to appease Justin. “And seriously? She’s blaming her ex for her husband’s crimes?”

I give her a soft smile as a thank you for playing along, and then realize I’m supposed to be looking for a swimsuit to wear. I somehow agreed to put on my bathing suit and hang out by the pool with my grandparents until our online grocery delivery is dropped off. Tamales take a while to make, so we’ll get started on them far before anyone is hungry again. My grandmother’s best friend grew up in Mexico City, and she taught us her great-grandma’s recipe. It’s basically heaven in food form.

“Kota.”

Uh-oh.

I know that tone. I pretend not to, digging through the clothes my grandparents brought me. No swimsuit. There’s one in the stuff that Tess got for me, but it’s a school-issued Whitehall suit. Blech. Oh well.

She’s trying to get me to ask about the double date. Also, she knows me far too well for my own good. When I refuse to take the bait, Maxine steps up beside me, smelling like her favorite fragrance (some sporty scent that’s weirdly Maxx-like). I missed that smell. Mostly, I missed her.

“You can ask whatever you want about what happened yesterday.” She says this last part loud enough that I know she doesn’t care if Justin listens in.

“I assumed you guys went out to eat or something?” I let the statement

hang as a question, fixated on studying the swimsuit I've never worn. I'll have to pair it with some borrowed board shorts from one of the guys if I want to keep my tattoo hidden a little longer. Yeah, I think I'll do that.

"You're doing your avoidance thing," Maxine accuses, and the annoying part is that she's dead right. I'm not really functioning on any proper cylinders right now. "Well, I'll just tell you then: we had sandwiches in a park, took a small hike, and came home. I came in to talk to you, but Parrish was already in your bed."

Right. One of the many times I pretended to be asleep over the last few days.

There's a knock at the door, and then all three boys are filing in. X kicks the door closed behind him, his gaze slipping unconsciously to Maxine before he forces it back to me. *I want to slap you*, I think, but violence isn't the answer. I mean, it's not the answer here. With Justin, it's the *only* answer. I know I've said it before, but asking a serial killer to nicely stop killing and change his ways doesn't work. I did try, you know.

"What was in that package?" Parrish asks sharply, pausing next to Maxine and totally invading my personal space. Not that I mind. I want to invade his personal space, too, until there's absolutely no space at all left between us. My cheeks heat and I force my mind away from sex.

My gaze strays to Chasm and he smirks, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking about.

"Not my package, Naekkeo: the one that Tess just refused at the front door." I ball up and chuck the swimsuit at Chas, but he just catches it, unfolds it, and grins. "I can't wait to see you wearing this."

"Pervert," I grumble, but the idea of seeing him and Parrish and ... fuck X, just him and Parrish ... in shorts and nothing else pleases me greatly. Speedos preferred. "My clothes for the ice cream social tonight. I'm afraid Tess is going to ask what was in the package, and then she'll know I'm gunning to escape."

She knows I escaped last night, too, which means she'll be on hyperalert.

"I have an idea on how to get you out of the house," Parrish asserts, knowing and not caring that Justin or Volli or Raúl or Caroline or who-the-hell-ever is listening in. We're allowed to do this. We *have* to do this. At least, I do. Make an appearance. Rub elbows with teenagers I'm supposed to kill. Fun times.

I expect that Justin has something special planned for tonight, but I can't even begin to guess what it is. Another embarrassing moment like my engagement to Chas? As long as nobody dies, I'm okay with that. He can humiliate me until the cows come home, and I'll take it. I'll do anything to keep this feeling of grief away from my heart.

Nevaeh's death is a tough enough pill to swallow, and I haven't seen her in months, was actually feeling distant and hurt by her actions before she died. But if I lost Maxine or Parrish or even *Kimber*, I—

"I'm against this idea, by the way." Chasm throws the swimsuit back to me and then holds up both hands, palms out. "But my opinion clearly doesn't matter here."

"I'm sorry my romantic feelings aren't subject to your opinion," X growls out, and the two of them turn to glare at one another. I sit down on the edge of my bed with the swimsuit in my hands.

"Just spit it out; I can take it."

Parrish moves over to stand in front of me, reaching out to put a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Lumen," he says, but I just shrug. While I don't entirely trust her, I don't hate her. In fact, I like her. I want us to be friends for real after all this crap is over. *Hah. As if things will ever be normal again.* But the hope—as silly as it is—remains. "Maxx and Maxine."

"Yes on the first part, no on the second." I give a tight smile as I look over at my sister before turning to Chas. "And your opinion makes a whole lot of sense now; I don't want Maxine involved like that."

I don't mention X. Everyone knows what I'm thinking about him anyway.

"Lumen for the dress and the transportation," Parrish says, hooking a thumb in X's direction. "The two Maxes for backup."

Heh. I didn't know Parrish was also referring to my sister and X as the two Maxes. It fits though, right?

Goddamn you, Justin. What a particularly cruel trick.

"Would that help?" Maxie asks, trying to play the part of the clueless sister. "Having me around to ward off blue-blooded teenage brats?" She gives Parrish a pointed look, but he ignores her.

"If Parrish provides some sort of distraction, it'll help the rest of us get out unnoticed." This is X's suggestion, said so mildly that it could be any suggestion from him at any other time, such as when he offered to help with

my clue spreadsheets. That feels like a different time, and as soon as I summon the memory, I'm wishing I could have it back, those quiet moments of plotting in the middle of the night. Or watching *Dirty Dancing* together. Or just, you know, doing our own dirty dancing together.

"You're not Patrick Swayze," I tell X, and he just stares at me. And then he laughs. And then he walks over and takes Maxine's hand. She doesn't resist, and I tell myself it's because Justin is watching. Because I know he is. Because, because *Maxine is innocent*. "Well, you're still not."

"I'm that good of an actor," he promises me, but what acting are we referring to? The now acting? Or the 'being into me' acting? He's holding Maxine's hand, but whenever I'm not looking, I'm certain that I feel his gaze. It falls on me like a steady ray of sunshine, slowly cooking my skin, burning it, making me squirm. I finally turn a reluctant look his way and our eyes catch. My breath hitches. My palms sweat.

Maxx blinks at me, like he can feel it, too, and then looks blandly in a different direction.

I hate him. I love him. I hate him, too.

"Get out." I don't mean it, but I wish I did. I want nothing more than for Maxim Wright to leave right now. "All of you—out. The plan is good enough." I take my phone off the desk and carry it into the bathroom, setting it facedown on the counter before I start the shower.

I creep back out, carefully shutting the bathroom door behind me. I've left the laptop downstairs, powered down and stuffed into a drawer; the TV and PlayStation remain unplugged. When I gesture at X, he produces the bug detector, scanning the room and giving us an all clear.

It's possible—probable—that Justin is already suspicious of Maxine: she was there when I watched the video of him with X. He knows that she saw the whole goddamn mess unfolding. But I'm going to play dumb for as long as I can. On another note ... Justin was *in* those videos personally. Granted, there was nothing Slayer-related in the conversation, but he's usually more careful than that.

Is there a reason behind it?

Not that it matters: Justin remotely deleted those videos almost as soon as they came in. If they're going to be of any use to me, it's as a clue to figure something else out. Like Maxx, for example.

"Explain to me why we should talk about our plans with *you* present?" I

ask finally, getting the question off my chest that's been nagging me for days. Maxx and I stare one another down. "You ratted Saffron out. She could *die* because of you."

"Better her than Maxine." X is frowning hard now, turning his attention to my sister. "Not all choices are easy, Kota. You know that."

My sister's face shifts with unease, and she slides her hand from his, wiping it on the front of her overalls like it's poisoned. Maxx sighs dramatically but doesn't comment.

"Please don't touch me unless you have to," she tells him, her words clipped and angry.

"While we're at it," I continue, feeling a screw come loose inside of me, "Maxx, why don't you tell us what was on the phone that Raúl showed to you during the video. You know, right before Justin told you that seducing me was a good deed." I cross my arms. "I'll wait."

"It's best if you don't know." That's what Maxim says to me, his voice a low, rumbling growl. He looks at me like he wants to pin me down on the bed and bite me. I shiver, but I don't acknowledge the expression. "It was bad, okay? Let's just move on."

"Why?" I ask, feeling snippy toward him. I'd like to bite him, too, but I'd make it hurt. "Is it another one of your many secrets?"

"Nothing said here right now is a secret," Parrish admits, staring at his friend. "If it were, he might not be allowed in the room." He turns back to me and raises a brow, doing his best to change the subject and keep us on track. Makes me think everyone here knows something that I don't. "You want to check in with Lumen? I'm sure she's planning on going tonight anyway."

"We don't need Lumen." Chasm is adamant on the matter, moving around Parrish to stand by the end of the bed. "I'll go with her." He looks over at Maxine and then back at X with a scowl, clearly wanting to say more but thinking better of it.

"You can go, but we still need Lumen." Parrish's mouth twitches in annoyance. "Seeing as the two of you snuck out together last night and did ... what-the-fuck-ever it is that you did ... Tess will be on the lookout. There's no way she's going to miss four of the five of us missing—especially Dakota."

"So, what? You want Lumen to wait outside the gate or something with her headlights off?" Chasm asks, sitting down on the bed beside me. He curls his

fingers with mine, and Maxx notices. He pretends not to care, but his brow furrows slightly. Or I could've imagined that. Yeah, it's probably my imagination.

"Pretty much. You all go with her, so no cars are missing from the driveway. I'll deal with Tess." Parrish gives Chasm an imperious look down the length of his nose. "You and Dakota can pretend to be wrapped up in here in a love bubble. Tess is too distracted by the Slayer thing to get on our asses about sex."

"Oh, well, that's easy then," Chasm says, smirking. "We don't have to pretend."

"You two snuck out last night?" Maxie asks, sitting down in my computer chair. She gives me a hard look, and I fidget under her big sister stare. "Seriously, Kota?"

"We had sex at an abandoned campsite," Chasm explains, smiling prettily. It's an expression meant to annoy Maxx, and it totally works. My sister doesn't even get the chance to respond, caught up in a testosterone-fueled argument instead.

"How fucking irresponsible can you be," X snipes, perching his perfect ass on the edge of my desk. Ugh. I wish I could just shut off my attraction to him for the time being, but love isn't a damn faucet. "What if something had happened? We shouldn't be taking unnecessary risks."

"We?" Chas asks, tilting his head as he studies his friend. "There ain't no 'we' anymore. You're an extra, an outlier, an interloper at best."

Maxx moves forward like he might do something, but then he just stops and exhales. It's like all the hot air goes right out of him.

"Chill XY," Maxie tells him, her arms crossed as she glances his way. "He does have a point."

Maxx says nothing, but when he turns and leaves the room, my sister goes with him.

"You want to talk about it?" Chas asks me, but I just give him a look. Do I? Of course I do. I want to pace and rant and maybe put up a poster with Maxx's face on it so that I can throw darts. But we don't have time for that.

"I'm gonna take a shower."

I head into the bathroom and do what I've been pretending to do for Justin's benefit: showering and washing my hair, brushing my teeth, putting on some makeup. Mostly, it's a stall tactic. When I come back out, phone in

hand, I see that both boys are still waiting for me.

“Text Lumen.” Parrish points at my phone, and I stare at it like one might gaze at a grenade missing its pin. “We’ll use her, but don’t think of her as a friend, just a pawn.”

Justin texts me an *LOL* and a skull emoji because, well, he’s a dick.

He wants me to know that he’s listening in—and that he agrees with Parrish’s assessment.

I ignore him, tap out a quick message to Lumen, and try to take solace in the fact that at least I get to spend the day with my family.

If I go out of my way to avoid Tess, she doesn’t acknowledge it.

And that freaks me out more than an interrogation from her ever could.



CHAPTER 7

The ice cream social is being held at the Fishers' Babylonian estate in the heart of Medina, this sprawling mansion with a lavish deck comprised of multiple tiers, all of them filled with the designer-clad spawn of modern-day aristocrats.

I can hardly believe how innocuous the setting is. Hell, it might be *fun* if I weren't here under duress.

I've been to ice cream socials before. It's just a fancy term for *serve up an ice cream bar and hang out*. Sally had one for her eleventh birthday, complete with a chocolate fountain. Well, sort of. Her mom bought a cheap fountain from a department store, filled it with chocolate sauce, and it ran for about two minutes before the sticky liquid clogged the motor and broke it.

Nevaeh came to the rescue, calling her own mother and asking a favor. A real chocolate fountain was delivered just before dusk, and I remember eating sundaes late into the night, until we were all grumbling about tummy aches.

That moment and this one feel disconnected, as if my prior experience took place on an alien world, one where I was Dakota Banks and nobody else. One where Nevaeh was still alive. On our drive over here, we listened to the Emerald City Murder Podcast (why?!), and it pissed me off when they repeatedly mentioned how there were thirteen victims.

There were *fourteen*.

Also, the host? Jack What's-His-Face? He has the voice of an AI sex robot.

Emotionless but somehow perverse. I'm not sure it's possible or fair to hate someone for their voice, but if I did, I would hate Jack, the murder sensationalist. When he talks about the details of the killings, it sounds like he's discussing his favorite things to do in bed. I would not be surprised if he worked for Justin.

"Just keep smiling," Lumen assures me, turning so that she's standing in front of me. She reaches out and smooths down some of the pink sequins adorning my dress. Correction: the sequins that *are* my dress.

Oh, the anguish of being relegated to Lumen's borrowed clothes—lots of pink, lots of skin, the antithesis of my personal style. Today's dress barely hits me at mid-thigh, a shimmering baby pink mini that Lumen described as *sequin chainmail*. That's all it is: an entire dress made out of big, iridescent sequins. They're locked together with tiny metal loops, a sheer underdress my only protection against occasional flashes of skin.

"Keep smiling, but don't smile with teeth." Lumen corrects herself, stepping back to study me like some sort of art project. To her, I truly believe I am. She enjoys makeup and clothing and live performance art in a way I never will. She's one of those rare humans who says they love being around people, and actually means it. Now, whether or not she likes *people* is TBD. "Like this." Lumen affects a sultry stir of lips, blinking coquettish lashes in my direction.

I do my best to imitate the move, and she snorts, clamping a hand over her painted mouth and flicking a look of primal fear over one shoulder. The scandal of being seen mid-giggle must be a terrifying social prospect. I wonder if it bothers her, being seen with me. The girl who trashed her car. The girl she beat up. The girl whose boyfriend had *her* beat up.

As far as said boyfriend goes, he's watching me with his hands tucked into his pockets, spinning one of his lip rings around with his tongue.

"When she smiles, it looks staged. When you do it, it's art by nature." Chasm says such an embarrassing thing without skipping a beat. I do, however. Skip beats. Several of them. My heart *tha-thunks* clumsily, and heat suffuses my face. Lumen looks at the pair of us like we truly disgust her.

"Arranged marriage preferred. Falling in love looks messy and gross." She tosses her hair as Chas rolls his pretty eyes, his slouching form propped up by a fancy light pole that looks like it belongs in a park and not at somebody's house. He stands up straight, the yellow tie he's wearing loose and slung over

one shoulder the way he likes it. Half-tucked black dress shirt, white jacket, designer jeans and sneakers. Business casual for a high school party. Medina folk are a strange breed.

“Falling in love requires a *heart*, so it’s not an option for you,” Chasm tells her breezily, sweeping past Lumen to take my arm. Even with clothing between us, there’s a spark that flickers and sears, leaving behind a scar of want. “You look ... really pretty tonight, Little Sister.”

For as smooth and casual as Chasm can be, he’s got a sweet side that I imagine belongs to me and only me. Same as with Parrish. Same as with—God, I hate Maxx right now.

“You look like an actor,” I tell him, forcing him to stand still and turning him to face me so that I can fix his tie. “But I’m glad you’re not. I don’t want to share this handsome face with other girls.”

I look past Chasm’s self-assured smirk in the direction of the affluent crowd. Most people aren’t even eating the ice cream. They’re ordering huge triple scoops in vibrant colors, adorned with glittering sprinkles, dripping with pearlescent sauce in lavender or pearl or metallic gold—*whatever happened to fudge, strawberry, or caramel?*—taking pictures or video for social media, and then dumping their towering creations in the trash.

Waffle bowls are not immune to the treatment.

Um.

I scratch at my temple with a single finger, wishing Parrish were here. Thankful that Chasm is. Hating that Maxim is among my escorts for the night. He’s already taken off with my sister in tow, hooking their arms together as they meander through the crowd.

“I feel like that’s a comment worthy of a dark corner or perhaps an unoccupied bedroom.” Chas captures my hands in his, pulling me a step closer and leaning down with that ripe mouth of his, like he might kiss me and steal my soul from my quaking body.

“Kwang-seon.” A stern voice makes us both jump, drawing Chas around to face his father. Seamus is standing just beyond the pool of light, arms crossed. I can’t see his face well, but his shoulders are tense. I remember that Maxx told me how Chasm wasn’t allowed to have girls at the house. Was this engagement idea something that Justin forced on his friend? “Could you come with me for a minute?”

Chas glances back at me, but I’m already nodding, waving both hands in

Seamus' direction.

"Go. I don't want to cause more drama between family members than necessary." I smile at my fiancé, but the expression doesn't appear to relax him much. His gaze shifts to Lumen, and the pair of them stare at each other in challenge.

"If you hurt my girl—now or ever—I will hurt *you*. That's a promise. *Yaksok. Yakusoku.*" Ah, the promise of a threat in three languages. *Trilingual-ism is hot.* He points at me. "Don't leave the crowd for any reason."

"Dakota and I are besties, Kwang-seon. We don't need you as a chaperone." She smirks at him as he grumbles in Japanese—I hear the word *mendokusai* which basically means troublesome—and leaves to walk with Seamus. I don't know what's going on there, but I guess I'll find out later. Unlike X, Chasm tells me the truth.

"What if I eat the ice cream?" I tease as Lumen grabs my elbow, the puff sleeves of her pink rosette-applique mini dress brushing my shoulder. It's hot pink, as opposed to the baby pink nightmare that I'm wearing.

"You absolutely cannot eat the ice cream," she assures me as we make our way toward the crowd.

As abhorrent as I find the company, their behavior, and my reasons for being here, I'm stupid-proud of us all for finagling a way past hyper-vigilant Tess. Poor Parrish is likely to be stuck with her for the rest of the night, pretending to complain that I've fallen asleep with Chas in my room while simultaneously schmoozing her by asking to watch old nineties and early aughts movies.

I feel guilty as hell about it though. I should be telling her *thank you*, rather than deceiving her. If Tess had run to the FBI the way I'd assumed she might, then all would be for naught. Every dark and deviant and horrible thing that I've done would be flushed down the toilet in a single instance. Justin would start hurting people I cared about. Of all the things I'm unsure about, that is not one of them.

If provoked, he will retaliate.

That is how it would go down.

I made an excuse to Tess about going to bed early, allowing my grief for Nevaeh to shine in my eyes. That wasn't false. I feel it with every step, every breath. Grief clogs up your heart, obscures old memories with fog that, once

cleared, seem taunting in a way that just isn't fair. Anything can be fixed, repaired, replaced ... except for a loved-one.

I will never see Nevaeh again.

The setting tonight, at the very least, is beautiful enough to obscure my grief a little. Strings of lights in a rainbow of colors drape the numerous stone arbors decorating the space, a fountain flickering through the same as water spouts in a brilliant stream from a metal lotus at the center.

Veronica Fisher is beyond loaded, and (lucky me) I get to kidnap her!

I sweep my hands down the shimmery scales of my dress, my heart beating like a trapped bird. Justin didn't send me here for no reason tonight. My phone feels like a lead weight inside the white clutch at my side, but I push aside the anxious thoughts.

The two Maxes have stopped for ice cream just ahead of us. I decide to focus on X instead, on the way my body feels hollow when I see him, as if he carved a space out for himself and then abandoned it, leaving me with an empty cavern. I lift my chin as we approach, trying and failing not to notice how dapper he is dressed in his James Bond suit and spiffy black bow tie.

Maxx seems ... nervous when Lumen and I move up to stand beside him. I can't explain why, but there's a tightness around his mouth, a depth to his gaze, that I've only seen a few times before. Like at the hospital, when Justin walked into the room to see him.

Come to think of it, doesn't it seem odd that Justin would visit Maxx at all? Nobody knew we were dating then. So Justin simply went to visit ... a friend's son? X might've saved my biological siblings, but that's not a strong enough reason for Justin to visit. Something else then?

"When are you planning on telling me what he's blackmailing you with?" I ask nonchalantly, and Maxx sighs. He doesn't respond as we all gather beside the big metal freezer with all the ice cream. I order a waffle cone with strawberry, blackberry, and blueberry ice cream complete with edible flower petal sprinkles. It's definitely Insta-worthy.

Maxx orders a hot fudge vanilla sundae, Maxine orders the same (they even like the same damn ice cream?!) and then we all stand there like awkward preteens at a seventh grade dance.

"Don't eat it," Lumen murmurs, touching my arm in warning. While she orders, I stare Maxx down, watching him watching me, and then I take a huge *bite* out of my ice cream. I'm more of a licker personally, but that whole

biting ice cream/licking ice cream debate is way overblown. “Oh my God, what are you doing?!” Lumen hisses as her attention shifts to the other students.

It occurs to me then that she really and truly does care what they think. She is the same girl who took Danyella to a party and forgot all about her in the name of popularity. That Lumen is this Lumen; she hasn’t changed.

That gives me some pause. Especially when she fakes a smile and gestures down at my dress in a blasé, joking manner that feels so forced I want to scream.

“You dripped ice cream on the dress.” That’s what she says, but she looks as nervous as Maxx is, as if I’m the only person at this party who isn’t in on the joke. “Also ...” Lumen cups one hand over her mouth and leans in. “You might very well be the only person here who isn’t on a diet.” She keeps smiling at me as she stands up straight, and I take another rebellious bite of the ice cream.

Maxx watches me for a minute, and then dips his spoon in, too. He makes a vigilante stand with his own bite, but he doesn’t smile at me or pretend like this is an act of solidarity of any sort. This is just Maxx being Maxx. Or ... is that stare a come-on? *Ugh, I’m so confused.*

“You just can’t help but crave attention, can you?” Veronica asks, coming up to me in a dress made out of tinfoil. Well, I mean, obviously it’s not *literally* made out of tinfoil, but it might as well be. It’s shiny and crumply and very 1980s of her. I smile, but it’s not a nice smile.

“And I thought my dress was bad tonight.” It comes out as a near hysterical laugh, but at this point, I am done. I am done trying to be nice. I am done trying to solve this problem like a civilized person. I want to come completely and utterly unhinged. It’s the only way to beat Justin; it’s the only way to make this stop. I have no choice now but to be honest, completely unfiltered. Even if that means being mean. *Even if that means being violent.* “But I didn’t get to pick mine.” I grimace. “*You did.*” Veronica gapes at me as I take another bite of my ice cream, grinning maniacally through the cold of it. “You chose to wear a dress that looks like the discarded tinfoil cover off an old casserole.”

“What the fuck are you even talking about?” She gives a disbelieving laugh before turning her gaze to Maxx. “Word spreads that you’re dating three guys, and then one of them dumps you for your *sister*? That’s some

white trash drama, don't you think?" Veronica's brown gaze comes back to me again.

All I do is smile.

At this point, what else can I do?

Maxx betrayed me. Nevaeh is dead. Justin is *never* going to stop.

"Are you jealous, Veronica?" I ask, reaching out as if to fix her dress. She slaps my hand away, and I laugh again. My eyes meet hers, and I channel Justin's easy confidence. Has it ever actually hurt someone to act in confidence, regardless of whether or not they deserve to behave that way? "Jealous that I could draw in three willing suitors while you have precisely ... *zero*." I lean in as I speak, getting close enough to her that I could kiss her if I were so inclined.

Frankly, I would rather tongue a toilet.

"Better single than a whore," Veronica snipes. Yikes. I reconsider her murder. JK. I wouldn't, but the urge is there.

"Who is this horrible person?" Maxine asks, staring at Veronica like she's sprouted tinfoil tentacles from her ugly dress. She hands her ice cream off to X, pushing up the sleeves of her green velvet dress with the pretty silver belt. It's not nearly as fancy as the rest of the clothing here, just a nice outfit for dinners out rather than some four or five figure designer affair. "Don't talk to my sister like that."

"Why?" Veronica quips, giving Maxie a smirking sneer. "What are you going to do about it? Aren't you, like, the kidnapper's daughter?" The gathering crowd chuckles; some people start filming in anticipation of a fight.

"Damn right I'm the kidnapper's daughter." Maxie lifts her chin proudly. "My mother saved my sister from growing up as a spoiled, entitled brat. Seems you didn't escape that fate."

"Boo-hoo. You're poor and your mom is a loser and a criminal. But keep trying." Veronica saunters off with that parting remark and Maxine lunges forward. If X didn't grab her arm, she might've started a fight. My sister is kind and pure-hearted, but she's not a pushover.

"Come on. Let's take a breather," Maxx murmurs, and I give Maxine a look.

I've got this, Maxie; don't worry about me.

X draws my sister away from the melee, but only after another nod from me. I'm glad she's here, but I don't want her taking swings at Veronica.

There's no need, really. This girl's fate is already sealed.

I take my ice cream with me and head off in search of Chasm. I sample it as I walk, enjoying long, languorous licks that draw the eyes of every asshole at that party. There are no adults to be seen right now. Even the employees scooping ice cream are teenagers.

But even teens are capable of wickedness.

Lumen struggles to keep up with me, a towering pink ice cream nightmare perched on her own cone. As she moves through the crowd, she pauses briefly to whisper in one ear or another. Curious eyes flick my way, some of them coupled with knowing smirks. Huh.

I stop walking and allow Lumen to catch up. Maybe she'll cause less trouble if we're in close proximity? I might like the girl, but there's no doubt that she's a pot-stirrer.

"Let me get a pic of this triple bubblegum mess before it melts all over me," she says, pointing at the yellow and blue wrapper of the *Dubble Bubble* gum perched on the top, an inedible decoration unless it's unwrapped. Lumen puts the ice cream up near her face, using her phone to snap several pics while I take in the other students.

My heart drops as I spot a familiar face in the crowd.

Delphine is here.

"You okay?" Lumen asks, blond hair casually arranged around her pretty face. I doubt there's anything casual at all about the easy nature of it, a trap in disguise, like a trapdoor spider building a tunnel to draw in unsuspecting prey.

I nod, but my throat is right; I don't want to talk to Delphine right now.

I especially don't want Delphine around Maxie.

Lumen tosses her ice cream—but not before plucking off the bubblegum—and chews it noisily as she waits to see what I'm going to do next. So she can report back to Justin? So she can manipulate me? Because she's actually my friend?

I have no idea.

Delphine spots me a second later, standing with her back to the exterior stone wall of the house—correction *mansion*—and surveying the crowd in much the same way I am. People avoid her, whether because of her association with Justin or because she used to be 'the help', I'm not sure.

When she sees me, a genuine smile takes over her lips.

I approach her, but even though I'm smiling back, I'm thinking of the scissors in her hand, Maxine's hair in her fist, and Justin's words spilling from her mouth.

"Baby sister." The words are soft, almost an exhale. "I've been waiting to talk to you, but you haven't been answering your phone or responding to my texts." Delphine pushes off the wall, her words fading into strained silence. I look into her brown eyes and wonder how much she knows. Could she have warned me about Nevaeh's death? Did she *really* fly to New York and watch my friend suffer an unnecessary tragedy?

Did she carry out more of the murders herself? The killer's letter did mention a maid, didn't it?

Somehow, I don't believe that she's a killer. I don't know why; I just don't. *But I can't trust anyone*, I think, *not fully*. Only in parts and pieces. Only in fragments.

"I'm so sorry about your friend." Delphine lifts up her arms, but only halfway, her lithe form cloaked in a pink cape gown. *More pink, ugh*. It's pretty though, undoubtedly expensive, draped in glittering chains of crystals that catch the light as she moves. The dress' slit goes all the way up to her thigh.

I don't accept the hug.

How could I, after she insinuated—whether true or false—that she was there when Nevaeh died? I'm disgusted by the offer.

I take another bite of my ice cream.

"You seem different," Delphine hedges, a flicker of uncertainty on her face making me question myself all over again. For the briefest of instances, she looks like the old Delphine, the one I met while she was working for the Vanguard. Which Delphine is real? The meek maid or the sleek socialite? Both? Neither?

"Do I?" I ask, wondering if she's simply seeing what I feel inside.

A break. A crack. An unveiling.

Lumen hovers nearby, loudly smacking the gum she rescued off her discarded ice cream.

Delphine hesitates again, sweeping back a curtain of blond hair from her face.

Look at the three of us, all wearing the same shade. *Pretty fucked-up in pink*.

“What am I doing here tonight?” I ask, wondering if she knows what Justin’s plans are. I’m not here just to eat ice cream and socialize.

“What do you mean?” Delphine replies, as innocently as if she were telling the truth. Right. Asking her for help or advice is totally and completely useless. Either she’s perfectly complicit or she’s as dedicated to her role as Maxx is.

I turn to face the crowd, only to find them all facing off right back against me. Danyella is making her way toward us in a sleeveless yellow midi dress with black boots. Her braids are twisted into a ponytail at the base of her neck, her glasses thick and dark and scholarly.

“Dakota, I was sorry to hear about Nevaeh’s passing,” Danyella offers, and I can’t help it, my suspicion roils.

Everyone seems suspect. Nothing is what it seems. I look around, still searching for Chasm, wondering why he isn’t back yet. It’s not like him to leave me hanging for so long. He doesn’t trust Lumen or Danyella, not Delphine, not even Maxim Wright.

“Thanks.” It’s the only word I can manage to get out. Danyella and I stare at each other, and an itch builds at the base of my spine. Like something’s coming. Like I’m standing in front of a speeding train.

I swallow hard, but I don’t let the unease show on my face. Any weakness here will be exploited.

Welcome to hell. You’ve got bite, but is it enough? Don’t trust anyone at Whitehall. Don’t trust anyone in this town. Cursed in blood and diamonds. People have been warning me all along, haven’t they?

I exhale, the music a dramatic drift of violins, the groaning of bassoons, the whining of violas. It seems to swirl around me in a summer breeze, raising goose bumps on my bare arms.

“Do you want to introduce me to your friends?” Delphine asks, but I’m sure she already knows who they are. Maybe she’s even met them before. I look back at her, but I don’t smile. Our eyes meet, and I swear that the desperate gleam in them is real. She wants me to like her; I truly believe that.

“Why don’t I just introduce you to my sister?” I ask, even though the two have already met. It was a miserable sleepover, having Delphine taking constant jabs at Maxie. She takes the insult to heart, glancing away as Lumen continues to smack her gum like she’s anxious as hell, and Danyella shifts uncomfortably from foot to foot.

When Chasm appears out of the crowd, red-faced and panting, I'm happy to see him. But then ... why is he red-faced and panting?

As soon as he sees me, he tries to make his way in my direction. The crowd of glittering, gossiping socialites stops him, creating a wall of designer clothes and disturbed half-smiles. Not everyone is attempting to block his way—despite the drama, most of Whitehall adores Chas—but we've got the usual suspects leading a revolt. Antonio. Gavin. Philippa. Tinfoil Bitch.

"Get the fuck out of my way before I *make* you get the fuck out of my way." He's breathing so hard that he almost chokes on an inhale, shoving his jacket sleeve over his mouth. I wonder what happened, to have him so worked-up the way he is, for him to be this late.

Lumen is staring at the ground now, and my gaze drifts to hers. She lifts up those light brown eyes, the color of fallen leaves at the end of autumn, just before a frost. That cold, too.

She turns at the sound of footsteps on the marble floors inside, and we both look to see Parrish striding through the foyer of the Fisher's home. He's headed in our direction, clothed in a pink tie and a white dress shirt, a gray suit.

His eyes catch mine as he pauses beside me, reaching out with courtly fingers to stroke my cheek. There's an anger in his gaze that brings out the gold flecks in his irises, scintillates his frenzy. There's a purpose there, too, grim and resolute. *Like Maxx?*

"Keep in mind that everything is bullshit, Gamer Girl," he whispers, slipping past me to snatch Lumen's arm in a tight grip.

"Fuck," I hear Chasm groan, sweeping both hands over his face. He drops his arms to his sides and then slips out of his jacket, tossing it onto one of the stone half-walls that meander through the courtyard and garden. He rolls up his shirtsleeves next, a threat in his amber gaze. "If you guys don't move, I'll drop you. This is the only warning you're gonna get."

Parrish yanks Lumen toward him, his attention on her face and not on mine. Well, for a moment anyway. He lets it slip past, winks at me, and then returns his focus to her with a nobleman's frown blooming on his pouty lips.

People around us titter and whisper, and I see Lumen's shoulders tense in response.

"My grandmother gave me a gift earlier this evening," Parrish begins as I stare at him, trying to puzzle out why he's here when he's supposed to be

back at Laverne's house with Tess. If he isn't there, and I'm not there ... it's only a matter of time before she realizes we're both missing again. *What the hell, Parrish?*

But if he's here, I smell Justin's handiwork.

Ice cream melts down the side of my cone and spreads sticky across my fingers; I drop my clutch to the ground with my broken phone inside.

"A gift?" Lumen asks coquettishly, blinking those long falsies of hers at him. She smacks the gum, not so demure anymore, and then blows a bubble. Parrish reaches out with a single finger and pops it, making her giggle. His lip twitches at one corner, but not in a smile. He blinks to clear the flash of wild lightning from his expression.

"A ring." Parrish draws a small box from his pocket, staring down at the black velvet. His hand is shaking. Is it supposed to shake? He looks up, but not at me. Still staring at Lumen. "Laverne seems to think it'd be beneficial to both of us if we were to marry." He snaps the box open and hands it out to her, and she takes it with a sly smile and not an ounce of surprise.

"If this is your way of proposing, you could use a lesson in flirtation." Lumen accepts the box with a smile as Parrish's expression remains absurdly neutral.

"I could *teach* a masterclass in flirtation." He watches stoically as Lumen removes the ring, this absurdly huge pink diamond in a silver setting. "This is a legal and social arrangement, not a promise that I won't cheat. Is there a single person in this town who's faithful?" He shrugs like it doesn't matter, and I notice Lumen stiffen up even more at the slight.

"Cute, real funny," she replies with a forced laugh, like it's all a big joke to her. I'm not entirely sure that it is. I have no words. I have no emotions. I feel *nothing* as I watch her slip the ring on her finger. "Yes, Parrish Vanguard, I will marry you." Lumen looks up, face beaming, and even though I know—I fucking *know*—that most, if not all, of this is performance art intended for Justin's eyes, I waver. The crack grows larger.

I stare at the happy couple as Chasm curses again, and then he's throwing a punch. Several of the boys move to intercept him as he ends up in a scuffle with Gavin and Antonio and the other unnamed rich assholes who always seem keen to do their bidding. Most of the crowd remains uninvolved, but they sure do like to watch.

I shove between Parrish and Lumen, ignoring both Maxie and Delphine as

they call out to me, and I enter the fray. I throw a punch of my own at Antonio's face, and he howls like a long-tailed cat under a rocking chair. These assholes must've known what was coming. Why else would they bother to block Chasm? *They didn't want him to warn me that this was coming. Which means they knew. Which means ... what was Lumen whispering as she threaded her way through the crowd?*

Somebody grabs my hair from behind, yanking me back. Chasm is fighting his way to me, but the melee doesn't last long enough for either him or me to truly throw down. Probably a good thing: this was bound to get bloody. Maybe even lethal. I don't trust anyone in Medina.

A quiet ripple breaks the crowd just as I manage to free my hair from the grasping hands of whoever it was that just attacked me—Veronica, of course—and I turn to see what all the commotion is about.

I'm panting now, shaking all over. My knuckles are split, so I must've *really* given Antonio something to think about. I rub the blood off on Lumen's dress. I'm sure it's expensive; if she needs compensation, Justin can give it to her.

Tess is making her way toward us, walking slowly, hair coiffed, a one-shoulder black maxi dress draping her svelte form. She has a sparkly clutch at her side and a wicked expression on her handsome face.

She comes to a stop just a foot or so away from me and Chasm. The other students have retreated slightly. I don't blame them. Seeing the way Tess offers up a tight smile before shifting her gaze to a white-faced Parrish, I can see we're in a world of trouble here.

Tess Vanguard looks like the millionaire crime novelist she is. She looks like a woman married to a billionaire's family. She looks like a woman possessed.

"Dakota." She turns her attention back to me, and I swear, I tremble. Somehow, I'm almost *more* afraid of Tess than I am of Justin. It doesn't make any sense, but there it is.

Another woman walks out wearing red, her gown whispering just above the stones of the courtyard. She seems to be about the same age as Tess and Justin—mid-thirties thereabouts—her face similar enough to Veronica's that I make the connection. I've seen this woman before: Ellen Fisher, Veronica's mother, the lawyer who railroaded Justin through the courts. Also, the lawyer who now works for Tess' publisher, the one who's suing her for refusing to

write *Returned Under the Guise of Night*.

“Tess,” Ellen greets, smiling like a shark as she looks her opponent over. “So nice of you to come, but I don’t recall extending an invitation.” Ellen titters, putting a hand to her lips in false modesty. “You and I are a little too old for drama, don’t you think?”

“Drama is just a word for nonsense without follow-through. I’m not here for drama.” Tess smiles again, moving over to the ice cream cart as everyone else stares. She orders a double scoop of strawberry on a waffle cone, ten-thousand dollar clutch in one hand, dessert in the other. And then she licks it, all while still staring at Ellen. “This is my week, Dakota. Not your father’s. I won’t share. If he wants you to attend these fancy parties, he can win the hearing on Monday.” She starts back in the direction she came from, calling out behind her. “Kwang-seon, Parrish, Maxim, Maxine. *Now.*”

Without waiting to see if we’ll follow, she disappears down the set of stone steps that lead to the expansive white gravel drive. This time, I do bite my lip. I can’t help it.

“Damn it.” Chasm takes my hand, yanking me along after the ice queen.

At first, I didn’t like Tess’ ability to shapeshift into one of Medina’s moneyed monsters.

Now I understand it. The dorky, quirky, plot-muttering author who piddles around in the kitchen, making voices for her characters as she talks out scenes, that’s the real Tess. Or, shall we say, the *original* Tess. It’s a version of Tess that never could’ve survived Justin’s abuse. A version that never would’ve survived Medina and Laverne and the fourteen-year loss of a daughter.

Just as the world has encouraged Tess to transform herself in ways she might not otherwise have done, it’s doing the same to me. There’s old Dakota, original Dakota, the one who put spiders outside and refused to kill an errant wasp trapped in her bedroom. Then there’s this Dakota, the one who murdered a corrupt police officer named Heath Cousins because it was him or her, him or her friends.

Because the world didn’t give her good choices.

I follow after Tess with Chasm by my side, and I don’t look behind me until we reach a white limousine—Laverne’s limousine—and climb in. Tess waits for us to pile in before she joins us, taking the final seat near the door.

Parrish is seated beside her, soaked in sweat and staring at the floor.

I can't imagine what Justin did to encourage him to propose to Lumen, but if I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt ... I turn to Maxx, but he's just looking at the floor.

I, too, decide to stare at the floor.

We return to Laverne's house, only to find the woman herself waiting on the massive front porch, a navy pantsuit offsetting the gold of her eyes, Parrish's eyes.

"I told you to leave them be," Laverne barks out, and Tess pauses just beside her, turning to face her mother-in-law. "You've made fools of them all in front of their classmates. How are they going to demand respect from their peers when you're over there making a scene?"

"Laverne." Tess' eyes flash as the rest of us stand in our finery on the driveway, just below the steps, as if not a single person dares join this battle. "You are one of the richest, most powerful women in the world." She emphasizes the words in such a way that they feel like they're being grated out of her teeth, flecks of ivory staining the air between them. "You could have me killed and no one would question it. If they did, you could cover it up. There isn't a politician you can't buy or a person you can't own." Here, my mother—and I really am starting to think of her that way—forces a hideous smile. "But what you can't do is buy your son or your grandchildren. You can't threaten them either. Given the choice between you, your money, and me, they'll pick me. Every. Single. Goddamn. Time. Therefore, I am *done* taking your shit."

"Excuse me?!" Laverne practically shrieks, her eyes widening, hands clenching into fists. "What nonsense are you prattling on about now?"

"Leave me and my fucking children alone," Tess growls out, and then she's striding forward and inside, still holding onto her ice cream. We follow dutifully along behind her, like designer-clad ducklings.

That's how Tess makes me feel sometimes: like a duckling.

It's not a totally negative thing. At this point, I'm grateful for the intervention.

Also, I can't breathe. Also, also ... somehow I have ice cream all down the front of my dress. When did that happen? Maxine sheepishly hands me the clutch that I dropped at the party, and it's somewhat comforting to see that even *she* is a tad intimidated by Tess Vanguard.

Tess strides into the living room before turning to face us, her eyes moving

straight to Parrish. She licks her ice cream, as if nothing at all is amiss, but I see the way her other hand squeezes her own clutch. That, and she's left the barest of indents in her waffle cone.

She's upset, but she's trying not to show it. With her clutch, she points at the signal jammer on the coffee table, dropping her hand just in time for Laverne to walk in.

"You proposed to Lumen Hearst?" Laverne asks, sniffing in a pompous, perfunctory sort of way. "You're a good boy, Parrish."

The smile that taints his lips is pure deviance. Nobody in their right mind would ever call Parrish Vanguard a 'good boy'.

Especially not me.

I want to stomp on his foot. I want to slap him. I want to curse and yell and break things until somebody notices how silently I've been screaming all this time. I look over at him, and even if I *know* this is one of Justin's stunts, it hurts. It stings.

I'm not sure I've ever been so angry that my rage went from hot to cold.

There's a glacier inside of me, a fissure ripping me up, a chasm of ice that descends into shadows.

I'm going to bury Justin in it.

It's not just a thought anymore, not just an idea: it's a fucking promise.

"You are not going to marry Lumen," Tess says, her voice a blade of steel. I imagine that steel pressed to Justin's throat, and it fortifies me somehow. I reach up to my face and realize there are tears wet and glistening on my cheeks. "You don't have to, is what I mean. If, after you turn eighteen, it's what you want, I won't stop you."

"I'm going to bed." Parrish turns and takes off without offering me comfort. How can he? Even with the signal jammer, there's the threat of the staff. There's Laverne. There's *Maxx*. I curl my lip in a scowl as Parrish saunters off, turning to toss one last, insouciant quip over his shoulder. Ever the cruel, little prince. "Punish me later, if you want."

Laverne watches him go before turning a challenging look on Tess.

"If he wants his inheritance—and I assure you that he wants it more than a teenage crush on his stepsister—he'll do what he's told." Laverne heads down the same hallway where Parrish disappeared, leaving myself, Chasm, X, Maxine, and Tess in the cavernous living room.

I imagine my grandparents are asleep in the guestroom. A small reprieve in

the unending nightmare that seems to be my life. They don't need to see me right now, silent tears streaking my cheeks.

"You're all in on this, aren't you?" Tess asks with a bitter laugh and another lick of her ice cream. She's staring at the wall now instead of at any of us. "Am I the last to know?"

"I imagine the authorities are the last to know," is how I respond, and Tess looks up, a brief flicker of guilt in her eyes before she fortifies herself. *Parrish ... literally just proposed to Lumen in front of half our school.* There's a good chance I might be sick.

I turn away and head for the stairs, uncaring who—if anyone—is following behind me.

Unfortunately (fortunately?) for me, Chasm is always a step ahead.

His palm slams into the door, and he slips in behind me, closing it by leaning his back against it. His face is a mess of fury, spattered with droplets of blood that might be his or ... just as easily could be somebody else's. I hope it's Gavin's. Or Antonio's.

I hope Veronica's face hurts as much as my knuckles.

"Hey." Chasm's voice is soft as I head in the direction of the bathroom, stripping off my borrowed dress as I go. There's the quiet murmur of foreign curses behind me, the click of a lock, and then he's following me into the bathroom. "You know he'd never hurt you on purpose, right?"

"You mean like Maxx?" I toss the question over my shoulder, turning back to the shower and starting it as Chasm's sturdy footfalls sound behind me. Was it really only a month ago that we had a threesome in this room after prom? Feels like eons.

Is it possible that time isn't simply measured by hours and days and years, but also by experiences? If so, I must be an ancient crone by now.

Chasm stops just behind me, close enough that I can feel the warmth of his body against my skin. He puts his hands on the curve of my waist, and my breath hitches.

"Like I said before, Maxx is a fucking wildcard. He always has been." I turn around in Chasm's arms, like a bee seeking a flower. I just want to see his face right now. He's ... it suddenly feels like he's the only one left.

I know that's not true. I know it. I want to kick myself. This entire night stinks of Justin's interference.

And yet ... it still hurts. The pain is digging so deep into me that it's

becoming harder to tell where it ends and I begin, like this is all I am now: fear and anxiety and pain. It's psychological torture, is what this is. While I know it's possible that Justin could be worse—believe it or not, there are bigger monsters out there—the stress is wearing on me. Big time. Huge.

I look up and into Chasm's eyes, the pinch between his brows and the sharp downturn of his pretty mouth giving away his stress. He looks tired to me, like maybe there are even *more* secrets that I don't know about. Knowing Justin, there very well could be.

Besides, I know these boys too well by now: if they all had to hurt me to ultimately save me, they'd do it. They'd do almost anything. Including break up with me. Including propose to someone else. Including murder.

And then I think about Maxx and my sister, and I'm confused all over again. If she was his primary concern all along, would things have played out any differently?

In the beginning, Justin had me hurting the people I loved, playing tricks, playing dirty. Now, everyone else is doing the same to me, and I hate it. It's so much worse. I'd rather have my fingernails pulled off than endure this emotional pain.

"But Parrish ..." Chasm finally hazards, sighing heavily and reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. His eyes close, and I can't help but admire the way his dark lashes rest against his pale cheeks. He really is very pretty. His eyes open again and catch me like prey; I can't move. I'm paralyzed. He looks fierce as hell all of a sudden, and I suddenly realize that *pretty* is a very silly word to apply to Kwang-seon McKenna. He is nothing short of devastating. "No way. And with Lumen? I mean, come on." He lets out a harsh laugh and then steps back, reaching up to run his fingers through his hair. "I'm so tired, Naekkeo. Can I crash in your room?"

"Can you?" I ask with a small laugh that in no way reflects my actual mood. Not only is one of my friends dead, not only did Maxim Wright betray me, not only did Parrish just propose to freaking *Lumen* of all people but ... I'm planning on murdering my dad. It's sort of a lot to take in. "*Will you please*, more like." I step back from Chasm, slipping out of my bra and underwear to get into the shower.

After a moment, he strips down and joins me, but nothing happens. Just like the shower we took together after we delivered JJ's body to Mr. Fosser's house and then, at Mr. Volli's request, blew holes in his corpse.

What a night that was.

I'm sure I'll have many worse ones before all this is over.

I hate being right all the damn time.



CHAPTER 8

Thursday.

Which means tomorrow is Friday. As in, the night of the Camp Kellogg party. You know, the one where we're going to kidnap Veronica, so we don't have to kill her.

Between me and Chasm, I'm the first to wake up. I sit up, blankets pooling around my waist, and I stare down at him sleeping peacefully beside me. For the briefest moment, I allow myself to imagine what it'd be like to have a future with Chasm, one where I can wake up next to him every day and not worry that my father might have him executed if I don't ask *how high* when he tells me to jump.

I reach up, running the fingers of both hands through my hair and exhaling heavily when I drop them back to my lap. My gaze is fixated on the dresser drawer where I've stuffed my phone. The thought of turning it on and checking my messages makes me sick, but, drawing on some well of inner strength I wasn't even sure I had, I force myself to my feet.

As soon as I turn the screen on, I see that there's a message from Justin.

Home on Sunday. I'll pick you up at your mother's on Monday morning, so we can attend the hearing together.

Bile rushes up my throat, but I choke it down, tossing my phone on the nightstand before I slip out the door and into the hallway. Softly, so as not to wake Chasm up.

“Hey.”

I find Maxx waiting there, leaned up against the wall, hands tucked into his pockets. He lifts his head slowly to look at me, green eyes dark enough that I wonder how I ever compared them to emeralds. They’re the color of envy, as if I’ve never seen the real Maxx Wright before now.

I pause there, my mind torn between worry over what’s going to happen on Monday—there’s no way Tess will let me go with Justin now and yet ... she has to ... more than ever, she has to—and Maxx. He pushes up off the wall and comes over to stand in front of me.

I’m immediately confused as to why *he* is here, and Parrish is not.

“What do you want?” I ask, trying and failing not to sound exasperated. He makes a show of using the bug detector, and it occurs to me that it’s always been him. Maxx checking for mics and cameras. Maxx checking my phone for me and reporting back. He’s had plenty of opportunities to be duplicitous.

He finishes and drops it by his side.

“We need Chasm up, so we can plan for tomorrow night. We can’t exactly wait until we’ve got Veronica lying on a tarp to start making decisions.” If I’m not mistaken, X sounds *annoyed*, like there’s something about this moment that’s pissing him off.

I give him a look, but before I can respond, Maxine’s door opens and she’s striding out to stand beside us. A few months ago, I’d have given literally anything to have her staying in the room next to mine—like, for real, I would’ve cut off a pinky toe—but right now? It just makes things more complicated.

Here’s the thing though: if having both Maxes around makes things uncomfortable and one of them has to go, it’s going to be the one with the XY chromosomes.

“What’s ... happening?” Maxine asks, clearing her throat and shifting nervously. It really feels like I’m the third wheel in this situation, like *I* am the clueless little sister. I’m transported right back to the coffee shop that day when I met Maxx for the first time and he pretended not to recognize me.

Then I realize something that should’ve occurred to me a long, long time ago.

“Why were you driving your own car?” I ask, whirling to face Maxine with my hands trembling at my sides. Something is wrong here. Something is very, very wrong. Even worse than last night.

“What?” she asks, her expression this odd mix of innocence and guilt that makes me want to scream.

“That day at the coffee shop, when I met Maxx for the first time. He took me home, but you didn’t come with us.” I don’t like how accusatory my voice sounds, but I can’t help it. This random fact is really bothering me all of a sudden. “You told me that Maxx was driving you up in the Gladiator and then ...” *Not to mention that he got there before you.*

Maxine laughs, and the sound freaks me out. It’s more like a surprised laugh, like I’ve caught her with her hand in the cookie jar.

She exchanges a look with Maxx over my head, and I freeze.

“Hey Naekkeo,” Chasm murmurs sleepily, opening the bedroom door. He has my phone in his hand, but he’s frowning as he stares at the screen. “You might want to check this.”

I take it from him with a trembling hand, both Maxes staring at me in such a way that I feel like I’m under interrogation.

“I ... was mad at Maxx when we first left Eugene; I didn’t want to ride with him,” my sister admits, but I’m trying to drown her out. I won’t lie. I don’t think I want to hear what she’s going to say. “We put each other on Bluetooth and talked it out during the drive; I wasn’t mad by the time I got there.”

“Mad about what?” I ask, still staring at my phone but knowing that whatever is waiting on the other side of this screen isn’t something I’m keen to run headfirst at. I look back up at Maxine, at the kind lines of her face, the face of the person I trust the most in this world.

“We had a fight over Mom.” Maxine exhales strangely, like bringing up her past with X is actively painful. She looks like she might be sick, too. We’re both prone to throwing up during stressful situations; my sister just hides it better than I do.

“Over Mom?” I ask, looking to see if Chasm has any clue what they’re talking about. The way he’s staring at his friend, it’s hard to say. He could still be angry about X breaking my heart. Could be something more. Justin has successfully created a situation where I’m questioning literally everyone around me—even if I know they’re on my side. Just because they’re working for my benefit doesn’t mean they’re not full of shit, too.

Self-sacrifice is a big thing in our circle. Even I’m actively scheming to finish this on my own terms.

Even I am lying.

“I told her like it is: Saffron is a kidnapper, and she ruined Tess’ life. I wasn’t shy about it.” Maxx doesn’t sound apologetic whatsoever, looking at my sister with a tight mouth but a somewhat gentle gaze. His eyes say *it might hurt, but keep going*. His eyes say *we’ve got this, Maxie*. “Loving someone doesn’t mean agreeing on every little thing.”

Hm.

“We broke up for all of one night, but we were back together by the time we all met up the next day.” Maxine’s voice sounds choked, like if she could go back in time and save me from this, she would. She would fly to New York and stop Nevaeh from turning on that stupid, fucking Netflix documentary. She would keep me as Dakota Banks for as long as she could, the truth be damned. Truth is important to Maxine, but not as important as keeping me safe.

I’m shaking all over now, but it’s not her that I’m mad at: it’s X.

“I’m so sorry, Kota,” he tells me, and he sounds like he really means it. What he’s apologizing for now, I’m not sure. A fight with my sister that doesn’t mean anything at the moment? Something else? I don’t care.

“You sound like a broken record.” I ignore him, unlocking my phone to stare at the texts that Justin has sent me.

At first, I don’t process anything, not until Parrish comes stomping up the stairs. He looks about two seconds away from breaking someone’s face.

“Tell me you didn’t,” Parrish says as he sweeps down the hallway like a tempest, getting right up in Maxx’s face. “There are certain lines you just don’t cross.” He points at his friend, stabbing him in the chest. I think if he didn’t do that, he’d just hit Maxx and he wouldn’t stop hitting.

Something has shifted overnight, and it feels like I’m the only one who doesn’t know what that is.

Chasm, either, for that matter. He’s staring between his friends like he’s never seen them before.

“Oh, I don’t think I can do this,” Maxine wails, putting her face in her hands. Her shoulders shake like she’s sobbing. Fear lances through my heart. I can feel myself metaphorically bleeding to death. My eyes lift to Chasm’s, waiting for him to turn back to me.

I read Justin’s newest text again. One more time. No, no, a third. A fourth. I’m still not getting it.

And then I turn and throw my phone down the stairs.

Parrish is still shaking with anger as he peers down the hallway to check for any of Laverne's employees, and then he turns all of that anger back over to Maxx.

"Tell her this is all bullshit, that we'll do what we have to do to get out of this."

Maxine is practically weeping now.

"What did it say, Little Sister?" Chasm is whispering, taking me by the shoulders and doing his best to gently shake me back to the realm of the living. He asks me again in both Korean and Japanese. It'd be cute if I hadn't just read what I read.

If I wasn't thinking what I'm thinking.

Somehow, even after being kidnapped and living a lie, I was okay. Because I made friends with the boys so quickly. Because I *fell* for the boys so quickly. It was me and them; we were a team.

We don't feel so much like a team right now, and I realize that if I lived sixteen years of my life not knowing that feelings and ideas are not quite as set in stone as we pretend them to be ... then why not this? Why *can't* Maxx actually be into Maxine? Why *can't* Parrish actually be with Lumen?

Makes sense now, I guess, why Justin said he wanted them set up in pairs like that.

I start laughing then, and I can't stop. It's hysterical. It's crazy. But what I just read makes *act on your feelings for Chasm* look like an easy task. I'm bent in half, howling as the three boys and one weepy older sister all go still and silent while they stare at me.

Then suddenly I'm on my knees without knowing how I got there.

Chasm is right there with me.

"You're freaking me the fuck out here," he murmurs, eyes so wide they look like marbles. "What did it say?"

Oh, one more thing, Princess.

I told you that everyone in this town is cursed—Maxim Wright included.

They are liars, cheaters, thieves. They are actors. They are heartbreakers.

I was going to request that Maxx and Maxine consummate their relationship, but it's already been done. Many times over. Doesn't seem like they ever stopped dating. Enjoy.

There were seven videos sent to me that I did not click on.

I stop laughing just long enough to notice Tess clambering up the stairs like a person possessed.

“Have any of you seen Kimber?” she asks, breathing like she’s climbed more than steps, like she’s scaled a mountain. “She sent me a text telling me she was going out, and I can’t get ahold of her.”

Oh, poor Tess, I think, staring at her face. She’s both angry and panicked, wondering if Justin’s gotten ahold of another one of her children. He might have. Is Kimber today’s hostage? If not Kimber, then who? It’s starting to really sink in here that blackmail is forever, isn’t it? It never stops.

I will *never* be able to appease Justin’s whims enough that he’ll leave me alone.

“I just talked to her,” Parrish admits with a long sigh, looking at Tess over his shoulder. “She snuck out to go to a yacht party, but they won’t let her on the boat.” His face tightens. “Because of Dad. She wants me to pick her up.”

“You did?” Tess asks skeptically, looking around at us. “You wouldn’t lie to me about this, would you?”

“Not a Slayer thing, Mom,” Parrish drawls easily, but Tess is freaking *staring* at me in that way of hers. Sometimes, I strongly consider the idea that she might be psychic. Then again, me sitting on the floor close to tears, Maxine red-faced and sniffling, Parrish in a rage, Chasm in a panic, Maxx acting like ... well, Maxx. It’s probably pretty obvious there’s something wrong here.

“Which marina?” she asks, and Parrish wets his lips, his anger just barely concealed beneath his apathetic disregard.

“She’s in the parking lot at Hope Marina.”

Tess doesn’t ask again—she definitely doesn’t believe we’re all okay—but she retreats just long enough for Parrish to snatch Maxx up by the shirt.

“What are you *doing*?” he grinds out as X very carefully untangles his friend’s hands from his shirt.

“Saving your girlfriend’s life, that’s what,” Maxx growls back at him. “Do you think Maxine and I *like* doing this? Shoving this into Dakota’s face? It’s not what either of us wanted.”

Chasm helps me to my feet, and I find myself just *staring* at my older sister.

“How did you trick him?” Chasm asks quietly, as if he’s determined not to believe the worst here.

“Who said we tricked him?” Maxx asks, and then he reaches down for Maxine’s hand and she lets him take it. Didn’t she tell him just the other day not to touch her unless he had to? I don’t understand. “What did Dakota and I do when Justin demanded that we sleep together? Did we trick him then?” He drags my sister past me, and when she reaches out as if to touch me reassuringly, I jerk away from her.

“I love you, baby sister,” she breathes, but she doesn’t press it. She allows X to take her away. More accurately, she *runs* away from me, as if she can’t handle the situation if she stays in it.

I don’t look at her.

I’m not even mad at her if it’s true.

I’m not.

Maxine is more important than whatever stupid feelings I might be having right now.

Parrish is watching me carefully, and I realize we haven’t had a second to address last night’s ‘proposal’. It seems so insignificant compared to what I’ve just discovered.

My sister had sex with Maxx Wright.

Maybe.

Those videos ...

“Don’t believe them,” Parrish warns me, getting in my face. “You know we’re only doing what we have to in order to get out of this alive, right?” He tries to grab my shoulders, but Chasm stops him with his hands on Parrish’s wrists.

“I don’t think she wants to be touched by you or anyone else right now. Okay?” He looks imploringly at Parrish, but his friend just yanks out of his grip. “Justin isn’t just going to want their word that they did it, you know? He’ll make Mr. Volli watch—just like he did with me and Dakota.”

“Don’t bring that up right now; I don’t want to *hear* about that right now,” Parrish growls out, his tone darker and more frustrated than I’ve ever heard it. “Don’t say that shit in front of her.”

“At some point, Parrish, there’s believing in someone else and there’s being an idiot. You’re being an idiot right now. Even if Maxx wasn’t into Maxine—even if he was into Dakota all along—he can’t get out of this one. Trust me: we were there, and we tried.”

Parrish whirls on Chasm, a storm of fury. It occurs to me that he’s angry on

my behalf.

“So.” Parrish cools his anger in an instant, tucking his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants. He’s shirtless, by the way, but there’s no enjoying that smooth chest or chiseled midsection. Honestly, I’m still considering putting a hole through the drywall. X did it, so why can’t I? “You believe that I actually want to marry *Lumen*?” This time, Parrish’s laugh is so bitter that it chokes me.

I turn and take off for the bathroom, hitting the cold water on the faucet and splashing my face. And then I pick up a heavy, decorative soap dish and chuck it at the mirror. The entire thing shatters and comes down in a glittering silver waterfall.

The boys come in behind me just in time for me to see their shocked expressions in the falling glass.

When I turn around to look at them, they’re both as white as a sheet.

“Let’s get some breakfast, shall we?” I ask, my voice so calm and solid that I almost believe my own lie. *Everything is okay. Everything is fine. Whatever lies are floating around, they’ll all rise to the surface soon.*

If Justin comes home on Sunday, he can be dead within seventy-two hours certainly? If I give him a day or two to get complacent ... I make myself smile, and Parrish grimaces.

“Let’s go.” I shove between them and head downstairs.

Tess has her purse slung over one shoulder and is on her way out the door, the two Maxes staring dubiously after her. My bio mom glances over her shoulder and smiles at me.

“I’m going to fetch Kimber; I’ll be right back.”

I’m not sure what to say, how to stop her, or convince her that we should go instead, so I say nothing at all. Tess takes off, the front door echoing in the massive foyer as she closes it behind her. I can only hope that Kimber truly did sneak out on her own and that this isn’t one of Justin’s many tricks.

My gaze shifts over to Maxine, eyes red and puffy from crying. She’s wringing her hands in the front of her *PNW Magic* hoodie. It has an artful sketch of a waterfall on it. X doesn’t look at me, staring out the window above the breakfast table at Tess’ retreating vehicle.

“Can we talk?” Maxine asks me, and I lift my gaze to hers. There’s so much pleading there, how could I not trust her? She wouldn’t sleep with Maxx, would she? Only, my sister and X are in so many ways the same

person. They have rigid moral codes, and they'd do anything, sacrifice anything, to save the ones they love.

If my sister thought she needed to sleep with X to save my life, she'd do it—even if it meant I'd hate her forever for it. The thing is, I don't hate her. I could never hate her, even if she did do it.

"Maybe later. I need time to process right now." I move over to the fridge and pretend like I have a reason to dig around in it. Really, food is the last thing on my mind.

"Maybe we should go for a hike today?" Maxx asks casually, and I laugh. I start laughing like I did earlier, and I just laugh until I can't breathe anymore. When I stand back up and wipe the tears from my eyes, the four of them are looking at me like they pity me.

"No, no." I wave my hands at them, offering up what I hope seems like a relatively sane facial expression. Calm. I am calm. Zen, even. Seriously. "We're not going to the party tomorrow; there's no need."

"What do you mean there's no need?" Chasm asks, almost frantic in his inquiry. I give him a look and a quick shake of my head.

"Justin told me he changed his mind about Veronica; he has other plans for her." I take a soda from the fridge to use on my forehead; I have a headache. The cold can should help. If anyone in that room senses I'm lying to them, so what?

Pretty sure at this point they're all lying to me, too.

We're peas in a pod, my sister and these boys and me. We'll do anything to keep each other safe, even if it means lying and scheming. I can't help but wonder if Justin knows that, too, if it's all a part of his masterplan.

"He has other plans?" Chasm clarifies, squinting his eyes as if he doesn't believe me for shit. "That sounds like a bullshit lie to me."

"What's a bullshit lie?" my grandfather asks, coming into the room with a frown carved into his kind face. The look is so serious that it transforms him into something mildly terrifying for a moment. Chasm must sense it, too, because he backs up a step.

Taken out of context—and without knowing Chasm well—hearing him say that to me must paint him in a particularly poor light.

"Bullshit lie?" my grandmother echoes, stepping into the kitchen beside her husband.

And then both of their gazes simultaneously drop to my leg and stick there.

Oh.

I'm wearing shorts; I have a tattoo.

Oops.

"Dakota Lorelai Banks," Carmen breathes as Walter's eyes widen in shock. "Where on earth did you get that?" And then she looks to Parrish and Chasm, and the tattoos on both of their arms.

My face heats, and I'm instantly reduced back down to the OG Dakota, the one I miss so much that I mourn the loss of her even as I continue to tread water, to fight desperately to keep her.

"This is ..." I drop the soda can by my side and look down at Parrish's meticulous artwork, the piece he worked so hard to craft for me, the one with so much meaning embedded in it. *Me, Saffron, Tess. Three hearts. A quill pen.* "It's a memento." I raise my chin proudly, pointing at the hearts with my free hand. "This represents me, Saffron, and Tess." My throat gets choked up even as Walter's eyes crinkle, and Carmen purses her lips slightly.

I turn away and move out one of the other entrances to the kitchen.

Whether they like the tattoo or not, approve of it or not, it doesn't matter. Because they don't have custody of me. Because I'm not actually a Banks. Because maybe even the few lynchpins holding me in place—my sister, the boys—aren't as steadfast and unbreakable as I believed either.

I head up to my room, lock the door, and refuse to see anyone else for the rest of the night.

Tess tries but since she's told me Kimber is safe, nothing else matters.

Not even my own broken heart.



CHAPTER 9

The next morning, Tess wakes me up by cheerfully announcing that she’s taking me to get the promised birth control. It’s not until I’m dressed and heading into the kitchen that I realize she really meant it when she said she was taking both of us—Parrish as well as myself.

He looks surly, but well put-together, hair manicured to mussy perfection, his clothes that sleek Junior Yacht Club look. I’m not sure how I feel towards him right this second, but having him engaged to Lumen—however ridiculous a stretch that seems—makes this entire excursion into its own little slice of hell.

Part of me is warmed by the idea of Tess taking an interest in my life, of trying to help me, of actually listening and taking action instead of lecturing. The rest of me is too miserable to fully appreciate the moment.

“Seems kind of ridiculous that birth control pills for men are only just now hitting the market, huh?” Parrish murmurs, clearly trying to make conversation with me as we lag behind Tess on our way to the car. He looks askance at me, but I don’t look back.

“Seems kind of ridiculous that the United States waited for a hundred other countries to approve OTC birth control pills before even *considering* it,” I respond, but my heart isn’t in the conversation. No, when something hits close to home, the ills of the world seem to fade away to distant stars. Suddenly, with an enemy on the home front, they’re just not as important.

Parrish stops suddenly, turning to stand in front of me. He plants his inked hands on my shoulders and leans in, close enough to kiss. I almost do it, too. Almost throw myself at him, crush his mouth with my own and allow myself to drown in the heat that's been simmering between us since moment one. This close, I can see the artwork that makes up his irises, a collaboration between nature and some holy divinity, if such a thing exists.

"Are you angry with me?" he asks, and I laugh.

I can't seem to stop laughing lately which is odd seeing as I've never felt less like laughing in my life.

"Angry?" I parrot, thinking back to the party and my genuine surprise and embarrassment at seeing him propose to Lumen Hearst. "Why would I be angry, Mr. Hearst?"

His lips twist in an *I fucking knew it* smirk.

"Dakota Banks, are you *jealous*?" he breathes, lifting his pretty gaze up to the sky. When he brings it back down, it's like a hammer, crashing into the fragile shield I've erected around my heart. Parrish takes my face in both of his hands, and there's a sudden softening of his expression, a look of tenderness that I'm convinced I'm the only person on this planet to have seen.

This is for me, just for me.

"I know it was one of Justin's tricks. How could it not be? But why didn't you tell me ...?" I trail off as Parrish leans close to kiss me, his mouth like embers, simmering and waiting for my oxygen to fan them to flame. I'm relatively passive during the kiss, but when he moves to pull away, I inadvertently find myself placing a hand on his side. The Baphomet necklace swings between us, a reminder that he isn't as 'future career politician' as his clothes might make him look sometimes.

"I tried to talk to you all day yesterday, but you shut me out." His voice gets tight, almost like he wants to scream. Or punch something. Correction: more like he wants to strangle Justin. He'll do it, too, given the opportunity; there is no doubt in my mind about that. "Don't shut me out, Gamer Girl. I got the text after you left the house for the ice cream social."

He slips his phone from his pocket and presents it to me. Even though my stomach turns leaden with dread, I take it from him and scan the message.

Laverne wants to see you with Lumen. She's incredibly insistent that I find a way to control my daughter and keep her away from you. Seeing as I

already promised Dakota that she could have you, that leaves me with few options. Shut your grandmother up before I do it myself.

I nod, but no words will come out.

Meanwhile, Tess is waiting patiently by some vintage car I've never seen before, arms crossed over her chest, watching us. She must have some sense of what we're up to over here, but she doesn't let on. Instead, she waits and watches.

My mother knows that Justin is the Slayer.

I still can't get over that. Still can't decide how to process it. The relative patience and serenity with which she's handling this is a bit concerning to me. Not a single cell in my body believes that Tess Vanguard would sit idly by and let a bunch of teenagers deal with her abusive, murderous ex.

"My grandmother gave me the ring and made it pretty clear what her intentions were. I don't care if it's Laverne or Justin or anyone else: I'll protect you from the world." He stands up straight, fingers playing with the necklace's silver pendant. To the uninitiated, one might think it was the devil on that necklace.

A nice reminder that things are not always what they seem.

"How can you still believe in Maxx?" I whisper, feeling a cold shiver sweep over me. It's nice and warm today. Birds are singing, the trees are bristling with greenery. Why does it feel like it should be foggy, drizzly, and dark? It rightfully should be, so that the day might fit my mood. "How?"

Before my sister got involved, I have to admit that I sort of did, too. How could I not, after all the things I've seen? More importantly, after all the things I've done. Imagine if Parrish had lost his shit on me and Chasm after our sort-of-fake, sort-of-real proposal.

After seeing that video of us making love at Justin's request.

I stumble over the thought.

Right.

Chasm and I *did* have sex.

So who's to say the double Maxes didn't do that, too? Even if just to save me and the rest of our extended family.

Parrish plants his hands on his slender hips, looking me over and clucking his tongue.

"What if I'd believed that you and Chasm had abandoned me that night?" he queries, tilting his head to one side. I close my eyes and shake my head,

knowing that he's trying to help here but that he's actually making it worse.

"Right. We didn't abandon you." I open my eyes, squeezing my hands into fists. "But we ended up in some sort of poly relationship after. I'm not sharing Maxx with my sister." There's an unspoken *even if he still loves me and they only did it to save me* floating there.

"Maxx wouldn't sleep with Maxine." Parrish is shaking his head, adamant and immovable. "Even if he wanted her over you—which isn't true—he would've known that sleeping with you would make her an impossibility forever. He isn't that sort of guy."

"What sort of guy?" I clarify, trying and failing to summon up that unerring belief I used to have. I'm not sure when it died off inside of me. When I heard that Nevaeh was dead? When Maxx told me he didn't love me? Or yesterday morning?

Regardless, I'm finding it harder and harder to remember what it felt like to hold that unerring confidence in others.

"He isn't a fuckboy *byeontae* who would sleep with a girl and then bang her sister, that's what." Parrish sounds annoyed now, but not at me. He's raking his fingers through his hair and looking off into the distance, at something in his mind that only he can see.

Byeontae? I think that means pervert. Good to know that Parrish doesn't think of Maxx that way.

"Are we going?" Tess calls out, patient but brimming with curiosity. Her urge to grill us is even more apparent after Parrish snatches my hand and drags me over to the car. We climb into the backseat together as Tess peers at us in the rearview mirror.

"Leave your phones here; this is a family day." She waits for us to comply, but since I threw my phone down the stairs yesterday, it's officially toast. Parrish sighs and climbs out, walking back to the front porch and then chucking his phone onto one of the many rocking chairs.

Using signal jammers and dumping our tech this often is a bad thing. A really, really bad thing. A terrible thing. A future tragedy in the making.

"New car, eh?" Parrish offers dryly when he climbs back in and makes a show of looking around. "Well, old car but new to you. Just like Chasm's. Trying to outrun the Slayer, are we?"

"If you keep avoiding technology, he's going to know that you know," I interject, a hint of fear creeping into my voice. "Tess, you have to stop."

“Don’t worry about Justin,” she tells me, and it’s the level of confidence in her voice that really freaks me out. She thinks that by knowing who he is, she can beat him. Doesn’t she understand? Didn’t she see the news on Monday? Fourteen people are dead, murdered without him even being present in the country. Even if she did go to the FBI, Justin is likely among the world’s most elite hackers; they’re never going to catch him.

It’s up to me. I only wish I’d done it sooner.

“For now, Parrish, do you want to explain to me why you proposed to Lumen? It seems clear that your relationship with Dakota isn’t over.” Tess starts the vehicle and, even knowing as little about cars as I do, I’m impressed. The engine turns over with an impressive growl and the entire thing rumbles like it’s ready to throw down on the track.

Scarlett Force—likely the world’s most famous race car driver—would be proud. Pretty sure she prefers muscle cars from the sixties and seventies, like this one. Err, at least I think so. It has the look that all the cars in her movies have, but I could be wrong. I only watch them when I’m with Maxine.

“Laverne is threatening Dakota through Justin; I had no choice.” Parrish’s voice is blasé as he reveals this tidbit to Tess, but I’m struck all over again by the idea that we’re actually here.

Tess knows.

Tess *knows*.

“Laverne ... I always thought she had the heart of a serial killer.” Tess starts off down the driveway, her hands tightening ever so slightly on the wheel.

“I don’t think she is a killer, unfortunately,” Parrish admits, shaking his head and holding his hands palm up in a clear admittance of doubt. “But I guess she could be. Right now, it seems she’s as interested in exploiting and using Justin as anyone else. She’s an angel investor for Milk Carton.”

“Of course she is.” Tess’ voice is tight with irritation. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from her or anyone else in this town. That’s why he’s here isn’t it? At least partially. To get his revenge?”

For as much as Justin is a villain, so is every other resident of Medina, WA.

“That ... and other things,” I admit as Justin’s voice reverberates through my skull. “*I’d much rather Tess was where she belonged: by my side or on her knees in front of me.*” I find myself somehow sitting there with my hands

pressed over my ears. “He wants to make me into a new version of you, make Chasm into a new version of himself ...” I almost call her Tess here, but I can’t bring myself to do it anymore.

All I want to do right now is call her mom, ask for her help even when I know I can’t have it.

Justin will never allow Tess to win, not without copious sacrifice.

“Mom, he’s obsessed with you.” Parrish says it before I do, leaning forward and putting one of his hands on the edge of her leather seat. With the other, he takes ahold of mine, braiding our fingers together.

“I know.” Tess’ face is grim, her mouth pulled tight. It’s possible that her response could come across as narcissistic, but it doesn’t. Instead, it’s just an unabashed fact. “I feel like this is more about me than anyone else, and yet he’s taking it out on the world.”

“He’s been taking it out on Dakota,” Parrish growls, and Tess flinches. But only for a second. The fact that she showed any weakness at all is a miracle. “From the very start. He kidnapped me to get at Dakota. He manipulated and blackmailed her into everything. The fire at the high school—”

“*You started the fire at Whitehall?!*” Tess chokes out, eyes going wide. She nearly swerves off the road, and that’s when I notice that someone is following us.

“Um, Tess ...” I hedge, looking over my shoulder at the so-non-descript-it’s-actually-descript SUV behind us. “Pretty sure we’re being followed.”

“Pretty sure I hired a top-notch security team,” she replies breezily, lifting a thermos of coffee to her lips. She sips deeply and sighs, and that’s when I notice the words *Tears of My Readers* printed on the front of the cup. I almost smile at that—damn it, I really *do* like Tess—but instead, her confidence and her nonchalance freak me out *more* than if it were one of Justin’s goons tailing us.

“You have no idea what you’re doing here,” I snap, getting angry all of a sudden. Tess doesn’t flinch. That annoys me, too. I’ve been awful the last few days (much of it of my own accord and not Justin’s) and Tess won’t give me any of the old reactions, the ones that hurt me and made me even angrier. Instead, she’s taking this all in like an ... behaving like an ... I can’t even make myself say it.

Like an adult.

Tess pulls the car over and puts it in park before turning over her shoulder

to look at us.

“You’re fucking up all the hard work I’ve put in.” My voice sounds desperate; I won’t lie. But I can’t help it. I’ve set fires. I’ve broken peoples’ hearts. I cheated on Parrish with his best friend while he was being held prisoner. I slept with my sister’s ex who she maybe or maybe doesn’t love. *I murdered a person.*

Was all of that for naught?

“I was married to the man, Dakota,” Tess repeats, getting annoyed with me. There it is. At least I can still piss her off if I try. I narrow my eyes on her, but she isn’t done. “You don’t have to convince me: I believe you. I know how dangerous he is.”

“You don’t know *anything*,” I growl back, and even Parrish gives me a look.

This is it. I’ve been on my best behavior this whole time. I’ve tried to smile through every backhanded comment, through every *literal* backhand, through the blood and threats and the constant mocking. I. Cannot. Take. It. *Anymore.*

Tess has the audacity to *smile* at me.

Surely, by the time Justin is through with her, she won’t be smiling anymore. That’s what I’m afraid of.

“Now that I know, I can help you.”

“If you hadn’t pushed me away in the beginning, you might’ve known sooner.” I don’t exactly say that she drove me into Justin’s arms—that’s not fair; she didn’t—but she certainly didn’t make things any easier.

Poor Parrish sits quietly on my left side, just watching the two of us. He can’t hide that edge of worry. He certainly isn’t trying to hide the fact that he wants us to get along. It’s *imperative* to his health and his wellbeing that Tess and I learn to love each other. Because if this is going to work long-term, me and him, then it has to be okay between me and Tess. If I made him choose me over her, he’d never be the same again. And he’d do it, too, I know he would.

He would pick me.

“You’re right.” Tess’ eyes are watering, but she’s struggling desperately to keep the tears from falling. She touches a hand to her chest, curling her fingers around the neckline of her emerald-green blouse. “That’s on me. It’d been so long since I’d seen Justin and ... Parrish was still missing when he returned ...” Here she trails off and lets out the darkest, most bitter laugh I’ve

ever heard in my life. Makes the ones I've been giving lately seem like giggles. "Him showing up while my son was kidnapped, I can't even *believe* I didn't make the connection."

"Mom, it's not normal to think your ex would kidnap and torture your son out of the blue. You hadn't seen the guy in, like, fourteen years, right?" Parrish tries desperately to intervene, and I love him even more for it. He looks me over, like he's considering taking off my seat belt and pulling me into his lap.

"Maybe not normal for other people's exes," Tess says through tightly pinched lips, "normal for mine." Tess pushes some hair off of her forehead. "Did I ever tell you that once, when I threatened to leave him, he turned and slammed his face into the edge of a door until he broke his own nose?"

Parrish and I just stare at her, and she takes that as encouragement to continue.

"There was blood everywhere, just pouring down his face, staining his shirt. Then he pulled a gun on me and told me that if I moved, he was going to kill me. He proceeded to call the police and have me arrested for domestic violence."

I'm speechless. I mean, I knew the guy was nuts, but that's a whole other level.

"Who breaks their own nose in order to fuck someone else over?" Tess asks rhetorically, and since she's cursing in front of me, that means she's really and truly upset, no matter how calm and capable she looks from the outside. "What's the more likely scenario? That I beat him, right? And it was more likely that Dakota was just angry and acting out, and she just happened to pick my typewriter to smash into the window of her own car." Tess looks at me pleadingly, like she's begging for forgiveness here. "But not with Justin. Never with Justin."

She turns back around, puts the car in drive, and continues on. The road is lined with tall evergreens, sunlight filtering down to the damp forest floor. Even though it's summer, this is the Pacific Northwest. It's meant to be green. There are supposed to be ferns. Rain is a happy thing.

"Does he want me dead?" she asks, but then she waves her hand around and shakes her head. "No, don't answer me. I'm sure he doesn't."

"Why don't you think he wants you dead?" Parrish asks, but I already know that Tess is right. Justin has said it more or less himself.

“Because then who would get to see his genius in action?” she asks dryly, sighing again.

“I think he’s like, not in love with you because I’m not sure he’s capable of love, but at least he’s fixated on you.” I don’t know how to make myself say this, but it has to be said. “You know that the fire on prom night was him, don’t you?”

Tess slams the brakes on the car so hard that the black SUV behind us skids a little. Fortunately, they’re keeping enough distance that we aren’t hit.

The way Tess stares down at that steering wheel, I know she hadn’t thought of that yet. There’s just so much, it’s hard to take it all in. I’m sure she would’ve come to that conclusion eventually, but she hadn’t gotten there yet.

“Maxx really was there on accident,” Parrish explains as I consider his statement. Was he though? Maxx, I mean. Were the kids supposed to die and Maxx saved them? Or did Justin plant Maxx as a hero? God. I hate that I’m even going there with my thoughts right now. One thing though stands out to me: the bunny. There was no reason for Maxx to go back and save GG other than pure altruism. Or love for me. Really, isn’t that a telling piece of information? *Clue number seven: the bunny*. “If he hadn’t gone back to the house to get his tux so he could join us at prom, everyone would be dead.”

“Who set the fire?” Tess whispers, voice like thunder, still staring at the steering wheel. She believes us, that Justin is responsible even if he was literally at prom with us.

“His assistant, Raúl.” The man’s voice rolls off my tongue like something slimy, a slug of distaste slithering. “Pretty sure arson is his gig.”

“There are others, too, like Amin Volli,” Parrish adds, ticking names off his fingers. “Some guy with the last name Fossier, Heath Cousins. Like I said before, Caroline.”

Tess’ gaze snaps up, flickering with barely suppressed rage.

“Right. Caroline.” The woman’s name is a violent grating against Tess’ tongue, and honestly, if I hadn’t seen Justin’s inner fury, I’d be afraid of Tess’. The only reason I’m less afraid of her now is because she plays by the rules. Another reason she’s going to lose. Horribly. A rule abiding individual cannot win against pure chaos. “She’s a killer, too?”

“Murdered three husbands, was planning on killing Justin, too, but he caught her beforehand. Parrish stabbed her in the leg.” Now that the words

can come freely, they just pour out of me like blood from a gaping wound. I simply cannot staunch the flow.

“We’re going to lunch after we visit the clinic.” Tess presses her foot ever so carefully down on the gas pedal and off we go again. “And you two are going to tell me everything you know, everything that’s happened, who exactly is involved and in what capacity. You hear me?”

Parrish and I exchange looks, but what does it matter if she knows a little or she knows a lot at this point. The outcome is the same. I can only hope she gives me the very last few days I need to handle this.

“He ... made you sleep with Chasm and Maxx?” Tess’ voice is this thin, stringy thing. There’s murder in her eyes. As surely as I’ve seen that expression in Justin’s, I see it in hers now. If she had a gun in her hand, and Justin was standing in front of her ...

I decide I’m not putting it past her to try to kill him.

In fact, she may try to kill him on Monday when he comes to pick me up. I can’t let that happen for so many reasons. I can easily see Tess ending up in prison for life. If Justin’s done as good a job at covering his tracks as I think, then she won’t be lauded as a hero but branded a murderer. Even worse: what if she misses? What if it’s not a fatal shot? What if Mr. Volli is waiting in the wings to jump in the way Raúl was when I tried to hit Justin with the shovel?

No.

My one and only goal right now is to get Justin to take me back to his house and then do this myself.

“Dakota, that’s sexual assault,” Tess begins, but I’m already shaking my head. I put my hands flat on the tabletop and dig my nails into the wood. We’re at a restaurant on the water that I’ve never been to before. It’s low-key and casual, just the sort of place I dreamed of going to with Tess when I first arrived in Medina.

It’s ironic that she’s bringing me here now, don’t you think?

“No, it’s not.” I’m adamant about that. I don’t hold myself or Chas or X responsible for what happened. *Stupid X, I hate him. I hate-love him. Ugh.*

“That was a violation of all three of you,” Tess whispers, her eyes filling with tears. She clamps a hand over her mouth and looks away. I hear her

mumbling something under her breath, something like *I'm going to kill that bastard*. She drops her hand and then suddenly, she's around the table and on her knees.

Tess wraps me up in a hug worthy of the Banks, and I'm left there to sit and stare wide-eyed at Parrish as he offers up the sweetest, softest smile. His face says it all; there's no need for words. *I told you she wasn't so bad, eh Gamer Girl?*

"I'm so sorry, Dakota." Tess is openly weeping now. It's a good thing her private security team secured the balcony for us to eat in private. Didn't hurt that Tess offered the owner a wad of cash beforehand. "I should've been a better mother; I should've seen it." She draws back, resting on her haunches in wide-legged slacks in a soft cream color, expensive flats peeling away from her heels as she balances on her toes. Her hand comes up to swipe loose strands of hair from my forehead.

I move to stop her, but she takes my hand in hers and gives it a comforting squeeze.

"Please don't go after Maxx," I add, because I really weighed telling her about him before I finally cracked. But if she does try to hold him accountable, I'll never forgive her. It takes a moment for her to respond, blinking back at me as if in surprise, and then a sadness descends over her beautiful features. She really does look like a model. I'm honestly lucky that we share DNA.

Really lucky. And not just because of her looks.

"Dakota, I wouldn't do that. He's as much a victim in all of this as anyone else." Tess rises up to her feet, pacing a tight loop with the blue of Lake Washington a sparkling backdrop. Houses surrounded by towering evergreens line the shores on both sides of the water. "Tell me more." She gestures at us as she paces, and Parrish and I exchange a look.

We've been over most of it at this point: the kidnapping, the typewriter, the fire in the theater, the hunt for clues, the insane asylum, my behavior at the original custody hearing, you get the picture.

A few choice things were left out: JJ, the poor girl who was sexually assaulted and murdered. Chasm and me, shooting Mr. Fosser's corpse. Lumen and Danyella. The plot to kidnap Veronica. Saffron. Delphine's possible involvement.

"He's untouchable because he never does anything himself," Parrish adds,

putting an elbow on the table and slumping into it so that his long fingers cup the side of his handsome face. With his other hand, he plays with his necklace.

“Well ...” I hazard, wondering if Saffron’s story might come in handy. I glance over at the bodyguards positioned around the outdoor eating area. We’re seated on a stone patio, tables with brightly colored umbrellas wafting gently in the cool breeze coming off the water. Carefully manicured hedges border the stone. That’s where the guards stand, just on the other side of the greenery.

Surely, they can hear us.

Tess looks around at them—three in total—and then stands up straight.

“Excuse me.” She offers up a slight clap of her hands (I cringe) to get their attention. And then a smile. But it’s not a *hey, how are you?* sort of smile, more like an *I’m the boss, and don’t you forget that* smile. “Could you give us some privacy?”

One of the guards—the only woman amongst the three—gives Tess a look, as if she doesn’t agree with the proposition. Then a sigh. And finally, after a soft murmur into her radio, all three of them move away to give us a bit of space. I find myself exhaling, even as I’m hoping we don’t get sniped from a nearby rooftop or something. Who’s to say the guards themselves won’t turn on us?

Such is Justin’s maniacal genius.

Tess takes her seat again, picking at her strawberry-walnut-goat cheese salad with a wary fork. She’s doing an admirable job of faking calm, but I can see right through her. Parrish looks worried, like he, too, wonders if Tess might try to stab her ex in his grandmother’s foyer.

My mother forces herself to take another bite of greens before looking expectantly in our direction. Both Parrish and I are now the proud owners of birth control pills. He says he’ll take his, so I don’t have to remember mine, but I’d like to take them for Chas’ sake, too.

The thought of having sex with both him and Parrish without a condom is ... exciting.

I do not think about Maxim Wright.

My cheeks turn a brilliant ruby red, and I home in on my food like the seagulls cawing at us from above. I fold a French fry into my mouth, looking over at Parrish. His brow scrunches when he notices the color of my cheeks

and chest, but he at least has the good grace not to comment on it.

“Saffron told me everything.” I sigh and reach out for my iced tea, trying not to let the sudden tension rolling off Tess get to me. “Like, about how and why she decided to kidnap me.”

There’s a heavy pause there, like the weight of the world is dangling between the three of us, suspended on thin strings from the loci of our hearts. Tess isn’t over the ‘forced me to sleep with Chasm/Maxx’ stuff just yet. I don’t imagine that this is the end of that conversation.

“Justin.” She says it, not me. And then she picks up her water glass and throws it, shattering it on the patio. When I look up in abject shock, I see that her cheeks and chest are as red as my own. “Of *course* the worst moment in my entire life was orchestrated by Justin!” Tess is practically yelling now, so I rush to clarify.

The thing is, as I tell the story, I don’t think it’s making things better. No, it’s making Tess even *more* angry.

“So after the real Dakota died”—I can hardly say those words without wanting to cry; I am so not over my initial trauma of finding out I was kidnapped/adopted—“Saffron decided she needed to be the hero and save me from Justin. Honestly, I suppose it’s a good thing that she did. It took him this long to find me, right? I don’t know what would’ve happened to me if I’d grown up with his influence.”

My mind goes back to that horrific moment in my fairy-tale princess bedroom, staring at myself all gussied up and wearing a designer dress, hair coiffed, makeup on point. It was Mia Prior staring back at me, a girl that I am so completely and utterly grateful that I didn’t grow up to be. You can take the person out of the Banks’ household, but you can’t take the Banks out of the person.

I am my grandparents’ upbringing as much as I am Tess’ and Justin’s DNA.

“This is my fault,” Tess mutters, reaching up to rub at her temple. “I should’ve left you where you were happy.” Her voice catches, but this time, it’s my turn to reach out and give her hand a comforting squeeze.

“Milk Carton was made to find me, Tess. He was going to get to me one way or another. If you think about it, you bringing me to Medina early saved my life.” I give her the barest hint of a smile. On the inside, I feel like shattered glass, pieces scraping together, cutting me up, bleeding me. The

double Max issue is really getting to me. “When Justin finally came for me, I had the boys’ support.”

When I move to pull my hand away, Tess takes it and clutches it tightly.

“You don’t have to worry about him anymore, Dakota,” she declares, lifting her chin proudly. I give her a wary look before exchanging one with Parrish. “You’ll never have to be alone with him again.”

“He’s coming to pick me up Monday morning,” I explain, and she shakes her head.

“No, he isn’t.”

She sounds so sure of herself, but how the hell does she plan on stopping him?

I’d say *over her dead body*, but that’s far too literal a metaphor.

My sister is waiting on the edge of my bed when I get back, hands on her knees, head down. She tries to smile at me when I step through the door, but I hesitate. Part of me is considering running away from her.

She loves you, Dakota Banks. More than anyone. If you could only pick one person in the entire world to believe in, it would have to be Maxine.

“Hi.” She greets softly, tucking some hair behind her ear. I notice the strands are a bit shorter than they should be, and a cold chill creeps down my spine. Delphine could’ve slit her throat while she slept, and this beautiful soul would’ve fled this world while I tossed and turned in a fitful sleep.

Even if Maxine slept with X, even if they’re in love, even if they played me from the get-go ... there has to be a reason for it.

“Hi.” I don’t move forward, but I don’t run from her either.

“Where have you been all day?” she asks, as if nothing’s changed between us. We’re just sitting at home in Catskill, NY shooting the breeze after school. “I tried texting you, but then I remembered you broke your phone.” Her voice is soft, but she doesn’t apologize or rush to explain. Even if she wanted to, how could she? Despite Tess’ occasional use of the signal jammers, there’s the threat of Laverne’s staff. Or Mr. Volli who seems to be able to come and go from this place as he pleases. As always, there’s Justin’s omnipotent, all-seeing eyes.

“Tess took me and Parrish to get birth control.” I shove my hands into my

front pockets in an effort to keep Maxine from seeing how badly they're shaking. Of all the things Justin has stolen from me, my trust and confidence in my sister is the worst. The most painful. The most heartbreaking.

"Oh." My sister shifts in my direction, opens her mouth in a very Maxine-like way (she wants to ask me questions, gently pry to see if there's anything she can help me with) but then she closes it, and I feel like I've been kicked in the gut. We can't talk about sex right now, not with the X thing between us like a wall. "You know that I love you, right?" she asks, her voice gentle but firm. "You know that I'd do anything for you, don't you? I'd die for you, Dakota."

I look up suddenly, finding that unerring determination in her face that I've seen mirrored in X's. They're so damn similar, I see why I fell for him so quickly. Why wouldn't I like a boy who's a mirror image of the person I respect and love most in the world?

"I know you would." That's all I can say. I mean it, too. I believe her, and that's why I'm so scared. I won't let her or anyone else die for me. Nevaeh already paid the price of my hesitation. My siblings nearly died in a fire. Agent Murphy is gone.

My hesitation is literally killing people.

You would die for me, but you're not going to.

"I thought you might need some company," she offers, changing the subject abruptly. "We could make peanut butter toast and watch a movie together? A K-drama?" Maxine pauses, waiting for me to respond, but I have no idea what to say, so I say nothing at all. "If you want to talk about Nevaeh —"

"No." My eyes fill with tears. It's not Maxine I'm mad at. It's myself. It's Justin. I can't talk about Nevaeh right now. I turn toward the bathroom, slipping in and locking the door before my sister can catch up with me.

After an absurdly long bath followed by an absurdly long shower, my water-wrinkled ass opens the door to find that she's fallen asleep on my bed. I dress in my pajamas and, after the briefest hesitation, crawl in beside her and curl up on the opposite side of the mattress.

We stay that way for the rest of the night.

Despite everything, it's the best sleep I've had since I arrived in Medina.



CHAPTER 10

Monday morning is as tense as one might expect considering Tess knows for a fact what she's up against.

Bestselling author versus serial killer.

I'd say it was a clear choice as to who was scarier, but have you ever met a successful author in person? They have a level of hubris that's tangible. In another life, I might find it annoying. But like this? I'm glad to have Tess on my side.

"Alright, in the car," she tells me, swiping her palms down the front of her black pantsuit. She's even got a navy-blue tie on. Paired with her red-soled Louboutins, she looks fierce as hell.

I woke up bleary eyed and yawning, wondering why Tess was shaking me awake so damn early.

Now I get it.

"She wants to get out of here before Justin shows up," Parrish murmurs, and I purse my lips tight. He's right: that's exactly what she's trying to do. Seeing as it's Monday morning, it's *technically* the start of his parenting time.

For the last two days, I've entertained my grandparents, tiptoed around Maxine, and avoided Maxx entirely. I've slept in Parrish's arms, cuddled up with Chasm and watched a Korean movie with no subtitles. I've eaten tamales by the pool with Kimber (weird, right?) and picked a new book to

read with Ben. I've challenged Henry and Amelia to matches on the Ms. Pac-Man machine and let them win.

Tess was on her best behavior the entire time, gently prying here and there but not forcing anything out of us. She was, however, quite adamant that nobody was to leave that house for any reason whatsoever (except for her). Maxx took her wishes to heart, and Chasm vowed to stay unless his dad asked for him to come home.

The Banks, obviously, don't have to listen to Tess whatsoever, but I played my part well. I've had little trouble convincing them that Laverne's massive estate has all we need. Pretty sure my grandparents are starting to think Tess is crazy, but I gather they're under the impression that Paul's arrest is the reason we're not going out. I have no idea if they believe he's the Seattle Slayer. I've been adamant that I don't think he is, that the courts didn't take me away from them to send me off to a murderer's house.

Only, that's exactly what happened, isn't it?

Two days of tense waiting, of wondering what Tess is up to when she leaves, of knowing in my heart that both physical and emotional pain are in my near future.

My skin ripples with goose bumps and I throw my arms around myself, squeezing tight as I think about seeing Justin for the first time since he had Nevaeh killed and Paul arrested. I don't even know how I'm going to react.

No, Dakota. You do know how you're going to react: like nothing has changed. You're a reluctantly obedient teenage girl, of no actual threat to him. That's what he needs to believe when you confront him.

Because no part of me thinks Tess is going to win our second hearing.

Did I mention how much I hate being right? It's a curse.

"He isn't going to like this," Maxx offers grimly, hands tucked into his pockets. He's staring at Tess, but he must feel my eyes on him because his sharp green gaze shifts to mine and sticks there. We stare at each other, and I struggle with a torrent of emotions. They soak me to the bone as I parse my way through them. The freezing cold rain of betrayal. The wind-chill of lost passion. The tornado of want.

I still want Maxx. I still love Maxx. My lips twist in disgust—with myself, mostly—and I look away. Why does he have to be here every freaking night? I want him to go home to Eugene. I told him as much last night when we brushed past each other in the kitchen by accident.

“Not until I know you and Maxie are safe,” is what he muttered, and then he followed me upstairs until I whirled on him.

“Go away,” I’d growled ... and then he’d looked away from me, slipped past, and disappeared into Maxine’s room.

Fuck.

“I can’t decide which is worse,” Chasm begins, ignoring X entirely. He’s been staying here, too. There are enough guest rooms, to be sure. And anyway, it’s what he’s always done, stayed with the Vanguards more than he stays at home. Us living in Laverne’s house hasn’t changed any of that. *“Winning this thing today or losing it.”*

Tess picks up her bag, pauses briefly to down the last of her coffee, and then ushers us out the door. My grandparents and Maxine are still asleep upstairs. I considered waking my sister, but her presence won’t change the outcome today. That, and I don’t need her to catch Justin’s attention any more than she already has.

The double Max deal? That has nothing to do with my decision. That much I can promise you.

When we head outside to the car, X stays behind. I do my best to pretend that a piece of my heart doesn’t stay back there with him.

“You don’t have to say or do anything today,” Tess reassures me, glancing occasionally into the rearview as if to check on my mental state. It’s hard for me to say where it’s sitting right now. I keep thinking that things can’t possibly get worse, but of course that’s never true.

Even now, I’m aware that things *can* and probably will get worse before they get better.

“I’m guessing you have some sort of plan in place?” Parrish queries, sitting in the front seat with Tess while Chasm and I snuggle up in the back. He keeps my hand clutched in his, squeezing tight. Depending on the outcome of this hearing, I may very well be leaving that courtroom in Justin’s car.

I hate to say it, but that’s what I’m hoping for.

Can’t kill the guy if I’m not staying at his place, am I right?

“I do.” That’s all Tess is willing to say, adjusting the mirror so that she can check on the black SUV that’s tailing us.

It takes about forty minutes to get to the courthouse in Kent. I’m too nervous to talk, but I do rest my head on Chas’ shoulder, and he strokes my hair while whispering to me in beautiful foreign languages. I close my eyes,

enjoying the steady beat of his heart. *If I never see you again after this, just know that I'd have been happy marrying you, Chasm McKenna.*

My eyes open to find Parrish, body craned around to stare at me, arm wrapped around his own headrest. His face is pinched, his beautiful eyes muddied with distress. He doesn't say anything either, but we look at each other, and I hope he knows that I feel the same way about him. *I'd be happiest with you both ... and with Maxim.*

I don't say any of that aloud. If I do, the boys will know that I'm planning something. Instead, I close my eyes again and snuggle deeper into Chasm's embrace. I'm glad for Tess' early escape plan as much as I'm worried about it. Forty minutes in a car with Justin this morning? Gross.

Unfortunately, when we pull into one of the frontmost spaces, he's already there waiting for us.

He's smiling like a shark that's scented blood in the water, but it's not quite as smooth and polished as I'm used to. He's on edge, and when he's on edge, he's even scarier than when he's singing hits from the early aughts. *Oh God.* My stomach turns as his bright blue eyes swing over to me.

"Good morning, Princess."

If Chasm wasn't holding onto my arm, I might've fainted right then and there.

Tess doesn't so much as *flinch*. In fact, she has the ovaries to smile at him as she approaches, offering Caroline a disdainful glance almost as an aside. My new stepmom clings to Justin's arm like a real newlywed, her dress a brilliant blue that matches Justin's eyes. Not accidental, I'm sure.

"Leave us for a moment," he instructs, turning to Caroline with that disturbing smile of his locked in place. She doesn't argue, but the way she flinches ... well, that makes me wonder how horrible their honeymoon must've been. This big bad is scared of this much bigger bad. Caroline doesn't even acknowledge her son, taking off with the clack of heels in the direction of the courthouse's front doors.

The first thing Justin does is slide a brand-new iPhone from his pocket—it's metallic pink, not my color at all—and hands it over to me. It even has a fancy case with a gold crown on it.

"That's real gold, Princess," he cuts out through gritted white teeth. "Seeing as I haven't been able to contact you for days, I assumed something accidental must've happened to your phone."

“I put up signal jammers,” Tess admits, still smiling. She looks much calmer and more put-together than Justin. He doesn’t like that. I can tell by the way his gaze flicks up and down her body, the way his handsome mouth twitches. “You’re not going to use your ridiculous app to spy on me and my family, Justin. That was *my* parenting time; you have no right to it.”

That makes him laugh. He reaches up and runs his fingers through his jet-black hair.

“Oh, *of course.*” And then he reaches out a hand for me. He doesn’t grab me. Doesn’t say anything at all actually, just raises an eyebrow. “And now we’re on my parenting time. Come here and give your daddy a hug.”

When I make a move to step toward him, Tess puts her arm out to block me, eyes flashing.

I stay where I am, tucked safely between Chasm and Parrish.

“You’ll never hug your daughter again after today,” Tess whispers, stepping even closer to Justin and then—holy fuck, my mom is a badass!—reaching out and fixing his tie. “You know why? Because I know what you’re up to, and I won’t stand for it.”

Um.

Did she ... she did, didn’t she?! Tess Vanguard just called out Justin Prior for being the Seattle Slayer!

“Holy shit,” Chas breathes, like he’s in awe of his adoptive mother. He tucks his free hand into his pocket and shakes his head in disbelief. Parrish smirks, a prideful expression kissing his aristocratic features. He knew she was going to do it, call out a murderer to his face.

“What I’m up to?” Justin asks innocently, reaching down to capture her hands. “You mean like ol’ Paulie? He’s a murderer, Tess. You’re lucky to have gotten out alive.” She very slowly extricates her hands from his grip. The look on her face tells me that she’s strongly considering killing him right here and now.

“You know exactly who and what Paul is, what he isn’t.” Tess stares him down as Justin’s grin grows even wider.

“Do I?” he queries, so innocently that if you could hear him and couldn’t see the awful expression on his face, you might believe it. His gaze shifts to mine and it’s like a claymore of fear has just severed me right in half.

“If I figured it out on my own, how long until the authorities do? You’re not as smart as you think you are, Justin.”

He taps his chin with a single finger, looking Tess over with an expression of faux perplexment.

“What is it you’re accusing me of here?” he asks again, cocking his head slightly to one side.

“You’re the Slayer, Justin. As soon as Paul was arrested, I knew it. There’s only one person in the world who would go through this much trouble to frame my husband. So don’t blame the kids: I didn’t need them to tell me. You’re just that transparent.” Tess is smirking now, and I swear that I’m watching some sort of epic clash of titans here.

Millennial versus millennial. Between them both, they have all of the cliches: singing old songs loudly in the car, obsessing over coffee, wine, and Disney, searching homes on Zillow for fun. Hell, Justin even uses the ‘Millennial pause’ when he’s recording videos.

“I think you’re vastly overestimating Paul’s affability.” Justin chuckles and then leans in close, his lips very near Tess’ ear. “Theoretically, let’s say I am the Slayer.” He puts one hand on her shoulder and squeezes hard. “What the *fuck* are you gonna do about it?”

And then he howls with laughter, drawing away from Tess just as she slaps his hand off her shoulder. She’s panting now, some of her hard-earned stoicism dissipating.

“Oh, I have some bad news.” Justin turns around just before stepping into the courthouse, putting his hands together and plastering this look of sympathy and horror on his face. He’s a skilled thespian, so skilled that it’s scary. “Judge Kim passed away in her sleep last night. I hear the two of you were good friends?”

Tess’ spine goes ramrod straight as Justin offers up a comforting smile.

“You pulled some strings to have her here today, didn’t you? What a shame. Oh well.” Justin shrugs his shoulders, grinning and winking at us. “Judge Valentine is well-known for his fair and honest judgments. He’ll take good care of us.”

My father turns and disappears into the courthouse as Tess looks over at me, her face white and her eyes wide. Chasm rubs his thumb over my knuckles, offering silent comfort.

All I can do is purse my lips together.

I’m not surprised, but in a macabre sort of way, I’m almost glad. Having a judge killed before an important case sort of points the compass of guilt in a

very specific direction. How the hell does he think he's going to get away with something like this?

"Your plan is fucked, huh Mom?" Parrish asks softly, and it's a clear testament to how worried Tess is that she doesn't call him out for cursing.

"Everything is fine." She turns away from us and off we go, straight into the pit of hell.

This hearing goes even *worse* than the last one.

As soon as Justin said the name Valentine, I remembered the phone call in Tess' foyer, the very first day I met my father in person.

"That was Judge Valentine; he's a good friend of mine. He's going to send over the emergency custody agreement that I filed for."

Judge Valentine absolutely roasts Tess, accusing her of calling in favors and falsifying evidence in order to get this new trial. He reams her for the tattoo on my leg and, in the end, guess what happens?

"This can't ..." Tess is panting heavily, hand to her chest. We're standing in the lobby just outside the courtroom. Justin has graciously offered me a few minutes to say goodbye to my mom and friends, but only because he's standing on the opposite side of the room, eyes gleaming as he takes in Tess' distress.

It's quite clear that he gets off on the torture of others. He's practically aroused, wetting his lips as he cuts her in half with his icy stare.

Agent Takahashi is there, too, but not for any positive reason. She's come to talk to Tess about Paul. Apparently, there's something going on regarding my stepfather and his case at the courthouse today as well. Poor Tess. Poor fucking Tess.

"I will *not* allow him to take my child," Tess hisses, storming up to the FBI agent and staring her down in such a way that a lesser woman would shrink. Itsumi smiles placatingly and shakes her head, a sadness and determination in her features that I don't remember seeing there before. Losing her partner has hit her hard.

I'm completely tense, clinging to Chasm's and Parrish's hands, wishing mine weren't so damn sweaty.

What if Tess tells Itsumi all the things we've been saying about Justin? He

won't be arrested quickly enough to prevent widespread damage. Mr. Volli could even now be waiting in Laverne's house, ready to kill Maxine and my grandparents.

"Unfortunately, Mrs. Vanguard, there's nothing we can do about that."

"He's a monster!" Tess snarls, but she doesn't specify why she thinks that, and Itsumi just gives her a blank look in response.

"Everyone is innocent until proven guilty. You cannot stop him from taking his daughter because you don't like the man." Agent Takahashi steps forward and takes Tess by the arm, encouraging her to move away from the three of us.

"Every ... other ... weekend," Chasm whispers, and when I glance over, I can't help but think he looks desperate. Desperate enough to do something we'll all regret. Actually, I'm glad Maxx isn't here right now. He'd probably lunge at Justin and try to strangle him with his bare hands, and then *he* would get arrested and Justin would do something even worse than make us sleep together. Or ... make him sleep with my sister.

I exhale.

Whether Maxx loves me or Maxine, he'd do something like that. I know he would.

"Every other weekend," I repeat, trying not to let fear overwhelm me. It's hard to believe that I'll be seeing the boys—plus Tess and my grandparents and Maxie—even less now, but that's the new custody agreement.

We are worse off than we were before.

I'm only surprised Justin allowed Tess any parenting time at all.

Give me forty-eight hours and this will all be over, I swear it.

Justin whistles for me from across the room.

"Alright Princess, time to go."

I take Chasm's face between my hands, lifting up on my tiptoes and pressing a sharp kiss to his lips. He almost doesn't return it, as worried as he is. At the last moment, his arms wrap my waist and his heat suffuses my mouth. He's not shy about it—why bother? Justin wants us together anyway—putting his tongue down my throat and molding me to the front of his body.

"I'm not going to just leave you there," Chas promises me when I pull back, staring down at me from his beautiful amber eyes. "While you're gone, we'll keep fighting. Now that Tess is on our side, it's only a matter of time."

I don't let on that I have a plan, that I intend on ending this myself. I also don't let the sadness in my face show. Tess thought she had Justin by the balls today, arranging things so that a judge who would rule in her favor would be present. Look what happened. Just look at it.

I turn to Parrish, unsure if I should be kissing him in front of Justin, but he doesn't allow me the space for hesitation. Instead, he cups my chin, lifting my face to his, and he brands me with his mouth. There's a confidence in his kiss that transfers into me, gives me a little bit of hope for the future, just enough that my resolve is strengthened.

"I love you, Gamer Girl." Parrish lifts his gaze to Chasm. "We love you." He looks at me again, and I swear, there's a sheen in his eyes, almost like tears. "No matter what happens, we've got your back. I need you to believe that, remember? You *have* to believe that."

"Tell my sister I love her," I add before jerking away from the two of them. If I stand here any longer, I'm going to burst into tears.

"Aww, why does it look like you're going off to war?" Justin teases, throwing an arm over my shoulders. "Is spending time with your old dad that big of a deal?" He laughs again, yanking me even closer to him. To anyone watching, it probably seems like a companionable move of sorts.

To me, it feels like I'm being choked.

"Wait!" Tess is there in an instant, shoving Justin's arm from my shoulders. The look he gives her could raise the dead.

I know immediately that I'm going to suffer as soon as we leave the public eye.

"You're not taking my daughter from me," she grinds out, physically blocking the exit. The two security officers on duty approach the scene from behind us, and I can tell that at least one of them is on Justin's side. The other is just doing his job.

"Ma'am, please don't make a scene," he says, trying to keep his voice calm. "I've been through a custody battle recently myself, and I know how hard it can be. But the law is the law. Mr. Prior hasn't done anything wrong."

Justin leans in close to Tess, speaking quietly enough so that only we can hear.

"If you don't move out of my way, I'll drive my fucking car right off the edge of a cliff and kill us both. You'd get what you wanted, wouldn't you? You'd be rid of both me and my child. And don't think I value my own life

so much that I wouldn't sacrifice it simply to spite you." He laughs then, and I can hear the truth in it.

Oh my God, he's escalating.

Tess' eyes are wide, but she doesn't move. If she attacks Justin, she'll be arrested, and I'll end up with him anyway. Only, it'll be worse for both of us.

"Leave me alone!" I yell at her, one more betrayal to seal the deal, and then I dart right past her and into the parking lot. *It has to be tonight; I have to kill him tonight.* I'm standing beside Justin's car, panting heavily and staring at the pavement when he comes up beside me and ruffles my hair.

"Such a daddy's girl," he murmurs with another laugh, and then he's opening my door for me and ushering me in like the princess he pretends I am.

We climb in and he starts the car, turning on his sound system to full blast. *Jessie's Girl* by Rick Springfield explodes into life around me as Justin begins to mouth the lyrics, patting the steering wheel in time with the beat.

I just lean back against the passenger side door and stare at him.

Why did I think it was okay to confide in Tess? Oh my God. I should've done whatever it took to keep her quiet. All I wanted was ... somebody to save me, I guess. From this craziness. From this man.

We exit the parking lot at a reasonable pace. He's really into the music now, and that scares me. The last time he was this into a song, it was Céline Dion and his encore was a backhand across the face.

We head away from Medina, traveling north along the coast. As we drive, he drifts close to the edge, close enough that when I look out the window, all I can see is the water below. Would he drive us both over the edge to spite Tess?

I believe him with every shuddering breath I take.

The next song on Justin's crazy playlist is *(I Just) Died In Your Arms* by Cutting Crew.

"These are the songs my daddy used to play for me," he admits after a while, glancing my way. It doesn't seem like we can get any closer to the edge, but he manages it, making me whimper as the car skids a bit on the gravel. "Maybe one day, you can play Backstreet Boys for your children."

"That sounds like a great idea." I force the words out, turning a bright smile in his direction. He's staring at me and not the road, those eyes of his so piercing that I feel like a pinned butterfly, squirming and flapping my torn

wings.

“If you ever get to have children,” he amends, threatening to turn the wheel and launch us both into the bay. *Okay, even if he does that, it’s not the end. Get your window rolled down so you can climb out. Take your seat belt off now while you have the chance.* That’s how convinced I am that I’m about to take a swim here. “I’m starting to wonder if I made a mistake with you. Perhaps I should’ve chosen Delphine to train? She might be as stupid as a toy poodle, but maybe that means she’d make a loyal pet.”

“I—” He doesn’t let me talk, cutting me off as he changes the song to *Accidentally in Love* by the Counting Crows. The car veers slightly back toward the center line in the road. As another vehicle approaches us from the opposite side, Justin turns even more in their direction.

“We could hit these people head-on, take a few extra souls with us to hell.” He doesn’t even sound angry right now, more excited than anything else.

It occurs to me that I could reach out and grab his wheel, yank us both to a watery grave before he gets a chance to hurt anyone else. Only ... I’m not ready. God, I’m selfish. I want to live. I want to see what happens with the boys. I want to hug Maxine and tell her I’m not angry with her, that I love her. I want to know what Tess and I can be like when there are no more lies between us.

Even considering all that, I might’ve done it, given up all my hopes and dreams to keep Justin from hurting the people I love. But I just can’t take a risk on something that might fail. If I throw us off this cliff and Justin lives, but I don’t, then my sacrifice will have been for nothing. I can’t let that happen.

“Why are you so mad at me?” I ask instead, trying to make my voice little and small. If Justin thinks he’s cowed me, really and truly scared the shit out of me, maybe he’ll stop? “I didn’t tell Tess anything; she figured it out on her own.”

Justin scoffs at me.

“And then what? She came to you, and you squealed like a pig under the protection of some illegal signal jammers?” He looks briefly over at me and then waves his hand dismissively. The other vehicle passes us without incident, and I try my damndest to hide the involuntary exhale of relief. “You know I don’t like it when you play with the rules, Mia. It’s not clever; it just pisses me off.”

“I’m sorry, Daddy,” I whisper, reaching out to put my hand on his arm. He allows me to touch him. That’s a good sign, right? *I just need to get through this drive then I’ll have a chance to finish this. I have to at least try to save myself.* “She just came at me demanding to know what I knew; I didn’t tell her anything, but I couldn’t get her to believe me. If it helps, I don’t think she’s gone to the FBI.”

“Wouldn’t matter if she did,” he says blandly, offering up the slightest hint of a smile. “Tess can scream my guilt to the world if she wants. It’s her husband that’s in custody, not me. Only makes her look insane.”

That’s the irony of all this, isn’t it? Justin always looks like the sane, reasonable one while the rest of us appear to have lost our minds.

He doesn’t talk to me for the rest of the drive, but I slump in relief when we arrive back at the former Vasquez house.

Justin climbs out and heads inside. I hesitate briefly before following after him, wondering what’s in store for me behind those doors. I know instinctively that I need a weapon. I would’ve packed one, too, if I ever thought he’d allow me to keep a bag with me. At the very least, he’d have gone through it.

Lips pursed in determination, I open my door and head for the bushes, looking for a spare garden tool, a branch, anything really.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?” Raúl asks, peering at me through the shadows. He’s standing on the other side of the hedge in a silver suit jacket, black slacks, and a purple tie. His glasses are the same shade of aubergine. “Something you’re not supposed to be doing, I take it.”

“Go fuck yourself.” I might be—and I’m ashamed to admit this—afraid of Justin, but I’m certainly not afraid of Raúl.

“I’m going to kill you first chance I get,” Raúl tells me in a voice calm enough that he could be talking about the weather. “Your father thinks he can mold you into his protégé; I disagree. You’re nothing but a liability.”

I push through the branches to face off against him, a mocking smile on my face.

“Justin’s told me on more than one occasion that he’ll let me kill you if I want. All I have to do is say the word. And Raúl? I think I’m going to take him up on that offer.” I shove past my father’s lackey and head for the house.

I might’ve at least sowed some seeds of doubt in Raúl’s mind, right? How can he continue to blindly follow my father knowing that Justin made an

offer like that to me?

As soon as I walk in the door, I know something is horribly wrong.

It smells like blood.

A scream followed by a slap echoes back to me, and I take off, pounding across the shiny marble floors into the solarium. Caroline is watching absently as Justin swings out his hand and catches Delphine across the face, sending my sister stumbling back, palm clutched to her cheek as tears rain down her face.

“What are you doing, Daddy?” she whimpers, throat clogged with blood. I can already see her face swelling from the blows. He’s been hitting her since he walked into the room.

I notice a broken teacup on the floor, liquid still steaming as Delphine slips in it during her attempt to get away.

Justin snatches her by the arm and drags her backward, turning to look at me as my sister flails in his grip. I’ve never seen his face the way it looks right now. Maybe I’d truly allowed myself to be fooled by his slow pace and charming personality, by the reality of getting Parrish back safe and sound. Only a moron would ignore the detachment in his expression.

He doesn’t even seem mad, just put out and annoyed by the task set before him.

“I warned you, Mia. Not only did you run your mouth, but you ignored my calls for days. I don’t see any progress regarding Veronica.” He throws Delphine to her knees. My eyes meet her brown ones as she lifts them to my face, as if she’s pleading with me not to interfere. Regardless of her involvement, I can’t watch this. I can’t let this happen to her.

I scramble for the right words to say, but Justin isn’t done with me just yet.

“You made a complete fool of yourself at the ice cream social. On top of that, you dare to stand in front of me and kiss an engaged man? What are you, a whore like your mother? A home-wrecker?”

“Please let Delphine go.” My voice is calm, but my hands are shaking as I approach him. I *should* want him to hurt her, after what she said about Nevaeh, but I don’t believe her. I don’t. She’s a liar, not a killer. At worst, she’s being blackmailed, too. “Hit me instead, Daddy. I can take it.”

He hauls back and kicks Delphine in the stomach, sending her doubling over with a gasp. Caroline sighs and looks away, out the window and toward the sun-drenched garden. The back doors are open, the sound of birdsong and

gently crashing waves drifting inside.

“What a waste of a good afternoon,” Caroline mumbles apathetically, as if seeing her stepdaughter being beaten means nothing to her.

“You’re exactly that type of person, Mia. I know you far too well.” Justin lifts Delphine up by the hair until she’s standing before him on wobbly legs, and then he close-fist punches her in the stomach and she falls onto the floor once again.

I move to charge him, but Raúl is right there, a gun pointed not at me but at Delphine.

“She’s expendable, Dakota,” Justin tells me calmly, looking down at his crumpled daughter as she bleeds all over his pristine white floors. When she adjusts her gaze back to him, I swear to God I see a flash of rage and defiance in her eyes before that weepy confusion takes over again. I try to tuck that information away for later, just in case. “I’ll have Raúl kill her, and I won’t lose sleep over it. You will though. Her face will haunt your dreams.”

“What are you saying, Daddy?” Delphine cries, moving to crawl over to him. She grabs onto his leg, still sobbing. “You said you loved me.”

Justin ignores her, gaze locked on mine.

“You *want* me to hit you because it hurts you more to see me cause pain to someone you care about. That’s pathetic, Mia. Do you think that makes you deep? Does that make you better than me? A martyr, even.” He walks toward me, pointing at me with a finger dappled in Delphine’s blood. “You are *my* daughter. Remember that. If I’m tainted, then so are you.” He turns to Raúl with a sigh. “Take her upstairs, get her ice, painkillers, whatever she needs.”

Delphine is still crying as Raúl helps her to her feet and leads her way. When I try to meet her gaze as she passes, she turns away as if she’s ashamed. Of herself. Of me. I’m not sure. I watch until I see her turn the corner to head up the stairs, and then I look at Justin.

He’s settled down into a chair at the table, pouring himself a cup of tea and then wiping the blood from his knuckles with a white linen napkin.

“Come here.” The words are a clear order. My eyes dart around the room, looking for another weapon, but then Caroline adjusts herself and I see that she has a small handgun lying on the window seat beside her. Our eyes meet and she smiles.

I think she’d like to kill me. Really, she’d enjoy it.

I take a seat.

Justin ignores me for a little while, sipping his tea and scrolling his phone. When he sets it down on the table with a sigh and looks over at me, he offers up a small shake of his head, like I've been caught using an AI chatbot to do my homework.

"You were warned and clearly, there's only one thing that makes you listen." He sets his teacup down. "Pick someone else to die."

My eyes go wide.

This, again?!

Justin uses his clunky wooden watch to set a timer, looking up at me with another smile.

"Thirty seconds."

"Raúl." The word explodes from my lips only to be followed by one of Justin's mocking laughs.

"You are more than welcome to end Raúl's life; I'll even give you the gun." Justin taps at the watch and raises a dark brow. "If you don't choose, I'll choose for you. I don't think you'll like that, Dakota. Next."

I'm going to kill him tonight, but I need an opening. I have to buy myself more time. Just a little bit more time. That's it. Hours, really.

My mind races frantically. I'm not as prepared as I was last time, when I yelled out Saffron's name knowing she'd still be safe. I'm counting in my head as I run through possible targets, people I can name that he can't kill right away. Because I'm going to save them by shooting or stabbing or strangling him, whatever I need to do.

My only way out of this is to become exactly what he wants me to be: a murderer.

But that's okay. It's alright. I know what I have to do.

Paul is in jail. Justin can't get to Paul. And even if he did, wouldn't that be the least horrible death you could bring about in the family? I don't even like the person I become when I have a thought like that. What the hell is wrong with me? Maybe Justin is right about me being tainted by his blood.

"Paul." I choke on my stepfather's name, and Justin's smile widens.

"Nothing would make me happier, but I need him for now. Try again."

I have no idea what to do. I'm literally in a full-blown panic now. I slide off of my chair, getting on my knees beside him. Justin's eyes flash, and I know he likes seeing me submit this way. My dignity is broken, and I barely feel human, but I'll do whatever it takes to save my family and friends.

“I’ll ... I’ll kill Veronica, and then I’ll get Antonio and Gavin and Philippa. All of them. I’ll kill them all.”

Oh. He likes that. He’s stopped his watch and is leaning over the edge of the chair to peer at me, eyes squinted in consternation.

“When? I haven’t seen much movement on the Veronica front. I need your assurances, Dakota.”

“As soon as there’s another party at Camp Kellogg.” I’m wetting my lips, clasping my hands together in pleading. “There are always parties there; Veronica always attends them.” I make myself smile, and it hurts me so much worse than the forced smiles that Tess and I used to share. “I have a plan.”

“And the others?” he adds, frowning, as if I’m not giving him the answers he wants.

“As soon as I can, right after Veronica.” *God, this is going to bite me in the ass.* But I try not to think like that. No. No. I’m going to take care of Justin before this becomes a problem.

“All four before school starts.” He sits back up and I gape at him. But what else can I do? He’s starting his watch again. “Or I can choose someone else ...”

“I’ll do it.” I want to puke as I commit to this, but they’re just words. Just words. They mean nothing.

He shrugs and reaches out for a bottle of alcohol that’s sitting on the table, splashing some into his tea.

“Lapsang souchong pairs well with a smoky whiskey, believe it or not.” Justin smirks before he takes his first sip, savoring it for an absurdly long time before bothering to reply. “Fine.” I almost pass out from relief, but it’s short-lived. It always is with him. “But since I was going to have you do that anyway, I want Lumen and Parrish to have sex. That way, you’ll realize it’s over with him and stop cheating on Chasm like the slut you are.”

My mouth is hanging open. First the two Maxes and now ... no. No fucking way.

“No, Daddy, please. You said I could have him—”

Justin sighs heavily and sets his teacup on the saucer, leaning down toward me again.

“I said you could do whatever you wanted with him, and I wouldn’t interfere—barring self-defense. This is self-defense, Mia. You and Parrish both have been running your mouths to Tess.” He looks at me with another

smile and a theatrical wink. “Signal jammers? Did you not consider that Laverne’s property has a wired system as well? I’m a hacker, Princess, and you’re an idiot.”

I’m struck dumb; there are no words.

How many wired cameras are there? Where are they? What has he seen and heard? Not everything, surely, or I’d already be dead.

“Besides, how is having sex with his fiancée hurting him? Lumen is a beautiful girl; I’m sure he’ll enjoy it.” Justin raises a brow at me, as if daring me to argue. “But you know what? I’m a reasonable man. Let’s do this instead: if it bothers you that much, Chasm can sleep with Lumen. Then *you* will know the pain of being cheated on. Cheated on like I was with your whore of a mother and P-p-p-paulie.” Justin snorts in amusement as he mimics Paul’s occasional stutter. “Your stepdaddy had a serious speech impediment when he was in school, you know. I used to torment him mercilessly.”

Now that I can believe.

I’m still sitting there, choking on the idea of Parrish and Lumen. Chasm and Lumen. On murdering four teenagers in the latter half of my summer vacation.

“You can pick the boy to send to Lumen’s bed.” Justin sits back up and shakes his head. “Isn’t it nice that I offer you choices? My father never afforded me the same luxury.” He stands up suddenly, chair scraping across the floor. “You have forty-eight hours to convince your pawns to obey. Otherwise ... *I* will choose the person who dies.” He takes his teacup and pours the remainder of the drink over my head, smoky tea and whiskey dripping down my nose and over my lips. “Maxine would suffice. I’ll even take Amelia or Henry. How about that bookworm brat? What’s his name? Ben? Only through the finality of death will you learn.”

Justin takes off, pausing near the entrance to the foyer. Delphine’s blood sparkles on the floor near his feet as Caroline sighs and continues to browse on her phone.

“Oh, and I want video.” He glances over his shoulder to look at me, tossing out one final order before he goes. “*Explicit* video.”

Justin leaves, but I don’t move. Instead, I sit there for so long that my legs cramp and the sun changes position on the floor.

When I do get up, I clean my sister’s blood from the marble, and then I go

upstairs to my room to think.

Tonight.

It all ends tonight.

As lofty as my ambitions are, I don't even make it long enough to see the sunset. I sit at my desk for a while, but I can't bring myself to use my computer. I'm almost afraid of technology at this point. When I sit down on my bed with a mental notepad open in my brain, thinking of ways I might go about this, I somehow end up with heavy lids and that's it.

Lights out.

My body feels stiff and sore when I wake up, but that's not fair, is it? Considering what Delphine went through. I tried to visit her last night, but she ignored my frantic knocking.

She's the first person on my mind this morning as I race down the hall to her room, checking to see if she's inside. She's not.

Next place I check is the solarium.

I shouldn't be surprised to find Justin, Caroline, and Delphine sitting around the table, eating breakfast like a happy little family. This is exactly Justin's usual brand of crazy. Only ... things are different now. Pretty sure he's never hit Delphine before.

I approach the table like I'm creeping up on a wild cougar in the woods. Raúl watches me from his position on the window seat, the same place where Caroline was sitting yesterday. The way he looks at me, I know that his loyalty to Justin is set in stone. If I kill my father, Raúl will try to kill me.

"Good morning, Princess." Justin gestures at the chair on his right side, and I don't dare do a thing but sit gracefully beside him. I'm not looking at him though; I'm staring at my sister. Her blond hair shimmers in the early morning sunshine, her makeup heavily applied but still not nearly enough to disguise the swelling. Her nails are painted a shiny pink, and her outfit is straight out of an influencer's wet dream.

She looks up from her food to smile at me, as if Justin didn't threaten to have her killed last night.

"Good morning," she says, reaching out for a silver coffee pot. "Coffee?"

Caroline looks at me with a smirking smile on her full lips, and I wonder if

I didn't imagine her supposed flinch yesterday outside the courthouse. That, or she's a damn good actress. The question is: was she acting yesterday or is she acting now? Or both?

"Um, sure." I pick up the empty mug at my place setting and hold it out to her, watching her steady hands as she pours for me. She doesn't appear to be remotely shaken. Now, you tell me what sort of meek, ditzzy socialite wannabe gets over a beating that quickly.

Something is up with Delphine ... Shaw? Or is it Delphine Prior now?

As if he can sense my thoughts—I think Justin is so skilled at reading people that he may as well be a mind reader—he pushes an iPad in my direction. I look at it before lifting my gaze to him. He's smiling, but he's still not looking at me, seemingly invested in the buttering of the biscuit in his hand.

"Go on. Take a look."

My mouth goes sour and I end up drinking my coffee black just to wash it down. I finish the mug and Delphine pours me another without asking, taking a bite of her scrambled eggs as she waits for me to unlock the tablet.

"The code is your birthday," Justin tells me when I stare down at it, and then he laughs. "Your *real* birthday, not the dead baby's birthday." Those cruel words don't even make me flinch. I'm past that. I'm in a different universe today. Even now, I'm fantasizing about what life will be like when he's gone, how happy I could be here in Medina. "Do you know what your real birthday is, Mia?"

I purse my lips. It takes me a few tries—it was February something—but I get the damn thing unlocked. The document that's displayed on the screen may as well be written in ancient Greek. It takes me three tries to understand it.

It's a name change order.

Mia Dakota Prior.

Those three words stick out at me like they're lit up in neon and plastered on every wall. I get tunnel vision for a minute there before I lift my gaze back up to Justin. He's stopped buttering his biscuit and is now staring at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

I have no doubt this is another punishment meant to inflict emotional agony on me.

"Isn't this great, Mia? Now we can all have the same last name, like a real

family.” Justin sounds far too pleased with himself, curling his fingers beneath his chin. I look back down at the tablet’s surface and then up at Delphine. She’s smiling at me, too, just like she’s done since the first day I moved in here, like nothing has changed. Justin reaches out and taps the glass screen. “I’m a kind and understanding man, letting you keep Dakota as your middle name. Say *thank you, Daddy.*”

“Thank you, Daddy.” My voice is mechanized, perfunctory. In my head, I’m imagining what Justin’s blood would look like if I took a knife from the table and slit his throat. Only, there are no sharp knives to be seen, just butter knives. This isn’t a good time to go after him anyway, what with Caroline sitting there. I think she’s made her decision to support Justin; she might actually try to save him. Even if she didn’t, she might just kill me as he lay dying and pretend he’s the one who delivered the fatal blow.

“Daddy had a whole new wardrobe delivered for me this morning,” Delphine tells me excitedly. “Finish eating, so you can come see all the beautiful dresses.” She tosses her hair and smiles over at Justin.

“He beat you until you couldn’t stand yesterday,” I breathe, unable to properly play my part. “He threatened to kill you.”

Delphine looks away sharply, but Justin remains wryly amused by the situation.

“He let his anger get the best of him. It happens to everyone.” Delphine looks back at me, still smiling. Her hand remains steady on her fork. “He apologized. It’s okay, Dakota.” She flinches and quickly corrects herself. “Mia.”

“Mm. We’re all going to make an effort to use your real name from now on. Isn’t that right, Mia?” Justin’s expression brooks no argument.

“That’s right.” Another auto response from me. I do my best to focus on my food so that I can get the hell away from this table.

“Look at this.” Caroline shows Justin an article on her phone, and he chuckles, passing it over to me.

Transactions Prove Paul Vanguard’s Alleged Affair – But Does That Really Mean He’s A Cold-blooded Murderer?

I scroll down, scanning the article to see that Paul made deposits totaling several hundred thousand dollars into Delphine’s account over the span of the time that she worked for us. I don’t know what to make of that, but I smell Justin all over this thing.

I hand the phone back to Caroline, and she makes a show of scratching me with her overly long fingernails. I pretend not to notice.

“Come on.” Delphine stands up and gestures for me to join her. “You’ll love this.”

Without a scrap of emotion, I rise from my chair and follow her up the stairs.

Delphine’s walk-in closet is bursting with designer clothes: new shoes, jackets, blouses, pants, skirts, dresses. There are *gowns*, too, like fairy princess ball gowns with sparkles. I’m sure the entire ensemble is worth six figures, easy. There’s even a ridiculous red ribbon stuck to the closet door.

The entire scene makes me sick. It’s like Justin picked his favorite movie clichés and brought them to life, just to see how they’d work on real people. Delphine at least pretends to be charmed.

“Isn’t it beautiful, Dakota?” she asks, just before Justin walks in behind me. Delphine’s face tightens slightly, and she switches back to using the name Mia. Again, accidental or intentional? “Can I take Mia for a drive?” she asks excitedly as Justin pauses beside me.

“Sure thing, honey.” He winks at her as she squeals and throws her arms around his neck, giving him a hug before she snatches a dress off one of the hangers and holds it up for me to see.

“Get dressed, baby sister. Let’s have some fun.” She takes off for the bathroom to change as Justin sighs dramatically.

“Your sister is either much, much smarter than you, or else she’s a level of stupid that’s astounding,” he murmurs to me, and I ignore him. He selects a dress for me and hands it over. “You’re wearing the same shitty outfit you had on yesterday. Go change. I’m tired of your slovenly behavior.”

I do as he asks, heading to my room to change into some flirty summer dress that I’d never look twice at normally. The only thing I like is the sunflower pattern on the silky white fabric. *Chasm*. God, I miss him already. I ache for him. He’d know how to handle this better than me.

Once outside, I spot Justin standing beside Delphine’s brand-spanking-new Mercedes Benz SL Roadster. It was one of the first extravagant gifts that he bought for her.

Justin points a stern finger in Delphine’s direction as I approach the car.

“Make sure to drive safe. I don’t need the two of you going over the edge of a cliff or something.”

When he returns to the house, I let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Delphine calls cheerily, climbing inside and waiting for me to join her. She takes us to a drive-thru bubble tea place before picking a scenic highway out on her phone and pulling up the directions.

My mind is a total mess right now, but I use this time away from Justin to plan. The custody hearing, the Parrish/Chasm/Lumen thing, Maxx/Maxine, it’s all there in my brain, but I keep telling myself that if Justin is dead, then none of that matters. If Justin bleeds out all over the floor the way Delphine did last night, then I won’t have to figure out a million other problems screaming for my attention.

I turn to my shiny new sister, smiling with the top rolled down, sunshine and sea breeze catching in her hair. If I squint when I look at her, I can hardly see the swelling. She’s a genius at cosmetics.

“You didn’t really sleep with Paul, did you?” I ask over the wind, studying her profile. “Are you telling people that because Justin asked you to?”

Delphine doesn’t respond at first, the pretty smile sliding off her face. Ten minutes later, and I’m sure she isn’t going to respond at all. Eventually, she pulls over, taking her phone from the cupholder and scrolling through it until she finds a series of photos.

I’m handed the phone again without a word.

There’s Delphine, shirtless in Paul’s office at work. There she is again, naked in his office at the house. Another photo of her in Tess and Paul’s bed with him asleep beside her. I don’t even know what to say, staring at these pictures.

What the actual fuck?

“Did you sleep with Paul because Justin asked you to?” I demand, looking up in alarm. Delphine isn’t looking back at me. Instead, she folds her arms atop the steering wheel, resting her cheek on them and staring out at the water. “Delphine, he tried to kill you last night!”

She doesn’t even flinch this time, just keeps gazing out at the horizon. We’ve pulled into some sort of lookout point. Another car joins us, a family of four spilling out with binoculars and phones in hand, snapping photos and peering out at Elliott Bay.

I ignore them, focusing on my sister instead.

“Just do what he says,” Delphine finally murmurs, lifting up and turning to

look down at me. I know we're only three years apart, but she looks a million years older than me right now. I once again get the strange sensation of being the clueless little sister, like somehow I'm supposed to depend on Delphine to protect me.

I don't trust her enough for that. Not even close.

"Do what he says?" I laugh as I say that, and then I open the car door, leaving both her phone and mine behind. She follows me after a few moments, pausing next to me at the wood railing that lines the small gravel pullout. "Delphine, he wants me to kill my classmate."

Now, this might come back on me in a bad way, but I have to give her something so I can see what she does with it. Is it possible that Delphine isn't as in love with Justin as she pretends to be?

"I'm sure he doesn't mean that." She smiles again, and her expression makes me want to scream.

"He beat you until you couldn't stand!" I'm shouting now, but fortunately, the nice family has piled back into their minivan and taken off. Lucky them. I cross my arms and stare her down. There's a chance Justin could be watching us right now, through some dashcam on a passing car or some hidden security camera nearby. But I can only handle so much paranoia. If I don't take any chances here, I am screwed six ways to Sunday.

"Look, Dakota." Delphine glances over at me with a sympathetic expression. It isn't lost on me that she's using my real name. Without Justin around, she doesn't feel the need to call me Mia anymore. She turns more fully to face me, reaching up to tuck some strands of blonde behind her ear. It's hard to match this image of her—a sparkling socialite in the sun—with the girl holding the scissors in the hedges, dressed in a dowdy coat and glasses. "If Daddy says your classmate needs to die ..." She shrugs her shoulders uselessly and turns back toward the water. "He's not the only villain in this town, ya know?"

"Not the 'only' villain?" And here I make quotes with my fingers. "Delphine, I'm done pussyfooting around here. Whose side are you on? Mine or Justin's? You can't be on both at the same time; it just isn't possible."

She continues to ignore me, as if I didn't just accuse our father of being a monster.

"So you're going to stand by and watch me murder my classmate?" I ask, and her face shifts strangely. I can't explain it, but it's as if Delphine is

wearing a glamour over her true self. I just don't know if her true self is better than what she's presenting or if it's worse.

"Only you know what needs to be done," she offers, looking over at me again. When she reaches out to cup the side of my face, the gesture doesn't feel entirely disingenuous. I push her away and take a step back, sighing heavily before reaching up to rub at my eyes.

I'm already tired, and it's barely two in the afternoon.

Also, I haven't killed my father yet soooo ... gonna be a long time before I have the opportunity to nap.

Forty-eight hours for Parrish and Lumen or Chasm and Lumen to— God. I really am at an impasse here.

"Can you take me home?" I ask, and Delphine offers me up a small look of hurt.

"I thought we could do some décor shopping?" she says it like it's a question, like there's still the possibility of us hanging out today. "At least Daddy gives us plenty of money."

I shake my head, meeting her gaze directly. I swear to God, she's pleading with me somehow. And not about the shopping.

"I don't feel good; I'd like to go home."

After a moment, she gives a slight nod, tunes the satellite radio to my least favorite podcast (why does everyone like Emerald City Murder so much?) and does exactly what I've asked.

Returns me straight to the devil's claws.



CHAPTER 11

“Knock, knock.” I’m standing casually outside the open doors to Justin’s office. He’s at his desk, working on something for the Milk Carton launch. Soon enough, this app will be in the hands of the public. For fourteen bucks, you can scan in the face of a loved one, press a button, and know exactly where they are at any given time. On every traffic cam. On store security cams. Through the screen of any phone. You can watch them, too, spy on them.

I’m sure nothing terrible will happen because of that. I desperately want to ask about lawsuits and privacy and the obvious risks that come with a technology that freaking *stalks* people, but there’s no need. Because Justin is going to die, and maybe then his technology will die with him?

“Yes, Princess?” He spins around in his chair to smile at me, and the look on his face is so ... innocuous, like he could actually be a real-life human. “I was thinking we’d order pizza for dinner and watch a movie. You said you hadn’t seen *The Princess Bride*? We’ll watch it together; you’ll love it.”

Actually, I have seen that movie. It was one that Saffron really enjoyed. But then, Justin never gives me a chance to talk, so it doesn’t matter. I don’t bother correcting him.

Can I really do this? Can I kill this man? My stomach twists into a knot, and I resist the urge to vomit. Been here, done this song and dance routine before. The hesitation is getting old. *Sort of a big deal to kill your biological*

dad, Dakota. Don't be so hard on yourself.

The image of him beating Delphine comes to mind. I force my brain back to the night of the fire. I fixate on Parrish, tied to a chair and bleeding. He was *this* close to death. I remember JJ. Agent Murphy. *Nevaeh*.

“Pizza sounds great.” I put a hand to my chest, smiling through my rage. “*When I want something, I really am willing to do whatever it takes—especially for the right girl. Even if that girl isn't you.*” Stupid Maxim the Men's Magazine. “I'm a pepperoni girl myself.”

“Excellent.” Justin slaps his palms on his thighs as he rises to his feet. He moves up to stand beside me, reaching down to squeeze my shoulder. And squeezing. And squeezing. It hurts so bad, but I don't dare cry out or let on that it's bothering me. That'll only excite him more. “Cheese for me, as I'm an ethical vegetarian. Dead animals for you. I'll order it now; why don't you get your sister and we'll start the movie while we wait?”

“I want to kill Raúl.” There it is, I've said it. The cat is out of the bag. No stopping now.

“Oh?” Justin blinks down at me, frowning slightly. “He's a disturbingly faithful man. More like a stalker, really. He comes in quite handy.” After mulling the idea over for a moment, Justin shrugs. “Oh well. If that's what my baby wants, that's what my baby gets.”

He turns around, heading to a safe in the corner of the room. I watch his back as he punches in a series of numbers, unlocks it, and removes a pistol of some sort. I'm not a gun expert. Like, really, I don't know the first thing about them. If this were a videogame, I'd be a lot better off.

Deep, long exhale. You've got this, Gamer Girl.

Justin passes the gun right to me, lifting his phone up to his ear at the same time.

The heavy weapon falls into my hands, and then everything just becomes that much more real.

After tonight, I will *never* be the same person. I'm already unrecognizable to the old Dakota. Heath Cousins' blood is on my fucking hands. But ... the man in front of me is my father, not some stranger I accidentally killed in the middle of a fight.

This is purposeful. This is planned. This is intentional.

This is going to save so many lives. I'd be a horrible person if I didn't do this.

“Come downstairs for a minute, would you?” Justin hangs up, turning to look at me and smirking. “Try to shoot him while he’s still on the stairs so we can watch him fall down them together.”

I don’t respond to that statement. It’s clearly intended to shake me. Justin doesn’t believe I’ll shoot Raúl. Maybe that’s why he’s given me the gun so easily? He’s not scared of me at all. He doesn’t even think I’m a threat.

My hands are shaking, my gaze fixated on the weapon. The only time I’ve ever shot a gun is when Mr. Volli made me shoot Mr. Fossier’s corpse. What about the safety? Does this weapon even have a safety? How do I know if it’s loaded or not? I’m a teenager, not a weapons expert. I’m not sure how to open it so that I can see.

Justin is looking toward the staircase, frowning. He glances at his watch, as if Raúl is taking far too long for his liking.

This is it.

Now or never.

I will never get another chance like this.

As if I’m in a movie or something, I spread my legs shoulder-width apart, using both hands to steady the weapon.

And I point it at the back of my father’s head.

He doesn’t notice at first, but after a good ten or twenty seconds of silence, he tosses an imperious look over his shoulder and raises a brow. When he smiles at me, I get the idea that maybe I’ve just made a horrible mistake. Is it too late to pretend I’m just practicing for Raúl? Can I back out of this?

No. No, I won’t do that. I’m ending this.

But damn, is it heartbreaking. I didn’t expect that, didn’t expect tears to stain my cheeks, didn’t expect to miss the only dad I’ve ever known.

“As horrible as you are, some part of me still loves you.” The words are a whisper, but it’s all I can manage right now. It’s taking all I have to keep my hands on the gun. Justin doesn’t seem to hear me. Or, if he does, then he doesn’t care what I’m saying.

“Are you going to make a citizen’s arrest, Mia? We both know you don’t have the balls to shoot me.” Justin chuckles, lifting up his hands to chest level, palms facing away from me in surrender. My focus narrows down to a pinpoint, on this spot at the back of his head where his dark hair curls ever so slightly. “No, no, don’t shoot. I give up.” He laughs again, and that just undoes me, the mocking cruelty in his voice.

I pull the trigger.

Nothing happens.

I pull it again, again, again, search frantically for a safety. There is none. The gun is just ... empty.

I drag my terrified gaze up from the weapon as Justin turns around, a slight frown marring his face. Before I know it, he's backhanding me so hard that I slam into the wall, my vision blurring. He doesn't stop there, coming for me and hitting me again. Again. Again.

I sink to the floor, blood pouring down my face, the gun still clutched in my hands. When I try to lunge to my feet, to strike him with the gun, to punch him, to do literally anything to defend myself, he kicks me so hard in the stomach that I forget how to breathe.

"Finally. What took you so damn long?" Justin gripes, and I realize that Raúl has joined us sometime in the last few minutes. Seconds? I don't know how long it's been, only that I hurt. Only that I can't breathe.

Justin squats down in front of me, and when I move to slam the gun into his face, he snatches my wrist so hard that I cry out. He gets right up in my face, blue eyes dark, mouth curled in an annoyed scowl. That's all I am to him right now: an annoyance. Nothing more.

"You didn't think I knew this was coming? Are you as stupid as your sister?" Justin takes the gun before releasing my wrist, and then he hits me in the mouth with the butt of it, splitting my lip. When he stands up, he hauls back and kicks me in the ribs again. Then he tucks the weapon in his waistband and plants his hands on his hips, clucking his tongue in disappointment as I groan and cough on the blood filling my mouth.

Raúl sniffs derisively as he looks down at me, flicking the hot pink lighter in his right hand.

It's hard to breathe; there's so much blood.

As I look up at Justin, I realize suddenly how terrified I am. I'm not ready to die here, especially not like this, at the hands of my own fucking father.

"Raúl," Justin says with a long-suffering sigh, wiping his bloody knuckles on the front of his white button-down. He passes his gaze over me as if I'm little more than dog shit on the bottom of his shoe. "Lock the princess in her fucking tower."

Raúl grins, a maniacal expression that chills me to the core. I shouldn't be surprised: this is the man who set the fire intended to kill my siblings.

“Gladly.” Raúl’s hand latches onto my hair, and he jerks on my head hard, dragging me across the floor. I scramble to stand up, but my head is spinning, and I’m choking on blood. Besides that, I’m still struggling to breathe. The lack of oxygen is making me dizzy.

Raúl yanks me roughly, right up the stairs as I struggle to take as much of the pressure off my scalp as I can.

As we pass Delphine’s room, her door opens and her eyes widen to saucers.

“Help me, please,” I sputter, a metallic taste coating my tongue. “Delphine!”

My sister—I was hoping beyond all hope that she was on my side—looks away sharply, almost as if she’s about to be sick.

“I’m s-sorry, Mia. You should’ve l-listened to d-d-daddy.” She’s stuttering so badly that I can barely understand her. And then her bedroom door is slammed in my face, and Raúl is throwing me unceremoniously onto the rug in front of my bed.

He squats down in front of me, smirking.

“How the mighty have fallen, eh you little bitch?” Raúl snickers, flicking the lighter over and over and over. With his free hand, he adjusts his glasses with a middle finger. “Did you really think you and your spoiled boyfriends stood a chance? This isn’t Scooby-Doo, sweetheart. It’s going to take a lot more than some meddling kids to solve the mystery.”

I spit in his face just before I swing, slamming a closed fist into his left cheek. Raúl lunges at me, knocking me onto my back on the rug, and then the hot metal of the lighter is being pressed into my skin and I’m screaming.

My nails rake his face, leaving welts, and he strikes the lighter again, burning me a second time before he jerks away and stands up. Raúl is panting as he swipes his hand down the front of his suit, his eyes lingering on the burns on my arms long enough that I get the idea he might be in trouble with Justin for doing that.

In the moment, it doesn’t matter. I know he’s done with me, so I roll onto my side, trying to catch my breath. *Should I try to call Tess? The boys? Should I livestream my face and show the world what Justin Prior is capable of?* Raúl takes off, slamming the door so hard behind him that my ears ring.

I force my aching body up, the sunflower-patterned sundress stained with blood, and I stumble over to the new gaming desktop that Justin bought me.

It's on, but as soon as I open the browser, I notice that the internet isn't working.

No. No, no, no.

The next thing I try is my new phone, but ... there's no signal.

Justin has cut me off completely from everyone I know and love.

"Fuck it," I mutter, dialing 911. I'm done with this; I can't take it anymore. I'm only sixteen years old, and tonight has made it abundantly clear that I need the help of someone that's left their teen years in the dust. I need Tess. I need Saffron. I need Agent Takahashi.

Even without phone service, a call to 911 can go through if a person is in range of a tower.

But not this phone. Not today. I try to call once, twice, three times.

I tuck the phone in the dress' pocket and head for the window, shoving it open with the intention of climbing out. Only ... there's an employee climbing a ladder with a hammer in hand.

"Sorry Princess," Justin calls out cheerfully from down below. "But actions have consequences."

The employee doesn't even look at me as she pulls the window shut and begins to pound in the nails, pulling each one from her apron pocket. I just stare at her, wondering if I should've pushed her off the ladder and tried to make a run for it. Only, I don't know who this girl is and if she's culpable or just another victim like JJ.

And still, I'm too softhearted to be of any use.

Turning around, I head for the bedroom door, but I don't expect it to be unlocked.

It's not.

Finally, I move into the bathroom to study my injuries. My bloody fingers squeeze the edge of the counter tightly as I struggle to comprehend the sight of my ruined face. The burns on my arms hurt so bad that I almost don't care how much blood there is running over my lips, spattering my forehead, dripping from my nose.

As the adrenaline fades away, the pain comes on in waves, and I find myself weeping silently as I mop the blood and treat the burns with a first-aid kit. I wish the boys were here. I want Chasm to take my face between his warm hands and tell me it's going to be okay in three different languages. I want Parrish's eyes to flash with righteous anger on my behalf before he

kisses the tears from my cheeks. I want Maxx. I want him so badly that I almost hallucinate him there beside me, taking the ointment from my fingers and gently applying it to the burns as he smiles tenderly at me.

“Sports medicine doc in training. I’ve got you, Kota.”

A loud sob escapes me, one that I desperately wish I’d kept to myself. I might not be able to communicate with the outside world, but I’m positive that Justin is still watching me.

Probably laughing, too.

All I can do is wonder which member of my family is going to die because of this.



CHAPTER 12

I can't sleep.

No sane person could in this situation. I was given a forty-eight-hour ultimatum to protect the people I love, and I've ruined it. Wasted one day, failed to *check for rounds in my goddamn gun*. What a miserable, pathetic murder attempt. Despite the Heath Cousins thing, I am not a very good killer.

I should've contacted the boys before I tried to kill Justin. Now ... now I don't know what's going to happen. *Even if I had contacted them, what could they have done? Parrish with Lumen? Chasm with Lumen? Could they have imagined a way out of this that didn't include infidelity or execution?*

With a groan, I roll onto my side and cough blood up on my pillow. That scares me. A beating I can handle, but what if there's internal bleeding? *Physically or spiritually, I won't live through that sort of injury. I'm strong, but I have an Achilles' heel. When I love, I love hard.*

Nevaeh's death, it would've broken the old Dakota.

The new Dakota is more resilient, easier to bend than to break, but if I leave this room and find out that I've lost someone even closer to me than my estranged childhood friend, my heart will finally stop bowing under the pressure. I'll find myself in pieces.

My hand fists in the pillow, smearing blood as I stare at the wall and wish for time to pass. Stress can turn five minutes into five hours, and it can turn five hours into a millennium.

That first night is an endless hellscape.

I can't sleep, but I don't have the strength to get up either. So I drift. I ride a never-ending sea of anxiety and fear, of what-ifs and terror. *Tumultuous waves of morbid curiosity, sinking this already failing ship. How long can I go scooping water out with my hands? When do I finally drift quietly to the bottom of an ocean of worries?*

I use rationality as a paddle, hoping that I'm steering myself away from the storm and not deeper into it.

Parrish won't be the one to die, I'm sure of it. Justin promised. Then again, isn't Daddy Dearest already verging on the edge of a lie by capitulating to Laverne's demands? Parrish was supposed to be mine after I found him, but that doesn't seem to be the case at all.

Okay, so it could be Parrish.

It's much more likely to be Maxx. He's the one that punched Justin, that saved my family from the fire, the one who— Says he doesn't love me. Who claims to have been cheating on me. Who's feeding information to Justin.

Not him then, not even if he's a terrible liar.

Chasm.

Oh my fucking God.

I work past that thought. I consider Maxine. I consider my younger siblings. I even consider my grandparents as possible targets.

But if Justin really wanted to dig a knife into my heart, he'd take my support away from me. He'd take away the promise of forever that I feel when I'm with Chasm. He'd destroy young love and hope and possibilities. He'd destroy one of the most kindhearted human beings to ever walk this earth.

Not only does he have the motive to kill Chas, he has the *opportunity*.

Justin could walk into Seamus' place at any time and finish off the boy that I love.

That's when I try to get up, when I fall to the floor on my knees, bleeding everywhere. I only make it as far as the window. The shutters on the outside have been closed for the night. I couldn't even break the glass and climb out if I wanted to.

I curl up against the wall, wrapped around my knees in the dark like a deposed princess.

Somehow, my frantic, pain-addled mind convinces me that Chasm is dead.

I'm so convinced that I weep the loss of my lover for hours.
All I can hope is that I cried for no good reason.
All I know is that I've probably cried for a very good reason indeed.

The only person who comes and goes from my room is Delphine. The morning after the incident, I'm so out of it that I barely register her there. She puts ice packs on my face, forces water and pain pills down my throat, and rubs sweet smelling salve on my burns. When she brings me food, I ignore it. And when she thinks I'm sleeping, I hear her murmuring curses under her breath.

"I'm gonna kill him," she whispers as she wraps a bandage around my arm, but I don't take her words seriously. When I begged for her help, she slammed her door in my face. As far as I'm concerned, Delphine and I are done. I even asked her in a fever-induced state of agony if she'd contact someone for me, but she sternly declined.

If I didn't feel like maybe Justin broke one of my ribs and perhaps dislocated my jaw, I wouldn't accept her help at all.

"Why don't we try to sit up today?" she asks cheerfully, flicking my curtains open on the fourth morning after. What Delphine doesn't know is that I've been getting up every day, checking the window, checking the door, checking my computer and my phone and even my TV to see if there's a way to get a message out.

But Justin isn't sloppy. Somebody who was wouldn't have been able to get this far or hurt and control this many people. My biggest hope right now is that Tess might panic when she can't contact me, and that maybe she'll sound the alarm. She said she wouldn't go to the FBI ... yet. How long will that last? Maybe it's better if it doesn't.

It might be time to sound the alarm.

I allow Delphine to help me up, watching the key that she wears around her neck dangle enticingly. When I go for it—in what I imagine is a surreptitious and underhanded way—she very gently catches my wrist, brown eyes boring into mine.

"Just do what he says for now and try not to make trouble."

I yank my arm away from her, ignoring the rumble of my stomach. I've

been refusing to eat, but today, Delphine is enticing me with a bagel sandwich, complete with melted cheddar cheese and sausage on it. *Holy crap, that looks good.* There's even a steaming chai beside it along with a glass of water, carefully decorated with a pretty summer flower.

"Do what he says?" I query absently, my mind straying as it has so many times over the past few days to the Lumen situation. Justin gave me forty-eight hours to convince her to sleep with one of my boys. Now what? It's been longer than that.

That hellscape I lived through on the first night? It's become my impossible reality.

If five hours during the night was a millennium, then imagine four days.

Something happened that second night. I don't know what it was, but I woke from my sleep soaked in sweat and screaming. Yeah. I ended up trying to pick the lock on my door as I cried, this deep sense of loss inside of me that I just couldn't explain. It's like I felt a life being snuffed out somewhere in the world, and its effect on me was utterly devastating.

Is somebody I love dead? What can I do when I'm literally being held prisoner, monitored via cameras every moment of every day? Besides that, I'm pretty sure that if Raúl gets the chance to kill me and make it look like an accident, he'll take it. Hell, he might just slit my throat and make a run for it, his loyalty to Justin be damned. I often sense him lurking outside my bedroom door.

I'm officially trapped.

So that devastation? That loss? The fear of the unknown? It's become my everything. I feel like I'm being eaten alive by my own emotions. I have effectively become my own monster. *Chas. Please don't let Chas be dead. It's irrational to assume that he's already gone, but it feels like he is. Because no matter how many times I go over it, killing him would be the easiest and most efficient retaliation.*

"So you want me to kill my classmate?" I continue when Delphine doesn't answer. She sighs as she lays out a clean pair of clothes on the bed. A folded towel is placed atop them, and she gives me a sharp look.

"Take a shower, Dakota. You stink."

I resist the urge to throw something at her. I also resist the urge to sniff my armpit because I'm sure she's right. I haven't showered since the Incident—let's give it a capital letter to distinguish it from the hundred other tragedies

that've occurred in the last few months—but I'm suddenly desperate to be clean.

Pushing past Delphine, I stumble into the bathroom, examining the bruises on my face. Justin is a master of hitting *just* hard enough to make his point. I'm bruised up, but I'm already starting to heal. I lift my shirt to examine the marks on my torso and find the same thing. Most bruises—even bad ones—heal in about two weeks, so I guess Justin figured he had plenty of time for me to rest up and recover.

“Do you think my rib is broken?” I ask as Delphine comes to stand behind me, a single small braid decorating her blond hair. It's pinned back on the left side with a gemstone flower pin that matches her dress. She's healing up, too. With the makeup, you'd never know.

“Probably just sprained. May I?” She holds up her hands and, even though it hurts my pride a bit, I nod and allow her to touch me. It hurts but not as much as it could. “I don't think so. Even if it were broken, as long as you're not coughing or feeling shortness of breath, it'll heal on its own.”

I open and close my jaw, wincing at the pain there, but wondering if I'm not being a bit of a hypochondriac. Not ... that this isn't a big deal. It is. It's *huge*. The way Justin treated me was never okay, but somehow, I didn't see him getting to the point where he'd just willingly beat the crap out of me.

My eyes threaten to fill with tears, but I shove the emotion aside. What use is that to me right now?

Parrish went through worse than this. I have no right to complain. Even now, the boys must be wondering if I'm alive or dead. That sort of emotional agony is worse than any physical pain. I should know: I'm experiencing it, too.

I turn back to Delphine, shoving the very last remnants of my pride down my own throat.

“I know you won't contact Tess or the police or anything, but can you *please* message Parrish for me?” I'm clasping my hands together now, practically begging. Delphine looks pained, but she's already shaking her head.

“He monitors my online activity, too, you know.” With a small sigh, Delphine moves over to the palatial shower on the other side of the room and starts the water. There's no need to fiddle with the temperature: the system is entirely digital, and I've already set my preferences. It's a small, meaningless

comfort. “If I could, I would, but I can’t. If you stop stirring things up so much, you’ll find that it’s not so bad here. Daddy will get you whatever you want, all you need do is ask.”

“He’ll happily bless me with everything but freedom, safety, good health, and the lives of my friends and family. As in, whatever he’s offering, I don’t want it.” I cross my arms obstinately and then wince at the pain in my chest. Delphine isn’t unsympathetic, but she doesn’t relent or offer any further advice.

“Be careful with what you say.” She’s pointing at the mirror now, and I understand what I already figured: the mirrors are cameras, too. Of course they are. “Now, shower and get dressed. If you behave yourself in here today, he might let you out for dinner.”

That piques my attention, and I find myself plotting already.

If Justin’s considering letting me out for dinner, I can talk to him about Veronica. Can’t exactly kill her if I’m trapped in my room, right? If he lets me out for dinner, he’ll surely gloat and the agony of wondering will be ... replaced with the agony of knowing.

Which is worse?

As I stand there, as the bathroom slowly fills with mist and obscures the mirror, I can’t quite keep back the impending wave of dread. I’ve gotten lucky in this game. The moves I’ve made have paid off and few people have died. But this time? I thought I was doing the right thing. All I’ve done is damn myself to a prison cell and damn someone I love to an early grave.

Damn it, Gamer Girl. Goddamn it.

However you look at it—as a chess reference or a video game reference—I have just royally fucked myself over.

Isn’t the best-case scenario here that Justin told the boys what they needed to do? Best case scenario is that nobody died ... and that somebody cheated.

And the deep sense of loss inside of me, it stirs.

Justin doesn’t allow me down for dinner that night, but the next day, I get an invitation for breakfast.

“Hurry, hurry, before he changes his mind,” Delphine is whispering, helping me dress myself and do my hair. She paints my face like a movie

star, hiding any sign of Justin's beating. What she doesn't do is cover the smiley face shaped burns on my left arm. There are two of them, angry and red and weepy. While Delphine does put salve on them, she seems to go out of her way to select a dress where they'll show.

That cannot be accidental.

"Good morning, Daddy," she greets cheerfully, offering Justin a kiss on the cheek when we meet him in the solarium. It's my first time seeing his face since I tried to kill him, and he hurt me. It feels different somehow, like his opinion of me has been irrevocably altered.

Me? I never liked the bastard. Nothing has changed. *Liar.*

"Good morning, Delphi." He gives her a kiss back, stroking her hair before he looks over her shoulder and his gaze connects with mine.

I curl my hands in the sweet, little cream-colored skirt that Delphine selected for me. It's embroidered with flowers, paired with strappy white heels, and topped off with a chocolate brown silk blouse. I hate the entire ensemble.

"Looking less and less like a hoodlum every day. Come give me a kiss." Justin taps his cheek, and I have to fight my facial muscles as a scowl threatens to steal over my lips. It's almost painful—actually, it's literally painful because of my injuries—to keep myself smiling pleasantly.

Justin's attention goes straight to the burns on my arm, and there's the slightest tightening in his forehead before he smooths the emotion away. Is Raúl in trouble? *Please, please tell me Raúl is in trouble.*

"Good morning." I give him a kiss, thanking the universe in its infinite mercy that Justin hasn't decided to order one of his cronies to rape me. Or, even worse, do it himself. Things are bad, but they are not at their worst.

Yet.

We all sit down at the table—Caroline included—and eat silently for the better part of ten minutes before Justin decides to pick at my scabs.

All the while, it stirs. And stirs. And stirs.

I clench my fork to keep from stabbing my father with it.

"Oh, Mia." He looks up from the sweet potato scramble with bell peppers that's on his plate. "Before I forget, I just wanted to let you know that I've been messaging your mother back for you."

I stare at him, my fork frozen in midair. *Just tell me who died, you motherfucker!* I strongly consider aiming for his carotid artery with the tines.

I clench harder.

“She’s been texting you, and I’ve been texting back. I didn’t want her to worry.” He goes back to his food as I sit there, fighting the sudden shaking of my hand. If Tess doesn’t know I’m in trouble, then she won’t know to contact the police. The FBI. Hire a personal army of bodyguards to infiltrate this place and rescue me.

I set my fork down.

“I’d like access to my phone back. It’s not as if you can’t see every little thing I do, so what does it matter?” My voice is colored with irritation that I know I can’t afford, but which Justin allows to pass with a derisive chuckle. Irritation I will show him. The grief and terror inside of me, the anxiety, I will bear that burden quietly so as not to give him the satisfaction.

Eat the big hairy dicks of my resistance, Justin Prior.

“Oh, don’t play coy with me,” he teases, and I just know I’m not going to like where this is going. I look at Delphine across the table, but she only meets my eyes for a second before returning her attention to her food.

Caroline, on the other hand, looks downright excited at the prospect of some drama. She’s got red painted lips and a big floppy black hat paired with designer sunglasses. Swear to God, she is the very cliché of a wicked stepmother.

“I know why you want your phone.” Justin takes another bite of his food, washes it down with some orange juice. I feel this horrible tightness in my shoulders. *It stirs. It stirs. Grief opens its heavy maw.* Something very, very bad has happened while I’ve been locked upstairs.

Please don’t let anyone be dead. Please, please, please.

“I can’t very well plan for Veronica if I don’t have my phone.” I’m trying to use Justin’s logic against him here. I’m trying not to scream. “Besides, I’d like to speak to my fiancé. That’s normal, isn’t it? For a girl to talk to her betrothed.”

I feel a big reveal is coming, and my entire body tenses up in preparation for what I know I’m going to hear.

Kwang-seon McKenna ... is dead.

“I spoke to him just a few minutes ago.” Justin checks his watch as I lift my head up, wide-eyed and drowning in emotion. Is he lying to me? Did I guess wrong and someone else has died? Am I psycho for hoping that’s the case? God, I hate myself right now. “He should be here any second.”

There's a crashing sound, like a door slamming into a wall, and then I hear frantic footsteps.

Never in my life have I wanted to see anyone as badly as Kwang-seon McKenna.

I shove up from my chair, turning just in time to see him stumble through the doorway. He's red-faced and panting; maybe he ran over here from his father's place? Or else he drove from Laverne's, and he's panicked about something else.

Maybe I don't give a crap because he's alive?

A strange sound escapes me as I struggle to stay standing. My knees are threatening to buckle with the weight of my relief. *If he isn't dead, who is? Is it wrong to think that perhaps his death would've hurt the worst? His or Parrish's or ... Maxx's.*

I can't seem to convince my terrified and shrinking heart that he's truly here, that *he* is the one looking at me like my life is a miracle. How can he possibly think that? He's a better person than me in every possible way. I don't deserve him. I don't. I fucking don't.

But I want him.

A small snuffle escapes me before I can stop it.

"Fuck, Dakota," Chasm whispers, looking me up and down. When he sees that I'm still relatively in one piece, he closes the distance between us in an instant, wrapping me up in his strong arms and pulling me to his chest. It hurts a little, and I let out a small breath of pain, but I don't let Chas move back or let go. I curl my fingers into his black t-shirt. Chasm's hand strokes my hair, smoothing down to the back of my neck. He rests his hand there, warm and solid and comforting.

Alive.

Yet still, the grief and dread remain.

"As far as the Lumen thing ..." Justin clucks his tongue as he rises to his feet, sending another sharp spike of fear through me. I cling even harder to Chasm, take comfort in him in a way I'm not sure I've ever found comfort in another person. "Don't worry about it."

And then Justin takes off through the entryway in the direction of his office, leaving me there to grip Chasm like a lifeline. I can't even believe he's here. I'd imagined my hellscape going up in various forms of flame. Black ones with blue innards. Red fingers licking a night sky. Smoke and ash and

heat to burn away the last of me.

But this? How is Chasm here? *Why* is he here?

I draw back just enough to look up at him, but his face is white, lips pursed, and there's a haunted expression in his eyes that I don't want to understand. I don't want to know. But I have to. There's no way around it.

"Who's dead, Chas?" I ask, fighting snuffles. It still hurts to get stuffed up, to cry. Justin truly wrecked my poor face. Chasm hesitates slightly, reaching up and laying his hand on my cheek. *Does he see it? Can he tell?* I hope not. He doesn't need to worry about that right now. He just needs to breathe. His heart just needs to beat. He simply needs to exist in order for me to survive the pain.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he whispers, voice rough, expression raw. He looks like a man that's been backed into a corner. It's not an expression I'm used to seeing on Chas' handsome face. "What did he do to you?"

"Please tell me," I beg, taking in his colored bangs as they cling to his sweaty forehead. He's beyond beautiful, like a dark angel descended from the sky. All I want right now is to run away with him and never look back. Even if Maxx and I are done forever, I ... at least I have Chasm and Parrish.

I hope I do, anyway.

Just tell me, Chas. Put me out of my misery. Tell me which innocent person I condemned with my foolish actions.

"Dakota, are you okay?" Chasm gives me a gentle shake to bring me back to myself.

"It's Mia now," Caroline corrects, rising to her feet. "Don't forget again or there'll be consequences. I *do* have the power to ban you from the house, young man." She heads into the garden, heels clacking, and Delphine scrambles to follow her.

Chasm and I are alone. Or, as relatively alone as we can possibly be in a house filled with cameras and criminals.

His eyes search mine frantically as he lifts his other hand, bracketing my face between them.

"What happened?" he whispers, but I don't care about what happened to me. I need to know who I'm supposed to be mourning next.

"Who died, Chasm?" I repeat, and I don't even bother to hide the tears this time. I just let myself cry. That's when I notice Raúl watching us from the foyer. He flicks his lighter for my benefit as Chas' gaze drops to the double

smiley face burns on my arms. That's what it looks like, you know, when somebody burns you with a hot lighter.

"Nobody died." Chasm's voice is firm, that full mouth of his tight with tension. "If Raúl hadn't checked me for weapons on my way in, maybe somebody would have." He scowls at my father's plucky assistant before looking back at me with a frown. "Now, tell me what happened to you before I lose my shit."

"Nobody died?" I repeat, relief flooding me so suddenly that my knees finally buckle. Chas catches me, lowering me gently onto my seat. He takes Justin's chair, pulling it close enough to mine that our legs are tangled together. His knee is almost touching me at the apex of my thighs, but the closeness doesn't affect me the way it usually does.

Something is very wrong here even if nobody is dead.

"What is it?" I lock onto his gaze and he shifts his eyes to the right, an inexplicable sadness filling his features. I pick up a glass of water, force myself to drink, offer it out to him. It's the only thing I can think to do while I wait for Chasm to get it together.

He reaches up, his oversized black puffer jacket shifting and creaking in the silence. Even in a state of extreme distress, he's the most handsome man I've ever seen. His ink black hair threaded through with a yellow lightning bolt over his bangs, the metal rings on either side of his lower lip, the plugs in his earlobes, his thick lashes. I can appreciate the Medusa on the front of his shirt, the way his blue jeans stretch over his strong thighs.

"We were able to work through the deal you made with Justin." Chas swings his jewel-like eyes back to mine, knocking the breath from me. *Best-case scenario is that Justin told them. Best-case scenario would be if ... if ...* "I love you so much, you know that?" He offers that up in such a purposeful way that I almost just stand up and run from the room.

"They might be on your side, but you might not like the things they'll do if they think it's for your benefit." Lumen told me that on the yacht during my father's wedding. I've often wondered exactly how far they would go.

They killed somebody for me. I'm so sure of that I forget I've stopped breathing. My head swims and I snatch up the water glass, downing the rest of it before I dare allow myself the chance to respond. *It stirs as I trick my heart with lies.*

"No matter what happens, that never changes." He reaches out for my

hands, running his thumb over my engagement ring. I know it's from Justin, that it probably has the bad juju of his relationship to Tess still clinging to it like a ghost, but ... It's a symbol of me and Chasm now, a promise of a future shining up at me. If we can get out of this, I have a pretty good thing going for me.

I am so damn lucky.

The grief inside my heart snickers at my optimism.

"It never changes," I repeat, making myself smile. *They killed somebody.* I don't know which boys exactly—between Parrish, Chasm, and X—but they did it. Who was it, I wonder? Gavin? Antonio? Or did they get Veronica straight-off for me? "Who is it?" I ask, and Chasm flinches. His grip on my hand tightens as he squeezes his eyes shut.

"Lumen," he whispers, shaking his head. He mutters something in Korean and then follows it up in mumbled English. "I thought you knew it was her."

My eyes swell with tears; I can't keep the feeling back.

"Lumen's dead?" I whisper, wondering why he lied to me in the beginning. Why tell me that nobody was dead when somebody very much was? I guess I thought he meant *nobody close to you is dead, but we got one of the people on your list.* Now I'm really confused here.

Because I still refuse to believe what's staring me straight in the face.

Blind hope is a wonderful trait to have, but when it fails, it hurts *so damn bad.*

Chasm slams the full force of his stare into me, opening his eyes wide.

"Uh, unless you know something I don't know?" He blinks back at me rapidly. "Little Sister, you better start talking now."

"If she isn't dead then what do you mean?" I'm sounding panicked now, but I don't understand what he's trying to say. Nah. Maybe I do? Maybe I just don't *want* to understand. Maybe it was easier to think the guys killed somebody than to think ... *that.*

"I ..." Chasm trails off again, mouth half open, no words. He closes it. He ruffles up his hair with his hand, and I wish he'd take his jacket off so I could see his tattoos. "Fuck it."

See, it's our couple motto. Told ya.

He leans in and takes my head in his hands, pressing his arcane lips to mine. A spell is cast. I'm stolen under it, and even though it burns, I don't fight it. I'm happy here in the heat of Chasm's innate magic. It's his

personality as much as his looks. Moreso. Mostly.

But, shit, he tastes like sadness, like goodbyes, like longing.

He tastes like somebody who willingly drinks the poison to spare his friends, like somebody determined to be the bad guy even when he's so, so good on the inside. Like somebody who believes he will never again kiss the girl he's holding like a treasure in his hands.

"God, I love you. *Saranghae*," he breathes, and then he draws back ever so slightly. Our noses are touching when he tells me what should've probably been obvious from the get-go. "I slept with Lumen."

There's a long pause there where the words don't process. I'm used to this by now. Do you know how many times I've read Justin's missives and suddenly had no fucking clue what the English language looks or sounds like? The words become strange symbols, strange sounds, become curses cutting themselves into my brain. Wrecking my heart.

"You ... did what now?" I'm still struggling, staring at Chasm staring at me. He's still holding my face, and he's breathing so hard that I can see his pulse in his neck. Thrumming. Thundering. A violent struggle in the strong column of his throat.

His lips purse in answer.

"You had sex with her?" I'm clarifying in the most basic of terms, so that I don't freak all the way out for nothing. So I don't flip this table, snatch a shard of glass, and charge into Justin's office with a primal scream. "I don't believe it."

Chasm's eyes flash.

"You don't believe it? Naekkeo, you *have* to believe it or we're all fucking dead." He releases me and sits back up suddenly, yanking out a new pack of cigarettes and lighting one up right then and there. I've never seen him smoke inside before. Also, didn't he quit?

"I thought you quit," I repeat aloud, clutching at my skirts with tense fingers. I'm frantic sounding, like a crazy person. I've finally lost it. Justin Prior is *actually* breaking me. Wow. Bravo. Slaughtering my childhood friend didn't do it for me, but hey, my man cheated.

Two of my men cheated. Two outta three, not half-bad. Should we shoot for Parrish next?

I laugh at the absurdity of the situation. Chasm didn't cheat: he did what he was told to do in order to save a life. Just like I did when I originally slept

with him. It's noble. It's self-sacrificial.

It's bullshit.

I turn suddenly and slide my arms across the table, knocking everything to the floor where it shatters into shards. The cigarette falls from Chasm's mouth, and he clamps a hand over his lips. I bend down and snatch up a ragged piece of porcelain with my left hand.

"You forget that I know he's controlling you!" I scream as I stand up, pointing at him with my right hand. I know I'm reusing the phrase that Parrish already used twice. Sort of lame. Need new material. I go to storm into Justin's office, but Chasm's hand snatches my elbow as I pass.

Did he touch Lumen with those hands? Did X really touch my sister like that? Am I really going to try to kill Justin after my failure last night?

Yes, I am.

I'm going to kill him.

"No, he wasn't." Chasm releases me when he sees that I've stopped trying to move, reaching a hand into his jacket pocket and sliding out his phone. He gets a video pulled up and then he hands it to me. "This happened before; I screwed up."

There's a video there that I do not want to see.

Likely, as badly as Parrish didn't want to see me make love to Chasm in the first place.

A sound escapes, like a kicked puppy. I put my hand over my mouth.

With X, there was a part of me that rationalized he truly must be lying because while he might have hard morals and be willing to do questionable things, my sister is cut-and-dried. Nope. She wouldn't sleep with Maxx. I firmly believe that. Believed it, actually, until a few seconds ago.

If Chasm could betray me, I don't know if I believe in anything anymore.

"You know that Maxx is clearly faking all this to save your ass, right? I hope you'd think that. In fact, I don't expect you to think it at all; I expect you to know it." Parrish told me that more than once. I have to cling to it, no matter how idiotic or naïve it seems.

I will not push play on that video just as I did not watch any of the seven videos of the double Maxes.

"Hey," Chasm offers with a small, panicked laugh. "Look, the choice is easy now, right?" Tears prick his eyes, and he reaches up with the back of his hand to swipe them away. "You can be with Parrish now. Maxx and I made

the choice for you.”

“I don’t think so.” Justin is back, frowning at the pair of us. I’m trying really hard not to look too closely at this video. It’s a bit of an odd angle, making me wonder how Chasm got Justin to accept it as evidence. That’s a good sign, isn’t it?

My brain takes me on an unwilling journey of all Lumen and Chasm’s past interactions. I genuinely thought he despised her, but now that I’m nitpicking memories, didn’t their interactions remind me of mine and Parrish’s in the beginning? Do Lumen and Chasm have a love/hate relationship that I somehow missed?

No. Freaking. Way.

My conversation with Chasm at the lake beside his cabin rushes back to me.

“I’ve got a crush that you don’t need to know about. She’s pretty much the exact opposite of you. Good grades, athletic build, outdoor interests. Not some Ashnikko simp with a crappy Twitch channel. She dresses up for parties. I like blondes so, she checks that box for sure.”

“Infidelity shouldn’t end a marriage. I was willing to give your slut of a mother another chance, but she took off on me and look how that turned out.” Justin gestures at me, as if I’m a sickening disappointment. First, a disappointment to Tess. Now, to Justin. I’m sorry to say that both of those things hurt. I wish I were stronger, that Justin couldn’t dig at me at all, but that’s the price of having a heart sometimes.

You get the pretty, but you also get the pain.

“Kiss and make up,” Justin orders, gesturing irritably at us. “You have a mission to carry out tomorrow night.”

I don’t look at Chas when he stands up and presses a kiss to my cheek. I don’t turn away from him either, which is a win in my book.

“Is there another party at Camp Kellogg?” I ask, voice skeletal. Chasm nods, but I feel more than see the gesture. I’m staring at the floor, at the drops of blood swelling from my hand as I clutch that shard of glass. I look up at Justin to find him smirking at me. He’s just waiting for me to go for him again so that he can attack me in retaliation or send Raúl after me. Mr. Volli, maybe. Perhaps some other psycho or pervert that he has on payroll.

“There is. Like I said, almost every night ...” Chasm’s voice trails off as I move away, tossing the bloody glass at Justin’s feet. I don’t look back as I

climb the stairs, but I can sense that Chas is following after me. I want to slam my door in his face, but I don't.

Because I want to believe in him, even if that makes me an idiot.

Still ignoring him, I move into the bathroom to retrieve my trusty first-aid kit.

"Let me." He rushes in behind me, gently taking my hand in his. I stand there, numb and silent and empty inside as he cleans the wound and then uses a length of bandage to wrap it up. Makes me miss Maxx, the sports medicine specialist.

If I really think about it, Parrish and I were fated from the very beginning. It was me and him from the get-go. I'm only with Chasm and Maxx because of Justin. As simply as they were given to me, they've been taken away, and I can't even complain because what sort of person demands love and fidelity from three other people? It's not fair to them, never was.

At least now I've gotten a taste of my own medicine.

"Dakota," Chasm begins, and I turn suddenly, hating how close together we are. He has his hands resting on the bathroom counter on either side of me, leaning down, blocking me in as his eyes beg in silent pleading.

"Don't call me Dakota anymore; my name is now legally Mia Prior." I smile sadly as Chasm's eyes widen in disbelief. I consider picking up my Korean workbook and practicing my Hangul—the Korean alphabet—but I don't know if I want to learn it anymore.

Chasm's betrayal—whether it's real or if it's just smoke and mirrors—hurts too damn badly.

Wasn't he angry at Maxx for this exact same thing? I don't understand. I'm at a complete loss.

"He changed your name?" Chas breathes, and then shakes his head, cursing under his breath. When he lifts a hand to lay it on my cheek, I duck past him and move into the room. When I check the bedroom door, I find that it's locked. We're locked in together now. What fresh hell is this? "He's been keeping you prisoner in here? We figured as much."

"Was he texting you as me?" I ask, trying to keep things business-casual here. There is no room for my broken heart. I just need to get out of here. As soon as I do, I'll go to Tess, beg her to contact Agent Takahashi on my behalf, make a stand legally. Clearly, this method isn't doing me any good.

"He was, but we clocked him right away. Tess, too. She's been a wild

storm since that day at the courthouse. Pretty sure she's up to something, but we can't figure out what that is." Chasm's voice is halted, hesitant, unsure, a complete one-eighty from his usual cocky confidence. "Are we ... we're not going to talk about the Lumen thing?"

The Lumen thing.

"Somebody had to do it. Nice to know you had it taken care of in advance." I look back in time to see Chasm cringe. He shrugs out of his jacket, tossing it on my bed, and then he paces, rubbing at his face as he does.

"What else can we do? Let him kill your entire family? Let him kill *you*? We need to do *exactly* what he says from now on."

"Why? So we can live in misery forever?" I retort, already regretting the words as soon as they leave my mouth.

Chasm's face flashes with frustration and then he's crossing the room, grabbing onto my upper arms with careful control. He could hurt me on accident if he wasn't trying hard not to. There won't even be a bruise there when he removes his hands.

"If I have to fuck a hundred girls to keep you alive, I'll do it." I try to tear away from him, but he won't let me go. "No matter what it takes, we're going to keep you safe."

"So you'll do it by cheating on me?" I ask, and there they are. The tears are falling again. "Maxx will do it by loving my sister the way he was supposed to love me?"

"There are signs, Dakota!" Chasm screams back at me, almost like he's about to break in half. "If you look, you'll see them. All along, there were signs." He releases me and raises his brows, holding his hands out and up in placation. "*Think* about it."

"Think about what?!" I'm shouting at him now, fully aware that Justin is probably listening and howling with laughter. Seeing other people in distress really floats his boat. "That you and Lumen have 'private tutoring sessions' together all the time? That the day you dropped me off at the café to see my sister, you'd already arranged to pick Lumen up?" I'm huffing now; I'm in a rage. "Which, if you think about it, is really weird. She has her own fucking car!"

Chasm just blinks at me like he doesn't know what to say and then he purses his lips tight.

"Yeah, Naekkeo. Signs like that." He turns away from me and sits down on

the edge of my bed, fingers digging into the pretty white bedspread. His head hangs low, tension rolling off of him in waves.

“When was that video recorded?” I ask, my voice so soft that I turn around and repeat myself to make certain that he’s heard me. Tears are freely rolling down my cheeks, and I know if I went to Chasm, if I asked him to make it all better, he’d stroke my hair back and hold me tight.

I want that, even as I’m angry with him.

If Chasm felt he had to sleep with Lumen in order to save my family, he’d do it. I know that. Him cheating on me is better than someone I love being dead. But for him to have done it prior to Justin’s order? That makes no sense.

Do I need a second set of clues? One for Maxx and one for Chasm? There’s clue number one in this particular set. Chas screwed up and slept with Lumen all on his own? What garbage nonsense. He’s the most selfless person in the world.

I move over to stand beside him, his gaze on the toes of his shoes. He loves sneakers, so I’m not surprised to see that he’s got on a new pair of kicks with black and white striped soles.

“Shortly after the fire,” he whispers, and I feel sick. If he ... if he really slept with her, that means he slept with me afterward. More than once. I can’t believe that. I *won’t* believe that.

There must be a trick to all this; there has to be.

First Maxx? Now Chasm?

“How did Justin get ahold of it?” I ask, crossing my arms, but Chasm just shakes his head.

“He wasn’t meant to,” he whispers, and I just lose it. As with X, I’m expecting some sort of secret sign, some indication that I’m meant to play along instead of hurt, hurt, hurt. That’s all I’m doing right now, aching and bleeding. Chasm looks up and frowns so darkly, I actually take a step back. “Now, tell me what happened to you and why.”

“I don’t believe you cheated on me.” That’s what I say. His eyes go wide, and he shoves up to his feet, so angry that I don’t know what to make of it.

“What did you think was going to happen, Naekkeo? You knew what I was like when you first met me. Hell, I bragged about bringing girls back to your bedroom.” He’s ranting now, but I’m not listening. I’ve seen his heart; I don’t believe this is anything but an act.

And yet ... I'm still crying.

The grief doesn't just stir, it *screams*.

"Did you really think I was a virgin?" he asks, looking at me skeptically. "Come on, you're smarter than that." Chasm turns away from me and paces over to the window, jerking on it and cursing again when it won't open. He slams his fist into the jamb. "I need some fucking air."

I can't speak. Not only is there a video of him and Lumen that I refuse to watch, there's this conversation that's calling into question everything I believed was simple truth.

Even though I'm still crying, I push the feelings aside. If I let myself, I will literally drown in them. Besides, it hurts my ribs to cry. It hurts my face. Sniffling, I wrap my arms around myself and stare at Chasm's back. We're going to be in here until Justin decides to let us out.

Presumably that'll be tomorrow night for the party—for the murder of Veronica Fisher.

"I tried to kill Justin." I move over to the bed and sit down, lying back so that my legs are still draped over the edge. After a brief moment of hesitation, he comes over and sits beside me. When he lays back, I close my eyes and pretend we're still solid as a couple.

It's easier that way, to play pretend. *How can I miss him when he's in the same room as me? How can I miss Maxim? How can I miss Parrish already?* I just want my boys back. My boys. Mine. My one sure thing in this mess.

"You tried to kill him?" Chasm clarifies, and I nod, eyes still closed. "Then what?"

"He beat me up." I shrug one shoulder as Chasm leans over me, denting the mattress on my right side, his body practically draped over mine. My eyes fly open as he carefully examines the burns on my arm. "Gifts from Raúl." *Please get off of me*, I'm thinking as my heart races. "My face, my ribs. I'm okay now."

My breath escapes in a violent rush as he reaches down and carefully lifts my blouse to study the bruises on my midsection. My hands fly down and push my shirt back into place, but I can't control the way my heart pounds or the way I'm panting. My belly muscles contract, an embarrassing physical reaction to his nearness.

Chasm gives me a look, and then he leans down and kisses me. It's a brief brush of lips, just a featherlight touch.

“Justin wants us to stay engaged.” He whispers that to me before sitting up. Shouldn’t he be saying something like, *Justin needs to believe I slept with Lumen, play along*. Wouldn’t that be a better use of his words? “How badly are you hurt, really?”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.” I turn away from him, pillowing my head on my hands. Chasm doesn’t say anything, but he does lie back down behind me.

Time passes in silence and then shadows fall. Next thing I know, I’m asleep.

Chasm spends the rest of the night in my room, in my bed, but we don’t touch.

We might never touch each other that way again.

The title 'CHAPTER 13' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '13' is in pink. The text is set against a background of dark, gnarled tree branches and a large, dark green heart shape. The overall aesthetic is dark and moody.

CHAPTER 13

Delphine wakes us up in the morning, slipping into the bathroom with me and helping with my makeup after I take a shower. I'm appreciative even if I'm wary of her. The last thing I want right now is for Chasm to see the full extent of the damage that Justin inflicted.

Chas studies me suspiciously when I come out of the bathroom, dressed in my Daddy Dearest finest, hair in a chignon just the way Justin likes. Shall I call this look 'Justin-approved mode' the way I did with Chas and 'Seamus-approved mode'?

We head down to breakfast together, sitting side by side but worlds apart. I notice that Chas keeps looking over at me, but I don't acknowledge him.

"Aww, is my Princess upset?" Justin asks, reaching out to touch my cheek. I notice Raúl on the other side of the room, just *glaring* at me. He has a black eye, a split lip, and ... am I seeing that right? There are several smiley face burns on the backs of his hands. I shift my attention over to Justin.

"When are you going to give me my phone back?" I exhale when Justin raises a brow, and I extract the device from my pocket. "I mean, give me a signal. Or access to Wi-Fi." As if on cue, my phone explodes in a flurry of notifications.

I very quickly scan over them—and see that Justin has been texting everyone I know, even Sally which just pisses me all the way off. One message in particular catches my attention: it's from Chasm. It's that damn

video.

I put my phone away. I'm more than aware that Justin monitors everything I do on it, but I don't have to bask in his oily presence while I'm doing it, do I?

"Do you mind if I attend the party tonight?" Delphine asks, batting her lashes at me from across the table. "I know it's a high school party and all that, but I thought you and I could—"

"I'll be busy." The words are curt to the point of being rude, but I don't care. Delphine has made it clear where she stands. That is, she's not willing to do a damn thing to rock the boat, not even save me from being burned by Raúl's lighter. "Sorry."

"Why don't we do something together, a little mother-daughter bonding time?" I almost choke on Caroline's words. Mother-daughter? She has a fucking son that she doesn't give two shits about, a son that almost died after being kidnapped by her now-husband. "We could get our nails done today."

"If you're getting your nails done, take Mia with you. Hers look like shit." Justin stands up, offering Caroline a kiss on the cheek. He snatches her by her hair suddenly and then digs his tongue into her throat. She whimpers like she *likes* it, clawing at his shirt and popping a button.

I almost puke again. Seem to be doing that a lot lately. I look back down at my plate—fresh cinnamon rolls today—but I'm not hungry. Chasm, on the other hand, has eaten two.

"Here." Justin reaches into his pocket, withdraws his wallet, and pulls out a credit card. He tosses it beside Caroline's plate. "Some spending money for you girls." His smile is reminiscent of a crocodile as he takes off for the front door, pausing when Amin Volli walks in from the direction of the foyer.

Caroline, meanwhile, is staring at the credit card with lipstick smeared across her face, *seething*. Not that I necessarily blame her. Spending money? She's supposed to be his wife.

"Why don't you spend the day with me today, eh son?" Justin asks, giving Chas a cheeky wink. "Your father and I are meeting with our marketing team to discuss the public release of Milk Carton. Seeing as you're the heir apparent to it all, might as well come with."

He's the heir apparent? I don't even comment on the inherent sexism in that. I'd rather not go anyway.

I'm also not stupid enough to mistake this for anything other than a threat:

I have Chasm with me today, so don't mess up, Princess. It's implicit even if it's not explicit.

"I haven't seen any of your writing pass my desk as of late?" Mr. Volli queries, and Justin snorts, tossing a leather jacket over his shoulders. My father scowls at me.

"Mia's been acting out, but I'm sure she'll be all better tomorrow?" I nod at Justin's words, but on the inside, I'm seething as much as Caroline. "You could *really* use another chess lesson. Unfortunately, she has no talent for it," Justin says to Mr. Volli, almost apologetically. He disappears into the foyer as Chasm stands up from his chair.

"Just remember that I love you—always," Chasm repeats, and he doesn't bother to keep his voice down. He presses a kiss to my temple that I cherish even if I don't visibly respond to it. His mouth ... it feels like home and safety and comfort, like love and lust and truth.

Damn it.

"That's what all men say after they cheat," Caroline remarks with a sigh, as if she's speaking from experience. I don't pay her any attention. Her comment wasn't meant as consolation but as a dig. Chasm curls his hands into fists but doesn't retaliate, following after Justin.

"What happened to your face?" Mr. Volli asks Raúl, adjusting his bright orange bow tie as he chuckles. The latter man says nothing, but his dark eyes flick over to me with a murderous thunder.

"Get your things," Caroline says with a sigh, quickly pocketing the credit card. "We're leaving now."

Kidnapping Veronica Fisher seems like an easy task compared to spending the day with these two.

I slap a bandage over my spurting heart and do as I'm told.

For now.

The PlayStation nails I wanted—matte black with one of the controller's symbols on each finger, the logo on my thumb—were vetoed by Caroline. Actually, fourteen different designs were vetoed, and she ended up selecting a plain French mani-pedi for me.

I tried to play Justin against her, texting him and calling him Daddy and

pleading unashamedly for the nails I wanted. He did tell me that I should ask for my wants, didn't he? His response? *You do what your stepmother tells you, sweetie. She knows best. We all know your taste runs poor.*

So that's how I ended up bullied by Caroline for the rest of the day, forced from one shop to the next as she swiped that credit card for all it was worth. Which, apparently, was whatever she wanted it to be. There's no limit on the damn thing, not as far as I can see.

My phone burns like a hot coal in my pocket, tempting me to reach out to Tess, to the authorities, to Maxine. Most of all, to Parrish. He's the only boy left who hasn't 'cheated' on me. I mean, he asked Lumen to marry him, but he wasn't at all shy about the fact that it was an act.

Yet, I've learned my lesson far too well. Justin doesn't give second chances. If I try to call or run now, and I get caught, it's over for somebody I love—in this case, it's over for Chasm. Maybe it's even over for me if I piss him off too much.

I decide it's better to bide my time.

Chasm is waiting in my room when I get back to the house, having narrowly escaped a hair salon.

"They want me to dye my hair," I murmur to him, even though I know things are not the same between us. I can't help it: I'm panicking. My hair—the split black and lime green color that it's been for months now—is part of my identity. Caroline wanted to make me a *blonde* and then got into an argument with Justin who wants me to be a brunette. He also wants to chop it off into a bob. As of right now, it falls all the way to my lower back.

I sit down heavily on the bed beside Chasm, shaking with frustration. If Caroline hadn't gotten annoyed with Justin and hung up, I might very well be sporting my new hairdo tonight.

"Fuck." That's all Chasm says. I mean, it's an apt statement. Fuck is right.

The room goes silent.

"I better get ready for the party," I say with a sigh. If I'm supposedly burying my seventeen-year-old classmate tonight, I should be allowed to wear sweatpants and a hoodie.

Chasm catches my hand as I stand up, running his thumb over my knuckles, over the bandage that's still wrapping the wound on my palm.

"Can I change this out for you?" he asks gently, and ... oh god. The sound of his voice absolutely breaks my heart. I can't take it. Maybe ... maybe

tonight at the party, when we're out of Justin's earshot, Chasm can tell me what's actually going on? X, too.

It's against my better judgment, but I let him do it. I even let him guide me into the bathroom by the hand. My eyes slam shut against emotion as Chas washes me off and bandages me up again with a tenderness that can't be faked. No matter what happened with Lumen, he really does love me.

That won't matter though if he truly cheated on me. Sleeping with her to please Justin ... that's bad enough. But the story I'm being fed? That he slept with her of his own accord? If he managed to fool Justin, the proof must be there. Am I the idiot for not wanting to believe it?

"Weren't you warned about me, Little Sister? Weren't you warned against all of us?"

"If you're lying to me, too, then there's no point in worrying about any of it. If I can't trust you, who can I trust?"

We had that conversation all of two weeks ago. Two weeks. Man, life can change so damn quick, can't it? One minute, I'm a Banks living in New York. The next, I'm a Patterson living in Tess' place. Now, I'm a Prior trapped in Justin's clutches.

One minute, I feel like I've got this romance thing in the bag, like this is the one area of my life I don't have to worry about. The next? I don't know who to trust.

"Thanks," I murmur, and he sucks in a sharp, almost startled breath. His thumb finds the pulse in my wrist and rubs a gentle circle against the rapid flicker. My eyes lift up and find his, and it's my turn to pull in a sudden breath. "We were made for each other; you can't betray me."

I slowly pull my hand from his, but he doesn't let go at first. He clings there. He holds me in place, and it takes everything I have not to collapse against his strong chest.

"You and me, Dakota, we're a forever sort of thing." Chas lets go of me like I'm poisoned and takes a step back. But his eyes? I can't escape the intensity or the color. Precious gemstones in a beautifully masculine face. And that mouth of his ... criminal. Vicious. Ripe. Sweet. Dichotomous.

I slam the bathroom door to block the image, freeing myself from the rampant need in his expression.

I change into my new outfit and step out wearing plain white sweatpants, a matching hoodie, and pink sparkly designer tennis shoes that I'd never in a

million years pick out. Oh, and a beanie. It says *Daddy's Princess* on the front of it. Gag.

Chasm's eyes take me in with a fiery sweep, one that he doesn't bother to hide. I just stare back at him as he smiles.

"There's the Gamer Girl we know and love."

We. And love. In the present tense.

I somehow smile back, and it doesn't hurt nearly as much as the ones I'm forced to give to Justin.

"Except for the ... the, um, what the fuck is that? You're not really wearing something like that to a Whitehall party, are you?" He gestures at his head, and I frown. I want to hate him, but I can't. It's literally impossible.

X, on the other hand, seems determined to make me dislike him. Why is that, I wonder? He brings up Maxine constantly, insults me, pushes me away. Because they're different, that's why. Once Maxx has decided something, he commits to it fully. Chasm, on the other hand, is a protector at heart. This sort of duplicitous nonsense doesn't suit him. Working to get Parrish back, I was able to see both Maxx and Chasm at work, how they react to blackmail and pressure and impossible situations.

Chasm was never comfortable with any of it, almost panicked at times.

Maxx was a friggin' hard-ass.

"Let's be real with each other: even you can't pull that ugly hat off." Chas smirks at me.

My face and chest bloom with an angry blush, and I glare at Chasm even as he's smiling back at me like some sort of cheeky demon. What did I think he looked like when we first met? A vampire? My heart pangs at the memory of Chasm pushing me into the swimming pool. I want a time machine, damn it.

"I need something to tuck my hair into when we"—now I'm gesturing with my thumb, like I'm slitting my own throat—"you know, do that *thing*."

"That thing?" Chasm queries, crossing his arms. His tattooed biceps bulge with the movement, and I get the idea that maybe he, too, is using his time away from me to workout, the way Parrish did when he was in Justin's custody. He looks more—

"Ripped." I sigh. And then I freeze. Chasm blinks at me, frowns, peers down at his arms, making a show of studying them before he flexes and shows off his right bicep.

“Ripped? Yeah, I’ve been working out. You want to see if you can hang from this?”

I stare at him.

“You might wear eyeliner sometimes, but I swear, you’re a secret jock.”

“A jock?” Chasm chokes out as I push past him, grabbing this long black wool coat that Justin got me. It looks like something a person would only wear to *a)* a very conservative office job or *b)* to a funeral. And not in a good way. A funeral for a person who nobody liked, held in the rain, at a ten-minute rushed ceremony in a sterile beige room. That sort of funeral. “Nobody who’d ever met me would call me a jock.”

He's smiling as he grabs his jacket and follows after me out the bedroom door. There's some pep in his step. That annoys me. There's none in mine.

I glare at him, and he comes to a stop, frowning all over again.

“Naekkeo, *mianhae*,” he murmurs, and I choke on this hard knot of feelings in my throat. That means, *I’m sorry*. And the next thing ... it’s not goodnight, remember? “*Saranghae*.”

“Speaking to me in Korean isn’t getting you out of this.” I take off at a quicker pace, and he keeps up with me.

“You’ve got *Hangul* memorized, right?” he asks, referencing the Korean writing system, but I don’t respond. “You’ve had days all alone in that room to study; you better have it memorized.” I still refuse to look at him, but damn, he’s charming. “King Sejong—that is, a Korean king—he invented this alphabet. He was once quoted as saying something like, *a smart man can learn it in a morning, a stupid man can learn it in ten days*.”

I stop at the bottom of the stairs, coat slung over my arm. I’m not putting it on until I have to. I only brought it to use as a disguise. It is summer, after all, and relatively warm. Warm-ish. PNW warm.

“Why couldn’t you have talked about these things *before* I wanted to strangle you?” I whisper, still struggling to catch my breath. “I wanted you to teach me your language.”

“And I will,” Chasm promises, grabbing my hands and giving them a squeeze. It hurts when he touches me. I don’t know how to feel. He repeats himself in Korean. “I’ll teach you everything there is to know about *Hanguk*.” That last word is the actual name of his country, not the Americanized version. “We can go to Seoul and visit the palace; you can walk around in a *hanbok*.”

“Stop it,” I growl back at him. He isn’t allowed to do this to me; it isn’t fair. “You can’t just throw your charm at me and expect to be forgiven. You better tell me the truth or it’s over between us. You know that, right?” I don’t want to say that. I tell myself it’s more for Justin’s benefit than my own. But ... if he cheated on me for real, that *would* be the end of us.

“Don’t say that. Naekkeo, everything I’ve told you is the truth. I’m so fucking sorry.” He tries to pull me toward him, but I yank back and end up slamming into Justin.

“Whoa there, sweetheart.” He kisses the side of my head as I find my feet, and the gesture makes me physically ill. “What’s going on here between you two lovebirds?” Justin grabs both my shoulder and Chasm’s in a punishing grip in which he pretends to be fatherly but actually leaves deep purple bruises.

“None of your business,” I growl back, and he *really* doesn’t like that. His grip tightens even further and he leans in toward me, peering me up and down before he scowls.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks, but I just ... I assumed he knew since somebody unlocked my bedroom door. That, and he’s, you know, the one who *told* me I had to go to the party.

“To ... Camp Kellogg to see Veronica?” It comes out like a question.

“You look like a punk,” he tells me, blinking at me like I’m stupid. “No, worse: you look *homeless*.”

“I look homeless in designer sweats, a designer hoodie, and designer sneakers?” I query back, and he flashes a white grin at me. It’s so white, it hurts my eyes, I swear to god.

“No daughter of mine is going out looking like a vagrant. Get upstairs and put on a nice dress.” Menacing pause. “*Now*.” Justin gives me a small shove, and Chasm moves forward to catch me. The look he gives my father is one of careful calculation. It’s an assessment of risk: when, where, and how can I kill you? He would never make a mistake as stupid as the one I made.

And oh, it’s *ice-fucking-cold*, the stare of a patient deviant.

“Let it go,” I whisper into Chas’ ear, pushing away from him and heading up the stairs. Delphine is there to meet me, arms crossed and smiling.

“Need my help?” she asks, but before I can shake my head, her phone dings and she checks her messages. When she shows the screen to me, there’s a text from Justin. *Let your sister dress and style you. She actually has taste.*

Right. He's just down the stairs, but he insulted me via text. What a true Villainennial move (villain plus Millennial, remember?).

Delphine follows me into my room.

When I emerge, I'm dressed in a corset style midi dress in black. Paired with red heeled boots and a leather clutch, it's chic and modern and ... not comfortable in the least. My boobs feel like they might fall out of the top, and I don't understand how I'm supposed to *kidnap* someone and then dig a hole.

Goddamn it.

Chasm sees me first, his eyes widening slightly at the sight of me in such a ridiculous outfit. He lifts his hand to rub at the back of his head, a slight flush coloring his cheeks. He stares at me as I walk down the stairs, absorbing the image before he swallows hard and closes his eyes tight. Like he's committing me to memory. Like he isn't sure that he *should* be looking at me like that.

"Much better," Justin schmoozes as the doorbell rings. He moves over to answer it, feigning surprise. "Oh, look, it's the Schaeffers." He opens the door wide and grins. "Come in, please."

Danyella's parents—followed by freaking Danyella—step into the house, all dressed nicely for dinner.

"I'd forgotten that Mia had a date with her little boyfriend arranged in advance, so she won't be joining us until later. You still wanted to have your sleepover with Danyella, right honey?" Justin smiles at me in the way I wish he meant, like a father who only cares for his daughter's happiness.

"Of course, Daddy." I smile at him, hook a curtsy which only seems to weird everyone out more—I guess rich people don't curtsy, huh? whoops—and then sprint for the door. Danyella catches my gaze on the way out and she looks *freaked all the fuck out*.

Not sure what my return stare says, but probably something like, *I won't screw your family over, I promise*. I'm such a sucker. If I cared less, this would be a lot easier.

"Seamus is still joining us, isn't he?" I hear Danyella's mother ask before Chas closes the door behind us. "And the Wrights? They're up from Eugene again, aren't they?"

Shit.

As soon as I'm seated in Chasm's Porsche, I'm rubbing my hands up and down my face.

Yeah. So. If I do something tonight that Justin doesn't like, he's going to execute the Schaeffers. Maybe Maxx's parents. I'm not even sure if Chasm's dad is totally safe anymore.

My body melts into the seat, and I startle as Chasm leans over me, hooking my seat belt for me. Our eyes meet, and I can feel his warm breath on my cheek. Um. My lips ache to press into his, but I turn away, staring out the window at the old Vasquez place.

"He probably couldn't get anyone out of Laverne's house. Tess has been keeping the whole household on lockdown. If anyone goes out, she sends those bodyguards with them." He starts the car and we roll out the gate onto the street. I don't look behind us, at the park where I killed a person. Nope. No, no, no. "I wonder how he enticed the—"

Chasm slams on the brakes, hooking a sharp glance over his shoulder at a passing vehicle.

"Ah, fuck me." His groan of emotional agony puts me immediately on edge.

"What? What is it?" I'm panicking now as he swings a terrified gaze back in my direction. "Who was in that car, Chas? Tell me!"

He cringes and closes his eyes tight before he answers.

"Mr. Hearst." Oh. "And Lumen." Oh.

Why is he groaning like that? He sounds pained, like the idea of Lumen dying at Justin's hands is too big a burden to bear. I hate that. I'm tempted to invite him for another overnight visit so I can shave his eyebrows off while he's asleep. He would look way less hot without eyebrows. *God, I'm an expert in lying to myself, aren't I?*

"If Lumen's here, and you're scheduled to have a sleepover ..." Chas waits for me to make the connection, but I refuse. Okay, fine, so he's more upset that Lumen might stay the night with me and less upset that she might die. I can make that make sense in my preferred narrative, the one where he never cheated and this is all smoke and mirrors. "You shouldn't have to suffer her presence." He snorts. "Nobody should."

"Unless they're fucking her, eh?" I reply, and damn, it's like he's been struck in the face. He visibly flinches.

"Naekkeo, I'm not asking you to—"

"Stop calling me that." I don't look at him. I just stare straight ahead. As mad as I am with Lumen right now, I don't want her to die. I don't want her

dad to die—even if her parents are part of the reason I’m in this mess. Maybe if they’d never screwed with Justin in the first place, he wouldn’t be so ... so *crazed*. But no, I can’t blame them for his actions, only their own. In my opinion, they do deserve to pay for what they did, but killing the entire family isn’t the answer. “Just drive.”

“Yeah, well, don’t let her give you trouble tonight.”

“How did she feel?” I blurt in response. I shouldn’t have said that. I really, *really* shouldn’t have said that. I don’t want to know. I don’t.

“Huh?” he asks, and then he turns as white as a ghost. “Why did you just ask me that?”

“If you really cheated on me, I have the right to know all the details.” I fixate my gaze on the dash as he scrambles around for something to say.

“God, I need a drink,” he mutters, and then he presses the pedal to the floor and sends us rocketing through the night. After several minutes of silence, he reaches out and turns the music on, selecting the same K-pop station we used before. Maybe he’s trying to butter me up because both he and Parrish listen to some *really* crappy rap songs; this is not Chas’ jam.

The song that’s playing is *Love or Die* by TNX. Great. Totally. I mean, I love this song, but the lyrics are what you might call apropos for our current situation. Not in a good way either.

I don’t force the issue, fighting the urge to talk to him for the remainder of the drive. We still have our phones, but as soon as we get to the camp, we can ditch them. From what the boys have told me, service is spotty out there anyway.

Doesn’t mean there’s not a spy in the crowd. Doesn’t mean Amin Volli isn’t lurking. Certainly doesn’t mean there aren’t wired cameras or cameras with internal storage that can be looked at later.

We pull into a nearly full gravel parking lot, silver under the moon and stars. Tall pines frame the space and trails dotted with lanterns lead into the darkness. Our headlights sweep across Parrish, leaning up against the side of X’s Jeep Gladiator. There’s an empty space right next to it, closest to the trailhead. Nobody would dare park in a space that Parrish Vanguard reserved.

Except ... maybe Veronica.

Or Lumen.

We climb out in silence, but my eyes meet Parrish’s through the silver shadows, and I can see the pain apparent in them. I look away, leaving my

phone on the seat of the vehicle. It's relatively warm out tonight, but I drag the shitty coat with me anyway. Might need it seeing as I'm half-naked.

Parrish definitely notices, letting his smoldering stare take me in unashamedly. When he reaches up to rub his chin, highlighting the smirk on his face, I'm the one that's blushing.

"Let's walk a ways," X comments suddenly, appearing from around the front of the Jeep. He, too, immediately homes in on my outfit. He stares at me, blinking like he's coming out of a stupor, and then he shakes his head with a disparaging laugh and something unintelligible muttered under his breath.

I wish I could describe what it's like to be with all three of them again after the hearing. The beating. The imprisonment. It's not the same as it was before I woke that morning to find Nevaeh dead, but there's still a sense of belonging with these boys that I can't explain.

Two of them might be—*might* be—cheaters, but I still love them. I still feel loved.

When the four of us were together, our stars aligned. We became a constellation in an ebony sky. Just one, twinkling diamond in the vastness of space might not mean much to the wandering eye, but put a handful together and entire stories could be formed in the stars.

That was who we were: a story in the making.

It had a beginning, we were just barely surviving the middle, and somehow, we had to fight our way to the end together. We had to get past this arc in our epic tale to see where the magic between us might lead, to see what spells we might weave in stardust.

My eyes meet Maxx's, and I swear that I see him waver. What clue number is this? Does it even matter if he won't give up his secrets?

Already, I was close to tears. Now, I feel them falling without my permission. My hand comes up automatically to dash them away and X catches it, staring at the bandage with such wide eyes that I can see his whites in the dark.

"What happened here?" he breathes as Parrish quickly moves up beside me. I shake my head.

"You're right: we should take a walk." I turn from the boys, glad for the lantern lights illuminating the path but wishing I had a regular ol' flashlight. One is produced from behind me and I look back to see Maxx holding it out.

He clicks it on with his thumb before I take it.

Just beyond the trees to our left, I can feel the heat of a bonfire, smell the smoke, hear the laughter and the music. We avoid that area, continuing on to a deserted spot in the dark. There's a cluster of picnic tables facing the lake. I'm surprised that there's nobody skinny dipping until I remember that this is the Pacific Northwest. It might be summer, but it's night, and we're in Washington state. That shit is cold.

"Are we clear?" Parrish demands, hands jammed into his pockets. He looks *furios* but at whom and why, I don't know. At Chasm? Probably. If he was mad at Maxx, he'll be furious with Chasm. Parrish is an equal opportunity ass-chewer.

X removes the bug detector from his bag, scanning the area, our persons, the area again. He puts it away, seemingly satisfied. It feels like such hollow protection now, but it's all we've got. "*I'm a hacker, Princess, and you're an idiot.*" If I think too hard about that statement, the situation feels hopeless.

"Clear." X exhales and sinks down onto the edge of a picnic table. He looks exhausted, shadows under his eyes, a tightness in his cheeks and forehead. He lifts his head up to look at me, clearly waiting for an explanation. "We haven't heard from Chas since yesterday. What the fuck is going on?"

"Are you okay?" Parrish asks me, ignoring practical concerns in favor of my feelings. I'm still silently crying, and he uses the long ends of his oh so preppy sweater to swipe the tears away. I lean into his touch, eyes closing, and then he's pulling me into a tight hug and warming me up from the inside out.

"Should we give them a minute?" Chasm asks, sounding distressed, and I get really freaking angry all of a sudden.

"Why are you still pretending?" I demand, reluctantly pulling back from Parrish. It smells nice out here, like earth and pine and grass, but Parrish's clean laundry and clover scent overpowers it all. I could sniff him out like a creepy simping bloodhound. "We're clear, right? Let's talk frankly."

"Where have you been?" X demands again, and the authoritative tone in his voice irks me so bad, I almost pick up a rock and peg him with it. "What happened to your hand?"

Hmph.

Fine, you prick. You want to hear it all? Let's just get this out there.

I'm a failure. I failed to protect you, to protect all of us. How stupid could I be? Why would I ever believe he would give me a loaded gun?

"I tried to shoot Justin, but he tricked me. The gun was empty, and then he beat the shit out of me before Raúl dragged me to my room by my hair and burned me with his lighter." I sound so unbelievably sad as I'm talking. I try to adjust the tone of my voice; it was meant to come out a bit snippy. Doesn't seem my vocal cords are capable of it though.

"What?" Maxx hisses, coming toward me. He's dressed in a pair of dark green sweatpants with the word *Oregon* in yellow on the side of one leg (university gear, no doubt) along with a matching hoodie and some black sneakers, the epitome of the handsome collegiate athlete. "When was this?"

"That's it. I'm done." Parrish moves up to me, pulling me back into his arms. "I'm going back with you tonight, and I'm going to kill himself. Maxx managed to get ahold of one of his dads' guns. Let's just do this and be done."

"We are not fucking charging in there with guns, Parrish!" Chasm yells back at him, like this is a conversation they might've had multiple times in the last week. "Whether you like him or not, Justin Prior is a genius. A very, very careful genius. He has people all over that property waiting to kill us all." He gestures angrily at the three of them while he argues. "Oh, and Dakota, he's got a *plant* in the FBI. Did you know that? An agent watching the house."

"How ..." I don't even respond to that. Why would I? Seems sort of obvious at this point. I'm not sure where it all came from, but Justin Prior has a *lot* of money. He could bribe anyone he wanted, anyone that was bribable.

Then there are certain people who ... My eyes meet Maxx's. He's not talking, just staring at me. The darkness seems to close in around us as I stare back at him, like it's just the two of us out here, like we are the couple in all of this dealing with side characters.

That's how he makes me feel, even now, like me and Maxim Wright, we're fated.

His face softens slightly before he curses and turns away, putting a hand over his mouth. He stays that way for a minute before dropping his arm by his side.

"Chas is right: if we march into Justin's house with guns, we'll end up dead. He's the type to kill Dakota in the last hour as a final fuck you."

Maxx's voice is firm, like he's more than done having this discussion. "And if she doesn't go back after this, we're *all* dead: the Banks, Tess, Kimber ... most importantly, Maxine."

I could kill him. Also, I appreciate him looking out for my sister. Again, I could kill him.

"I'm not sacrificing any of you for my freedom." I heft my chin in the air, so annoyed with two of these boys that I have no problem throwing my superior moral air about. *Heh*. Superior moral air? Wow. Maybe Mr. Volli is right and I should totally scale back my writing? Mmm. Nah. "Frankly, it's just not worth it." Inhale, exhale. I am calm. "Now, again, we're all alone out here, zero tech. Can you *please* tell me what's going on? Chasm didn't sleep with Lumen, and Maxx isn't dating Maxine." I don't want to describe the looks that pass over the faces of the aforementioned men. They're not pretty. Actually, they're pitying, as if something about this situation is pitiful.

As if *I* am pitiful.

"Dakota, please don't keep doing this," Chasm begs, holding his hands together in prayer. He even shakes them at me in supplication. He says an entire sentence in Korean of which I understand nothing at all. "This isn't the end for us unless you want it to be. Even Justin wants us together." He offers a hoarse laugh, like this whole thing is just one, big joke.

I can only stand looking at him for so long. Luckily, Parrish is there, stepping up and taking me by the hand.

"I love Maxine. I didn't mean to mess with you, Kota, but I didn't have much choice. I'll do anything to protect the girl I love." Maxx won't even look at me as he talks.

"Even fuck her sister?" I snap back at him, and he smiles grimly.

"Even that."

I slip my hand from Parrish's, half-jogging to the edge of the trees. When I come out of them, I'm in a field of wildflowers, purple and white blossoms teasing my bare legs as I head in the direction of the fire. *Please don't let there be ticks out here*, I think before I remember that ticks are pretty rare around here. Also, I don't really care about ticks at all. Ticks are nothing. My heart is broken, and it hurts so damn bad, it's like having a broken bone, the two halves grinding together. I can feel the pain in my teeth, in my tongue, in my toes. There's not a single part of my body that's unaffected.

"Little Sister, *jebal*." Chasm comes around front of me and kneels down,

grasping onto my hands. I recognize that last word. Pretty sure it's a desperate sort of *please*, like he's begging me. "I'm sorry you have to hurt like this, just wait a little longer. The only way we can get through this is together."

"Friends forever." That's my response because, apparently, I'm in a mood. "I have an idea." I'm still wiping tears from my face when I take my hands from his, slipping around him and hurrying into the ring of light cast by the bonfire.

Right away, I feel eyes on me. Some people point their phones in my direction, and I wonder if they've got service, if they're filming me for Justin, or ... if they're maybe just drunk and recording everything?

Philippa Deveraux—you know, the brunette whose name I can never remember—is vomiting into a bush. Gavin is flirting with some guy who looks way too old to be a Whitehall student, and Antonio is shamelessly hitting on girls.

"What's the plan?" Chasm asks, lifting up the edge of his lip in an almost growl as he steps out beside me. Parrish appears on my other side, and even if one of them is possibly-maybe-he-can't-be-a-cheater-please-no, I don't care. I feel stronger, better.

"What does Veronica usually drink?" I whisper, hoping the boys are familiar with her partying habits. They seemed to be before, like they knew everything about their Whitehall classmates, every dirty little secret.

"Whatever makes her feel grown-up and wealthy." It's Maxx who answers me, coming out of the waist-high grass—well, waist-high to me, only thigh-high to him—to stand beside Chasm. "Whiskey, especially if it's Scotch. Or Vodka, especially if it's Ukrainian. Why?"

I inhale deeply, slapping my clutch into Chasm's hands. He seems surprised.

"Only Chasm and I are meant to handle Veronica. You guys should stay away from us while we're doing this." I look over at Parrish, and he meets my gaze with worried eyes and a tight, angry Prince Sloth frown. He wants to scold me, tell me to believe in his idiot friends. He wants to kiss me. Probably, he's remembering that we're both on birth control now, so we could ... Ahem. "I'm going to antagonize her, then dump her drink. Chasm is going to tell her not to make a big thing of it, and offer out his untouched drink which, obviously, will already be spiked with the sleeping pills."

“Or Chasm and I could hold her down while Parrish shoves the pills down her throat. Don’t make this unnecessarily complicated,” Maxx gripes, and I turn a glare on him. He’s not looking at me though. Instead, he’s staring across the bonfire in Veronica’s direction. She has a drink in hand, an equally hideous dress to the one she had on the other night, and she’s snickering and snorting with an assorted array of designer-clad girlfriends. “If it were up to me, I wouldn’t bother executing this whole stupid plan. I’d just execute *her* and be done with it.”

I whip a horrified glare in his direction; he’s fucking serious.

“Maxim Wright!” I hiss-whisper, eyes going wide. “Don’t talk like that.”

He returns my stare with a mulish one of his own.

“Your safety—and especially Maxie’s safety—is too important to risk for the sake of Veronica Fisher. She tried to shove you off a three-story building, remember? She cut off your clothes and livestreamed it. She’s not worthy of the air she breathes.”

I stare at him, and he stares at me, and I start to get so hot under my barely-there dress that I wish I were wearing nothing at all. *And lying next to Maxx on the forest floor.* I slap both hands over my cheeks.

“Stop it, Dakota,” I whisper, and all three boys exchange looks before Chasm grins big.

“I knew you were still in there somewhere,” he teases, but hearing him say that just makes me feel ... sad. I want to go back to the night we found Parrish, when the three of us were sleeping in his room and talking so late into the night that it became early morning.

I want to go back to gaming, just the four of us. I want that threesome after prom. I want ... even more than that.

One step at a time. Justin might have an array of valuable hostages in his palace, but he can’t keep inviting people over for dinner night after night. One time, one day soon, he won’t be holding anyone hostage, and I’ll have a brief moment where I can tell someone—probably Agent Takahashi—the truth, and it’ll be over in a different way.

But, if I were really that confident in Justin going down without dragging other people along with him, I’d have gone this route from the start. Really, murder was a better option.

“C’est la vie.” I wave my hand in the air, and Chasm snorts again.

“No wonder I liked you from the start—you’re as weird as they get.” I

can't acknowledge what he's just said, or I'll have a total breakdown. But if I just let it linger inside of me? It feels pretty good. "Alright, fine. Let's execute this plan."

Parrish pulls out a plastic bag from inside the pocket of his jeans. Paired with the gray crewneck sweater, his usual Baphomet necklace, and his air of inherent superiority, his bumptious royal persona is holding strong tonight.

"Getting access to Tess' sleeping pills was a pain in the ass. Instead, we've got Benzos, stolen from my dad's office." Parrish chuckles, and he and Chasm share this maniacally deviant look that makes feminine parts of me purr ... and also consider running very, very far away. "Anyway"—Parrish waves his hand lackadaisically—"Chas has double and triple checked the math; this should put her to sleep without killing her."

There's such a small amount in that baggy, it seems insignificant. But what if we did overdo it? What if something happened to Veronica? There's no love lost between me and that girl, but I definitely don't want to be responsible for her death.

"I've mapped the cameras," X explains quietly. Even if Justin could see us through some of the other phones, there's nobody around to hear us. "You and Chas are going to pull into the leftmost garage door at Laverne's place, closest to the house; we'll leave the party early so it doesn't seem like we're leaving with you. Be careful in the garage: there's a hidden camera as well as a wired one."

Oh, wow. They really have planned this whole thing out, haven't they? I'm ridiculously pleased by that. Somehow, it feels like another clue. *Both X and Chasm are faking it. They have to be. It's the only thing that makes sense.* I truly believe I know them *that* well.

If it turns out I'm wrong, then I never belonged with them in the first place.
Deep exhale.

"You guys know about the wired cameras?" I'm looking at Maxx, wondering if I'm the only one who didn't think of that sooner.

"We do now." That's all Maxx says before diving back into the specifics of our mission. "Follow Chas' lead, and don't talk about *anything* you wouldn't want Justin to know."

"How long will she be out for once she takes that?" I ask, smoothing my hands down the front of my dress. It didn't escape my notice that all three boys were *very* pleased with my outfit. Even if I don't like to dress up

personally, Delphine's hair and makeup skills are worthy of the silver screen.

"That's an interesting outfit choice," Parrish remarks when he notices me fidgeting with the dress. "Haute couture for burying corpses?"

"We're not *actually* burying a corpse," I mutter, but I don't even know why I'm defending the damn dress. "I didn't pick this out; I didn't choose to wear it. I was intending on coming here in sweatpants and a hoodie."

"And a sparkly pink beanie that says *Daddy's Princess*," Chasm adds, snorting. "You guys should've seen her in it; it was irony at its finest."

"Yeah, well, Justin doesn't exactly let me wear VTuber gear or anime tees." I gesture at my chest which only seems to draw their collective attention to my breasts.

Even—*especially*—Maxx's.

He catches himself after a second, and his eyes look up at mine in surprise.

"Fuck, I'm a bastard, aren't I? I'm dating the older sister but can't forget what the younger sister looks like in bed."

My mouth drops open.

"Did he really just say that?" Chasm asks, looking to Parrish with narrowed eyes.

"He really just did because he's a fucking asshole." Parrish turns to me, and his gaze gets caught on my body all over again. Our eyes meet, and he smiles, nice and slow and terrible. "Why does it feel like it's been forever since we had sex?" He cocks his head to the side, necklace swaying, and then points at me. "Oh, did you forget we were both on birth control now?"

"I'm going to stab you with a very pointy stick," I growl at him. My life is horrible. I want to be angry and sad and frustrated. How dare he try to cheer me up? Parrish's dirty smile gets even wider.

"We have to take our moments where we can, never know when Justin or Caroline might kill us and that'll be the end." He snaps his fingers at me. "Come here, Gamer Girl."

"After you snapped at me?" I ignore him. We're kidnapping somebody tonight, and even if we know that we're not going to hurt her, Veronica doesn't know that. She might be terrified, might truly fear for her life in a way that few people ever understand. "No, thank you."

"If these guys are both cheaters, it's just you and me now, right?" Parrish comes over to stand closer to me, and his face is deadly serious. "If that's the case, if they're telling the truth like they claim to be, it's just us, Dakota."

I'm tongue-tied by both the pain and the perfection of what he's said, but when he reaches for my hand again, I let him take it.

"Where are you going?" X snaps as we walk past. Chasm is so crestfallen that I want to run back and launch myself into his arms.

"To have a minute to ourselves," Parrish says, and then he throws an imperious look over his shoulder. Firelight catches the beautiful planes of his face. "The way we used to, and the way we're going to forever after when all this shit is over."

He pulls on my arm, and then we're running back through the wildflower field in the direction of the lake. Parrish directs me over to a cabin and lets us in. Personally, I'm a bit creeped out that it's unlocked and instantly wary. See? My life can't even be fun anymore; I suspect everyone and everything all the time.

"What if he's watching us in here?" I whisper, but Parrish just shrugs.

"So what?" he asks, moving over to a table and lighting a candle. No, not just one candle, dozens of them. Pretty black ones. I get the idea that maybe this moment isn't quite as organic as I thought it was, and I'm okay with that. Parrish planned to bring me in here? Romantic? Or does that make him a perv? Both, probably. "Let that fucked-up pervert watch." His lip is curled when he turns back around to look at me, hands on his hips. "We're not doing anything against his orders."

"He hasn't *explicitly* said I can't be with you, but he sort of implied it. Many times over. How much of a risk do we want to take?"

"I'd risk everything to be with you," he tells me, and my heart melts. It's more than just a line. This is the guy who broke his heart open to me more than once, spilled the rawest words I've ever heard from another human being. I'm already choked up. "Dakota, no matter what happens, you know how this ends?" He gestures between the two of us. "Me and you. If Justin ..." Here he trails off and exhales. Something profound is coming, I'm sure of it. "If he ever hurt you, I'd kill him even if it meant losing my own life. If I die, then I'll take this perfect love for you into the next life. In the next hundred lives. In *infinite* cycles of rebirth."

"You will say literally anything to get laid, won't you?" I whisper back because I'm not admitting how much I loved that cheesy line. Parrish knows I like it whether I admit it or not. The slow simmer of his smile confirms the truth of that.

He stalks toward me, limned in the candles' light from behind, bathed in shadows from the front.

Parrish's warm hands press gently against either side of my neck before he slides them back and under my hair, tangling his fingers together. He leans down, putting his forehead to mine.

"I didn't bring you here to have sex." The words are whispered in such a way that it seems like, perhaps, he means just the opposite of that.

"You didn't?" I ask skeptically, reaching up and curling my fingers around his forearms. I give them a yank, but if he doesn't intend on going anywhere, I'm not getting him to move without asking. "Why not?"

"Well." Parrish chuckles, the sound low and hot. "I wouldn't be against it." A pause, a shift of those beautiful eyes to the side in the dark. "I mean, I was hoping for it, but I don't want to pressure you." He looks back at me, and his lips purse into a tight, thin line. I know then that we're going to talk about it first.

Talk about ... *them* first.

"Do we have to?" I don't mean it the way it sounds, and one of Parrish's brows goes up. "Pear-Pear." I adjust my hands so that I'm gripping the front of his shirt. "Not the sex, I mean Chasm and Maxx. I don't want to talk about them."

Parrish releases me and moves over to one of the beds—there are two twins on either side of the doorway—and takes a seat. He tugs me down beside him and turns, looking me in the eyes with an impossibly honest expression on his face.

"Who else are you going to talk to about this then?" he probes, and I can tell by the tone of his voice that it's a serious question. "Maxine?" A pause. "Saffron." More like a period at the end of her name. He holds a grudge against her for kidnapping me, proof of his undying loyalty toward my bio mom. "Tess? Do you want to talk to Tess?"

I rear back from him like I've been slapped.

"Tess and I are making progress, but I'm not going to tell her that Chas and X cheated on me; she'd never forgive them."

"Should she?" Parrish asks, pulling me closer so that he can see my face in the flickering candlelight. "If they're telling the truth"—an annoyed pause on his part—"then should she?"

"Do *you* know if they're telling the truth?" I'm hoping desperately that

there's someone in my trio of asshole boyfriends that will talk to me here. "We've always told the truth away from the tech. Why is this any different?" My eyes water again, but I ignore them, blinking rapidly to clear the tears away.

"I ... know some of it." He's hedging nervously. I don't buy it. He knows. He knows, too, and even he won't tell me the truth for whatever reason.

"You three are impossible."

I stand up and Parrish follows, looking panicked.

"Do you think I want to be engaged to *Lumen*?" Parrish grates out, but I just shake my head. I never let that lie get to me, and he's been honest from moment one: this is a trick, a scheme, another move on the chessboard.

"I don't care about that." Lie. I do. But not in the same way. "I care about ..." Ugh. I can't make myself say it.

"Care if they're in love with or have had sex with—or both—other girls?" Parrish fills in for me, and I nod. I can't speak. See? This is why I didn't want to talk about this; it's killing the mood. And believe me: there was a *mood*. We walked through wildflowers in the moonlight. He prepared this cabin for me. We have chemistry.

Most importantly, we're in love.

"Worst case scenario, you have me," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "That's it. That's all I can say right now. Just ... trust me, even if you can't trust them. Tell me how you feel. Talk to me. Hell, let's book a rage room and go destroy some old TVs or something." Oh. A rage room. One of those places where you can go, rent a room filled with junk, and destroy it all with sledgehammers and baseball bats. Very therapeutic. Well, so I hear. I've never been to one. "Now ..." A groan escapes me as Parrish's voice drops another octave. He was serious before. He's *dead* serious now.

"Now, what?" I whisper, but I know.

"You tried to kill him? Gamer Girl, I *told* you that I would do it." I try to move away from Parrish, but he doesn't let me go. Instead, he pulls me in close and wraps his arms around me, resting his chin on my head as I tuck into him. For the first time in days, I let go. I let him hold me and all the burdens strapped to my shoulders. "He hurt you bad this time, didn't he?"

Parrish isn't just talking about the physical pain.

He rubs my back in slow, comforting circles until I lift my face up to his. Whatever he sees there he takes as invitation to kiss me. His lips brush mine,

leaving a tingle in their wake. And then he kisses me again, and it's much harder, more urgent.

My hands push up and under his shirt, nails scraping along the flat planes of his lower abs. When I first met him, I thought he had stupid muscles. Maybe ... they're less stupid now. I go right for his nipples, and his eyes widen.

"Good God, Gamer Girl," he murmurs, and I snort.

"Alliteration."

Our mouths come together in a spark of heat, his hands wrapping my hips. Parrish drags me as tightly against his front as he can get me, his tongue taking over mine, his body responding so violently to my presence that it's like being wrapped up in a firestorm. As my fingers wander his chest, I can feel his scars—nineteen tick marks from nineteen horrible days. If they still hurt, he doesn't let on.

"Parrish," I murmur, but he's sitting down hard on the side of the bed, undoing his pants with one hand and encouraging me to straddle his legs with the other. I take a seat on his thighs, looking down as he frees himself and then tips my chin up so that our eyes meet.

"Too fast?" he asks, breathing hard.

Oh no. Not fast enough.

I don't say that though, just stand back up and drop my panties to the cabin floor.

When I climb back onto his lap, I brace my knees on the bed on either side of him, skirts hitched up to my hips. I lean in close, one hand on the side of his strong neck. Even ... even if it is just me and Parrish, that's okay. I accept that.

I don't realize that I say it out loud until his eyes widen and he leans away from me.

"You mean that?" he asks, a strange shadow passing over his face. Something hardens in his expression and he touches his hand to the side of my neck the same way I'm doing to him. Our foreheads come together naturally, and I close my eyes with a shuddering breath. "If it's all four of us, that's okay, too. I accept that."

My breath hitches with a swallowed cry, but I cover it up by kissing him.

I wouldn't be surprised if magic were to swirl around us, carrying my skirts and our hair into a supernatural breeze. Kissing Parrish Vanguard truly

is like kissing a prince. And it's not because he's handsome. And it's not because he's wealthy.

It's his heart. It's well-guarded, but now that I know him better, I understand why: it's precious. This boy feels things at such a deep, intense level, he has a need for all those walls he puts up. I feel like, somehow, along the way, I crashed through them all.

He drops his hand from my neck, cupping my waist. Our mouths are pressed together, sharing breaths, his hands lazily working their way up my sides until he finds my ribcage. Parrish fiddles with my dress and—much like I suspected—it doesn't take much to tug it down. My breasts are exposed to the warm air of the cabin, and I gasp against his lips.

“Are you ready for this?” he asks me, always checking in. I brush some of his pretty hair off his forehead, the candlelight catching the honeyed highlights. I'd originally assumed he dyed his hair, but now I know that the color is natural.

“Ready.” I smile. I blush, too, but hopefully he can't see that.

You're supposed to kidnap your classmate tonight, my broken brain reminds me. But in here, like this, with shadows and candlelight? Justin and the real-world danger he represents, it all feels like a dark and terrible fairy tale.

In here, that's what's real.

“I brought lube.” Parrish points at the small, rough-hewn nightstand next to the bed. I look over to see that he's really thought of everything: there's a bottle of lube, some condoms, some snacks and drinks. I look back to him and raise a brow.

“I don't think we need any?” It comes out like a question, but it's not. It's a fact.

“Mm.” Parrish pulls my hips forward so that our bare bodies brush together beneath my skirts. I exhale, letting my head hang back, my hands locked onto his shoulders. I'm probably hurting him, digging my boring manicure into his sweater.

“Wait.” I lift my head back up suddenly, grabbing at his sweater. As soon as he realizes what I'm doing, he helps me tear it off, chucking it aside as I sweep my palms down the front of his body. I make sure to brush my palms over his nipples, studying the expression on his face. He curls his lip in a half-growl, but no sound comes out, like he might be holding his breath. “Did

you miss me?" I ask, finding the length of him beneath my skirts and giving his shaft a squeeze.

"Gamer Girl, I miss you even when you're right in front of me. That's how far-gone I am." He kisses me again, his tongue slipping between my lips, and then he ... surrenders. He lets me take over the case, my fingers teasing his body until his hips are coming up off the mattress.

"Naked," I command imperiously, trying to put on a Sloth Queen crown to join him in his delicious cavalier apathy. "Now."

Parrish smirks at me, hefting me up by the hips and causing this very embarrassing, very feminine gasp to spill from my mouth. He sets me on my feet, stands up unashamedly, and then shoves his pants down to the floor. He bends down, yanking his shoes off, his socks, stepping out of his pant legs. While he undresses, he stares at me.

We don't talk; we just observe. There's intimacy in that, the looking and the waiting, in the anticipation. It's all important.

"Happy?" he asks, rising to his full height and holding his arms out to either side of his body. Not only is he a canvas, he's a reminder. A reminder of how all this started: a kidnapped girl meets a milk chugging asshole. A reminder that first impressions aren't always what they seem: we hated each other. A reminder of all we fought for and gained. The scars on his chest pick up the light, and I can't resist stepping forward to run a finger down one of them. "We've survived some shit, haven't we?"

His voice is so soft that it touches something deep inside me, a tiny flicker of hope that I thought had gone out. No matter what: I *must* protect that flame.

"Thrilled." My voice is thick with desire as I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him violently, passionately, with everything that I have. Parrish pulls me back down to the bed, encouraging me to straddle his naked body while I remain fully clothed. Err, mostly clothed. My panties are gone, and my breasts are bare, and I feel beautiful when he looks at me.

We kiss again, long and languorous, like we have all the time in the world. Eyes closed, hands roaming, bodies gently knocking together without penetration.

I crack my lids just to make sure his eyes are still closed, and then I adjust myself so that I'm poised right above him. Our first time without a condom. *Responsibly* without a condom.

I lower my hips until the tip of him is right there at the heat between my thighs. That's when his eyes open, and he looks me straight in the face while I lower my body onto his. Or rather, his into mine. He feels warmer somehow, a hot strike of lighting between my legs.

My breath rushes out as I take my time settling down, until our bodies are well-acquainted with one another. I'm panting now, but I'm not moving. Not sure that I can.

Parrish's eyes narrow to mischievous slits, and he tilts his head to the side, kissing and sucking on the side of my neck until a loud, satisfied groan escapes me. Pretty sure there's nobody around to hear. I mean, I hope like hell there's nobody around to hear.

"I love you, Dakota." He's serious when he says it, too, like he needs to make sure I understand that. "Everything I do, it's for you." Somehow that feels like a hint—a big one—and it makes my heart soar. Even if it's not supposed to put those feathers of hope in my soul, it does. I grow wings.

My arms fly around Parrish's neck, until I'm hugging him tightly to me. He does the same, wrapping me up in his strong embrace. That's when I start to move, grinding my body against his. The sounds he makes, oh god, I eat those up. Literally. My mouth moves to his, and I kiss the groans of pleasure away, swallowing them whole as I move faster, harder, faster, harder.

With a growl of frustration, he rolls us over until he's on top and the lumpy camp mattress is underneath me. His pretty tattooed fingers swipe hair off my forehead just before he cups my face, kisses the shit out of me, and drives in *deep*.

Now I'm the one making strange sounds, and he's kissing them away. His hands skim up and underneath my skirts, fingertips drawing tiny flames along the outside of my naked thighs.

"I love this dress," he tells me, his voice low and hot. "But I also hate this dress." He sits up, helping me pull the damn thing over my head so that we can toss it aside. Oh. That feels so much better. Parrish braces his forearms on either side of me, his bare body and my bare body pressed tight together. He looks down at me with a smirk, one that I'm sure will haunt me for the rest of the night. Into my dreams. Will help convince me it's worth it to get out of bed in the morning.

I twine my arms around his neck again, allowing myself to relax even against my better judgment.

Parrish takes over, using his body to pleasure my own. He even sneaks a hand between us, finding my clit and making me bite my lip when he gently strokes it with his thumb.

My eyes are half-closed, but I can see the specter of him in the flickering darkness, his pretty mouth shiny from kissing, his chest and arms covered in his and Chas' artwork. *Chas*. I shove the thought aside violently, meeting Parrish's movements with my own, my ass coming up off the bed.

It's quick and hot and messy when he finishes.

"Shit." He's cursing now as he pulls out and lays alongside me, his hand finding its way back between my legs. When that ardent mouth of his touches my bare nipple, I can't hold back a small scream—especially when he puts two fingers inside of me. We're both panting and kissing when I finish, and I'm glad for it because my second scream is even *louder* than the first, swallowed up by Parrish's insouciant mouth.

My body shudders, fighting the rush of pleasure until it breaks, and then I'm boneless and uncaring about the small, uncomfortable mattress we're lying on. I just want to stay here forever. I turn toward him, letting him envelop me in his arms, and I breathe peacefully for the first time in weeks.

Since that horrible morning I woke up to find Nevaeh dead—to find thirteen other people dead—since Maxx betrayed me, since Justin beat Delphine, since he beat me, since Chas claimed to have cheated. I've at least found a small whisper of peace in a world of screams.

"We're close to the end, I can feel it," Parrish whispers roughly against my hair. "You never lose a game, right? You always get the high score. You always finish off the final boss. What makes this any different?"

I don't tell him what, surely, we both know to be true.

This isn't a game. It's real life. And in real life ... consequences are dire.

Sometimes, bad things happen even when intentions are good. Even when they're the best.

Whether by accident or intent, the results are the same.

Parrish is the first to sit up, reaching for one of the sodas on the nightstand. He cracks the top and offers it out to me first. I take it with a shaking hand, trying my best to ignore the smug smile on his face.

"Wipe that cocky look away, Mr. Vanguard," I murmur before taking a sip, and he laughs.

"If making you feel good causes me to get cocky, so what?" He sits up a

little more, completely and utterly naked, a tattooed god bathed in firelight. “I *like* making you feel good, Gamer Girl. It’s all I seem to want to do.”

“And if making me feel good makes you feel good, well then, that’s just an innocent byproduct?” I tease and he grins at me, propping one knee up and resting his elbow against it. He pillows his head in those dangerously idle fingers of his, watching as I take another drink and offer the can out to him. “These are pretty nice sheets for a camp bed.”

I only say that last thing to clear the heated fog that’s suddenly taken over the cabin’s atmosphere.

“They better be. They’re fifteen-hundred thread count; I stole them off Amelia’s bed.” Parrish huffs out a breath, causing his hair to flutter across his forehead.

“How did you and Maxx manage to escape Tess?” I ask, and if my words falter on the name *Maxx*, Parrish pretends not to notice. He studies me, his eyes a dark brown in the strange light. I feel like squirming under his gaze, even more so because I know how different things are between us now.

Not the sex-without-a-condom thing, but our relationship. Because we’ve defined it. Because we both know that Maxx and Chasm don’t factor into us staying together—for better or worse.

“Did we?” he asks, hitching a shoulder in a lazy shrug just before he yawns dramatically. Then he scratches lazily at his rock-hard abs, and I have to look away to maintain my composure. Parrish snatches the can from my fingers and puts his mouth way too close to my ear for comfort. “She seems awfully sharp as of late. Only time will tell if she knows we flew the coop.” He sits back and I dare to glance his way, watching as he wafts his fingers lazily in the air, holding the can with the other hand. “I’ll deal with the consequences—whatever they may be—later.”

“I’m starting to wonder if we’re as smart as we think we are. There’s no way that Tess hasn’t told someone about her suspicions.” I tuck my knees up and put my arms around them, suddenly aware that sex this time was different.

I ... have to clean up. Ahem. My cheeks flush—right on schedule—but I keep my gaze forward and don’t look at Parrish.

“Unless she’s plotting against Justin in her own way.” Parrish finishes off the soda and stands up. My gaze is drawn to his firm, perky ass, and I sigh in such a way that he hooks a pompous look over his shoulder. “Stay there; I

brought supplies.”

Parrish squats next to the other bed, pulling out a small duffel bag. He rummages around in it as I consider calling Tess anyway. Danyella and Lumen and Delphine be damned. Screw Seamus. Screw the Wrights.

But fuck.

I’m so damn weak.

I can’t run to the FBI knowing they’ll all die.

I scoot to the edge of the bed as Parrish returns to my side with some wet wipes, new underwear that he clearly stole from my room, a panty liner, and a smile.

“Here.” He hands the small pile over to me and then turns his back, clearing his throat. “I looked it up online, and apparently, it’s sort of a pain in the ass for women after ... well, you know.”

“No wonder I hated you from the get-go,” I whisper, but I appreciate him more than he could ever know. I get myself together while his back is turned, but when I go for my dress, he turns to me and our eyes meet. “I was going to go to Tess tonight, beg her to call the authorities.”

The words slip out of me in a rush and Parrish’s face softens.

“But then, I know Mr. Volli is lurking around the house, and I can’t just condemn Justin’s dinner guests to death. He’s got the Hearsts there, the Schaeffers, even Chasm’s and Maxx’s dads. That’s assuming the FBI would send, like, a taskforce straight to his house which I doubt. If they didn’t arrest him right away, he’d start a full-scale slaughter.” I sit down hard on the edge of the bed as Parrish comes back over to sit beside me, our naked thighs pressed together.

“Trust Tess, Dakota. I know she hasn’t been your mother very long, but she’s been mine since forever. She knows now, and that’s what’s important. She’ll handle this. All we need to do is tread water and mitigate losses.”

I sniffle a bit, using one of the wet wipes for my face. Parrish wraps his arm around me again, his dewy clover smell soothing me in ways nothing else ever could or ever will. I lean into him and we stay like that for so long that someone ends up knocking on the door.

My head snaps up, but Parrish just scowls.

“*Ppalli, ppalli,*” a rough voice grumbles in Korean. But it’s not Chasm.

It’s X.

“He’s telling us to hurry up,” Parrish snipes, shoving up to his feet. He

snatches his sweater and yanks it over his head. “It’s annoying, but he’s probably right. We have a felony to commit tonight, and it’d probably be best if we did it before Tess comes looking for us again. The ice cream thing was a fucking disaster.”

I stand up and wiggle back into my dress, slipping on the ugly coat along with it. I feel suddenly cold, and I can’t decide if it’s because we’re about to do this, or because Maxx is outside. Or because Chasm. Or a million other shitty things.

“Where did you get a million black candles?” I ask as Parrish reaches out for the door. He pauses just before his hand makes contact and turns around. The way he stalks across the room gives me the chills, and I anticipate him touching me.

Only, he walks right past and blows all the candles out in a single breath.

Darkness falls around us, the barest sliver of moonlight leaking in the window. That’s when I feel hot hands on my waist, and the atmosphere shifts like the coming of a sudden storm.

Parrish walks me forward, encouraging me to put my hands on the footboard at the end of the bed. My skirts are pushed up, my panties yanked to the side, and then after unzipping his pants, he’s inside of me again.

The second time is much quicker than the first, a very naughty, wild sort of thing. I grip the footboard for dear life, biting my lip hard to keep quiet so that Maxx won’t hear, and struggling to keep my boobs from falling out of my dress.

Doesn’t work. It comes down, Parrish kneads one in his strong grip, and then he’s coming again, so hard that he curses up a storm and sags against me. I’m pressed into the end of the bed before his fingers find their way beneath my skirts again.

I’m immensely grateful for the wipes and the panty liner afterward.

“I ordered the candles online—with Laverne’s stolen credit card.” Parrish waits for me to fix my dress and coat, and then he yanks open the door and lets in both the cool night air ... and the smell of danger.

Because—let me be the first to tell you—it absolutely *reeks* out there.

And not just because of the Veronica thing. Because of Maxx.



CHAPTER 14

“Did you two have a nice time?” X quips when we walk out and find him waiting on the bench under the cabin window. Um. So he would’ve heard everything that happened inside then? I don’t know how soundproof these cabins are, and I’m not sure that I want to know.

“You should know as well as we do, seeing as you were sitting outside and listening to the entire thing.” Parrish breezes past him, wading straight back into the tall grass with its dotted purple and white flowers. Chasm is just standing there in the center, a cool breeze coming off the Pacific and tousling both his hair and the boughs of the evergreens silhouetted against the stars above him.

He’s not looking at me, just staring up at the sky, but there’s a melancholy cast to his features that makes my heart ache so badly that I clutch at the top of my dress like a dying person.

Maxim rises to his feet, coming to stand on my left side. My body senses the change in the very air molecules around us, a white-hot rage coming off of him that he hides so well. He slips his hands casually into the pockets of his sweatpants, looking out at the field, at Chasm, at Parrish as he makes his way toward his best friend.

“Why are you so angry?” I ask him, and he laughs. Like I’m the crazy one. Like I’m the cheater. *Clue number nine: this entire vibe.*

“We’re here to kidnap a girl, and you two run off to fuck?” X scoffs and

takes off while I fume behind him, imagining that I'm in a videogame, that I've just found a golden bow in a treasure chest, that I'm aiming it squarely at Maxx's back as he starts to walk away from me.

I take a deep breath to steady myself and then follow him into the grass.

"She isn't dead, is she?" I hear Parrish ask, and my eyes go wide. I don't even have a second there to address X and the weirdness of him sitting outside the cabin.

Well, okay, maybe I have a *second*. I catch up and match pace beside him.

"If you're a liar, you're a terrible one. And if you're not, you're a creep." He sighs as I blurt that out, rushing into the field with my dress catching on my legs. I come to a stop next to an indent in the grass, my gaze landing on the same spot where both Chasm's and Parrish's rest. "Um."

Veronica Fisher is lying there in her absolutely *hideous* dress—some sort of gold embroidered tulle minidress, gag—red hair fanned out beneath her, shoeless, completely and utterly comatose. For nearly thirty seconds there, I'm convinced she's actually dead.

"What about the plan?" I choke out, embarrassed that I was in a cabin having unprotected sex while X and Chas were getting things done. So much for Parrish's 'we're not a time schedule' speech. "I was supposed to walk up to her, knock over her drink—"

"Ambushing her outside the pit toilet was quicker, more efficient, and far less likely to fail." Maxx gives me a look, one that's *just* this side of unapologetic. His green eyes look black in the moonlight. "I grabbed her; Chas squirted a mixture of the pills into her mouth."

"She was probably scared out of her mind," I whisper, kneeling down beside the sleeping girl. I can see her breath now that I'm on her level, and that's reassuring. I'd almost thought Maxx had gone through with his threat and killed her to, like, protect me or something.

See where I'm at here? I doubt him, but I also don't doubt him. I know it makes no sense, but I still believe if he had to kill someone to save me, he would. In fact, with his strange sense of morality, I know that he'd do it in a heartbeat.

Chasm either didn't hear what was going on in the cabin or doesn't care to address it. He has this grim look to his face that tells me he thinks he deserves this. He deserves to be dumped. He deserves to see me and Parrish happy together. So ... he's punishing himself. For sleeping with Lumen or for lying

to me and tricking me into thinking he slept with Lumen?

Ugh.

“No cameras out here.” Chas looks around, and an owl hoots in the distance, giving me the chills. *Well-timed, mystery owl. Well-timed.* “Help us carry her to the edge of the trail, and I’ll get the tarp from the car. Dakota and I can drag her over to the trunk.”

Maxx hefts Veronica up by himself, tossing her over his shoulder. *As if I needed a reminder of his strength. He sure can pick up a girl, can’t he?* Also, gross. We’re committing a kidnapping here. Not the time for those sorts of thoughts.

“And she wasn’t,” Maxx says, giving me a look. “Afraid, I mean. She was so drunk, she’s probably lucky we got to her when we did. We helped her puke.” He takes off in the direction of the trail, but I don’t follow right away. Now I’m thinking about Nevaeh and how she died, and I’m suddenly not sure I have the strength to go through with this.

“Hey,” Chas begins, but I’m not in the mood for another emotional breakdown tonight. I ignore him, jogging to catch up to X’s long-legged strides.

Chasm runs ahead for the tarp as the three of us wait behind a cluster of butterfly bushes, eyes peeled for partygoers.

“If only I’d killed that son of a bitch, then we wouldn’t be here.” I sound sulky, I know, but it’s true.

I failed. Big-time.

“Sorry you’re not a more successful murderer, Kota,” X drawls, dumping Veronica unceremoniously on the ground. “It’s not something you should be sad about.”

“I’m *already* a murderer,” I choke, my mind on that horrid sensation of the knife popping through Heath Cousins’ skin. God. Not saying the guy didn’t deserve to die, based on his rap sheet and all, but I certainly didn’t want or need to be the one to do it.

“That was self-defense.” X isn’t looking at me, peering off in the direction of the parking lot for Chasm while Parrish watches our interaction with narrowed eyes. When Maxx finally does look at me, I swear I can see sadness in his face. It only lasts for the briefest of seconds, and then Chas is there and it’s game-on.

“Okay, you two head out,” Chas says after X has helped him load Veronica

onto the tarp. “We’ll leave in about fifteen minutes.”

“If you need help, call Tess. Your life is worth more to me than anyone else’s.” Parrish gives me one, last kiss on the cheek and then he and X are gone, leaving Chasm and me to stand in silence in the moonlight.

So awkward. This is so freaking awkward.

“Naekkeo—” I cut Chasm off before he can speak.

“Answer the question I asked you in the car: how was Lumen in bed? If you answer that for me, then we can talk.” Only he can’t. He doesn’t. And so we wait in uncomfortable quiet for the fifteen minutes to pass, and then we start dragging the tarp in the direction of the Porsche as fast as we can.

I keep thinking—and believing—that I’ve sunk to my lowest.

I killed a man, albeit in self-defense; I *craved* (and still do) the murder of my father. But now I’m kidnapping an innocent girl? Veronica might be a total bitch, but she hasn’t done anything that warrants murder, has she? I mean, was she *really* going to push me off the third-story courtyard?

Hmm.

Maybe that’s a hypothetical I don’t want to answer?

About halfway to the car, we hear voices and exchange panicked looks.

“You keep dragging her; I’ve got this.” I leave Chas before he can protest and walk quickly back in the direction of the bonfire. Several girls—including Philippa—are there, looking for Veronica.

“Have you seen her?” the brunette (yes, Philippa) snipes, and for just the tiniest of instances, I almost wish that the boys hadn’t stopped Raúl and that her house had burned down. I immediately feel guilty for thinking that, and an inner panic starts, one that I’m well-familiar with now.

Am I tainted by Justin’s DNA? Does being the daughter of a serial killer make me culpable somehow? Does it mark me? Do I have bad blood? Should I be put down before my darkness blossoms into Justin’s tangled thorns?

No. No. No.

I close my eyes.

A person is *not* responsible for the actions of somebody else—even if they’re related.

“Is she, like, mute or something?” Philippa slurs drunkenly. I still have my eyes closed, yes. And no, I haven’t answered their question.

“God, she’s such a fucking weirdo,” one of the other girls mumbles, and then they turn and leave together without waiting for an answer from me. I

don't see them go, but I can hear their chatter fading away as they head back in the direction they came from.

Dakota Banks had known many truths before she became Mia Prior. She had known she was a member of the Banks family, that she was loved and wanted and cared for, that Saffron might not be a perfect mom, but she had a mom nonetheless. That Maxine was the perfect sister. That she had a heart and a good sense of morality from which to draw her strength.

She had thought all those truths became lies when she discovered Tess Vanguard.

But did they? Were they? Because even if she didn't share blood, she was still a member of the Banks family, was cared for, wanted, and loved. Saffron wasn't a perfect mom, but she was fighting to defend a girl she perceived as her child. And Maxine, she would do anything to keep her little sister safe.

I open my eyes.

Even if some things have changed, core truths remain.

Chasm and Maxx still care about me. They're still on my side. They don't relish seeing me hurt. All of that is still true. I'm also beginning to wonder how much my sister really knew, and how long she's been in on all of this.

What if ... I don't have time to speculate on the double Max thing, so I don't. I catch up to Chasm just in time to help him load Veronica into the ... trunk?

"What the hell?" I'm standing there and staring at the open hood of the Porsche. "The trunk is in the *front*?" I blink in surprise as Chas chuckles. There's almost, almost, *almost* a bit of wry humor in it.

"Cool, right? Engine's in the back." He takes the brunt of Veronica's weight with me assisting, and we curl her lithe form up inside the car's hood before closing her into what might've been her coffin had circumstances been different. Chas slams it shut and then, adorably and in character, opens the passenger door for me. He even takes my coat for me when I slip it off, folding it and putting it between our seats.

"Off we go," he murmurs before sliding into the front seat. It's a fairly long drive, one that was nearly unbearable on the way here. Doing it all over again on the way back? With Veronica in the trunk? Hood? Whatever.

I start my own music on my phone, setting it in the cupholder and staring stubbornly out the window.

"What is this?" he asks after a moment, reaching up to poke his finger in

his ear. “Is this supposed to be music?” *Savage* by A.C.E is playing. More K-pop. “Maybe you’d hate it as much as I do if you understood the lyrics?” Chas posits, and I turn a sharp look on him. He’s got my attention, that much is for sure.

“Maybe I’d understand the lyrics better if my tutor hadn’t cheated on me?” Oh, and there it is. Plain as day. But didn’t I just go over this in my head and decide to trust Chasm? Damn, it’s hard though. “Do you want me to pick something other than K-pop?”

“It’s not that I *hate* K-pop.” Chasm shifts his gaze to mine for a brief flicker before looking to the road again. He keeps one hand on the top of the wheel, the other in his lap. It’s a casual pose, but it appears staged right now. His shoulders and back are far too tense. “I was just teasing you.” Another sigh. “I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t look back at me again, so I keep my eyes focused on the road. If they water when *Shooting Star* by N.Flying comes on, so what? I don’t know what this song means either, but oh my God, my heart hurts so bad.

As soon as I’ve got service again, my phone blows up, but I ignore it. Well, I ignore it until the anxiety of what Justin might be sending gets too much to bear, and I drag it out of the stupid clutch he forced me to bring.

Come right back home when you’re done at your party, sweetie. I love you.
Right.

Chasm looks over as we swing into Laverne’s driveway, his eyes landing on my white-clutched fist as I squeeze my phone. My cute, little iPhone with the pink case with the real gold crown.

I want to throw it into the ocean and watch it sink.

The garage door is closed when we pull up, but it opens automatically for us. Chas must have an app on his phone or something.

We park to the left of Maxx’s Jeep, and out we climb. I’m hyperaware of the cameras that he mentioned as I let Chasm take the lead and follow suit. He makes a show of checking inside the house before hurrying back.

We pull Veronica from the trunk/hood, lowering her to the floor and then standing up side by side to study our, um, victim? I don’t know how Justin thinks of the people he kills or has killed, but it’s not a pleasant route to go down with one’s imagination.

“Why don’t you take her dress, shoes, and jewelry off?” Chasm suggests, turning his back in a way that I don’t imagine most ‘murderers’ would. “I’ll

burn them later. For now, put them back in the trunk.”

There’s a huge lump in my throat as I squat down, my belly roiling with horror. Veronica’s only asleep, but what if she were dead? This is so gross. I do what I have to do, removing her shoes—one of the heels is broken from her drunken stumbling—and then her necklace, bracelet, and earrings. When I strip her dress off, I find that she’s wearing a push-up bra with thick silicone inserts in it.

“I knew it,” I mutter, leaving her in her strapless white lace bra and matching thong. I cover Veronica back up with the tarp. “You can turn back around now.”

He does, taking the pile of items and putting them in the Porsche.

“Now, we’ll tape her up.” Chasm grabs a roll of lime-green duct tape and shakes it at me for emphasis. I give him a dry look. “What? I bought it because it matches your hair.”

Damn it, he’s cute. He’s so cute, and I was so mean to him in the beginning when he didn’t deserve it at all. I love him so much that I can barely breathe. I don’t need clues with him the way I do with Maxx because ... I trust Chasm. Implicitly. Perfectly.

I might be a lovestruck idiot.

“We just ... killed someone,” I whisper to him, trying to look alarmed. I’m a terrible actress. Oh my God, I’m the fucking *worst* actress ever. I can’t keep a secret or run a script to save my life. It’s all been luck so far, anything I’ve gotten away with. I’m going to blow this entire thing. I narrow my eyes. “You’re a cheater and now you’re a blasé murderer?” There we go. Just enough heat to really throw it in his face. I notice the way Chasm’s pretty amber eyes go wide, the subsequent frown that takes over his lips.

Good. If he *is* messing with me for Justin’s benefit, I can do the same right back. I *should* do the same right back. Our lives depend on it.

We roll Veronica up just so, leaving a surreptitious spot for her to breathe, and then we tape her like a mummy. If we really were murderers, this is probably a *terrible* way to commit a murder and get away with it. What must Justin be thinking? We’re burying her on *Laverne*’s property?

“What if we get caught?” I whisper, and Chasm snorts.

“So what? Then we’ll be in jail and away from your crazy dad. What’s so bad about that?” He acts for a moment like he’s forgotten the cameras are there, but that’s far from the case. He’s provoking Justin intentionally. To

lend our act more credence maybe? It's so hard to know what he's thinking, but I sense I better just let the commentary lie.

Together, we drag Veronica toward a door that leads to the enormous grounds of the Vanguard estate. On the way, Chasm grabs a pair of shovels in one hand, and off we go.

It's warm outside, but the breeze off the water is cool. *I should've put the ugly coat back on.* I'm shivering before we make it a dozen steps, pausing to kick off my stupid heels.

Yep, I'm burying a body barefoot. Think it'll mess with my beautiful mani-pedi? *Eyeroll.*

"Here." Chasm goes to slip out of his sweatshirt, yanking it over his head and raising his shirt with the movement. My eyes get caught on his abs, and I'm immediately ashamed of myself. "Take it." He holds it out to me, panting slightly.

I yank it from his hand and slip it on without bothering to argue.

Oh God. It smells like him. It smells like peppermint and chocolate and leather and love.

It's almost painful for me to wear it.

Shoving romance and sex aside, I help drag the tarp to the *precise* point where there are two cameras that don't overlap. I'm not sure how the boys got our replacement tarp in place, but there it is, waiting in the moonlight.

Parrish and X are there, too, propped against trees. They make their way to us in silence, stealing away Veronica in the taped tarp, and disappearing into the woods. Our new tarp is also taped up with lime green, filled with dirt and rocks. We start dragging that one, hoping like hell that any differences in the tape pattern are too obscured by the lack of light to be noticeable.

The hole was dug in advance, thankfully. But once we roll the fake Veronica in? We have to refill it.

That's what my life has come to: digging graves in designer dresses.

Chasm offers to finish the hole by himself, but I'm not about to let him do all the work. I shovel dirt, sweat dripping down the sides of my face, and then we rake debris over the top to mask the spot. There. All done.

"I could use a drink," I mumble, which is a statement way above my

paygrade, but out it comes anyway. Chas looks at me through the darkness and offers up a smile. Maybe he thinks I suggested a drink, so we'd have a reason to go into the cellar and then into the vault where Veronica's being kept. That's not why, but hey, if it serves a double purpose ...

He takes my shovel from me and leans it up against the trunk of a tree.

"I'll put it away later." His voice is low, almost tentative. That is, if Kwang-seon McKenna had a tentative bone in his body.

"Doesn't it freak you out how easy that was?" I whisper as we walk, the trees behind us ruffling in the breeze. God, I miss the fireflies from back home. One day, I'd like to show Chasm the fireflies. My heart contracts, but I don't examine the pain, not just now. The Lumen thing ... I guess I'll deal with it when I get home. Deal with *her*, I mean. A sleepover, yay. I remember Maxx's warning about keeping the truth to myself and try to speak cryptically instead. "Veronica's in a hole and we're moving on like nothing happened."

"Don't dwell too much on it," Chas tells me, a warning in his voice. He knows where I'm drifting, back toward the Heath Cousins thing. "We'll get through this. If nothing else, Veronica's disappearance is going to catch the attention of the authorities. Her parents won't let this go; they'll hire a damn army to find her."

Chasm stops talking as we approach the back door, typing in the code and then reaching out to open it. I hesitate briefly, wondering if I shouldn't just ask him to take me straight to Justin's. Only, the thought of going back there fills me with so much dread, I'd rather risk his retribution for being late than cut my reprieve from him short. Another backhand is worth an hour here, easily.

I pad barefoot and dirty inside the darkened house, through the living room and in the direction of the kitchen. Nobody stops us as Chasm inputs the cellar code next and down we go. My mind drifts back to prom night, to my conversation with Chasm and Parrish, to our night in my borrowed bedroom.

"God." The groan comes out even though I mean to keep quiet, and he hooks a wry look over his shoulder.

"Prom night? I wish we could go back to prom night, too." Chasm pauses at the bottom of the stairs, a frown on his face. "I know the vault is in here ... somewhere." He looks around and then selects a bottle carefully from one of the shelves. "What are you into? I'll pick you something nice."

I give him a sharp smile right back, and then I just snag the nearest thing I can find.

OVAL Vodka, it reads. More importantly, the bottle is decorated in, like, a million little crystals. That's what catches my attention.

Hmm. Whatever. Bottom's up. I unscrew the top and tip it back, taking a swig and then gagging as Chasm snorts with laughter.

"Remember the Jägermeister?" he asks me, and now my trip down memory lane is in full-force, and I'm damn near tears again. Instead, I curse up a quiet storm as Chasm's sharp brows rise in surprise. And then I take another drink. And another.

There's a grinding sound from the floor directly behind Chasm, and then a door is swinging upward and there's Parrish, lit from behind with bright, white light.

"Quick. Get in here before Tess decides on another late-night wine run." He gestures for us to follow, and we do. When he notices the bottle in my hand, he hooks a sly smirk. "Dakota Banks, since when have you been into vodka?"

"Since I buried my first body in the woods," I reply with a smirk of my own. I descend a series of stone steps, trying to pretend like I'm in some atmospheric Agatha Christie novel. Only, this gothic mansion isn't dusty or coated in spiderwebs. Modern light fixtures follow us down, illuminating the underground space. There's even a fancy runner covering the stairs with a gold and burgundy pattern that was probably super trendy in the early nineties.

When we hit the landing below, Parrish scoots past me and Chasm to press his thumb to the keypad on the outside of a metal door. A code follows after.

"This thing is completely off-grid," he explains. "But if Laverne comes down here, she can check the log and see who's been in and out." There's a long pause before Parrish grabs the handle. "Well, that, and she'll see the girl chained up inside."

He opens the door, revealing a long, narrow room decorated with glass cases like some sort of museum. My head is already spinning a bit from the alcohol, but the sight of this place makes me take another drink. *Underage drinking, not great, but then ... Daddy's a serial killer, so I'm entitled to some sin.*

The girl we kidnapped tonight is lying on an air mattress on the right side

of the room, chained to the wooden leg of one of the display cases by her ankle. She's passed out, facedown on the bed, snoring like a hibernating grizzly bear. Veronica's an ugly snorer; I consider telling her that when she wakes up, but then my empathy kicks in and all I can do is feel so sorry for her that I want to cry.

Want to, but don't. Instead, I take another drink.

"That's strong stuff." X is sitting on a chair close to Veronica, looking over at the bottle in my hand. I meet his eyes and swig some more of it, and he curses.

"You're sure there are no cameras in here?" I ask, and Parrish nods.

"One just outside the wine cellar door that records who goes in and out." Parrish plants his hands on his hips as he watches me walk the length of the room, studying the jewels inside the cases, the various safes, the shelves lined with random items. It's a true treasure trove in here, some Scrooge McDuck type shit. I mean, there aren't any gold coins to swim in, but close enough. "Even if Justin gets suspicious about our cellar visits, it'll be hard for him to get one of his cronies in here."

"What about the signal jammer?" I ask, looking down at an empty spot where it seems like a ring might've been kept. Ah. The ring that Parrish gave to Lumen. I take another drink.

"Tess got in trouble with Agent Takahashi," Parrish admits with a long sigh, rubbing his forehead. "But she's been turning it on occasionally anyway. Did you know a person can get actual prison time for using one? That's the last thing our family needs."

I did know that, actually, because I looked it up. I wonder if Justin ratted Tess out? Wouldn't surprise me. He enjoys both petty revenge as well as murder. It's all in his wheelhouse of psychopathy.

"Just remember, if things get really bad, we can steal some shit from here and live a really good life somewhere else." Parrish comes up behind me, sliding his arms around my waist. I close my eyes and lean into him, and when he goes to take the vodka bottle from me, I let him. He releases me as he swigs some of it and, even though I know he's sort of joking, he's also sort of serious, too.

If I thought I could truly escape Justin with my entire family in tow, I'd do it. But where would I go? It'd have to be somewhere remote, without access to the Internet, with no phone signals. I'd be in hiding for the rest of Justin's

life, never able to travel, always looking over my shoulder.

Running away is tempting, but it's not a realistic option.

I turn around, parking my butt up against the edge of the display case. My eyes shift over to Veronica's still form again. There's a small toilet nearby that doesn't seem to be attached to anything. I raise a brow at that as Maxx stands up and notices where I'm looking.

"Composting toilet," he explains, pointing at it. "Doesn't weigh much, most dignified option for Veronica. Frankly, I'd have given her a bucket with some wood shavings in it." He shrugs his strong shoulders, but I force my alcohol-addled brain not to notice. *Liar*. I know it seems weird, but I suddenly want to see Maxine. I shouldn't though. I'm not supposed to be here at all. "You do know what a composting toilet is, right?"

X's voice is playful, but I pretend not to notice, tossing my hair over my shoulder.

"It's for, like, camping or tiny homes or something." That makes him smile, and he nods. Of course he'd be the one to think of something like that. He kicks a cooler nearby, crossing his muscular arms over his broad chest.

"She's got plenty of food, plenty of water. We'll check on her as much as we can." He exchanges a look with Parrish as Chasm hesitates near the door. "How long do you realistically think we can keep her down here before Laverne finds out?"

"She's pretty fixated on the issues with my dad right now, so maybe ... a few weeks?" Parrish looks over at me, and I swallow hard. Two weeks is not a very long time. Then what? Do we move Veronica? Where the hell could we move her? "We'll figure this out, Gamer Girl. Don't stress. If we have to, we can put her in my room, in the bathroom or something. She'd have to be gagged, but—"

I hold up a hand. This is getting dark. I mean, it's already dark. It's super messed up. But I need a moment to just soak in the fact that we did, that we accomplished this task without incident.

Maybe.

Guess I'll know more when I get back to Justin's.

"I should probably go," I say with a sigh, stealing the bottle back from Parrish.

"Stay." Parrish's voice is soft enough that I get chills, flickers of hot memories in the darkness of the cabin. Our eyes meet, and my face flushes all

over. Doing it without a condom was a whole new level of intimacy; I'm glad we saved it for later. Definitely gave us something to work up to. "Let's all have a toast in the cellar. No cameras there either."

"*Jebal, Naekkeo,*" Chasm murmurs, offering up prayer hands to me for the second time that night. "Please."

I sigh, my gaze swinging to X, but he gives me nothing. I prefer when he's being a dick.

Whatever.

Together we head back into the cellar, and I allow Parrish to steal my bottle away again. He puts the cap back on and lifts it up for my inspection.

"Take this home for later." He then selects a nice bottle of champagne, pops the top, and produces four champagne flutes from a shelf in the corner. Once again, he's planned this moment in advance.

"I have to admit: when you said your grandmother had a vault, I expected a creepy tunnel with dripping water, some stalactites, lit by tallow candles." My lips twitch as another Agatha Christie quote comes to mind. I blame the alcohol. In reality, I'm a dork whether I'm drunk or not. "*They tried to be too clever—and that was their undoing.*"

"I love you too much for words," is how Parrish responds, holding up his glass for a toast. "To mayhem, murder, and mystery."

I clink my glass with his. Both Chasm and Maxx hesitate, exchanging looks before they, too, join the toast.

Another quote comes to mind, and I can't help but let it out.

"*When you find that people are not telling you the truth—look out!*" I down my entire glass in one sip, gesturing for Parrish to pour me another.

"Who says we're not telling the truth?" X demands indignantly, closing his eyes tight, like he's so beyond frustrated that he wants to scream. He, too, empties his glass in a single drink, opens his eyes, and then steals the bottle from Parrish before I get my refill.

"Can we not talk about the ... that stuff right now?" Chas asks, and he doesn't sound like screaming. No, he sounds like he wants to upchuck all over the stone floor at our feet. For the life of me, when I look at him, I cannot imagine him sleeping with Lumen. Way too gross. Way too selfish. Way too untrue. And I knew from moment one that he never really had a crush to begin with.

Or if he did, then *I* was that crush, and he was purposely misleading me.

I hold out my glass so X can refill it, but he won't do it.

"You're already buzzed, Kota," he says softly, like he's worried about me. Oh, the fucking audacity.

"My heart is broken, X. Why can't you just leave me be? I *want* to drink. Don't I deserve this much?" When I reach for the bottle, he lets me take it, his gaze burning me straight to the core. He swallows hard and turns away, resting his hand on one of the shelves.

"Justin's keeping her prisoner in her room," Chasm clarifies, in case the other two didn't get the memo from what I said earlier. "She's all by herself, all day, all night. He doesn't seem to care if I stay there, so I'm going to spend as many nights as I can with her."

"If I want you there." I say that, but I don't really mean it. Whether he cheated on me or not, I *do* want him there. I pour myself a fresh glass, drink it, and then pour another. Who cares if I'm stumbling drunk when I get home? Not Justin. No sir.

The scene inside the shadowed cellar is oddly intimate, a tender quiet dark that makes my soul throb.

As I stare down at the bubbles in my glass, I have to resist the urge to throw the champagne bottle against the wall the way Parrish did when he was kidnapped. I sip my drink this time, trying to slow down a bit.

"I thought he broke my jaw and my ribs," I admit, staring at my glass and not at the boys. I can feel them shift, can sense X turning back around to look at me. "He's been baby-stepping me. We're at a whole new level. Did I mention that he almost drove his car off of a cliff with me inside of it?" I smile bitterly as I look up, finding three sets of too-wide eyes in shocked, angry faces.

"This isn't working," Parrish grinds out, giving X and Chasm looks. "We're doing all this shit to save Dakota, and she almost died? She got the shit beat out of her?" He flings his hand at me, the one with the champagne glass in it, and ends up splattering alcohol all over the floor. "How much further do we go? Huh? If I can keep Dakota safe, I'll do anything. But if not? What are we even playing at here?"

"I'll stay with her," Chasm repeats, but he sounds slightly panicked. "Justin *wants* her to follow in his footsteps. He doesn't want her dead, he wants her to be like him."

"I'm telling Tess all of this." X doesn't even ask me, just states that fact

like the annoying alpha-hole dickface bastard son of a bitch that he is. He steals the champagne from me and our fingers brush together with a sharp flare of heat. *Clues, clues, clues.* Too many to count.

“If you were a book boyfriend, everyone would hate you,” I state firmly, grabbing the vodka bottle. “*Everyone.*”

“Good. They should hate me. I slept with you two more times than I had to. That’s fucked up.” Maxx watches me as I throw my cup on the floor, letting it shatter.

I turn for the steps and prepare myself to face Justin—and lie to his face. I just hope I’m up to the task.

Leaving the close, comfortable confines of the cellar isn’t easy. It’s right up there with leaving New York for Washington state with Tess.

Speaking of Tess ...

“Damn it,” I murmur when I crest the top of the steps and there she is, sitting at the counter in the kitchen with a glass of wine in hand. That sharp gaze of hers takes me in from head to toe, fixating briefly on my dirty feet and chipped fingernails. Not a single part of me thinks she’s sitting here by accident.

Tess takes a sip of her wine, leaning back on the stool and cocking her head to the side as the boys file out behind me. Parrish curses, rubbing at his jaw, still holding the vodka bottle in his right hand.

“So we’re drinking in grandma’s cellar, are we?” Tess asks, setting her empty wineglass on the counter. But as angry as she is, I see sympathy and understanding in her gaze that either wasn’t there in the beginning or else she hid it really, really well. She looks at me with so much empathy that I want to open up and spill all my secrets.

I don’t dare say a word, not until I know Justin isn’t listening in on us. Are there wired cameras in here? The bug detector is actually *better* than the signal jammer for our purposes; it can detect them if there are. I look to X, and he sighs, pulling it out and doing a scan as Tess watches with piqued interest.

“We just obliterated forty grand of grandma’s best booze,” Parrish admits, setting the vodka bottle on the counter.

“We have a limited amount of time before I have to disable the jammer,” Tess admits, standing up from the stool and reaching out for me. She hesitates slightly, but there must be something in my expression that invites further contact because she places both of her palms on my cheeks. A sharp inhale of breath tells me that she sees right through my makeup to the swollen and bruised flesh underneath. “What has he done to you?” she whispers, but I pretend to misinterpret the question.

How can I tell Tess that I tried to kill Justin? If she keeps me from going back, there’ll be hell to pay. Heads will literally roll.

“He took my phone,” I admit, and Tess nods.

“I know. I could tell right away.” Her lips are pursed into a tight line, her glasses askew, her hair pulled back into a wild ponytail. She looks almost crazed in the dim light from the oven hood; it’s the only light on in the room. All the blinds and curtains are pulled tightly shut. I’d say it was to protect the family from the reporters at the end of Laverne’s private road, but it’s far more likely because of Justin. “Even pretending to be you, he couldn’t resist taking digs at me.” She brushes my hair back, looking me over with eyes dark with worry. “What I meant was, what did he do to you? Has he been beating you?”

I pull away, and Tess lets me go.

“I have to get back before he realizes I’m missing.” I toss a sly look Tess’ way. “Snuck out to party, ya know.”

“Uh-huh.” She crosses her arms, dressed in an oversized sweater that says *Mt. Hood National Forest* on the front. “Sorry, but I’m not buying it. What are you doing here, Dakota? Where are your shoes? And why are your feet and hands dirty?”

I shrug nonchalantly, casting a glance in Chasm’s direction. He, too, has dirty hands and dirty shoes.

“We had sex in the woods.” I lift my chin up in defiance, but Tess just sighs, shaking her head slightly. She doesn’t believe me for a second.

“We have mad chemistry, don’t we?” Chasm breathes, almost reverently. I can’t even look at him. Pretty sure Tess can tell that I’m resisting a strong urge. Our interaction only makes her frown harder.

“What is he having you do now?” she asks, looking to Parrish. He smiles at her and lifts a single shoulder in a lazy, sloth-like shrug. “Maxim, surely you understand that confiding in me makes the most sense right now. Justin is

dangerous, and he only gets worse with time, not better. Trust me: I lived this life.”

I promised I’d tell Tess everything, that I’d even spill my guts to the FBI, but this has all become so real, and the consequences are so grave. My confidence and my hubris got me into trouble before. I need to be extremely careful, or I might not leave that house unless it’s in a body bag.

“We’ll talk later,” X confirms, and I curse under my breath as Tess’ entire body goes rigid.

“You still haven’t spoken to Agent Takahashi?” I blurt, and Tess hesitates *just* long enough that suspicion creeps up on me like spiders in the dark, legs tickling my skin.

“Not yet, but I’m planning on it. You heard that Paul was denied bail, right? I have to make a move soon. I can’t let my husband go down for Justin’s crimes.” She rubs at her face. “Unfortunately, he’s always been a clever monster; I can’t find enough proof to justify going to the FBI without looking insane. Which, obviously, is what he wanted all along.” Tess looks off to the side, and I know I’ve caught her in a lie. Scares me to try to figure out which part of all that was fake.

What if ... what if she went to the FBI already and they didn’t believe her? Oh God. Justin has plants in the FBI; what if he finds out about that? What if ... So many what-ifs. It’s going to drive me insane.

“Saffron’s in town.” I drop that instead, because I’m not about to tell her about Veronica. Not ... yet.

“Saffron?” she asks, and Tess’ eyes turn to saucers behind her glasses. “What is Saffron doing here?”

“Trying to kill Justin,” I admit, and Tess sits down heavily on the stool again. She very quickly pours herself another glass of wine. “Somehow, she knows how to avoid tech completely. He can’t find her, and it’s driving him nuts. More than anything, I think he’d personally try to murder her if he could get his hands on her.”

“There was a time there where I felt exactly the same,” Tess mutters, offering further insight into her complex relationship with Saffron Banks. I dread the day where they’re in the same room together. You know, if that ever happens and Justin doesn’t kill one or both of them.

“She’s the one that put Amin Volli into the hospital,” Parrish adds, looking to me for support. I nod at that, and then we all freeze at the sound of

footsteps.

“The staff’s been dismissed temporarily,” Tess murmurs, and we all wait in anticipation to see who it is that might be coming around the corner into the kitchen.

It’s Maxine that appears from the shadows. Pretty sure she didn’t expect to see me there because her eyes go wide and she quickly closes the distance between us, throwing her arms around me and locking me into a big sister hug. I don’t even let myself wonder if these arms are truly holding X at night. I don’t care about that. Even if they are ... I love my sister too much to let her go alongside Maxx.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, separating us just enough that I can see she’s wearing her favorite pajamas. She got them for Christmas her senior year of high school and has treasured them ever since. It’s this fancy button-up silk set that she says is almost too posh for the dorms. They’re blue and white pinstriped, and something about them makes me feel marginally better all of a sudden.

“Only here for a second.” I hiccup and clap a hand over my mouth, but Maxine’s already raising an eyebrow.

“You smell like alcohol, Kota. What would Grandma and Grandpa say?” She puts her hands on her hips in a very big sister sort of way before she flicks her gaze to Tess. Maxine looks right back at me and keeps on with her scolding. “And not like beer either. What have you been drinking?”

“Err, crystal-covered vodka?” I say it like it’s a question, and Maxine tsks her tongue.

“A little drinking now and again is okay, but don’t let him knock you out, baby sister. There are the things he makes you do, and there are choices.” Maxine points at the bottle, and I resist the urge to hang my head in shame. “This is a choice.” There’s a long pause there, filled in by Tess’ sudden exhale. I wonder what it’s like for her to see me with my sister? I mean, she let Maxine and my grandparents stay here for God’s sake. But it can’t be easy. “I love you fierce, you know that?”

“I know.” It’s barely a whisper. “I love you fierce, too.” I make myself look up and into her eyes, as determined as mine have been since the moment Justin presented the first challenge to me. So what am I doing now, letting him get to me? I’ve got to stay strong. I fucking *have* to. “I snuck out tonight, but if I don’t get back soon—”

“Did he hit you again?” Maxine asks, and I curse myself for rubbing at my face so often that Delphine’s careful makeup job has come undone. Or maybe it was all the sweating I did while I filled in Veronica’s ‘grave’?

“Same old, same old,” I reply, which isn’t true. I pray the boys keep their mouths shut. I know Tess well enough at this point—and I definitely know my sister well enough—to understand that if they realize the full extent of Justin’s abuse, they will barricade me into this house, consequences be damned. “A slap here or there. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a huge fucking deal,” Tess breathes, rising to her feet again. She moves over to stand beside me, closing her eyes for a moment as she tries to gather her frustration and temper and put it under wraps. “A slap here or there? Dakota, be honest with me.”

“I’m being as honest as I can be with you.” I look her straight in the face. “Remember when I said *never stop fighting*? I really need that now. I need your help, Mom.”

Maxine seems surprised to hear me call Tess that, but my sister smiles anyway.

“We’ve got your back, even if it doesn’t seem like it.” I believe Maxie when she says that ... and then I glance over my shoulder to see all three boys watching me.

“Chas, can you take me back to Justin’s?” I ask, and even though I can feel Tess tense up, she doesn’t stop me from leaving. That surprises me; I thought I might have to physically escape her. Maybe she understands that the cops will come and take me away if she doesn’t let me go, that keeping me here will make it all that much worse for me. Can’t be easy to let your daughter leave to be with a murderer though.

“I love you so much, Dakota,” Tess hedges, as if she’s ashamed of herself for not saying it more. For not saying it sooner. For not working harder to bridge the gap between us. Her eyes, so like my eyes, are filled with quiet tears. “I’m going to get you—all of us—out of this. Do you hear me?”

I nod, but there are no words left that I can say. I’m choked up. I’m tired. I want to go to sleep and fall into oblivion for a brief, few hours of peace. Maxine hugs me next, murmuring words of encouragement against my hair.

Parrish kisses me so deeply and so passionately that Tess clears her throat several times and then snatches him by the sweater, yanking him back. X and I simply stare at one another before a muscle in his jaw ticks and he looks

away.

If I'd known how close he was to getting shot, I might've kissed him then.

As Chas and I exit the kitchen and head in the direction of the garage, I can feel Tess watching me.

And plotting. Oh yes, she is most *definitely* plotting.

The title 'CHAPTER 15' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '15' is in pink. The text is set against a background of dark, gnarled tree branches and a large, dark green, heart-shaped object. The overall aesthetic is dark and somewhat macabre.

CHAPTER 15

The Seattle Slayer—the main head of the hydra anyway—is waiting for me when Chasm and I pull up outside his house. He offers me a slow clap as soon as I open the car door to climb out.

“Well done, you two. Bravo.” Justin ruffles my hair as he approaches, and I go completely still as he sighs remorsefully. “If only you’d gotten your hair done the way I wanted when you were at the salon.” His grip tightens ever so slightly, and I feel rather than see Chasm gear up to intervene if needed. “What’s the matter, cheater?” Justin asks, and then he laughs at his own joke. He’s the only one, by the way. “Relax. That was Caroline’s fault, not Mia’s.” My sperm donor presses a horrible kiss to my temple before he releases me. “I’ve already dealt with that problem; it won’t happen again.”

Jesus. So Raúl and Caroline will be sporting matching bruises or burns perhaps?

I don’t let myself think about it. I don’t honestly care what happens to Caroline. She kills people for money, so she’s nearly as bad as Justin. Nearly, but not quite.

“Can I stay the night?” Chas asks, but he’s looking at me, not Justin.

“Doesn’t matter to me.” Justin shrugs his shoulders, heading back inside and leaving me alone in the rapidly cooling evening air. It’s mid-July now, and I’ve only just realized that we missed the Fourth of July entirely. Back home, it was all about barbeque and family dinner and boxed fireworks we’d

set off in the driveway. Sometimes, we'd attend the local fireworks show in town, but it was always more fun for me to stay at home with my grandparents, Maxine, Sally ... Nevaeh.

I rub at my face again, turning away from Chasm to go into the house. He stops me with a hand on my arm, and I pause with one foot on the first step.

"Do you want me to stay or go? I'd rather stay and protect you, but ... if you want, I'll leave." He releases my arm, and I exhale.

Danyella is inside; *Lumen* is inside.

"I want you to stay," I admit, and it's far too easy to give into the side of me that loves and misses him. It scares me a little, like I might actually forgive him if he did cheat on me. God, didn't I learn from Saffron's many, many mistakes with men? Hopefully, he didn't. With Justin around, everything's a scheme. "Just stay away from Lumen."

I turn a look on him and he lifts up both hands in surrender.

I find my friends (err, friends with a big, fat question mark) waiting for me in my room. As soon as I open the door and see Lumen sitting on my bed, I close it and turn around to look at Chasm.

"Go find a spare bedroom close by and sleep there tonight." I leave him standing in the hallway before I enter the room, closing the door behind me before Lumen notices Chas. Too late for Danyella, although she pretends not to have noticed him. Good on her. "Hello."

My eyes find the diamond ring on Lumen's finger and my eyebrow twitches strangely.

Is this a play on Justin's part to see if he can get me to kill Lumen? It's almost working.

"Mia," Danyella greets very, very carefully. There's a bead of sweat on her temple, and a confession resting on her lips. I can sense it. At this point, I'm suspicious of everyone and everything, even the sun. Like, is it even going to rise tomorrow or is it, too, going to pull a fast one on me?

"Mia." Lumen stands up, nervously swiping her palms down the front of her pretty lace camisole. It doesn't even look like sleepwear, more like lingerie. I noticed her nighttime style was a bit different from mine the last time we had a sleepover.

God, has it only been a few months? Feels like it's been centuries. Or like maybe time doesn't even have a meaning anymore.

I just stare at them both, unsure as to what I should say.

“Um.” Lumen looks to Danyella, and they share a long, silent conversation before the former turns back to me. Her honey brown eyes are wary even as she plasters on an expression of unapologetic smugness. “What? It wasn’t like he was that good anyway.”

Time literally stops.

And then I launch myself at her even as I’m screaming inside my head that I shouldn’t be doing this. All along, this is what Justin has wanted, has strived for. To break us apart. The only reason these tricks didn’t work earlier is because we all hooked ourselves up to some raw-power-trust-and-love-bullshit, like we’re characters in a nineties Saturday morning cartoon.

Like the world isn’t evil. Like good people exist. Like it is possible to be morally righteous and win a dirty fight.

This sort of thing happens in anime all the time, but in real life? No way. No freaking way.

So I throw myself at Lumen the way I *should* have thrown myself at Chasm instead. I knock her right off the bed and onto the floor as Danyella moans and bargains and pleads for us to stop.

“You guys are fighting the wrong enemy here!” she shouts, likely aware that Justin is listening but beyond caring. He’s probably eating this shit up. “Guys, stop it! Use those prefrontal cortexes and think rationally for *fuck’s* sake.”

Oh. Danyella rarely cusses. Doesn’t matter.

I’m on top of Lumen now, and she’s just pissed me off, and how dare she say that to me, and I hate Justin, and my life is a mess, and I’m really sad, and I don’t know what to do with my feelings—

I swing on her and she lifts her forearms to block me.

“Go ahead, hit me!” she shouts, but even though she guards against me, she doesn’t fight back. “I had my girls beat you up, remember?” So I wail on her, and I’m ashamed to say that I enjoy it. A little. In the moment. But then I slam my palms down on the floor on either side of her head, letting my own hang as I pant.

In the end, I think she has a bloody nose. Yikes. Did I really do that?

“You think I actually slept with that jerk?” she hisses, so quietly that I question whether or not she really said anything at all. “Slap me.” A bit louder that time, but still oh so soft.

I react without meaning to, slapping her across the face and then

scrambling off of her as I crinkle my brow. *Did she ... just say what I think she said? And why would she tell me when Chasm wouldn't?*

Oh.

Because maybe he loves me and doesn't want me to get hurt so he's willing to emotionally scar me in the short term in order to reap long-term gain? Holy crap, I'm dense. I facepalm myself hard, but then let my head just stay in my hand, like maybe I'm crying or something.

Lumen—despite professing to have a crush on me—does not care for me the way that Chasm does. So she's willing to tell me, because she cares about me a little less. Like, she thinks she's helping here. Only, I'm such a bad actor, I'm going to mess this up so badly.

At least you just bloodied her nose in front of Justin, right? That'll help. I was truly and honestly mad, too.

Then again, Chasm has been saying from the start that we shouldn't trust Lumen for shit. *Exactly, so why would he sleep with her?* My mind is going in frantic circles; I can barely stand the doubt.

"Ow," Lumen moans dramatically, leaning her back against my desk as she holds her hand to her nose. "Some paper towels or something might help, Danyella." It's practically a barked order which Danyella clearly doesn't like. Instead of scrambling to obey—who would *dare* defy the great and powerful Lumen Hearst, Queen of Whitehall—Danyella stares her friend down until Lumen winces and apologizes. "Sorry, a towel, toilet paper ... I'll take literally anything. Really, I'm sorry, Dani."

Danyella wrinkles her nose at the nickname, but she fetches a dark washcloth and adds warm water to it before presenting it to Lumen.

"Are you two done behaving like females fighting over a male in the wild?" She rolls her eyes, and I cringe. Eww. When she says it like that, it's kind of embarrassing. Really embarrassing. Yeah, I'm embarrassed, and my boobs are blushing. "If you need to beat someone up, go beat on Chasm."

"Um, thanks?" he says as he opens the door and comes in. I should've explicitly told him not to come in here. The awkwardness in the room amps up as he studies Lumen's bloody face, looks over at me, back to Lumen. And then he grins. "Oh yeah, Little Sister. Did you beat some ass for me?"

"Not for you!" I growl at him, shoving up to my feet. My glare could melt concrete. He stares back at me, blinking rapidly, and then a sickening horror dawns on him and his eyes widen. Chasm very quickly looks away. *He knows*

that Lumen told me! He knows! Now that I see them in the same room, it feels silly to have accused them of having love/hate vibes. There's no chemistry there, no love lost. "Lumen made a disrespectful comment toward me; I reacted poorly and without foresight."

"Okay, ma'am. Do you have your AARP card?" Chasm looks over to Lumen and scowls. "What did you say to her, you fucking snake?"

"I said you were crap in bed," Lumen grumbles, swiping at the blood on her lips with her tongue. I turn toward her and move like I might charge her again. See? Maybe I can pull this off? My acting isn't so bad. *It's just acting.* "Which is true."

I bare my teeth at her, and Danyella points a finger at her own mouth.

"You look like a honey badger," she whispers, and I snap my jaw shut. What the hell is a honey badger? I'm not exactly sure, but I won't embarrass myself again. Danyella's expression softens. "A small mammal known for its fearlessness, aggression, and ferocity."

"Right. Thanks." I look over at Chasm, still blinking wildly at me. And then I turn and take his arm, dragging him out of the room. I spin around suddenly, slamming my palms into the door on either side of him. He jumps in surprise as I lean in, putting my mouth next to his ear.

"Oh, fuck." That's the response I get, and I swear, I feel his body vibrating underneath me. "Naekkeo, what are you doing?"

"Claiming you." I squint my eyes in determination, purse my lips, and then I ... bite him in the neck. Chasm groans, his arms sliding around me as I lick and nibble my way up to his ear. "You didn't sleep with her, did you?" I whisper, so softly that I wonder if he can hear me over his own panting breath. "Kwang-Seon ..."

He doesn't respond, but the way he stares at me when I pull back says a lot.

If he sleeps with me after I've declared that I believe in his innocence, then he'll be confirming it for me. Because Chasm would never sleep with me if he truly had cheated and I hadn't accepted it. He'd want me to make the decision to forgive him and be with him of my own accord, not via deception.

His hands slide along either side of my face, fingers digging into my hair, and then he pulls my mouth to his and absolutely ravages it. There's a sense of relief there, a violent plea for forgiveness ... and a hunger. Chasm walks me backward, pushing me into the wall beside Delphine's door. She doesn't

come out to see what we're doing which surprises me. She's been hovering around me since I first moved in here, and yet on the night of a sleepover, she's not around?

I file that information away for later.

"Which room are you staying in?" I mumble, and Chas reaches down for my hand.

He yanks me into the room to the left of Delphine's, closing the door by pushing my body up against it.

"He's got cameras all over this place," Chas murmurs against my ear, but I already know that. I'm used to it at this point, resigned to my strange reality. He pulls back from me, breathing heavily as he studies my face. "I never wanted to hurt you, Little Sister."

"You seriously can't call me Little Sister anymore," I pant out, lifting up my hand and wiggling my fingers to emphasize the ring. *I should've stolen the one off Lumen's pretty, little finger.* I might still do it, too. "We're going to be married."

I choke on that last word, ducking under Chas' arm and looking around the room. I haven't explored this house whatsoever. What's the point? So Justin can watch me walk around and laugh? This room is as lavishly appointed as my own, albeit in a different flavor. Burgundy linens, a four-poster bed with a canopy, a plush black rug.

I turn around to see that Chasm hasn't moved, his hand braced on the wall, head hanging down. I wait for him to process whatever it is that he's going through before he finally glances over his shoulder at me, mouth pursed into a frown.

He drops his hand and turns, only to pause at a knock on the door.

Justin doesn't wait for us to invite him in. Instead, he comes strolling and whistling, pausing a few feet inside the door. He tucks his hands into the pockets of his navy slacks and grins.

"Nice to see the two of you are in the process of making up. If you want, sweetheart, we can hang Lumen Hearst from the wood beam in her pretty bedroom at home. Wouldn't that be sweet justice? Then maybe you could keep fucking Parrish on the side while Laverne searches for a new arranged marriage?" Justin rolls his eyes and chuckles, but I'm struggling to see what's funny in his statement.

"I was considering cutting her finger off and taking the ring," I admit, and

Justin blinks in surprise. He cocks his head to the side like he doesn't quite believe me, and I stare at him with all the rage and hatred I feel. For him. All the anger I have is directed his way.

"Well, that too could be arranged. We could drag her downstairs and pretend it was a cooking accident." Justin strolls into the room, moving over to the fireplace and flicking the switch to start the gas. Flames sprout up behind the fake logs as he turns to study the pair of us. "How was it tonight by the way? Did she scream? Beg for her life?"

"She was so drunk that she was barely conscious," Chasm admits, moving over to stand beside me. "I stole some Benzos from Paul and mixed them with water." He mimes pressing a syringe with his thumb. "Squirted it into her mouth."

Justin frowns at that, and I worry suddenly that we've given away our plan somehow. Is there something in Chasm's words that makes the whole story fall apart?

"How boring. No blood? No screams?" Justin sighs and shakes his head, reaching up to run his fingers through his hair. "I have to admit: you're all quite boring. Not like the fuckers I came back to Medina to destroy. One tiny little rumor and they're at one another's throats, always ready to throw each other under the bus. Hell, most of these bastards would sacrifice their firstborn for a good business deal." Justin shrugs one shoulder. "No matter what I do: make you fuck each other, make you fuck other people, it doesn't seem to have much effect."

Justin walks slowly toward us, pausing to reach out and take my hand. He studies my ruined nails and clucks his tongue.

"Why did you bury the body?" he asks me, but I don't know what sort of answer he's looking for, so I don't respond. Then he hauls back and slaps Chasm hard enough that blood taints his mouth. Chasm moves to go for him, but I turn and throw my arms around his waist, forcing him to remain still as Justin laughs. "You're supposed to be the goddamn king, Dakota. Get your pawns to do grunt work. For Christ's sake, what do I have to do to get through to you?"

Justin reaches into his pocket and draws out his phone, turning it around and showing off some random picture of a beautiful estate at the top of a mountain. There's a long, winding road that leads up to it, bordered by a beautiful lake. One day soon, Maxx's Jeep will be sitting at the bottom of

said lake. Justin gestures with it as Chasm pants, hands clenched into fists, *this* close to pulling a Maxim Wright.

“What do you think of this for the wedding venue?” That question gives us both pause. I release Chas and stand up as he takes the phone, scrolling the page with his thumb. “I asked an AI chatbot to plan the wedding, and this is the locale that it chose.” Justin snorts like that’s the most hilarious thing he’s ever heard in his life. “I’m considering adding an AI chat function to Milk Carton. What if a customer is busy and doesn’t have time to check on his cheating whore of a wife all day? You could simply ask the chatbot to make a detailed list of all the places she’s been along with the time spent at each location, who she was with, and if there’s any footage worth watching. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

All I can do is stare. I seem to be doing a lot of that lately. I’m speechless now, utterly speechless.

“Well.” Justin sighs and reaches out for his phone. “I asked what your opinion of the venue was, but I actually don’t care. You’ll be getting married here. Autumn weddings are always nice. I’ll make the booking.” He turns and heads for the door, closing it behind him.

I force Chasm to take a seat on the edge of the bed.

“I’ll be right back.” I rush to the bathroom for a warm washcloth, crawling onto the bed behind him and wrapping my arms around his neck. I hold the rag to his sore face, cradling him against me.

“Are you doing this because you’ve forgiven me or because you still don’t believe it?” he whispers as I lean down and put my cheek up against his. He takes the washcloth from me and holds it in place. “Did you watch the video?”

My heart begins to palpate. What is he trying to say? That Lumen was lying to me just now? What if she’s trying to trick me into getting Chasm to admit *his* lie, so that Justin will find out?

“I didn’t. Do you want me to?”

He turns toward me, our faces so close that kissing is an impossible temptation. We brush mouths gently, slowly, a worshipping of one another’s lips.

“Watch it.” He turns away from me then as I sit back, pulling his phone from his pocket and handing it over to me. Pretty sure mine is still in the clutch in his car. Oops.

I take the phone with a shaking hand, and then I settle into the pillows near the headboard.

“Have you watched the ones with Maxine and X?” he asks next, still looking away from me in the direction of the fireplace.

“No.” I can only handle so much at once, pulling up my text thread with Chas and staring at the video’s odd angle. I hesitate before clicking it, my heart in my throat, palms sweating. I want to take this stupid dress off, wash the dirt from my hands and feet, and then I want to wrap my naked body around Chasm’s.

If I really think about it, he’s been trying to help me out since the beginning. Not just since Parrish went missing, but all the way back. I mean, other than when he pushed me into the pool. He checked in with me on my first day at Whitehall, offered to tutor me, told me his secret and barely reacted when I blurted it out in front of Maxx and Parrish.

I’m not entirely sure that I deserve him.

“I was an asshole, too,” I admit, and it probably seems out of context. Chasm turns to look at me, still cradling the washrag to his full mouth, his beautiful eyes wide.

“You cheated on me, too?” he asks, and he sounds dangerously close to a precipice of no return. I rush to explain before this situation gets out of control.

“What I meant was, I was an asshole when I first arrived in Medina,” I breathe, and it’s hard to admit it. Hard to admit that I was wrong, too. I judged everyone here too harshly, just the same as they judged me. I was rude, and I reacted, and I retaliated. Tess, Parrish, Kimber ... they weren’t the only ones who failed to see the efforts of those around them. I didn’t give anyone else any more credit than they were giving me. “You said I had a snotty East Coast attitude, like I was better than everyone else.” I exhale a shaky breath. “You were right.”

Chas kicks his shoes off and then turns, sitting cross-legged on the bed to stare at me.

“What are you trying to say?” he asks, cocking his head slightly to one side. There’s a bit of dirt on his chin. I can’t help what I do next, sitting up and licking my thumb before I swipe it off. He swallows hard and then closes his eyes, like he’s desperately trying to gain control over his unwilling body. When he next looks at me, I gasp.

“You’re so handsome, *oppa*. It’s almost painful to look at you.”

Chasm scoffs at me, turning his head away sharply.

“Stop that. I’ve explained this to you before: it’s hard to concentrate when I’m pitching a tent.”

“It’s hard to concentrate when I’m ...” I can’t even make myself say what I want to say, and he knows it. This devious smile curls his lips, and I almost throw the phone on the floor and declare *fuck it*. That suits us, right? It’s our motto, after all.

“Wet?” Chasm supplies, and I kick him hard in the knee. “Yikes. See that? You are overly aggressive toward me.”

“I was, and I’m really sorry, Chas. I hated everyone here because I was upset, and because bad things had happened to me, unfair things. But I judged the whole world for it, and I didn’t offer the courtesy I was claiming was owed to me. So, again, for all of that, I apologize.”

He looks at me so earnestly that I know, beyond all doubts, that he did not cheat on me. I just know it. He doesn’t even have to say it with words. However he worked this out—a deepfake video, a careful performance, a sly camera angle—it isn’t true.

Especially not with Lumen.

It’s so much easier to believe Maxx could be with my sister because my sister is amazing, and I know from that day in the coffee shop that she was head over heels for him. So, while I’m trying to remain optimistic on that front, I’m certain now on this—and not because of Lumen’s words. They were like a slap to the face of what I already should’ve known.

You couldn’t even convince me for one day, Chas. What if Justin finds out? What if he hurts you because of it?

“Dakota, I’ve liked you from the first second that I laid eyes on you. I felt bad for pushing you into the pool, for insulting you. I was trying to be loyal to Parrish, and I ended up hurting my girl in the process.” He drops the rag into his lap and then reaches out his hands for mine, stroking his thumb over my knuckles as we stare into one another’s eyes.

This could be the most emotionally intimate moment I have ever shared with another human being.

“It’s okay—” I start, but he shakes his head.

“No, I owe you an apology, too.” He swallows down a lump of feeling and leans closer to me. “You were right to judge Medina: most everyone that

lives here is selfish and pompous and entitled. You're one of the only people I've ever met who doesn't care about money and connections and using other people for your own gain. That's what I liked, and I saw it right away. If I weren't such a coward, I would've approached you before Parrish did."

"You're not a coward, Chas. You love Parrish, and you're selfless, and you were trying to spare his feelings. It's why you took on the Lumen thing, because you were trying to let Parrish and I have each other, even if at your own expense."

I realize then that we're being far too open in front of Justin. What if he gets it in his head to send Lumen in here, dressed in her negligee, and then he makes me watch—

I stifle the thought. I need to switch the narrative a little to prevent that from happening.

Chasm doesn't seem to know how to respond to what I've just said anyway. He looks hopeful though, and his expression is killing me.

"Justin wants me to kill Lumen, and with the way I feel right now, it wouldn't be a hard task. Easier than Veronica even, and she had it coming. What sort of girl betrays another girl by cutting her clothes off and filming it? That's gross. Anyway, the more I think about it, I believe she really would have pushed me off the third-story courtyard."

Chas nods at me, like I'm finally getting it.

"Didn't I warn you about Whitehall? She absolutely would've pushed you off and claimed it was an accident." He sits up, a tiny split in his lower lip, and he gets on all fours, putting his mouth up against mine. "Watch the video so we can do this. I can't do this if you haven't watched it."

I exhale and sit back. Pulling away from him is physically painful, but I force myself to do it anyway. I keep that tiny flame of hope alive, and I hit play on his phone.

It's definitely Chasm in that video, sitting on the edge of a stone half-wall outside a building that I don't recognize.

"*You want to marry Parrish, but you want to fuck me, is that it?*" he asks, and those words coming from his mouth make me want to punch Lumen all over again. I see why the angle of the phone is so odd: it's in the pocket of Chasm's book bag, just barely peeking out. It feels natural that way, like he didn't know he was being watched or had briefly forgotten about Justin's ubiquitousness (sorry, Mr. Volli, thesaurus-brain).

In the video, Lumen sighs, moving into the frame and putting her hands on Chasm's shoulders. My mouth twitches, and my hand tightens around the phone to the point of pain.

"You're telling me you come to cram school to learn?" She laughs at that, leaning in and putting her lips near his ear. *"Or is it our little breaks in the bathroom that bring you back every week?"* Lumen's voice is so low that I can barely hear what she's saying.

She takes his hand as he sighs, snatching his book bag up, and then they're walking into the building together. There's a few seconds there where the camera only films the wall, but then they're in the bathroom and he's setting the bag on the floor.

I don't see much of their faces, but I do see Lumen and a guy in a Whitehall uniform. I do see his pants come down. I do see ... a lot of things.

I'm barely breathing when I set the phone down on the bed.

"Naekkeo?" he asks me, his voice soft and gentle and pleading in a way I don't think he'd allow anyone else to hear.

There was Korean being spoken in that video. There was sex happening in that video. I could see butt cheeks and hear moans, could see Lumen's face as she ... But I didn't see Chasm's face. Actually, his head was cut off the entire time, and his body was clothed in such a way that it could've been any guy. There are other students at Whitehall who also speak Korean, including the guy that Chas punched in the face for voicing his opinion on Parrish dying at the Slayer's hands. Same dude that threw an alcohol bottle in the lake near Chas' house before he yelled at him about it.

I look him dead in the eyes.

Would Justin let this video slide? Maybe not. But Amin Volli ... he's the one who watches these things and checks them over, right? What if there's something else going on here that I'm just not getting?

Either way, I don't believe that Chasm is the guy having sex with Lumen in this video.

It's a fake. A well-done fake. A fake, nonetheless.

Is Justin getting sloppy or is he so busy that he's making mistakes? Is he trusting his pawns so much that he's not double-checking their work? Or maybe I'm just privy to information that he's not?

Not that I can say this out loud, but I would recognize Chasm's penis anywhere. That peen in the video? That's imposter peen. Chas is way bigger

than that. Better looking than that, too. Like, I know it seems weird but his dick is as handsome as his face.

I throw the phone on the ground, and it skids across the floor.

Chasm gets back on all fours and crawls over to me, his mouth brushing mine.

“I don’t think I could ever forgive you for sleeping with her,” I tell him, and he kisses me anyway, nice and slow and deep. His lip rings press gently into me, the metal warm from his body heat, tempting me to bite down on one and tug. I do, and he exhales so roughly against my mouth that we end up clashing together in a rush of sudden need.

There’s no more waiting, no more talking.

This is happening.

He did not cheat on me.

I’m going into this believing that. If I’m wrong somehow, I guess I’ll find out later, but I would rather trust him and be wrong than not trust him and betray him in that way. If the thing with Lumen is real, and he sleeps with me now, we were never meant to be together, and I should at least finish this with no regrets.

He didn’t tell me at Camp Kellogg because he knew I couldn’t pull off the pain and hurt in such a way that Justin would believe it. My dad might not have studied this particular video, but he’s always watching me. I’m the one under scrutiny at all times, and I can’t fake this shit for the life of me.

“I’m a hacker, Princess, and you’re an idiot.”

Sometimes, even when I think we’ve gotten away from Justin, he’s still watching me. Chasm was being cautious because his video is bullshit, and maybe Maxx is doing the same thing. What else is going on that I don’t know about?

We are all lying to save each other.

“Chas—now.” I help him out of his t-shirt, but we’re so desperate to keep kissing that our mouths are pressed together even as I’m still fumbling the fabric over his head. His dirty hands and my dirty hands, they roam over one another’s bodies with a sinful desperation.

He pulls away suddenly, moving over to the light switch near the door, and he slams his palm down on it, bathing the room in shadows and firelight. When he comes up to stand beside the edge of the bed, unbuttoning his pants and staring down at me, I know I have to bring this up. But damn I don’t

want to.

“I was with Parrish tonight,” I whisper, even knowing that Justin will hear. “Are you okay with that?”

His smile is a precious thing in the dark, the fire’s light catching on the pretty brilliance of his wicked teeth. Okay, yeah, the vampire description works; the demon description is better.

“No.” He shoves his pants down and then kicks them aside, reaching out for my hands and pulling me from the bed. His lips press tight to my ear. “But I’m going to fix that.” He kisses down the side of my neck and then turns me to face away from him, yanking down the dress’ zipper and letting it pool on the floor.

When he grabs me next, it’s to haul me into his arms as I gasp in surprise.

“Kwang-seon,” I whisper, his heart beating so wildly that I can feel it against my body.

“What? You think Maxx is the only one capable of holding you, Little Sister? Please.” He scoffs as he moves us into the dark bathroom. The only illumination comes from a night-light that’s plugged in near the door, offering just enough assistance for Chas to seat me on the edge of the massive tub.

He starts the shower and then returns his attention to me, putting his hands on either side of me as he leans down. The way Chasm kisses me then, it’s with purpose. It’s a promise. It’s a vow. He carries that feeling with him as he kisses down my throat, over my clavicle, past my breasts, presses a smoldering flick of his tongue against my navel.

“Look at you Miss I-Make-Pot-Brownies-for-Grandma, you’re a rebel now.” He yanks on my belly button piercing with his teeth and then graces my tattoo with another kiss. “Metal and ink and unprotected sex. My good girl’s gone bad.”

“Dude.” I can’t even respond because he’s spreading my thighs and lavishing that sensitive skin with his horrible tongue. “Don’t ever reference that song again; it’s tainted.” I’m of course referring to *Good Boy Gone Bad* by TXT, the song that Maxx somehow chose for his ringtone.

What a dick.

Chasm falls back onto his haunches and grins at me, his lightning bolt hair glowing in the dark.

“It’s just a fact, Naekkeo. You’ve grown a lot since you first came here.”

He puts his hands on either side of me again, looking into my face. We're almost the same height with him on his knees and me sitting on the bathtub's edge. He kisses me again and then nips my ear. "You'd look nice with six-gauge lobes." He taps at the small plugs in his own ear before whispering huskily to me. "You know what I look like when I fuck, don't you?" He turns to me at the same time I turn to him, the cascading water of the shower providing a small, brief shield against listening ears.

We're naked.

It's dark.

We have cover.

"Did that look like me when I fuck?" he asks, and I gasp, throwing my arms around him. I'm squeezing him, and he's wrapping me up right back. "Why don't we talk more about this later?" He draws away, looking serious. I understand why, and I'm surprised he's even given me this much. "Water's hot."

"The water here is always hot." *That* is what I say, how I respond to his confession. Trauma has yet to shape me into a coy seductress. Hasn't done much for Chasm either: he was always wicked good at making women feel breathless. Only ... this is just for me now, has only been for me for a while.

"One day, you little shit," he mutters under his breath. "That's all it took to break me; you make me helpless." He grabs me and hauls me into his arms, pushing my back into the wall beside the shower as he ravages my neck, his hands holding my hips.

"This is helpless?" I gasp, but he cuts me off by biting my lower lip.

"Helpless against the way I want you—as often and as hard as I can."

I wrap my whole body around him as we kiss our way into the shower, pausing only to wash the grave dirt off. I'm sure I'm not the only one who remembers our shower after the Mr. Fossier incident.

Only, that was chaste.

This is not.

Our eyes meet, and Chasm licks some of the water off his lip.

"Bed or bathtub?" he asks me, but I'm finding it so hard to speak that nothing comes out. He touches his hand to the side of my face as wet rivulets trace his sharp features. "I hope you know that you're not going back to your *friends* tonight." He scoffs at the word and then shakes his head. "Actually, just strike Lumen off your list. You don't need to spend any time with her."

“Trust me: not a problem,” I reply, wondering if there’s yet something else happening behind the scenes. By all accounts, Lumen did us a favor by allowing her tryst with the ‘small dick guy’ to be filmed and used like this. So what gives? “But I *am* going to prove her wrong.”

Chasm thinks for a second, and then he lifts both brows in surprise.

“Oh? That I’m crap in bed?” He laughs at that and then leans in again to kiss me. “You’d know the answer to that already, wouldn’t you?”

Chas turns the shower off and then pulls me onto the bathmat just outside of it. He grabs a towel, fluffing my hair up, laboring to dry my body with an exquisite attention to detail. When he stands up, I reach out and put my palm on his lower belly.

The tension amps up when he sucks in a sharp inhale, eyes darting downward as my fingers trace lower and lower and then ... stop. I move away from him, and his gaze follows me. I can feel it grazing my back as he dries his own hair, damp feet padding across the floor behind me in the dark.

My breathing is heavy and strange as I move to crawl onto the bed, but I don’t get very far. The towel hits the floor with a thump and then Chas’ hot hands are on my hips.

“No condom necessary, right?” he breathes against my hair, tucking me tight between his body and the mattress. Chasm uses his foot to drag the small stepping stool closer to me. The bed in this room is fairly tall, and there’s a decorative set of steps that one could use to climb into bed if necessary. It’s not necessary for us in that regard, but it works for other things. “Stand on this.”

I step up on it, finding myself at the right height to make things even more intimate.

“*Did that look like me when I fuck?*” Chasm’s words echo, a question firmly seared into my soul.

“I love you,” I tell him, swallowing past the emotion. “You know that, right? You’ve been saying it to me a lot, and I haven’t said it back.” I look over my shoulder, and his face is right there. We look at one another’s lips way too much to be sane. We’re doing it even now. “Okay?”

“I know it even when you don’t say it: I can see it in your eyes.” He kisses me like it’s an invitation, and I start to turn toward him. Instead, Chasm puts his hand on my upper back and gives me a gentle push. My body curls over the edge of the bed, his hands gripping my hips.

He moves one of them between us, and I close my eyes as I feel him pressing against me. The firelight flickers against my closed lids as I pull in a deep breath and then exhale slowly while Chas enters me. It's as magical a feeling as his kiss, a binding spell, an alluring curse. My fingers curl into the blankets as we come fully together, his own breath a rough, shuddering exhale.

Chasm smooths his palm up my back, pressing it hard between my shoulder blades.

"As long as I have you, I'm happy." That's the last thing he says to me before he starts to thrust. There's enough give in that mattress to offer some movement, but not enough that I can't feel everything when he slams me against it. I bite down on a wrinkle in the covers, keeping the wild sounds trapped in my throat. "Don't do that; let me hear you."

Chasm encourages me to relax a little more, working us together until a fine sheen of sweat covers us both. I'm panting now, making small sounds that he responds to with appreciative noises of his own. I lift up on my forearms, savoring the feel of Chas' hands on my skin, his heat at my back, his strength all around me.

When I match his pace with my own body, working back against him, the moment changes to something more primal. We're both moving now, and I'm sitting up even more, pushing against him. I end up with one of my own hands between my legs as we rock harder and faster toward a climax.

It's more or less mutual, my pleasure causing him to find his, and we shudder together. His grip on me gets rough as I drag the covers toward us with my own violent grasping. Chasm's palms fall to the bed on either side of me as he breathes through the moment, and I sit there with a hummingbird heart and a pulsing body. I can feel my blood rushing through my veins, down to my toes, my fingertips, making my head spin a little—but in a good way.

"That ..."

Chasm doesn't even have words. Instead, he exhales and then pulls away from me, helping my boneless body onto the bed before he climbs up beside me.

We lay facing one another, curled into similar positions with our faces close.

"That ... what?" I whisper, still fighting to catch my own breath. "You can't just leave off like that."

He looks at me through the dark, so tender and adorable that I want to roll away and hide my face.

“That was perfect.” He pushes my shoulder so that I’m lying on my back and staring up at him. “You’re perfect for me, Naekkeo.” Chasm’s mouth finds its way down my chest and belly, and then elsewhere, and I’m grabbing at the blankets again as he discovers all the right spots and tortures me with his tongue.

“It’s not.” That’s what I say when he finishes and lifts up to stare at me like I’ve lost my mind. I grab a handful of his hair and pull him to me. “*That video, it’s not how you fuck,*” I whisper to him, and he gives me a heart-crushing twist of lips.

“Nah.” He pretends to kiss me again but draws back before I can take his mouth. “I’m a goddamn talent, aren’t I?” Chasm rolls onto his back, and I end up tucked against his side with his arm wrapped around my waist. He lifts his head to try to peer at me, brow raised.

“A true natural,” I agree, briefly forgetting that we’re at Justin’s place. I’ve adapted to the high stress life we’ve been leading. If I can’t relax in a serial killer’s den, then I’ll never relax.

“Let me get you pj’s or something; we can take another shower.” Chas adjusts my position so that I’m cradled by pillows. I grab his arm when he tries to get up.

“Let’s not shower,” I say, voice tiny and small with embarrassment. He narrows his eyes on me and then smiles prettily.

“Oh yeah? Okay. You want to wear *me* to bed? That’s fine.” I slap him but his smirk only deepens. “Fine, you want me to get some pajamas from your room?”

“I’d rather wear some of your clothes,” I admit, and this look of pure joy sweeps his face before it’s replaced with a deep, primal satisfaction. He hops out of bed, squatting beside his duffel bag on the floor. I hadn’t even realized he’d brought his stuff.

He came here, to this horrible place, for me. He could have been (relatively) safe back at Laverne’s with Tess and the boys, but he chose to be with me instead.

Yeah. Even with the serial killer shit, I’m lucky. Love like this isn’t easy to find.

“Here.” Chas drops a t-shirt and some panties on the bed before pulling on

a pair of sweats for himself. “You’ll be clothed, but not *too* clothed.”

I snag the items, my skin heating with its usual unfortunate blush. I don’t care; I just want to be swallowed up by his clothes. By him.

“I’m sleeping here tonight,” I add as I sit up and pull the t-shirt over my head.

“Uh, you leaving wasn’t an option.” Chasm hops back on the bed beside me and then snorts when he realizes that I’m staring at the panties he’s given me. They’re mine, from my dresser at Laverne’s. Maxine brought me lots of new underwear when she gave me all those clothes. “Yeah, sorry. Parrish and I went through your panty drawer for practical reasons. We figured you might need some clothes.” He drops down to whisper to me again, but I don’t think he cares if Justin hears this part. “If it makes you feel any better, Maxx saw what we were doing, got a hard-on, and then took off at a run. He might be in love with your sister, but he’s still got that *hentai seiyoku*, you know what I mean.”

Japanese words this time, not Korean. Also, the meaning? *Sexual perversion*. Chasm might be joking, but he’s a little bit serious, too. Maxx is still into me whether he wants to be or not.

My blush gets a million times worse, but Chasm doesn’t seem to notice (or pretends not to) and then he scoops me up into his arms and curls around me protectively. We don’t necessarily *sleep* the whole night, but neither of us leaves that bed.

It’s a small, brief slice of heaven in a never-ending hellscape.

I just hope we haven’t given away any of our most precious secrets to Justin.



CHAPTER 16

I crack my lids to perfect darkness, certain that I imagined the voice calling out to me from beyond the door. *Whoever that is, they better be a ghost. Only a haunting is getting me up now.* But it's not a ghost: it's worse. Justin's OG spawn is calling. Guess my first assassination doesn't even deserve a celebratory day of sleeping in.

My eyes close in stubborn retaliation, and I almost drift off again, but the knocking doesn't stop.

"Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey," Delphine calls cheerfully, and I groan, turning and burying my face against Chasm's bare chest. I come to with a frustrated sigh, eyes opening to find Chas half-asleep and grumbling next to me. *He's cute as hell though, won't lie.* Lots of hickeys though. Lots and lots. Him and me.

A quick peek under the blankets shows me that he's unfortunately (fortunately?) still wearing the sweatpants he got out last night. So, not naked. Nope. As for me, I've somehow lost my panties during one of our nightly, err, sleeping breaks. When did that happen? *Not the time I said, 'yes, oppa, more' because that would make the whole ordeal even more shameful in the light of day.*

I flick Chasm in the forehead and he bites my finger in retaliation. He holds it gently between his teeth as he lifts a single eyelid.

"What fucking time is it?" he mumbles as I lift my head up in the direction

of the door.

“We’re coming!” I call out, waiting for her to respond.

“Breakfast is ready. I’ll help you get dressed if you hurry up.” She sounds grotesquely cheerful today which worries me. I still haven’t made up my mind about Delphine, but I’m leaning toward *don’t trust the bitch*. With a sigh, I look over at the windows and see that this room has some fancy blackout blinds that my bedroom does not. If Justin was only going to update a few things in this beautiful old house, I’ll take automatic blackout blinds for the win.

“I have no idea what time it is, but we eat early in this house.” I move to slip my finger from Chasm’s lips, but he sucks it in instead, wrapping his tongue around it. His hand snatches my wrist, gripping hard. *Holy shit*. “Just because I fell asleep in your bed does not mean you’re forgiven.”

This is purely an act now, and Chas knows it. I need to prove that I can play along without being lied to. If I can, then Maxx ... He might just tell me the truth.

Chasm releases my finger but drags his tongue along it as I pull away from his mouth.

“Right. Your cheating piece of shit fiancé.” He sits up suddenly and leans in to put his mouth up to my ear. “If I had slept with Lumen, I wouldn’t *let* you forgive me.” He swings his legs out of bed and stands up, letting his head fall back with a groan. “Shall I start the shower?”

“I’ll shower in my own room, thank you.” I’m so grotesquely relieved at the idea that Chasm is still mine, that he didn’t betray me. I’m also sore, but I don’t want to tell him that. I feign distant apathy.

Chasm whispers something under his breath in Korean—I’m sure Justin has a translator earbud ready to go at all times—and then stalks off into the bathroom. I grin when he slams the door behind him, heading into the hallway to find Delphine waiting for me.

She’s wearing a sparkly silver shirt, tight black pants, and heeled boots. Her blond hair is upswept, her makeup ‘barely there’ flawless.

“Are you okay?” That’s the first thing she asks me, moving over to give me a tight hug. “I heard about Veronica, and I was worried that you’d be upset.”

Right. I beat Lumen up, amorously attacked Chasm, and then fell asleep before I got the chance to act out my pain over ‘murdering’ Veronica. Shit,

shit, shit. No wonder Chasm lied to me about the Lumen thing.

“I’m ... numb.” I hug her back, just in case things go south. Then I can at least have this one hug with a sister I don’t even know. That I still want to know. *Please don’t be one of Justin’s cronies.* We draw back from one another and Delphine smiles, reaching out to stroke my hair from my face before she lets me go.

“Understandable. I’m always here if you need to talk about things like that. I won’t judge.” She smiles as she turns toward my room. “Let me get your clothes picked out for you.”

Something ugly, I’ll bet.

“Sounds good. Thanks.”

I shower in my own bathroom, dry off with a fluffy towel, and put on the horrible dress that was left out for me. It’s a white cotton minidress with lilacs printed on it, so short that I know I’m going to be pulling it down obsessively. It has a tie in the front, leaving this little peek-a-boo of skin beneath my breasts.

I hate it.

I wear it.

What else can I do?

Delphine does my hair and makeup, as usual. She even makes me sit on the edge of my bed so that she can help me into these chunky beige ankle-strap pumps. I feel like Mia Prior when I walk out into the hallway behind her, but Chasm doesn’t seem overly disappointed by the look.

His eyes light up and he rakes his fingers through his hair several times as I approach. For his part, he’s dressed like he always is: handsome, edgy, with a kiss of early aughts emo, and designer sneakers. These ones are bright red, and they pop like crazy against his black-on-black ensemble of a long-sleeved shirt and jeans.

“I like your eyeliner,” I mumble, and he grins, some of that strange sadness stripped from his features. He’s as terrible an actor as I am, but we both better get our crap together—and quick. Delphine’s already disappeared down the stairs, but Justin is a harsh and omnipotent critic.

“No shit? I put it on for you.”

He walks away first, and I hurry to catch up, trying not to obsess over that comment or any of the other one-liners he keeps chucking at me like bolts of lightning.

Lumen and Danyella are waiting at the table when we get downstairs, seated next to Caroline in her flowing off-white blouse and wide-legged brown slacks with purple heels. On a positive note, Justin and Raúl are missing.

“You kids are so lazy, sleeping your entire lives away. It’s practically noon.” Caroline yawns dramatically, reaching up to fix her hair, its color disturbingly similar to Parrish’s. I check the time on my phone. It’s ten-thirty, nowhere near to noon.

I take a seat, Chasm pulling out my chair for me. He scoots me back in and then grabs the spot beside me while Delphine settles down in Justin’s favorite spot—at the head of the table, obviously.

“We’ve been up for a while,” Lumen offers, smiling at me. I won’t lie: I want to slap her again. “I take it the two of you made up last night?” Her brows go up as she chuckles and—even if it’s all part of an act—I’m annoyed with her.

“Sorry to make you wait.” I smile pretty, too, lifting the silver lid off the eggs and hashbrowns underneath. I set the lid aside and pick up my fork. “Chasm and I had copious sex last night; there was a lot of cleanup.”

Delphine chokes on her food as Chas makes a strange sound in his throat.

“Sorry about my sloppy seconds.” Lumen adjusts her hand so that she can examine the ring on her finger and Danyella turns a death glare her way.

“What are you doing?” she hisses, shoving her bright yellow glasses up her nose. She’s got on white capris and a daisy-patterned crop top. Shoes are honey-colored wedges (I’ve never seen her wear the same pair twice). Very cute. But I can’t properly appreciate the outfit because I’m just sitting here praying she can get her bestie under control.

Don’t react. It feeds him. You are stoic and strong.

“Doing?” Lumen asks with a scoff, shoving up from the table suddenly and rising to her feet. “She’s forgiven Chasm, but she won’t let go of Parrish either. You *slept* with him at the camp last night? What the hell is wrong with you?” Her eyes flash, and I can’t tell if she’s serious about what she’s saying or if she’s warning me.

Doesn’t matter.

I take another bite of my food as Chasm bristles with annoyance beside me. He slams his fork onto the table, but I beat him to the punch line.

“Tit for tat. You slept with my fiancé; I slept with yours.” I cover my ass

(but mostly Parrish's) and act like this isn't such a big deal at all. Lumen stares at me before huffing in annoyance and taking off.

"Good riddance," Chas grumbles, returning to his food as Delphine tries to laugh the situation off, tucking some hair behind her ear.

"Well, this is awkward." She pokes at her food with her fork, like a nervous nobody. It's driving me nuts. Clearly, this girl is a genius. I would just love to know whose side she's really on. "My sister's a cheater now, too."

I ignore the barb as Danyella sighs heavily.

"I'm sorry about Lumen," she says, pushing her plate back from the edge of the table. "She's going through a lot right now."

"Really?" Delphine asks, doe eyes wide, lashes fluttering as she blinks innocently at Danyella. "Which part? Selling her family estate and moving to Bellevue? Or the rumors about her father's affair with his financial advisor?"

Ouch.

Danyella purses her lips and stands up, trying to force a smile for me. I don't know why she and Lumen were here other than that Justin essentially blackmailed them into it. If there was something they were trying to achieve with me, I don't know what it is. All I know is there's nothing to be gained by trying to talk to them there. Whatever news they might have will need to wait.

"I'll go find Lumen." She says that like anyone else cares, taking off out the doors and heading in the direction of the water.

Personally, I'm wondering if Justin wouldn't let Chasm and me take the boat out. Could we talk freely out there? Or is that way too much to hope for? I'm desperate to know about the video Chas made and how they pulled it off, how they convinced Justin to accept it as proof. It was set up to look like he'd cheated on me long before the directive, a surefire blow to my heart and my ego. Smart move. Good foresight.

"Where's Justin?" I ask as Caroline pauses with a bite of honeydew melon to her perfect mouth. She sets her fork down, staring at me, and I realize I'm meant to correct myself. "Daddy, I mean. Where is he?"

"He's off to enjoy the fruits of his labors," my new stepmom remarks, smiling privately into her napkin as she dabs at her lips. She offers her phone up to me and I take it, reading the headline and feeling a tightening of anxiety in my gut.

Veronica's kidnapping is big news. Huge. It's *everywhere*.

Probably because her parents—the Fishers—were just indicted on embezzlement charges.

Ah. So here we go. I kill their kids; Justin ruins the rest of their lives. Not that it matters, just salt in the wound, right? But holy cow, the man is vindictive.

Now I'm supposed to get one of the others on the list next? What was I thinking?!

About saving lives, that's what I was thinking.

Great. What unsuspecting Whitehall teen do I get to 'murder' next? I wonder if I couldn't just store the whole of Parrish's graduating class (along with a handful of sophomores and juniors) in Laverne's vault? We could get a few more composting toilets and air mattresses down there, surely.

Right.

We need a better plan.

"He'll be back for dinner; we're going out as a family," Caroline continues, her careful makeup unable to hide her bruises, a matching set to my own. I just smile blandly back at her before I dig into my food. Under the table, Chasm's fingers wrap my hand and squeeze. "Somewhere nice, hopefully. I'm owed that much at least." Her lips twitch as she looks down at her plate, and then she sets her fork to the side, resting her forearms on the edge of the table. Ah, the whole *it's rude to have elbows on the table but somehow forearms aren't rude* trick. "Especially since I took care of your father's little problem after the wedding."

It's a jibe to remind both Chasm and me about the mysterious blood on the wedding dress. Right in front of Delphine, too. Damn it. My sister continues on with her reign of obliviousness.

"Gosh, Caroline." I smile mischievously, bolstered by last night's discovery.

Chasm is not a cheater. I knew it. I should've known it from the first *second*. Which, of course, brings me to Maxim Wright. I have an idea on how to test him, too. *Stubborn prick*.

"Yes, darling?" she replies, just as cheekily.

"Daddy seems to have come around since the first time he talked to me about you." I tap my lips and pretend to be deep in thought. "What was it that he said about you? That you were a 'user and a loser'?" I make quotes around

the words, and then lean in. I do, in fact, put my *elbow* on the table. Gasp. “You know he’s still in love with Tess, right? Both men you wanted like her more than you.”

“I’m going to shave your head next time we’re at the salon,” Caroline remarks with all the politeness of a pit viper. I get the idea that she’s my ‘minder’ for the day, here to watch me while Justin is away. Delphine pauses with her fork halfway to her mouth and turns this *glare* on our stepmother that gives me the chills.

She looks ... murderous. Pardon the pun. Well, maybe it’s not even really a pun? She truly and utterly looks like she’s plotting Caroline’s death as we speak.

“Seeing as Justin didn’t ask you to sign a prenup, he must really mean till death do you part, eh? You’re not getting out of this marriage unless one of you is buried.” As soon as I speak the words, I almost feel bad about them. “You’re basically trapped in a domestic violence situation.” I add this last part with a wave of unnecessary sympathy, and that just triggers the hell out of her.

Caroline stands up and comes around the table. Before I know it, she’s backhanded me as hard as Justin, and Chasm is lunging out of his chair in her direction. I put a hand up to stop him, but it’s Delphine that intervenes.

She snatches Caroline’s arm, digging her manicured pale pink nails into the sleeves of the woman’s blouse. Caroline turns an aghast look on my sister before shaking Delphine’s arm off with a violent jerk of her body.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Delphine continues, getting up Caroline’s face. “You’re the *stepmother* here. You don’t think Daddy loves his daughters more? If you touch my sister again, I’ll kill you.” Delphine looks at me with a smile as I sit there dumbfounded and silent. Chasm curls his lip in disgust at the situation, but he doesn’t hit Caroline, which I appreciate. “If she bothers you again, just let me know.”

My sister takes off, her heeled boots loud on the marble floors.

I hold up my hand to my cheek. Too soon after the last beating. The pain is in my jaw, in my teeth, even my right eye is throbbing. Chasm notices, filling a cloth napkin with ice from his water glass. He holds it up to my face, and I take it. The situation mimics what happened last night, our roles flipped.

“If she touches you again, I agree with Delphine.” Chasm stares at Caroline, but she doesn’t notice or hear him, staring after my sister with a

determined glint in her gaze. That's a mistake. Chas is the type to sit and wait until the perfect revenge plot strikes. He serves it ice-cold.

Caroline shakes her head and leaves us, a strange hush falling over the solarium.

At least the flowers smell nice.

"How the hell did you survive this alone?" Chasm asks softly, putting a hand on the side of my head as he studies me. "You know that I can't stay here today, right? I'm working part-time for my dad and Justin on Milk Carton stuff."

I didn't know that. Not sure how I feel about it either. Chasm spending all day with my father, that makes me uneasy. It feels like another threat.

"Is this an optional part-time job?" I query politely, and his lips twist in amusement.

"I'm a hacker; you're a writer. That's what we do now." Chas pauses when his phone pings. He reads the text before sliding it over to me with a sigh. "See what I mean?"

In the writing cave today, Princess. Mr. Volli is waiting for your future masterpiece. His words, not mine. I told him not to hold his breath.

Right.

I turn to Chasm, but he has this grim half-smile on his face.

"Come get your phone before I leave?" he asks, and I nod. We walk together through the foyer and then out the front, and I shamelessly ogle Chasm's ass as he leans into the Porsche to get my clutch. He passes it over, complete with spy cam. Err, iPhone. Same thing, different names.

"A rose by any other name," I say with a long sigh, and Chas stares at me. *I am quoting Shakespeare at random, so ...*

"Damn it, don't do this to me before I go." He takes my head between his palms and kisses my forehead tenderly, a man about to head off to war.

"Don't do anything to jeopardize yourself, you hear me?"

"Can you agree to the same?" he retorts, but I don't answer that because I can't. I *will* jeopardize myself again if needed. I'm almost sure that I'm going to have to. "That's what I thought." He kisses me again, expression pointed. "No more heroic deeds, Mrs. McKenna. Just don't do it."

He steps away from me, walking backwards for a minute before he turns around, slips into the Porsche, and turns right at the gate.

Some part of me feels like he's going to die.

I can't shake that creeping chill for the rest of the week.

I've never been so happy to see a Saturday morning in all my life.

The custody agreement states in perfectly clear language that Tess' parenting time begins at exactly seven am. It's a minute till, and Chasm and I are dressed and ready to go. We're just waiting for those few final seconds to tick down before we head outside and hop into the Porsche.

That is ... if Justin lets us leave.

"On our way out the door already, eh?" he asks when we come down to the foyer. He's drinking coffee out of a mug that says *I'd Rather Be Hacking*. Real cute. "Well, have fun, kiddos." He grins at me and chuckles before moving into his office, Raúl stuck to his ass like an undersea barnacle. Nice cat eye frames on those glasses though. He even has a matching turquoise lighter that he flicks antagonistically in my direction.

I flip Raúl off as he goes, but Chas snatches my hand in midair and gives me a punishing look of admonition.

"Don't antagonize a loose cannon, Dakota." He drops my hand and then stifles a yawn, checking his phone for the time. That last horrible minute must've already passed, right? "God, I'm tired. Can we nap when we get to Laverne's?"

"Sorry about that," I murmur absently, still staring after Justin. He's just going to let us leave? How? Why? It doesn't make any sense. I don't like how chipper his mood seems to be this morning.

"Sorry?" Chasm repeats, opening the front door for me and allowing in a sunny summer morning. "Are you apologizing for keeping me up with sex every night?"

I turn a wide-eyed look on him, but he seems to find something either sensual or funny in that statement. Maybe both. He's not *wrong* per se—we've been having a lot of, um, fun—but that's not what I meant.

"Sorry you had to get up so early when you came home from Milk Carton so late." I clarify my statement, moving ahead of him onto the porch and then down the stairs. I'm foaming at the mouth to get out of here. I'd climb the fence all over again, and I'd do it without Maxx and Chas' help this time. "Pervert."

I'm reaching for the door handle of the Porsche when two cars pull up outside the gate: Tess' new-old vintage ride, and the super obvious black SUV full of bodyguards. Chasm and I exchange a look as we walk the length of the gravel drive and then use the smaller of the two gates to let ourselves out.

No alarms. No explosions. No gunfire raining down from the trees above us.

It's deceptively peaceful this morning.

Tess is already climbing from the car, but I notice that she doesn't bother pulling onto the property. The large drive-through gates are opening of their own accord—well, Justin's accord—but she ignores them, putting her hands on my shoulders and looking into my eyes.

"Are you two okay?" she asks, and then she gives Chas a grateful/annoyed look as he walks up to stand behind us. "I'm not thrilled that you left and came over here, Kwang-seon, but at the same time, thank you for watching over my daughter."

Chasm gets tongue-tied the way he does around Tess sometimes, reaching up to rub at the back of his head.

"Yeah, uh, not a problem. My pleasure, seriously." There's something about the way he says 'pleasure' that makes Tess' eye twitch. "You want me to drive Dakota back or ...?" He doesn't finish the sentence because he knows that Tess will want to take me with her, even if he'd prefer to keep me by his side.

"Why don't you go back to Laverne's? Dakota and I have some errands to run today." Tess smiles at him, but I sense a trap lurking beneath her civil expression. Unease colors my insides, and I shift nervously on my feet. This woman, she's a pit bull.

Chas hesitates slightly, but at a nod from me, he steps close, brackets my face between his hands, and kisses the breath out of me.

"I'll be waiting, Naekkeo," he murmurs, giving Tess a chagrined sort of look before taking off.

We climb into her car and wait for him to leave before we do, a prudent move with Justin around.

I am a bit disappointed to see that Parrish isn't with Tess. Makes sense though. Why bring him within reach of the devil's idle hands? Maxx ... I'm sure he's still fully committed to his lies, but I'm going to break him this

weekend, I swear it. I have a plan.

“Do you have your phone?” Tess glances at me, and I shake my head.

“Chas has it.” I sink into the seat, overwhelmed with a sense of stark relief. I’m alive. I’m driving away from Justin’s. Nobody else that I love has been murdered (yet). It’s a good day.

“Did you hear about Veronica Fisher?” Tess asks, surprising me. I shrug my shoulders loosely, keeping my gaze focused out the windshield. “There’s no need to hold back: I know that Justin is involved. The Fishers’ daughter goes missing and they’re immediately arrested for embezzlement? They did him wrong, there’s no doubt about that.” Tess swallows, hands tight on the steering wheel, and risks looking over at me as she asks her next question. “Is Veronica dead?”

I shrug again, so uncomfortable with this conversation that I don’t know what to do. *Like, what the fuck Tess?! She was so easy to fool in the beginning. Not so much now.*

With a determined press of her lips, Tess drives us in the opposite direction of Laverne’s place.

“Where are we going?” I ask, alarm creeping into my voice. Too much time spent with Justin maybe? Tess isn’t going to drive me to the edge of a cliff and threaten to kill us both.

“Driving lessons.” She inhales and then exhales dramatically, gathering herself. “When Paul and I bought you the BMW, I wasn’t thinking clearly. All I wanted to do was ... I wanted to spoil you, buy you things, so that you would like me.” Her cheeks and chest flush, another reminder that we’re related. I can’t help but stare at her. The worse Justin gets, the better Tess becomes. “I told you I’d sign you up for driving lessons, and your face just dropped.”

EEK. Guess I really am that terrible of an actor.

Tess continues when it becomes obvious that I have nothing to say.

“We’re moving back into the house soon; they were able to save your car.” Tess smiles at me as she says that, but I almost puke. Soon? What sort of non-specific timeframe is that? I have a kidnap victim to think about here! “I thought if I taught you to drive, at least you’d have a way to get yourself around. That is, if Justin ever lets you leave the house.”

She huffs out in frustration and then pulls the car over suddenly.

Even though I know that my mother isn’t a killer, I start to panic. My hand

goes to the door handle, ready to fling it open and start running.

Tess seems to realize that, reaching out for my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Did you and the boys kill Veronica?” she asks point-blank, and a laugh escapes me. I’ve been doing that a lot lately, huh? Laughing like I’ve lost my mind.

“What? What are you talking about?” I ask, trying to withdraw my hand from hers. She’s studying my face with such intensity that I actually squirm. “Of course not.”

“Did Justin make you bury her?”

Um. Tess is like *way* too perceptive for her own good. Grr. What the hell do I do about this?

“Why would you ask me that?” I inquire politely, still trying to extract my hand. She won’t let go, and unless I’m willing to wrench it away violently, it’s staying where it is.

“You appeared at the house in the middle of the night with dirty hands and feet. Chasm, too. I stayed up all night trying to figure it out, but it wasn’t until I saw that Veronica was missing that I made the connection. Where is her body, Dakota?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” This time, I do yank my hand away, and Tess sighs. She ruffles up her perfect hair, looking out the window at the sunny summer day that feels so at odds with the tone of my life. It should be gray and drizzly and foggy every day; that’s how thrillers get their atmospheric tint. Nothing sets the mood like the weather.

“Bear with me a little longer, Dakota. We’re going to do this together.” She looks down at me, reaching out to touch the side of my face. For someone with emotional intimacy issues, Tess has come a long way fast. “And whatever you’ve done, I know it’s under duress. It’s not your fault, not even if someone is dead.”

I cringe at that, thinking back to Heath Cousins. To Nevaeh. JJ. I have a lot of blood on my hands. I turn away, but then I hear Tess’ car door and see that she’s already climbing out. She leans down to look at me, a very real sort of smile on her face.

How she can smile like that in the situation we’re in ... I should be surprised, but didn’t I learn just the other night that you have to take happiness where you can get it? If you spend your whole life chasing after

something and forget to enjoy the thrill of the journey itself, it won't taste nearly as sweet when you get there.

"Come on then." Tess gestures with her head that I should get out and switch places with her. "Your great-grandmother had a muscle car just like this, and you've inherited her bravery and tenacity that must've skipped right over me and my mother." She winks, and now it's me that's blushing. "I'm not just going to teach you to drive, I'm going to teach you to drive a stick."

Yeah. I like my biological mom. I might even like her better than Saffron.

I feel like a traitor to the Banks family—it was emotionally easier when I hated Tess—but I climb out and get behind the wheel.

The next several hours of my life feel like a dream, like a taste of what could be.

Happiness is on the tip of my tongue, but all I can taste when I swallow is the metallic tang of blood.

The title 'CHAPTER 17' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '17' is in pink. The background features a dark green heart shape, a black tree branch, and a pink gradient background.

CHAPTER 17

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” Veronica screeches as soon as I walk in the vault door and she sees me. She charges to the end of her chain, tripping and falling as she claws at the floor. A mess surrounds her: popped air mattress, shattered dishes, food splattered on the walls, the compost toilet knocked onto its side. “Get over here, you white trash bitch.”

I stay well out of her reach, frowning heavily as I assess the situation.

I came in here with sympathy and sadness in my heart, but now I’m wondering if those are greatly misplaced emotions.

“Told you we should’ve killed her,” X quips, sighing as he stands to the left of me, looking over at our charge with a scowl of his own. Parrish and Chasm are engaged in distracting Tess—a task that’s becoming much harder over time.

I haven’t seen or spoken to Maxx or Parrish since the night of the kidnapping, and I can feel their absence the way one feels a lack of oxygen underwater. *I drown without you, Maxim; you are my breath.* I don’t say that, but I know he feels it. The way he watched me when I charged into the house and leapt into Parrish’s arms, those green envy eyes were blazing. *Clue number ten: blazing eyes.* Mr. Volli likes to say, *eyes don’t blaze, Miss Prior, try a different adjective,* but I guess he’s never been in love.

If he had been, he’d know better.

“You might be right about that. Killing her, I mean.” Maxx and I study

each other, and this wry sort of half-smile breaks on his face, making me like him even when I should rightfully want to go all Seattle Slayer's Daughter on his ass. "Tess knows we have something to do with her disappearance," I tell him, and he visibly cringes. "She grilled me about it in the car, taught me to drive, and then bought me an ice cream cone." I scratch at my ear with a pinky finger, recalling the fresh memory of sitting beside Tess in the sun next to the water, licking a double strawberry scoop and smiling. Wow. Unexpected but not unpleasant. "She isn't sure if we killed her or if he did it, but she believes Veronica is dead."

I don't have to specify the 'he' in that sentence.

"I wish she were." That's what he says, turning his stare back on Veronica. Whether he's in love with me or not, he certainly doesn't look at me the way he looks at our hostage. I can see the inherent cruelty and meanness in him, the emotions that he struggles so hard against. He shouldn't stress so much: someone without a heart wouldn't bother to worry about those things.

"You've always been a loose cannon and a psycho," Veronica continues, pushing up to her feet and pointing at Maxx. If she is scared, she's doing an admirable job of covering the emotion up with rage. "Do you know the things these three used to do at Whitehall together?" she asks, suddenly changing her tune in regard to me. "They're messing with you. Why would you want to get involved with their shit?"

"If I'm a loose cannon, what does that make you?" Maxx leans in, taunting her with his presence. I'm not sure that he doesn't enjoy it. "You're cruel, Veronica. You only have friends because they want your money and connections. Nobody cares about you. If you could just see the Whitehall reactions on social media. Most people are glad you're gone."

Ouch. Is it wrong that I find him attractive when he's like this? Maybe. Also, don't care.

"You middle-class wannabe." Veronica is absolutely *seething*. "You've spent your entire life licking Parrish's ass and trying to pretend like you're one of us. You're not. Never will be. You're just a social climber with faggots for dads."

Maxx doesn't even get angry; he laughs. If I were Veronica, I'd be afraid of that sound.

"Philippa is especially excited to take your place. I hear she's already slept with one of your favorite fuckboys." Well, there's that classic Maxim Wright

one-two punch. “Your parents are more concerned with their embezzlement charges than their missing daughter. At least my dad’s care whether I live or die.”

Veronica grits her teeth, snatches a piece of broken plate, and tries to swing at him, but Maxx steps back in the nick of time, clearing her rage. He then sighs and shakes his head, moving away from her entirely.

“I shouldn’t engage, but she just irks the fuck out of me.” He pauses near the door and we huddle together as she screams, a caucus of two.

I ignore Veronica and focus on Maxx. I didn’t exactly *want* to be down here with just him, but now that I am, I can hardly control myself. I want him to hold me, kiss me, tell me he loves me. It’s as if he can sense it, staring intently at me, his face falling before he picks it back up and then retreats a step, putting space between us.

I pretend not to notice. If I’m getting the same vibes I got in the coffee shop bathroom the day he discovered that Justin was the Slayer, well, I’m not quite sure what to do with that.

Not to say that I don’t have that plan percolating ...

“We’re moving back to the ice palace soon,” I tell Maxx, not caring if Veronica hears me. She may as well know everything now. We can’t let her go until the situation with Justin is taken care of anyway. “What are we supposed to do with her?”

He looks down at me with an expression of frustration and then rakes his fingers through his hair.

“What else? We’re going to have to drug her again and move her somewhere else.”

“The second—and I mean the *second*—that I get out of here, I’m going to kill you both.” Veronica is practically hissing now, pacing back and forth with her ankle chain clinking. She looks ridiculous in the Pokémon pajamas I gave her to wear. At least she’s not running around in her lacy push-up bra and thong, that’s something I didn’t need or want to see.

“Yeah, but where?” I ask, sighing and turning away for a second to think. It’s hard, with Veronica staring me down like a rabid dog. “Maybe one of Chasm’s dad’s rental houses?” It’s just a suggestion, but I discard it as soon as I come up with it. We need Veronica close, so that we can take care of her and keep an eye on her. Besides, Seamus rents those out regularly. That, and who knows what he and Justin might be using them for currently? Lodging

for one of Justin's murdering pawns? "Or not. God, I feel like my brain is running low on innovation. I'm just tired of trying to be clever all the time."

Maxx opens his mouth like he might offer me some comfort, but no words come.

"What if we tell Tess?" he suggests after a span of silence. I just turn to stare at him. Tell Tess? That's insane. She'll force us to release Veronica. She'll—I stop my own rapidly spiraling thoughts.

Will she though? Will she really, knowing Justin the way she does?

"Hah." Veronica snorts and then laughs, drawing my attention back to her. "Right. You're the girl whose mommy saves her from everything." She starts ticking fingers on her hand. "First, from poverty. Then, from a Whitehall party. Now, a kidnapping. Guess she's not strong enough to save you from the Slayer." Veronica laughs at that, obviously referring to Paul, but something about that statement triggers me in the worst way.

I walk up to her, and I slap her. Hard. So hard that blood blooms at the corner of her lip. She touches her hand to her cheek and turns back to me in disbelief.

"You're being held captive, Veronica. Do you think pissing me off is going to save you? My life would be so much simpler if you really were dead right now." She gapes at me as I cross my arms and stare her down. "Besides: Paul isn't the Slayer."

Veronica scoffs and turns away, but I'm not done.

"My father—Justin Prior—is the Slayer. He commanded me to kill you under threat to my life and the lives of those I love. Keeping you around puts us all at huge fucking risk. Remember that." I start to walk away, but she isn't done either. She actually picks up a second piece of broken plate and throws it at my back. It hurts, but it's minor.

"Oh, hell no," Maxx growls, but I stop him with a hand on his arm. He allows me to touch him, but he stares at my fingers resting on his forearm like they burn. Like they ache. Like he's breaking inside.

"The next time she throws her food, don't bring her any for two days," I tell him, refusing to look at the expression on his face for a second longer. "The next time she pops the air mattress or dumps the toilet over, take the item away and don't replace it."

I open the door to slip out, and Maxx follows shortly after.

"Please don't touch me anymore." That's what the bastard says as he

breezes past me, taking off up the cellar stairs. I grit my teeth, but I follow him anyway.

We check the kitchen, but the coast is clear.

That's when we hear the argument taking place.

"I'm just supposed to rot here for the rest of the summer? Why can't I go to the hunt? We've literally gone to it every year—not that you seem to care since you made me miss the ice cream social." Kimber storms into the kitchen behind Tess. Chasm and Parrish are right behind them, and they both look absurdly relieved to see that Maxx and I are already out of the cellar.

Tess notices the pair of us standing near the fridge, but says nothing, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"I don't enjoy repeating myself, Kimber Celeste. I've already told you: nobody is going anywhere or doing anything until your father gets out of jail."

"So, I get literally no summer at all?" Kimber whines, ignoring me as she grabs onto Tess' arm. "We go back to school in, like, two seconds. I've done *nothing* but rot in here."

Tess sighs and turns to face her daughter, but her expression is unmoved.

"Do you think you're the only one suffering? What about your dad? Hmm? He's in jail for a crime he didn't commit. What about Ben? He hasn't been able to attend a single junior book club meeting since Paul was arrested. Amelia and Henry have their ballet recitals and their horseback riding lessons; I'm sure they're missing those, too."

Maxx and I exchange a look, communicating without words even though we're broken up. *Aww, poor spoiled rich kids*, I think is what we're saying.

"You are welcome to invite your friends over—if their parents are okay with it." Tess sighs and rubs at her brow, eyes shut tight and brow pinched. "What am I even saying? Lord knows no sane parent would let their child spend the night or even the day at a house where a serial killer was living." She opens her eyes and looks at me like she's sorry, like she knows how hypocritical her words are.

She's a parent, and she's letting her child spend the night (many, many nights) at a serial killer's house. Not by choice, of course, but under threat of the courts and law enforcement. How ironic.

"This is an old person's house." Kimber's complaint falls on deaf ears as Parrish and Chasm sidle up beside me, their dual warmth granting me all the

best carnal memories from prom night. Maxx is ... I just don't think too hard about Maxx right now. "This is my *grandma's* house. Who would want to come over here anyway?"

"Well, excuse me," Tess shouts right back at her, putting a hand to her chest. "I am so sorry that you have to waste your life away in an eleven-thousand square foot mansion with a pool and a tennis court!" Tess steps toward Kimber, nearly spilling her coffee all over the toes of her gorgeous red heels. "I grew up in a mobile home, Kimber. Try harder to get my sympathy."

"Bet you walked uphill to school in the snow—both ways." Kimber grumbles this part as she yanks the fridge open, looking at the assorted array of sodas, sparkling waters, juices, teas, flavored milks, and kombucha like it's all undrinkable garbage.

"I *did* walk to school. I walked there, rain or shine, and then had to hurry and change into my uniform in the girls' bathroom and accept the dress code violations I got for my dirty tennis shoes. Because I only had one pair, Kimber. Because my parents were awful, and my grandmother was older, and we all just did the best we damn could." Tess turns away from her daughter and leaves the room, and I'm pleased to see that Kimber's cheeks are bright pink.

So are her boobs.

It runs in the family, apparently.

"You should be ashamed of yourself," Parrish scoffs, moving up behind Kimber and giving her hair a tug. She swats him away, her gaze drifting to me before she looks pointedly back at the fridge again. "Mom's going through a lot of shit right now; Dad's in jail. Don't you give a crap about anyone but yourself?"

Still, Kimber doesn't respond, just grabs a drink and turns to look at the rest of us.

"I like your family," she tells me, and then she's shoving between me and Chasm and disappearing down the hallway. I watch her go before looking back to Parrish with my eyes wide and my heart thumping.

"Was that an olive branch? It felt like an olive branch." I head to the fridge to grab my own drink.

"She's treating you more like I imagine she'd treat a sister-in-law than a long-lost bio sister." Parrish pauses and then shrugs. "Works for me, since

we're going to be together forever."

"Goddamn it," Maxx murmurs, trying and failing to make a quick exit. That's a clue, too, right? He can hardly stand to be in the same room as me.

Maxine appears and the two nearly bump into one another. He abruptly turns back and then lets himself slump against the wall with a sigh.

"You're here finally?!" Maxie asks, coming over to give me a huge hug. She holds me at arm's-length, peering me over. Likely, she's looking for more evidence of Justin's abuse. I don't let her hold me there; if she keeps looking for it, she'll find it.

And also, the hickeys from Chasm on my neck.

She spots those right away, and I clamp a hand over the marks.

"Kota Banks," she whispers dramatically, and I hear Maxx snort. When I look his way, he's staring off into space and pretending to be disconnected. Whether he laughed or not isn't up for debate. But did he laugh at me or Maxine?

"What?" I mutter, clutching my palm against the worst of the hickeys. "I'm a big girl now, Maxie."

"Big girl, maybe. Little sister, always. Parrish Vanguard, you should be ashamed." She glares at him, and he lifts a cultured brow in response. Most of these marks are not his. Some might be. Primarily, they're Chasm's. Makes me think that Maxine is fully aware of the Lumen subplot. She doesn't believe I'd forgive Chas so easily, and therefore assumes Parrish is the one ravaging me. "Next time you leave marks, do it somewhere our grandparents won't see."

"Good advice, Maxie," X purrs, like he's interested in her and not me. Doesn't it feel like a staged performance at this point? Screw them both. "You know I never make that mistake."

My sister ignores him, but Chasm grins mischievously.

"Yeah, Pear-Pear, keep your dirty mouth to yourself next time." He teases his fingers under Parrish's chin, and the Sloth King lazily swipes them away.

"This is what I get for letting you take the heat over that stupid condom, isn't it?" Parrish watches Chas slip into a chair at the table and then steps up beside him, planting his palms on the surface. "How many times did you guys fuck this week anyway?"

"Um, hello, standing right here?" I raise a hand, but they both ignore me.

"Wait, you slept with Chasm?" Maxx sounds indignantly enraged at this

point, like maybe he didn't know that I'd 'forgiven' Chas for cheating on me. Perhaps he's jealous that he hasn't gotten the same treatment? Stubborn, blockheaded alpha-jerk. He's standing up straight now, some of his *I love Maxine soooo much* routine falling by the wayside in his shock.

"Dakota wouldn't let me sleep; I'm exhausted." Chas yawns again, stretching his arms over his head. "We had sex more than we slept, that's for fucking sure."

"Excuse me." Maxine walks up to the table and puts her hands on her hips. "Don't talk about my sister like that—especially not in front of me. She's a person, not a sex object."

"Of course not." Chasm sits up and folds his hands together on the table. "I'm saying that *she* treated *me* like a sex object."

That's it. I move over to Chasm's chair and I grab a handful of his silky hair in my hand. It's meant to be a tease, something to get him to shut up, but I've been grabbing his hair like this for days in entirely different scenarios. Our eyes meet, and he exhales, and then we're locked in some sort of gross love bubble.

"Stop that." Parrish steps between us, and then *our* eyes lock, and we're trapped in some sort of gross love bubble, too. "I'm jealous. We'll need to spend the rest of the weekend naked in order to soothe my hurt feelings."

"If you all haven't forgotten, there are far more important things at play here than relationship dynamics." Maxx looks like a predator as he stalks over to join the rest of us at the table. Inspiration strikes me in the worst way, making my chest hurt.

He was wild, that boy. He pretended to be civilized, but he was at best an antonym. The look he gave me was male and hot and possessive. I don't think he even knew he was doing it: it was simply in his feral nature. My body reverberated with carnal memory, highlighting each place he had touched, kissed, the tender spot he'd penetrated.

One could not stand beneath the wanting stare of Maxim Wright without feeling the full force of the sun.

I open my mouth to respond, but there's no time to say anything. Probably for the best. Not sure if I was going to respond to his statement, or the purple prose inside my own head. To be fair, it was all accurate. Maxim is a beast.

My grandmother is on her way into the kitchen, and she's smiling at me. I smile back, even if seeing her here makes the dire nature of our situation

stand out in excruciating detail. *I could be at home in our farmhouse, counting the days to Maxine's next visit, baking some stupid viral dessert that Sally found online while Nevaeh scrolls on her phone and complains about her newest ex.*

"Did you just get here?" Carmen asks, giving me a one-armed hug. She's holding an empty mug in the other hand. As she separates from me, she gives each of the boys a quick, scrutinizing look and then goes about preparing herself a new cup. "You want a peppermint tea?" she adds before I get a chance to answer her first question, and I nod.

"I've been here for a few minutes," I offer up, almost shyly. Carmen seems to notice, lifting those expressive brown eyes of hers up to mine. She locks gazes with me, and I feel abruptly like I should tell the truth about everything. Just like when I look at Maxine. Or X. My grandmother has similar qualities. "Who's taking care of the house while you guys are here? I realized that I never asked."

That house is like a family member to me; I'm concerned for her safety.

I grab a seat at the counter, Parrish and Chasm leaving a spot for Maxine on one side of me, and then facing off in a silent staring contest to see who gets the stool closest to mine. Parrish wins with a flourishing smirk, but only because Chasm spoils him too much.

"Our crazy old neighbor," she says, fixing my tea with just the right amount of honey and handing it over to me.

"By 'our crazy old neighbor', she means a woman named Eliza that she's known for literally twenty years." Maxine explains this all to X and then laughs, and then he laughs, and I realize that I'm craning my neck to stare at them.

I snap my attention forward again to see Carmen watching me.

"Holy shit, she's scary," Parrish whispers in my ear, and I stifle a snort. Badly. By slapping my hand over my mouth.

"Kota." My grandmother leans one elbow on the counter, her mug steaming in front of her, and she *stares* hard at me. Does she wonder why I'm not throwing Paul's arrest in Tess' face? Why I don't seem to mind that my new stepfather is an alleged murderer? Does she notice how gun-shy and anxious and angry I am? Probably yes to all of those things. "Are you gossiping about me?"

"I said you were scary," Parrish admits, and Chas groans, facepalming

himself.

“Hm.” Carmen stands up, staining the edge of her mug with her bright red lipstick. “I certainly can be.” She looks to the double Maxes again, and I realize that she’s picked up on their dynamic. Great. I don’t know what to say or how to handle the situation, so I excuse myself to the bathroom and end up sitting on the closed lid of my toilet with the cup of tea.

There’s a slight knock at the door before Chasm comes in.

“I’ve already checked the room for Mr. Volli,” I explain randomly to him when he stops in front of me. I pretend like I’m totally chill, like plenty of teenage girls drink hot tea on the closed lid of their toilet.

“That’s creepy that you even have to say that,” he tells me, peering around the room like maybe my app development teacher is crouching in the corner of the ceiling like Spiderman. I couldn’t say I’d be surprised. “But good. Because I want to talk to you.”

He has the bug detector in hand, using it to scan the bathroom before he deems it safe. Ish. Everything about Justin has that sticky ‘ish’ attached to it. Nothing is concrete.

“We’ve been talking all week, haven’t we?” I ask, but we haven’t *really* been talking. Other than that initial conversation where we dug deep and apologized to one another, it was all small talk. I wrote in the studio; he went to work at Milk Carton; we came together at night. Together being a euphemistic word.

Chas comes to stand in front of me, kneeling down and placing both hands on my knees. He’s so tall that we’re still somewhat on eye level with one another. I sip my tea and pretend like my hands aren’t shaking.

“There’s a lot going on that you don’t necessarily know about.” That’s what he tells me, and I blink at him in confusion, looking toward the door as if I expect Parrish to come walking in. Chasm reaches out to take my chin, turning my face back toward him. He’s deadly serious right now. “But I can tell you already figured most of it out. You’re too smart for your own good.”

“Figured what out?” I ask, and Chas gives me a cynical look.

“That I never slept with Lumen.” His face twists like he’s just bitten into a particularly sour lemon. Chasm stands up suddenly and paces a rut, raking at his hair and then grabbing some and giving it a sharp yank. That’s his favorite anxious tic for sure.

“Well, yeah. You admitted it to me, remember?” I take a sip of my tea,

trying to affect a Parrish-like air of composure. Can one appear to have dignity and equanimity on a toilet seat? I can at least try.

“You knew before I told you.” Chasm sighs, narrowing his eyes on me. “How?”

I look at my tea mug and try to figure out how to explain what I need to explain.

“Cheating is the most selfish act a person can do in a relationship, right?” I turn to see that he’s gone completely still, listening. “One brief flicker of pleasure is worth destroying your partner’s emotional confidence, worth shattering their trust. So how could you, who is the most selfless person I’ve ever met, have done something like that?” I take another drink of my tea as Chas sprawls on the floor in front of me.

“*Did that look like me when I fuck?*” I don’t mention that part. I savor the memory, but I don’t mention it.

“I didn’t want to do it; I hated just the *idea* of it. But what else was there? I couldn’t let Parrish do it. What would you do without Parrish?” His voice sounds broken, and he swipes a hand over his mouth as he sighs heavily. How can he even ask me that? Like Parrish is more important somehow? “Anyway.” Chas drops both hands into his lap. “We made that video a while back, just in case.”

“Just in case?” I ask, and he shrugs.

“This wasn’t an *if*, it was a *when*,” Chasm confirms, reaching out and taking my tea from me. He sniffs it, sips it, mulls it over, sips it again. I smile slightly, but only slightly. “The guy in the video, his name is Min-su, and I’ve caught him and Lumen in the bathroom at the *hagwon* before.”

“What’s a *hagwon*?” I ask, and he stifles a laugh of his own.

“Cram school.” Chas takes another sip of tea. “I have the full video with Min-su’s ugly face prominently displayed. If you need to see it, I understand.” Chas waves a hand around dismissively, as if this is nothing at all. Knowing his character, I’m sure he was hurting as much as I was. “I’ve been working on it during my night classes; I inserted the footage into an old feed, and then referenced it in a way that Justin would seek it out. I knew he’d like it best if he caught me cheating before giving an order like that. Having me betray you of my own free will was better than forcing me to do it at his hand.”

“No deepfake videos or AI generated images, just old-fashioned angles and

cuts, eh?” Despite the situation, I’m proud of him for his ingenuity. He gives me this sort of *look* in response.

“And brilliant hacking, don’t forget.” Chasm lifts the corner of his lip, but it’s not quite a smile. “Justin could spot a deepfake from space; I’d never get away with that. I’m not even sure how we’ve made it up until this point. Probably because Lumen is still his pet, and she vouched for the authenticity.” Chas scratches at his temple with a single finger. “Or else Justin *does* know we’re messing with him and just hasn’t gotten around to punishing us yet.”

“If Lumen *is* still working for him, why would she have sex with Min-su on camera to help us?” I’m not sure how I feel about that. Her constant claims of crushing on me seem even stranger in context. Did she truly feel that way at any point, or was all of that yet more pageantry on Justin’s end?

Chasm’s mouth twitches and he finishes off my tea for me.

“To help us? No. Never. Stop trusting people you shouldn’t trust.” He points at me with the mug. “Lumen’s a bitch and a double-crosser. She only made the video because Parrish agreed to marry her. Despite what she says, that is *still* what she wants.”

A knock sounds at my bedroom door and Chas stands up to answer it while I stay where I am, mulling over what he’s just said. He’s never trusted Lumen, but I wish that we could. Those times with Danyella and Lumen were as happy as any I shared with Sally and ... Nevaeh. I miss having female friends.

Footsteps sound in my bedroom and a tense hush falls as I wait to see who our visitor might be. I should know before I even see him: I can feel Parrish like a storm. His presence makes my bones ache. He appears in the doorway behind Chasm, hazelnut eyes and lush lips dripping with disdain.

“We’re discussing Lumen, are we?” He draws a finger across his throat, the corner of his lip curling in distaste. “I gave her what she wanted in the short term—a ring and a proposal—but I was never going to uphold my end of such a ridiculous bargain. I’d be more likely to leave her at the altar.” That seems to amuse him, and he rubs his hand over his mouth, the sunburst design on the back of it catching my attention. “Now *that* would be funny: the Hearsts would never be accepted in polite society again.” He laughs at that, and I shiver. My god, what a dick. I’d almost forgotten. He’s only nice to me, I guess.

“You’re not taking her to the altar for many reasons, Mr. Vanguard.” I staunch the flow of jealousy, wondering when I might be able to steal that ring back from Lumen. It should be mine, shouldn’t it? My eyes catch on the diamond ring gracing my finger now. Can I wear three of them? Is that weird? *Why are we thinking about three rings when you only have two boyfriends at the moment?*

“Jealous, Mrs. Vanguard?” Parrish retorts, hopping up to sit on the edge of the counter as Chasm pokes at an absurdly fancy fainting couch in metallic gold fabric. It sits against the wall kitty-corner to the toilet, and appears to be an antique which begs the questions: why is there an expensive antique in a bathroom and why am I still sitting on the toilet?

“Mrs. McKenna,” Chas corrects with a sigh, finally taking the risk and plopping down on the thin-boned sofa. “Am I going to break this damn thing?”

“It’s an eighteenth-century piece, worth at least six figures. Don’t you dare ruin it.” Parrish tosses his hair off his forehead with a flick of elegant fingers, leaning back against the new mirror. Not sure when it was replaced or who did it, but my moment of rage has been erased entirely.

“Seriously?” Chas asks, scrunching up his face. “And do you honestly give a shit?”

Parrish throws his head back as he laughs, fingers curled around the edge of the countertop.

“Obviously not, you dumbass. I don’t know or give a fuck about the ugly shit in my grandmother’s house.” He perfects the ideal rich boy moue as he stares at Chasm. “What I *do* care about is how you went to stay with Dakota at Justin’s and then spent the entire time in bed with her.”

“Get luckier, I guess,” Chas shoots back, tattooed arms exposed and crossed over his chest. He smirks at his friend, and I roll my eyes.

“Can I interject here?” I stand up and turn to face the pair of them. “I won’t be changing my last name for anyone, especially not since I’m going to have to change my name from Mia Prior back to Dakota Banks in the first place.” I raise my brows at Parrish. “Did Chas tell you that yet? That Justin changed my name?”

Parrish exhales and then nods, his knuckles turning white as he tries to hide some of his anger.

“We can talk about the last name thing later. What’s been happening over

there? You two have been offline for a week.” Parrish peers at me like he’s trying to uncover any secrets I might be keeping. He’s good at it, too. Not like the double Maxes or Grandma Carmen, like they’re summoning truth from the soul. It’s more like ... Parrish is so shrewd that he could cut it from you with sharp words alone.

“Let’s talk about Lumen instead: what did you guys tell her exactly?” I’m fixated on this. It seems more important than they’re letting on.

“To ensure she doesn’t screw us over, I agreed that I’d marry Lumen after this is all over. She wanted collateral, so I gave her the proposal. It worked out: Justin texted me that night and Laverne laid on the pressure, threatening me with my inheritance. Not that I care. But it came together nicely.” Parrish exhales and closes his eyes for a few seconds. He might be playing his blue-blood role perfectly, but he’s tired, too. “Lumen messes around with Min-su all the time anyway. I don’t see how a prenup-free marriage is a fair trade.”

Parrish hops down off the counter and comes to stand beside me, reaching out a hand and trailing long fingers down my cheek. The simple sensation becomes grotesquely erotic, and I snatch his hand in mine, pressing that familiar warmth against my skin. As terrible as our current situation is, it’s weirdly better than having Parrish kidnapped. That was the worst.

“I’m sorry you and Chasm had to go through with all that.” He bends to kiss me, lingering too long at my lips. I sigh and finally push him away. I’d rather pull him close, but we’re not done talking. “I’m also worried that you two aren’t pulling this off. Sex all week? After he cheated with your friend? Is that believable?”

“Justin wants us together,” Chasm growls out, looking at the empty shower instead of at Parrish or me. I think he’s worried about the same thing. I also think he’s angry with himself for not being able to pull it off the way Maxx is. *That boy better be tricking me. I’ll shave his head if he isn’t. I’ll put his hand in warm water while he sleeps. I’ll ... die of a broken heart.* “He told us as much. He wanted her to be cheated on the way Tess cheated on him with your dad.”

“Hm.” Parrish sighs and stands up straight, hands on his hips. “Still, I’m nervous about it. Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Why would you trick me anyway, Chas?” I grumble. “You seemed so mad at Maxx for doing the same thing.” I look hopefully at both boys, waiting for them to confirm my theory: Maxx is a liar. He’s lying for my

benefit, but he's still a liar.

"Look. Justin *lets* me hack because he doesn't worry about me at all. But you know what I've stumbled across while I've been doing it? Dozens of instances where we thought we'd avoided his eyes and ears but played into his hands instead." Chasm stands up from the fainting couch and walks over to stand beside Parrish, his boots loud against the polished floor. "I didn't feel like I had a way to set this up so that you'd understand and play along. I wanted to. I just realized how naïve I'd been."

"So ... you're not mad at Maxx anymore?" I'm still fishing for information, but the way those boys turn to look at each other, doing their silent bromance communication ... I don't like that.

"I was angry at Maxim for other reasons," Chasm hedges, but he doesn't seem willing to voice those reasons. "I am *still* angry at Maxx."

"He's as full of shit as you are," Parrish says with a lingering sigh. I stand up at that, sandwiched more or less between the two guys that had a threesome with me in this very room. "He hasn't said anything to me; I don't know anymore than you do. But didn't I tell you to trust him?"

"Don't," Chasm snarls, and I can see now that he truly is still furious with his friend. "I disagree completely: don't trust a thing he says. Whatever he's doing, I would not be surprised if he's setting himself up to die."

Chas leaves the bathroom in a fury, and I realize as he goes why he's so upset with X.

He loves him and he's worried about him.

That scares me more than believing that Maxx might actually be in love with my sister. He can marry Maxine and have little hiking babies with her if it'll keep him alive. My stomach churns and I clench a hand in the fabric of my dress. I only wore it because Justin would never have let me leave the house in a hoodie, but maybe it's time for some *Super Mario* leggings or something.

"I'd suggest we have sex right now, but your grandma is under the impression that I came up here to get you." Parrish turns to me and then pulls me into his arms, tucking me under his chin and holding me close enough that I can press my ear to his chest and listen to his heartbeat. "How long before she comes to check? Can we get away with it?"

"No, you cannot." Tess' voice makes us both jump, and we turn to see her standing in the bathroom door with Chasm hovering just behind her. He sighs

with relief which makes her mouth twitch. He's probably relieved that we were only discussing sex, and not something related to Justin. Tess ... I'm not sure what she thinks.

"Shit." Parrish releases me reluctantly as our mother (that sounds so weird, doesn't it?) stares us down. She's always been like this, barging in on us, uncovering our secrets, busting our asses. It feels comforting now in a way that it didn't before.

"Language," she says automatically, and Parrish snorts. "Are you all *sure* there's nothing about Veronica Fisher that you want to talk to me about?"

Dang. She's still on that? Of course she is.

Because she knows we're lying.

I want to tell her the truth, but even though I trust her now, I don't know if she can handle this the way it needs to be handled. Releasing Veronica won't do anyone any favors, and I just can't see Tess leaving a captive teenager in her MIL's basement.

"Why the hell would we have anything to do with Veronica Fisher? Let's just say: I won't be attending the funeral if she turns up dead." Parrish heads for the door, but Tess doesn't move out of his way. She puts her hands on either side of the doorjamb, trapping us there.

"Is she dead, Parrish?" she asks him, her gaze on his. He stares right back at her, guileless and unflinching. Chasm and I might be shitty actors, but Parrish is talented. Years of dealing with the diamond-encrusted sharks of Medina, I'd guess.

"Why would I know the answer to that question?" he retorts, and then he ducks down and slips under her arm. Tess lets him go, but she keeps me there, Chasm still waiting nervously behind her. I'm okay though; I've been dealing with Tess for hours now. She's pestered me about my time at Justin's repeatedly and in great detail, like she's gathering information for a decisive strike.

"I'm sure Veronica will turn up safe eventually," is what I say, and since that's not a lie at all, it comes out in a believable way. Now that I'm really thinking about it, I don't imagine Tess would have a heroic 'let's save this poor girl' response at all. No, I think she'd use Veronica to bait Justin, throw her out with the hope that he'd kill her and make a mistake in the process. The girl would be bait in a trap.

Keeping Veronica away from Tess and Justin both, I'm saving her life.

“Okay.” It’s Tess’ turn to use that universal word on me. “Come downstairs. I know your brothers and sisters are excited that you’re home. Your grandparents, too.” She steps back and waits for me, but she can’t possibly know all the emotions I’m cycling through because of her words.

My brothers and sisters. Excited. Home. My grandparents (and not simply *the Banks*).

I might not be Catskills Dakota anymore, but I’m also not the girl standing in the world’s last Blockbuster, digging through hoodies and holding back tears.

Through all his scheming, Justin has brought us together.

What a gloriously unintended side effect.

“I wanted to ask Ben if he’d started *A Series of Unfortunate Events* yet. Book two is my favorite.” I smile at Tess as I pass by, and I know she can tell it’s a real smile. It startles her a little, I think.

Startles me a little, too.

Maxx and I are alone together once again but romance—or the other side of the coin, betrayal—are far from both our minds. Veronica is just *that* annoying. Yet, someone has to clean up the mess she made earlier, has to feed her, has to make sure she’s still here and hasn’t harmed herself. It’s easier for Chasm and Parrish to distract Tess while I help Maxx out. Logistics is why I’m down here this evening.

“I’m not surprised that your dad is a *killer*,” she hisses at me, curled up in the corner in her borrowed Pokémon pajamas. She’s glaring at me like some sort of demon from the depths of hell, eyes narrowed to slits, mouth curled. Her red hair is tangled and mussy around her pretty face. “Bet that bad blood is in you, too. How do you ever think you’re going to live a normal life with a father who’s a serial killer?”

“How do you think you’re going to live through the night if you keep provoking us?” X asks casually, dumping the composting toilet as I push the tray of food across the floor in Veronica’s direction. I’m not getting any closer to that barely coiled rage than I have to.

“I won’t be here to help move her when the time comes,” I warn Maxx, ignoring Veronica entirely. “Do you guys really think you can handle

drugging her, getting her to the ice palace, and then ... putting her wherever you're going to put her?"

"Parrish's bathroom, most likely. After what happened with Delphine, I doubt Tess is going to want any maid service for a while." X snorts, kicking the toilet across the floor and putting it back into Veronica's reach.

The door opens and I glance over, expecting Parrish or Chasm.

Only ... it's not Parrish or Chasm.

It's Kimber.

Staring at Veronica.

Luck is relative. Sometimes, getting a broken leg feels lucky because you survived a potentially deadly accident. Sometimes, having your sister stumble on your kidnap victim is lucky because you're there to control the damage. That's all I can do now.

"Help me!" Veronica screams, shoving up to her feet and taking off in Kimber's direction. When she gets to the end of the chain, she trips and falls hard, slamming her chin on the stone floor. Blood blossoms around her lips as Kimber's eyes widen and she looks to me and Maxx, back to Veronica, to me and Maxx again.

And then she turns and takes off running.

I'm after her in an instant, bounding up the vault stairs, and then leaping forward to tackle her so that she falls to the cellar floor.

"Mo—" Kimber starts to yell before I clamp a hand over her mouth. She's still screaming and struggling when X joins us, helping me hold her down.

"Please wait," I'm repeating over and over again, panic surging through me. This could ruin literally everything that we've worked so hard for. There is no doubt in my mind that if Justin finds out that Veronica isn't dead, that we tricked him, that he'll kill people. Maybe even me. In the beginning, I was sure that Justin was infatuated with me, that I was safe from the worst of his evils because he wanted so much from me.

Now? I know it's Tess that he really cares about. Well, 'care about' might not be the right phrase, but you get the idea. Tess is his endgame. Mm, more like his game over. If Justin thinks killing me will do the trick, that'll be it. Tess plus revenge equals happy Justin. I don't mean much to him at all, and that's a sad thing to admit.

"If you tell Tess about this, we're all dead," X growls, giving Kimber's shoulder a shake. "The Seattle Slayer will get us all." He looks at me and I

just barely move my hand away from my sister's mouth. We release her, but X is up and blocking the stairs before she gets the chance to move. No way in hell is she getting past him. He's a brick wall of stupidly delicious muscles.

Thirstiest Gamer Girl alive, I swear.

"The ... Slayer?" Kimber asks, looking up at me as I rise to my feet. She remains on the floor, mouth gaping open as she blinks through the shock. "Who's the Slayer?" She snuffles slightly, running her arm across her nose and mouth. "It's most definitely *not* my dad."

And then she's shoving up to her feet, this look of raw vindication on her face.

"My dad can't even kill a spider!" she explains, all of this rage and frustration bubbling up from within her. Outside appearances might suggest that Kimber doesn't care that much about Paul. That's not true at all. She's angry, righteously angry. "Literally, he scoops them up in cups and puts them outside." She crosses her arms and lifts her chin, looking at me like she expects answers.

What else can I do but give them to her?

My gaze slips past her to Maxx, and he curses, ruffling up his beautiful wavy brown hair. I miss touching it. Even now, in this shitty situation, I want to touch him. My fingertips ache.

"Your call." X crosses his bulging biceps over his chest, and I have to mentally shake myself. I look back at Kimber.

"No, your father is not the Seattle Slayer." Hard swallow. Shame. Hard to breathe. "Mine is."

Kimber just stares at me, but she doesn't move to condemn me the way I thought she might.

"That Justin guy?" she asks, and I nod. "Seriously?" I nod again.

"He threatened to hurt the people I love if I didn't kill Veronica." It sounds absurd when I say it, but that's God's honest truth right there. "Obviously, we couldn't kill her. We have to keep her hidden until we can figure out what to do about Justin."

"Tell Mom." Kimber crosses her own arms and nods, like that's the obvious conclusion to come to. "If you don't do it, I will."

"Like hell you will," Maxx warns, but we both ignore him.

Oddly enough, this is the most sisterlike moment I've ever had with Kimber; X's opinion is irrelevant here.

“Tess already knows that Justin is the Seattle Slayer.” I swallow again, brushing hair back from my face. Kimber hesitates, looking past me toward the vault’s door. Then at Maxx.

“My brother knows about this?” she asks, and he nods. A heartbeat passes before she adds, “Chasm?”

“Him, too.” Maxx moves forward, seemingly confident that Kimber isn’t about to bolt. “Why? Still crushing on him?”

She throws Maxx a look of pure horror.

“Knowing that he slept with my sister? Gross.” And there it is. Both Maxx and I cringe as Kimber looks between us, unsure about our reactions to her statement. If she only knew. “We’re moving back home; what are you planning to do with her?”

“We’ll move her,” I confirm, still not liking the idea. It’s risky. Way too risky.

“This is insane,” Kimber whispers, looking at the door again. “But, like, Veronica is a total bitch so it’s not completely undeserved.”

“Is that why you agreed to lure me and Chasm to her?” I ask dryly, remembering the pain and humiliation of being set up by my own sister outside the hedge maze. Ugh. Kimber at least has the common decency to look ashamed.

“I just wanted you and Chas to pay for not giving a shit about my missing brother,” she mumbles, staring at the floor instead of at my face. When she lifts her gaze to mine, there’s a newfound respect there that I was not expecting. “How long do you plan on keeping her prisoner?”

“As long as it takes,” I admit, shrugging my shoulders. “Until I can figure out what to do with Justin. If it helps, I have tried to kill him twice and failed twice.”

Kimber’s eyes are as big as saucers now.

“I still think you should tell Mom,” she admits, and the fact that she’s referring to Tess as ‘Mom’ and not ‘my mom’, well, it’s a huge step. “She was sort of shitty to you before, I get that. I was sort of shitty to you before, too.”

“Sort of?” X queries dryly, still standing up for me despite everything. “You were really shitty to her, Kim.”

She whirls on him, cheeks and chest turning red.

“I was jealous, okay? My whole life I’ve heard Mom talk about Mia. I’ve

seen her weeping on her birthdays, on Christmas, on Mother's Day." Kimber looks at me, almost shyly. "And she's so *weird*. I've never met anyone like you before. Like, I don't understand you at all."

"That's an excuse to be an asshole?" Maxx clarifies, but Kimber's already shaking her head.

"Screw you, Maxx," she snaps before mollifying. I'm proud of her for catching and correcting her own temper. "I didn't say that. I just ... I ..." She hesitates briefly, swallowing hard and fiddling with her skirt. "I'm sorry. Look, I'll prove it to you right now: what do I have to do?"

"Fucking hell." It's Parrish, standing on the stairs and looking at his little sister like he's seen a ghost. "I'll tell you what you have to do: keep your goddamn mouth shut. That's literally it." He stomps down the remaining steps and points a finger in her direction. "You hear me? You owe me for picking on Dakota and Chasm while I was gone." He pauses and narrows his eyes. "And for believing I was dead when I wasn't, ye of little faith."

"I'll keep my mouth shut if you make me cool next year." Kimber is dead serious, holding out a hand in Parrish's direction. "That's all I want: some clout."

"I'll shove that clout right—" Parrish begins, but then I'm stepping between them and taking Kimber's hand in my own.

"As his girlfriend, I vouch for him." I give Parrish a long look, and he sighs, waving his hand around absently.

"Yeah, sure, whatever. Though making *you* anything more than a wannabe grunt is going to be an extreme task. And that's *with* grandma's money. If she disowns us, it's impossible." He turns a heated look on X, as if it's his fault that Kimber stumbled on us down here. It was only a matter of time, really. The two boys stare at one another before Parrish sighs and gives Kimber another warning look. "Just don't mess this up."

Kimber grins at me, putting her hands into her skirt's pockets. It's pretty cute actually, a yellow and pink plaid ensemble with suspender straps. It looks nice on her.

"I'm useful in other ways; I know how to get things done." She hooks a thumb at her chest. "I can help with whatever you need. Honestly, knowing Veronica Fisher is shitting in a bucket is hilarious. She'll never live this down. All I need is one photo, okay?"

"Maybe later," Parrish agrees thoughtfully. "A few good Snaps of her

wearing Pokémon pajamas and crapping in a composting toilet should destroy her reputation permanently.”

“About the Pokémon thing,” I start, but he’s not listening to me.

“She never thinks anyone can get the better of her. How did you guys pull this off?” Kimber’s practically bouncing with excitement now, eyes shiny with the promise of good goss.

“Our little sister’s a cruel one, isn’t she?” Parrish asks, patting Kimber on the head like a puppy. “We stole some Benzos from Dad and drugged her with them.” She chuckles, and Maxx and I end up exchanging another look. Middle-class camaraderie for the win. Rich people are crazy. “If you fuck this up for us, I will ruin the rest of your high school career rather than enhance it. Do you hear me?”

Kimber’s nodding, but Maxx still looks worried, like he doesn’t trust her.

“What can she do? Report Saffron’s whereabouts to Justin? Oh wait, that was you.” As soon as I say that, Maxx turns the power of his stare on me and I immediately regret changing the dynamic again. Socioeconomic comrades is easier than distanced lovers.

“Yeah, so, it seems like there might be trouble in polyamorous paradise; I’ll show myself the door before this gets weird.” Kimber heads up the steps and Parrish hesitates slightly before leaving us to secure the vault’s inner door.

“You’re angry with me; you have a right to be.” Maxx is looking at me like he wants me to hit him or something, like he’s craving righteous punishment. “What I don’t get is why you’re not angry with Chasm.”

“Oh, you’re curious about that, are you?” I taunt, taking a step back. As soon as I do, he takes one forward, and my entire body reacts in a way that’s more primal than anything else. Maxx is definitely the sort of man that sets off my mammal brain. I bet there’s a name for the scent that he exudes. *Eau de asshole*. “Wondering if I won’t forgive you for banging Maxine?”

He visibly clenches his jaw, but the eye contact never wavers. I wish it would. I wish I’d never said that at all.

“So, you did forgive Chasm then?” he asks, sounding disgusted with me. Or maybe it’s himself that he’s disgusted with. I hope it’s the latter. *I have a plan*. In a purposeful move, I run my tongue across my lips and a muscle in his jaw tics in response.

“I know that he never slept with Lumen because he told me the truth as

soon as he could.” That’s not *exactly* how it happened, but close enough. Maxx’s eyes widen and his mouth opens on words that he doesn’t say.

“Excuse me.” Parrish sniffs as he slams the hidden door back into place. Did I mention that the keypad to open it is located inside a fake wine bottle? How cool is that? Agatha Christie would approve. “I don’t mean to interrupt your little lover’s quarrel that’s going on here.” He flicks his fingers at us, stirring up that volatile, bellicose relationship between him and Maxx. *Sorry, Mr. Volli. Bellicose ... it means inclined to start quarrels or wars.* “Don’t take too long or I’ll *let* Tess find the two of you down here.”

Parrish leaves, pounding loudly up the steps and leaving me alone with the boy who made me believe in love at first sight.

“I *am* telling the truth.” That’s what Maxx finally settles on for a counter argument.

“Liar.” I stand my ground, and his nostrils flare, his fists clench. If he were in love with my sister, wouldn’t I be a simple annoyance? Why get so worked up? He starts to leave, but I’m not done. This is all part of my plan for the weekend: break Maxim Wright. “Too many things don’t add up. Big things as well as little things. You can’t retcon your way into fooling me.”

“Oh?” he asks, the sound a warning from that skillful tongue of his. Those green eyes are lit again, raking over me in a way that feels physical. I step toward him. “Like what, Kota? Tell me, so I can clear up the misunderstandings.”

“Like when you said ‘that’s my girl’ at the arcade,” I reply easily. That one hurts. The whole memory hurts. “Like when you got jealous over my old crush, Ryan Phillips, during the dinner party at Justin’s. How about when *your* sister told me that you look at me like I’m the only human on Earth?”

“Those things don’t mean anything.” He says that, but he doesn’t sound like he believes it.

“Those things mean everything.” I stay where I am, close but not too close. If I try to push forward now, he’ll run from me.

“If you think I’m going to apologize and then throw you over and fuck you, you’re sorely mistaken.” He turns away from me abruptly and tries to escape, but I grab him around the waist. I throw my arms around him and press my body against his back, eyes squeezed shut, heart pounding. *God, he smells amazing. He smells like hope, like home, like mine.*

It’s just like that day in the coffee shop bathroom when I held him and

begged him not to get Parrish killed. What am I begging for now? A release. An admittance. A sign.

“Why would you say something like that? You don’t sound like you’re in love with Maxine.” I keep hold of him, determined to stay here until he unhooks my arms with force or specifically asks me to stop. He’s right: no does mean no. If he says it, I can’t keep touching him.

“I said I *wasn’t* going to fuck you,” he breathes, but he’s so tense, I feel like he’s about to snap. We stand like that for several minutes. No complaints from me. It’s nice to hold him like this. It’s actually me who pulls away first, moving around him and up the steps. I can feel his eyes on me the entire way, can feel him come up behind me, his arms on either side of the doorjamb as I peek out to ensure that the coast is clear.

For a few seconds there, Maxx is pressed nearly against my back, hot and powerful and taut.

Parrish yanks the door open and waves us out, shutting it as silently as he can behind us and then resting there with his back against it. He can sense something is weird between me and Maxx, but I pretend like nothing happened.

Kimber is sitting at the table with a snack and a drink, a sly smile etched into her mouth. She looks absurdly pleased to see high-and-mighty Veronica Fisher in her grandma’s basement.

“What were you doing down there anyway?” Parrish asks as Maxx yanks open the fridge. Guess it’s his turn to stare into it and pretend like he’s thirsty. I don’t even laugh when he takes out an electrolyte water.

“Jock,” I whisper, and he narrows his pretty green eyes on me. “Well, it’s true.”

Chasm very quickly comes into the kitchen, sees us all in relatively safe positions, and lets out an audible sigh of relief. Tess is all of two seconds behind him.

“The kitchen is a hotspot, is it?” she asks with a certain amount of false cheer. Yeah, I don’t like that. Not at all.

“The kitchen *is* the heart of the home,” Parrish agrees, returning her smile with one of his own. They look like they’re wielding swords with those smiles.

“What are you guys up to?” Tess continues, giving her younger daughter a look. Having Kimber in here helps with the overall disguise, I’d say. How

could we possibly be plotting with Kim around?

“Kimber was apologizing to me,” I say before anyone else can speak, and my little sister turns a look on me that actually makes me smile. She’s looking at me the way she looks at Parrish.

“Really?” Tess asks, appearing startled. “For what?”

“For hating her without even trying to get to know her.” It’s Kimber that says it, not me. “I’m going to my room. Don’t bother me for the rest of the night.”

She takes off out of the kitchen but, despite the risks of her knowing, I feel a little better somehow. Sharing secrets can bring a sense of closeness.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Tess murmurs under her breath, giving me a once-over. “Miracles do happen.”

They do.

Unfortunately, so do nightmares.

I can’t sleep, not even with Parrish and Chasm in my bed. Not even after ... ahem ... with Parrish and Chasm in my bed. It was prom night 2.0. The only thing missing was stupid Maxx.

I end up downstairs, sitting at the table in the dark and staring out a crack in the blinds at the fountain outside. I have a pen and paper with me, like maybe I’ll actually write on my own and not just at Justin’s command. Obviously, it’d be easier to write on a computer or use dictation on my phone, but eh. Bio dad can’t exactly watch me through a notebook, now can he?

I do my best not to think about Mr. Volli’s latest critiques.

Oh come now, Mia, Chat GPT could write a better opening paragraph for this chapter. You’re not going to get your ass handed to you by AI, now are you?

Asshat.

There’s a glass of chocolate milk sitting beside me. I down it like it’s alcohol, trying to keep Maxine’s warning in mind. This is more of a Dakota Banks sort of deal, chilling in the dark with writer’s block and chocolate milk.

The sound of tentative footfalls sends chills down my spine. On instinct, I

duck beneath the table, hiding in the shadows as a person moves into the kitchen. I'd know that silhouette anywhere: Maxim Wright. He's too broad-shouldered and well-built to be anyone else.

Also, when he reaches out to open the refrigerator, light illuminates him and I see that he's covered in mud. Another summer storm rolled in earlier, just long enough to soak the ground, but it retreated as quickly as it came.

With a curse, he pulls out another electrolyte water and takes a long swig. He swipes his arm across his mouth, setting the bottle down on the counter and then bracing his hands on either side of it. X's head hangs down, like he's tired. No, more like he's bone-weary and exhausted.

I study him from my hiding spot, taking in the mud on his shoes, the tear in his shirt, and the strong, earthy scent about him. It's mixed with something else, something far less pleasant. *Death*. Maxim Wright smells like death.

Pursing my lips, I shove out from under the table, startling him.

Unfortunately, when one startles Maxim Wright, he doesn't just jump. He grabs me and slams my back into the wall, pinning me there before he realizes who it is he's just knocked the breath out of. His eyes widen and he releases me like I'm an electric fence, shocking him and stopping his heart.

"Kota, what are you doing down here?" he asks, and the sound of his strong voice in the dark activates parts of me that are better left dormant. His hands move away from the wall and settle, strangely enough, on the curves of my waist, leaving muddy handprints.

Just like the day at the track, when we made love in the woods.

I banish the thought.

"Having chocolate milk." I point past him in the direction of the table. X doesn't bother to look, that intense gaze of his fixated on my face. I feel immensely uncomfortable under his stare—and especially under the heat of his hands—but I don't dare move. He feels like a powder keg, ready to explode. "A better question might be what are *you* doing down here?" I make a point of looking him over, reaching out to grab his wrists.

The movement of his hands gives me whiplash. He snatches *my* wrists, carefully putting distance between us, as if I were the one who initiated this contact in the first place.

"It doesn't matter," he says, scoffing and shaking his head as he turns away. "Go back to bed, Kota."

I kick him in the back of the leg, and he turns a violent look on me. When

he turns the rest of the way around to stare at me, I regret doing that. There's something in his eyes, this haunted, pained look that I swear wasn't there before. It makes me sad. It makes me want to save him from it.

"What happened, Maxx? What is he making you do now?" I snort at that, swiping my hands over the muddy prints on my t-shirt with a sigh. "Besides forcing you to pretend to date and sleep with my sister."

Maxx laughs at me then, and it's not a very nice sound. It's the sound of a good boy gone bad. I almost start that song from the K-pop group, Tomorrow X Together, just so I can hear it on a loop. It's like, Maxx's theme song now or something. In English, the lyrics mean something like, *I loved you, good boys gone bad*.

"Go to bed, Kota." He moves away for real this time, grabbing his water bottle and then heading out of the kitchen. He goes the long way around to the hallway where Parrish's room is, avoiding me completely. Except, for some reason, I chase after him.

His hair is damp with sweat, his muddy clothes stuck to his body, and that smell ... He can't have been doing anything but digging. I'm right behind him when he turns back to look at me, an exasperated expression on his face that gives me more hope, rather than less. *He's still mine, even if he won't admit it*.

"What, Kota? What is it?" God, he sounds half-ready to collapse.

"You killed Veronica, didn't you?" I ask, a sick feeling taking over me. Maxx shakes his head and steps in close to me. He grabs me by the shoulders, yanks me close, and puts his mouth right up to my ear. The sensation is devastating. My hands clench in his dirty tee.

"You're lucky that Tess is using the signal jammer right now, but it never lasts long, and it's not the only way to spy on us. Don't speak the truth so freely or it's all for nothing."

"What's all for nothing?" I press, but Maxx isn't in the mood. He turns away from me, and I grab onto his arm. The strength of his bicep beneath my fingers gives the moment a decidedly different feel. It's less ... tense, and more ... *intense*. "What were you burying, X? *Who* were you burying?"

"I need to shower and get back in bed with Maxine before she realizes I've left," he explains, not unkindly. I want to pummel his back and scream at him to drop the act. Instead, I release his arm. He stumbles a bit, but he doesn't retract his statement.

He keeps walking, and I let him go.

But not for long.

Because, like with Chasm, I have an idea on how to make Maxx confess the truth without words.

Tomorrow night, this betrayal bullshit subplot *ends*.



CHAPTER 18

“I should ban you from this bed,” Parrish mumbles in the morning, peering over me at Chasm. Somehow, I ended up with Parrish spooning me while I spooned Chas. Parrish pokes his friend in the cheek as Chas groans and slaps back at him. “You get to be with her alone at Justin’s; why can’t I have her to myself while she’s here?”

“Pear-Pear, go back to sleep.” Chasm sounds groggy, but also like he wants to put his friend into a headlock.

“On my last full day with Gamer Girl? Fuck that,” Parrish snorts and sits up, yawning and stretching his arms above his head. Did I mention he was shirtless? Chas, too. It’s a lot for my hormone-addled body to take in this early. “Wake your ass up.”

“I’ll be right back.” I extract myself (reluctantly) from my hot guy pile and pad into the bathroom to check my phone. No signal. Awesome. I use the toilet, padding back into the bedroom to find Parrish leaning over Chas, stroking inked fingers down his cheek.

“Hey Kota, want to play a game?” he teases as Chasm shoves his friend away from him and Parrish laughs. I won’t lie: I’m glued to the spot. Seeing Parrish touch Chas like that gets to me in a very basic and primal female way.

“Would you guys actually have sex with each other?” I wonder, and Chas’ eyes widen. It seems a legitimate question, considering our romantic entanglement with one another.

“He’s my *hyung*. No fucking way. *Get off of me.*” Chasm tries to dislodge Parrish, but his bestie’s in the mood to tease. Parrish lunges forward and plants a sloppy kiss on Chas’ cheek, ruffling up his hair until Chasm manages to flip him over the side of the bed and onto the floor.

Parrish lies there on his back, laughing hysterically as I grin.

“You two are way cute, you know that?” I move back over to the bed and sit down beside Chasm, putting my foot on Parrish’s sculpted belly. He must work out a lot to look like this, but I never see him do it. Maybe that’s part of his mysterious charm? He puts his hands over my foot and holds it there. “*Hyung* means, like, older brother, right?”

“It means *stupid asshole that we should’ve left in the kidnapper’s hands,*” Chasm grumbles, reaching up to fix his mussed hair. He tosses a grin my way, and my heart flip-flops. “But yeah, it’s an informal term for a guy to use on an older brother or older male friend.” He lifts a knee and tosses his elbow on it, resting casually against the headboard. “You think we’d actually have sex? No way.”

“It seems unfair that I get to have three boyfriends, but you guys only get one girlfriend.” I pick at the covers with my fingernails and Chasm leans in toward me.

“Three? You have two.” He sits up and then throws a pillow at Parrish’s face. Parrish rolls with it, stuffing the pillow under his head and staring up at the ceiling. “Unless something happened last night when you disappeared?”

“We found you downstairs, mumbling to yourself à la Tess at the kitchen table; we decided you were safe where you were. Did something happen with Mr. Morally Upright and Annoying?” Parrish closes his eyes as I trace a line down his stomach with my toe.

“Sort of.” I try to move my foot away and he grabs it again, rubbing the arch with a strong thumb and causing me to bite down on my lower lip. Holy shit, that feels good. I clear my throat. “Last night, I couldn’t sleep so I decided I’d work on my writing.”

“What you should’ve done is woken us up so we could fuck,” Parrish explains as he finally releases me and stands up, hunting for his jeans. He yanks them on over his boxers as I stare at him. “What? I’m being serious here.”

“So am I: Maxx came into the room covered in mud and reeking like death.”

Chasm stops with one leg off the bed, the covers in his left hand. He's just staring at me. Same with Parrish. He hasn't even bothered to button his jeans as he comes over to me and grabs my shoulders with both hands.

"Explain."

I do my best to give them the details, but there aren't many.

"Seeing as you guys are okay with working all sorts of angles in the background, do you two know anything about this?" They're both staring at me like I've just unzipped my skin and revealed myself to be a purple-scaled alien with six arms. "I'm taking that as a 'no' then."

There's a knock at the door—it's Tess. It's always Tess. Who else would it be?

She opens the door without waiting for a response (some things never change) and then curses, covering her eyes and looking away.

"Why does it seem like I'm always walking in on the three of you?" she murmurs, her voice colored with irritation. "Not only are the Banks staying here, but—"

"Mom, chill. We're battling a serial killer. Who cares if we cuddle at night? Make love not war." Parrish fixes his pants as Chasm searches for a hoodie and tugs it on. I'm wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, so all good there. "You can look now."

Tess looks back at us, studying the three of us like she doesn't believe we stayed chaste all night. Instead, I notice with a sharp shock of fear that she has my unicorn notebook in her hand. It's not that I wrote much, but ... but what if she read what I did write?!

"Clever catchphrase, Parrish. I remain unamused." Tess turns to me. "Dakota, I found this on the table," she starts, holding it out hesitantly in my direction. I rush forward and take it, hugging it tightly to my chest as Tess stares at me. "You used it at the cabin, too, right? Are you interested in writing?" she asks me cautiously, and I shrug.

"Novelists might be replaced by AI in a few years." If I sound salty when I say that, maybe it's because I am? Or maybe it's just an excuse not to care too much about this idea. It's taken hold of me, I won't lie about that.

"If you ever want me to read what you're writing, I'd be happy to. I won't even give critiques unless you want them." Tess sounds far too excited about this. I'm not even sure what to say, so I don't respond. "I just wanted to let you all know that I'm going to a party tonight. Not a fun one, but a typical

Medina affair.”

There’s a strange hesitation in her voice that makes sense considering the circumstances. A party? Like with Justin on the prowl? Like with Paul in jail? She’s working on that decisive strike I mentioned.

“Mom, don’t put yourself in a dangerous situation,” Parrish warns her, and she gives him this pointed look in response.

“I’m the adult here, Parrish.” It’s a statement of fact, but it irks nonetheless. “I’m not going to play games; I feel like I can accomplish something by attending.” Tess smooths her hands down the front of her silk blouse. Paired with jeans, it gives her this effortlessly casual look that I envy just a little. “But I need you to understand that even if I’m not here, it’s not a free-for-all. Nobody leaves the house; nobody comes into the house.”

“As if we have anywhere to go,” Parrish responds blithely while Chasm frowns heavily behind him.

As if.

Apparently, that’s not an entirely true statement.

The text comes in several hours later, and I find myself as dumbfounded as I always am by Justin’s various statements.

Raúl will be by this evening to see you for just a few minutes. Please accommodate him.

Um.

I set the phone in my lap, making sure to turn the screen off before my grandparents can see it.

“Your turn, Kota,” Walter says with a smile, gesturing at me to roll the dice.

Yes, we’re playing a board game. Yes, the Banks are that sort of family. Yes, all three boys are playing along with us. If the double Maxes are sitting together, so what? I trust my damn sister. I do. *But damn, it’s painful to see them laugh together.*

“Sorry.” I refocus my attention, biding my time until the game is over and I can pull the boys into my bedroom. “What the hell does this mean?” I whisper, gesturing at the phone as Chasm and Maxx peer over Parrish’s shoulders to read the message. My sister has excused herself to the bathroom.

I haven't decided if I want to tell her about this just yet. "Why would Raúl stop by at all?"

"Because Justin knows Mom is going out tonight." Parrish hands the phone over to Chas and then paces alongside my bed. Nobody speaks again until Chasm leaves it in the hallway and shuts the door; Maxx takes care of the bug detector as he always does. "Shit. I don't like this. Do we tell Tess?"

"If she's attending a social function in Medina, it's for a reason. Maybe she already has a plan?" I nibble at my thumbnail as Chas sighs.

"You know she's already gone to Agent Takahashi and told her everything, right?" he says, scoffing as he turns away, hands on his hips, head down, eyes closed. He's thinking. He's sexy as hell when he thinks. Smart is hot on Chasm McKenna.

"What do you mean?" I ask as a hand crafted of bone and ice grips my frantically beating heart. "How do you know that?"

"I don't *know* it, but how could you think otherwise? Tess probably went to the FBI before she ever asked us about Justin." Chasm lifts his head and opens his eyes, and it's such a treat to see those bright amber jewels looking back at me that I almost forget to be afraid.

If Tess really did go to the FBI, and they did nothing to stop Justin, then what? I know he commits few of his own crimes, but there are still ways to charge him. Agent Takahashi seems like a shrewd woman. Would she truly let an accusation from Tess go uninvestigated? He killed her partner for fuck's sake!

No. No. He *had* her partner killed. Big difference.

"You're not leaving this property with him," X instructs authoritatively, as if he has any say in what I do or don't do. "We're on Tess' parenting time." He moves away and out the door, heading in the direction of Maxine's bedroom.

So much for my plan tonight. That is, I was going to seduce Maxx and see if I could get him to break the way I did with Chasm. If he sleeps with me, I'll know the truth regardless of his words. I bite my lower lip, adopting Maxx's nervous habit against my own will.

"If Tess has any parenting time at all, it's because Justin allows it. If Raúl wants me to go with him, what else can I do?" I sit down hard on the edge of the bed, dread crawling up the vertebrae of my spine, a monster of unease ascending a ladder of ivory. "If I tell Tess, she'll make a thing out of it. She'll

tell Raúl to eat shit; she'll call Justin and say the same thing. I'll end up paying the price tomorrow."

"Whatever you decide, we'll be waiting to step in as necessary." Chasm looks to Parrish as my stepbrother approaches the bed, leaning down with his hands on his thighs. He peers into my eyes like he's searching for something.

"How much longer can we do this? At some point, we should make the ultimate decision. We tell Tess everything—Veronica, included—and then we hole up together and we don't leave. If we do that, Justin will come for us, and then maybe, just maybe, the authorities will step in and do their damn job." Parrish holds up a hand, a single finger raised. "One more violent incident, Gamer Girl, and I'm going to sing like a motherfucking canary."

I don't argue with that.

But ... one more incident is all Justin needs to prove his point perfectly.

Raúl shows up within minutes of Tess leaving the house. I want to tell her that she looks beautiful in the crimson evening gown that she's wearing, but her gaze is distant and far away, and I understand on a primal level that she's going to this party to meet up with Justin. Whatever it is she plans on doing there, I don't know, but I don't beg her not to go.

Even if ... even if she tries to kill him tonight, that's okay. I almost want her to. Does that make me selfish? It's just, the idea of this all being over is so tempting that I want to cry when I see the limo pulling out of the driveway. My only wish is that if she does try to kill him, that she succeeds where I failed.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Raúl, meeting him on the driveway. He doesn't seem to feel the need to hide his car or his presence which likely means Laverne knows him the way she does Amin Volli. The boys are watching me from the kitchen window—Maxim included. I only hope they're able to keep my grandparents away for the time being.

"Shall we walk the grounds together?" he asks in that persnickety voice of his. *Flick, flick, flick* goes the lighter in his hand.

Um. I am not a fan of the smirk he's wearing on his well-groomed face.

Raúl doesn't bother to answer my initial question, handing over his phone so that I'm faced with a familiar scene. Mr. Volli is sitting on camera with the

black stag mask on, smiling at me. Now that I know Justin as well as I do, I see what an admirable take on him this truly is. The one, big difference?

That *smile*.

That's *aaaaall* Mr. Volli.

I shudder. Somehow, the bow tie and the quirky personality and the love of Sylvia Plath blinded me to the darkness in his eyes. It's plainly obvious now as I study the rifle in his lap, the same one I saw the night he asked me to kill Veronica.

Then again, nobody has as much darkness in them as my biological father. It's a *relief* that he's not actually onscreen.

"You'll forgive me for interrupting your mother's weekend, won't you, sweetheart?" Mr. Volli asks, tilting his head to one side. I make myself smile back at him. It's a small comfort knowing the boys are inside the house, aware of where I am and who I'm with. If something goes wrong, at least they'll know who killed me.

"No worries at all." I try to keep my voice nonchalant, but now that Raúl's mentioned walking the property, I've got an idea percolating. His low laughter is further confirmation that this is going to end badly. If he's that smug, then he knows what Justin wants tonight.

And maybe he also knows I'm going to fail.

Fleeing Under a Summer Rain, Chapter Three (really, you should read it; it's a brilliant book): *I pretty much knew I was fucked as soon as I pulled into the driveway. Dad asked me for one, simple thing, and I failed to do it—with good reason. But would he see it that way? How many chances was he going to give me before he lost his shit and strangled me?*

It's a metaphorical strangling in the book, not so much IRL. Correction: it's a metaphorical strangling in chapter three. The main character's father hasn't escalated yet; mine has.

"This shouldn't take long," Mr. Volli continues, and I watch in horror as Raúl moves to the trunk of his car, pops it open ... and extracts two new shovels.

Oh no. No, no, no. Fucking no. Please no.

He's going to have me dig up a body where there is no body.

And then what?

"We're going to play a little game," Mr. Volli explains, toying with the rifle. "You're going to dig up Veronica's grave, so we can move the body to

a better location. In the meantime, you're going to consider who I should kill first when there isn't one."

I laugh at that. See, there really are certain stages of grief. Right now, I'm at *hysterical dark comedy*.

"Why do we need to move the body?" I ask, trying to think up reasons as to why we shouldn't dig Veronica up at all. "It's safe here. Isn't Laverne wrapped around your finger?"

"Get moving." Mr. Volli sets the butt of the gun on the ground and then stands up. "If there's no body, I'm going to start hurting people until you explain where Veronica Fisher is." He disappears off-screen as Raúl snatches his phone back.

"Here." He practically throws the shovel at me, nearly hitting me in the head. He has a shovel of his own in his other hand. "Just in case you've forgotten where it is: let me lead the way." Raúl takes off, and I follow, debating the merits of running for the house right now. If I can get inside fast enough, I can lock Raúl out, warn the family, call the FBI.

I draw the shovel back, intent on hitting him in the back of the head with it.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Raúl teases, looking over his shoulder at me. He smirks before turning back around and continuing across the yard in the direction of the trees. I notice that he's very careful to avoid muddy spots, so as not to tarnish his pristine white loafers.

"And why not?" I ask, feigning cleverness that I don't feel. I am *not* going to that grave. What good will it do me? I need a plan that doesn't involve the boys rushing out to save me and dying in the process.

I decide it's better not to wait for an answer.

I drop the shovel and run, booking it across the yard until I'm near the back door.

"Because Amin is inside the house," Raúl calls out, stopping me with my fingers inches from the handle. I lift my gaze up to a second-story window and the man standing just inside of it, complete with stag mask and a smile crafted of nightmares and spiderwebs. Jesus.

That room ... is my grandparents' room. Amin Volli is *inside* my grandparents' room while they *sleep*. How did he get in there? What the actual fuck?

I need another plan. Fast. Now. Emergency. This is a real fucking emergency.

Slowly, so as not to spook the murdering poet, I back up, bend down to collect the shovel, and return to the spot where my father's assistant waits impatiently. I'm in shock right now. I am. I can barely breathe, but I'm not panicking.

I'm numb.

"You truly are a colossal moron," Raúl sniffs. "If I were Justin, I'd have drowned you at birth."

I say nothing. I don't need to respond to his insults; I need a way out of this. My gaze shifts to the house and the fluttering sheer curtains near the French doors. The boys are still watching me, but they're not coming outside. Why not? They must've seen me run. They must know I'm in trouble.

I find myself oddly comforted by their inaction.

If they come outside now, it'll only make this situation worse.

Raúl guides me to the spot, and really, it's obvious enough. The dirt looks disturbed; it's grave-shaped; it's definitely not a full six feet deep. It's bad. If there were a dead body here, we'd have been arrested by now.

I start to dig. Slowly. I'm not Maxx or anything. It's a lot of work to move this much dirt. Raúl stands stiffly to one side, his phone held up so Amin Volli and/or Justin can see exactly what's happening in real time. *What if I ... I'll claim that someone else moved the body, like the boys did it on my orders, but I don't know where it is. Ugh. I should've thought of that earlier; I've already started digging.*

Another shovelful. Another. *What if I accuse the FBI? What about Tess, like she found it? She did question me about it; he won't hurt her.* I repeat that last part a few times before I switch to another idea. *Hit Raúl, steal the phone, try to make a call before Justin can block the signal. Stupid. Run to the house while screaming, wake everyone up so they're moving around. Get inside and ... go from room-to-room waking people up to explain the situation while Volli executes my grandparents?*

No. None of that. I'll apologize and beg for forgiveness, lead Raúl and Amin straight to Veronica, and I'll kill her while they watch. That'll do it.

Or not.

I'm wondering if there even *is* a way out of this when I crack the next layer of dirt—and gag.

The smell of death is so strong, I'm choking on it. Both cloying and sweet, an uncomfortable sense of mortality shifts like a pall over me, and then I'm

just vomiting all over Raúl's expensive loafers. I can't help it. There's no controlling it.

I lift my head up and swipe at my mouth with the sleeve of my *Sailor Moon* sweater, tears streaming unbidden from the strength of the smell.

Raúl whips a patterned handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at his ruined shoes, cursing wildly under his breath. When he stands up, he turns a look on me that could curdle milk. Oh god. Milk. I almost throw up again.

"Move." Raúl shoves me back from the edge of the hole and pokes around in it with his own shovel. The more he does that, the worse the smell gets. I stumble away, falling to my knees and gagging. "There's a body here."

I don't want to look back, but I do, watching as Raúl uses the phone to record the scene.

"Is it Veronica?" Mr. Volli asks, sounding as shocked as I feel.

Why ... is there a body in this hole? And then, of course, it becomes obvious.

Maxim Wright.

Oooh, he and I are going to have a long conversation together! He buried a body here for me? But whose body? I'm glad that I checked on Veronica earlier or I'd really think he had killed her. *He loves me.* The proof is right there.

Why else would a boy move a body to this spot? That's true romance: grave robbing.

Raúl bends down beside the hole and pulls a pocketknife from his jacket. He flicks the blade open and cuts through the lime-green tape until he can see what—or who—is inside the tarp.

"It's a girl," Raúl remarks, snooty voice edged with true shock. "Right stage of decomposition, seems to be the same age as Veronica. The clothing is the same." He's clearly frustrated, lifting his gaze up to mine and *glaring* at me from behind his fabulous red-to-yellow ombre glasses frames. I wish I liked Raúl; he has serious style. "Now what?"

There's a long, long pause. I imagine Mr. Volli is having to wait for Justin to process this information before he can relay orders again.

"Let her go," Mr. Volli replies finally. "You'll move the body; Mia is done for the night."

I stand up suddenly, pushing back the feeling of nausea. *Maxx saved my ass. He saved all our asses.*

Raúl hangs up the phone and then narrows his eyes on me.

“I should hit you with this shovel and bury you in the woods with ... whoever this is. We both know it isn’t Veronica.” He’s glaring daggers at me as I offer up a smug smile and a bow. I really, *really* need to watch Raúl.

I am damn near positive that he’s going to kill me.

“Guess you were wrong, huh? I wonder if Justin will burn you again for backtalking me?” I wink at Raúl and then take off, running as fast as I can.

As soon as I’m inside, I find Parrish and Chasm waiting in the living room for me. I throw an arm around either of their necks and hug them close. *Where the fuck is Maxx?*

“Whoa, whoa, Little Sister, are you okay?” Chas holds me at arm’s-length, looking me over before his worried gaze meets mine again. He knows what happened; I can tell. I can only assume that Maxx told the boys about the body in the grave, and that’s why they didn’t come outside. Why should they? We killed Veronica, all is well, nothing to see here. “I ... I can’t believe he asked you to dig her up.”

Parrish steps closer to us, laying a hand on my shoulder.

“Company.” That’s all he says, slitting his eyes as he glances back to the figure in the hallway.

It’s Amin Volli, striding toward us in the mask, gun held at his side. He pauses beside me, still smiling, and then reaches out to give me a patronizing pat on the head.

“Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one’s head, and listen to silence.” Mr. Volli chuckles and then bends down to give me a kiss on the cheek. Both Chasm and Parrish tense up, but the man is holding a rifle so ... It’s best to leave him be. “That’s a quote from *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath’s only novel. It was semi-autobiographical, you know. Read it. I think you’ll like it.”

He stands up straight and heads for the French doors near the patio, letting himself out.

I sag with relief, falling to the sofa and wondering if the smell of death is clinging to me the way it clung to Maxx last night. Maybe I shouldn’t be sitting here? But I can’t seem to move, the relief is so great.

“One more incident,” Parrish growls at me, but he doesn’t elaborate because he can’t. Not right now. We need to be very, very careful with what we say. There’s a wired camera in the corner of the living room that Maxx

surreptitiously pointed out to me during the board game today.

“Can you check the kids? I need to make sure my family’s okay.” I’m breathing hard enough that I feel dizzy, adrenaline swirling through my blood and causing my heart to flutter strangely. Parrish doesn’t respond, like maybe he’s having trouble summoning words through his rage. He nods, reaches out to run a thumb over my lips, and leaves.

“Where did he go?” I ask, turning to Chas, but I don’t need to clarify who I’m talking about.

“He disappeared down the hallway when he saw you coming the second time.” He offers this bit of information, and I surge to my feet, heading for the stairs and taking them two at a time.

First things first: I check my grandparents and Maxine.

Neither of my grandparents wakes up when I peek in, but I can hear Walter snoring, and I see Carmen adjust herself under the blankets. Maxine is next, lying on top of the covers with her legs and arms wrapped around a large body pillow. The relief I feel nearly knocks me to my knees.

Yeah, but how long will this last? Everyone is okay today, but what about next time? Or the time after that? What about Nevaeh and Agent Murphy and Mr. Parker? Blackmail is forever.

I burst into my room, shedding my clothes and wishing I hadn’t worn the BlackMilk *Sailor Moon* sweater today. It’s officially toast. The items are not salvageable, so I shove them into the trash can in the bathroom and then knot the top of the bag closed until I get a chance to dispose of it.

When I see Maxx, I’m going to end this.

I take the fastest shower I’ve ever taken in my life, scrubbing vigorously and then hopping out to find both Parrish and Chasm waiting in the bathroom with me. It scares me that I didn’t hear them come in. They’re both sitting on the counter, but Chasm averts his eyes respectfully while Parrish stares.

“Sorry, but we agreed that leaving you alone was not an option.”

“Asking if she’s okay with you watching her shower might be another conversation we should have,” Chasm growls at his friend, and Parrish turns away sharply, almost like he hadn’t realized what he was doing.

“I needed to stare at her to make sure she was safe,” he says it pompously, rudely, like he’s trying to make a joke out of it. There’s no joke there at all: he’s serious. There’s an ache in his voice that tells me he’s been pushed to the edge tonight. Parrish won’t be playing Justin’s games much longer.

“I know the feeling.” I reach a hand out to touch Parrish’s shoulder, and he whips that sharp gaze of his back in my direction. Our eyes catch, a gasp slips past my lips, and it feels like I might need a towel ASAP. I stumble over to the rack, snatch it up, and fling it around my body like it’s on fire.

It may as well be: I *burn*.

I head back into the bedroom to pull some clothes on, this frantic feeling taking over my chest. It seems urgent somehow that I get to Maxim Wright. I don’t say anything to the boys because we haven’t used the bug detector, the signal jammer isn’t on, and Mr. fucking Volli is wandering around the property with a gun. But ... it feels like Maxx has been kidnapped all this time.

In the beginning, Parrish was the hostage. Maxx might be here with us physically, but he’s the one who’s tied to a chair and bleeding. I’m sure of it. *He dug up a body from ... somewhere. Transported it here. Dressed it in appropriate clothes. Wrapped it up in a tarp. Taped it. Buried it.*

That’s a lot of trauma to unpack.

I throw on some clothes, barely registering what it is that I’ve grabbed, and then head for Parrish’s room at a brisk walk. The urge is to run, but what if Justin is watching?

The boys follow me, which is a huge relief; I hear monsters lurking around every corner. The house seems alive in the dark, but we don’t turn on any lights as we go. Instead, I tiptoe up to Parrish’s bedroom door, listening carefully outside of it.

“We’ll be waiting,” Parrish whispers, and I nod, giving him and Chasm a final smile before I gather my courage together. This is it. I’ll know whether Maxx is a kidnap victim or just a guy who’s in love with my sister.

Either way, he saved lives tonight.

Pulling in a deep breath, I shake out my hands and grab the doorknob, letting myself in and leaning back against the door to close it. The room is empty, but I can hear the shower running.

Oh.

Maxx is naked and wet in there.

I don’t lock the door in case the boys need to come in, wandering into the room to find GG, the rabbit, sitting on top of one of the room’s many dressers. A true smile breaks over my lips as I move up to the cage—it’s gotten an upgrade since the initial one Chas purchased—and putting my

fingers through the bars to stroke GG's soft head.

"One day, you'll have a hutch and a yard, and you'll live with me and Parrish and Chasm and Maxx." I'm fantasizing here, but the thought's too comforting to let go of. I briefly check the closet as well as under the bed (no Mr. Volli, thank god) before hopping up to sit on the side of it. My gaze is drawn to the large mirror in the corner, the spot on the floor where Parrish and I had sex, the chair I sat in while he was tattooing me.

Traveling down memory lane keeps me focused, helps me to sit still and be patient. I'm so focused on it that I don't realize the shower has turned off. The bathroom door opens and Maxx appears, nude and in the process of towel-drying his hair.

My mind is obliterated by the sight.

His bare skin—and there's *a lot of it*—is steaming from the heat. Those muscles-on-muscles-on-muscles that he's developed from a lifetime of activity are shiny with water, highlighting planes and valleys, droplets sliding down his flat stomach past his navel to his ... Oh my god.

My hands come up to cover my mouth as I take in X's erection with wide eyes.

That's when he notices me, catching me red-handed and staring at his dick.

"Kota." Maxx is clearly surprised, but not surprised enough to cover up his junk. He pauses where he is, about halfway between the bed and the bathroom, towel still held up to his hair. His eyes are wide, his expression briefly unguarded. He knows he saved my ass, and he knows that I know, and he isn't sure what to do with any of it.

Water drips down the strong bridge of his nose, gets caught on the fullness of his lower lip. He's just staring at me while I sit there in embarrassed silence, cheeks and chest flushed, body warming toward the idea of Maxx closing the distance between us and touching me.

I need him to touch me right now.

"What are you doing here?" he asks as those green eyes of his take me in from head to toe, cataloguing the pajamas I'm wearing, noticing my own wet hair hanging loosely around my face. He seems to get that his erect penis is on display, wrapping the towel around his hips and crossing his arms.

"You know why I'm in here," I retort, and his face tightens up with frustration and worry. He covers the remaining distance between us in a second, putting his hands on my shoulders, mouth near my ear.

“Do *not* say a damn thing. I hear footsteps sometimes; I see people lurking. We are never as alone as we think we are.” He releases me, but the effect his hard, wet body has on mine is impossible to resist. I’m shifting uncomfortably on the bed, mouth dry, warm heat blossoming between my legs.

He notices. It’s quite clear that he notices. His green eyes catch on me in such a way that I know he’s thinking about it, too. He’s naked, and I’m wearing sweatpants that could come off quite easily, and we don’t even need a condom.

“Fuck.” Maxx laughs, but clearly not because any of this is funny. He’s going hysterical, same as me. He looks back in my direction, and that impossible chemistry that’s always bloomed between us, it’s got sharp thorns. I find myself choking on my own panting breath. “You need to go back to bed, Dakota.” His voice is getting mean again, like he’s worried I’ve stumbled too close to the truth. I mean, he isn’t wrong: it’s true.

Maybe I shouldn’t do it, but I can’t take it anymore, all this not-knowing and second-guessing and feeling lonely and missing the hell out of him.

“You did it for me, didn’t you?” I ask, but I don’t need an answer.

“Did what?” he replies easily enough. He stays close to the bed, close to me, smelling like soap and male and sheer frustration. He’s annoyed with me, but only because he’s worried. “Can you please leave?” He stalks over to Parrish’s dresser, pulling nicely folded clothes out of the top drawer. Oh, wow. I mean, I could’ve figured he was the type of person to unpack his suitcase or duffel bag and put all his stuff in the dresser or closet of a hotel. Personally, I like digging through crumpled piles on the floor to find what I’m looking for. “I already explained it: it’s not you that I’m interested in.”

“Oh, really?” I hop off the bed and walk up behind him, throwing my arms around his waist again. “Prove it.”

He turns around so suddenly that I’m startled back a step, but Maxx doesn’t let me go, catching my forearms and yanking me close.

“You know why I did it, why I pretended to like you. Why is this so hard for you to accept?” He’s practically pleading with me to hate him. In the moment, I don’t understand why.

By Friday night, I’ll understand perfectly and wish that I didn’t.

“Because I love you, goddamn it!” I shake his arms off, but he just grabs right back on, pulling me even closer. He’s bent low, his face in mine, his

eyes searching my own. “And you love me, too. When did you start liking me for me and not because Justin told you to? Or is this all a sham? For all I know, Justin forced you to make that video recently.”

Maxx sighs so deeply that I almost back off, almost let him keep this annoying fantasy project running. For some reason, he thinks it’s not only important but vital. And after everything I’ve learned about Maxx from others, after everything I’ve personally observed, I know that he really *will* do anything for the right girl. Which is me. Which means he’ll even break my heart.

And my sister, because she loves me, is willing to go along with it if it means saving my life.

“Do you want me to fuck you and tell you I love you?” he demands, his voice close to a growl. He’s wearing so very little, and he knows that I’m ready for him. It’s only one small step between the way we’re standing, and sex. I can feel it crackling in the air, a violent tension begging to be broken.

“That’s hurtful, when you say it that way,” I whisper, but when he moves like he’s going to kiss me, I don’t pull back. I tilt my head to make it easier for him.

“Yeah, I can fuck you. I can pretend to like it, too.” I slap X for that one, but he just grabs a handful of my hair, and then his lips are on my own, and I can feel it in the press of his mouth: *you’re mine, Kota*.

I’m his, and he’s mine.

You know how I know that? Because if Maxx was really in love with my sister, he would rather die than kiss me right now. If he had to do it before in order to please Justin, oh well. But not now. He’d walk through fire for the girl he loves.

His tongue is an obliterating force, taking over my mouth as he walks me back into the wall. His towel falls to the ground, but I sense it more than I see it. I can’t see anything right now, my eyes shut tight, my lips burning from the frantic press of Maxx’s mouth.

I have no idea when those videos were filmed, if Maxx was working on me from the very beginning or if it’s something Justin had him film later to trick me, but I don’t care. I don’t give a shit about any of that. Instead, I twine my arms around his neck and I *know* without knowing at all that he’s never slept with Maxine.

He’s never loved Maxine.

X's hands are all over my body, pushing my shirt up, strong fingers on my breasts. He's kissing me so fiercely that I forget to breathe, sucking in a huge gasping breath when he pulls back a few inches. There's worry on his face, fear even. That, and a terrible sadness that makes my heart hurt so badly that I want to grab onto him and never let go for fear that he might drift away.

"You—" I start, but we don't have a ton of time. I swallow whatever questions I was going to ask, whatever things I was going to say. "You're brutal." Just that. It's true anyway.

Maxx laughs, and the sound is dark as hell. I should be worried about that, but all I can think about is how much I want him to touch me.

"You have no idea, Kota." He wraps me up in those big strong arms, pulling me up against his chest. My fingers scrape down the angel wings tattooed into his broad back, marking him. I don't even know if I have the words to describe the things that Maxx does to me. He lights me up in these wild, primitive sorts of ways.

Our mouths are violent as they take one another in, kissing and nipping, tongues down each other's throats. When he grabs for my sweatpants and yanks them down, I don't stop him. He pushes them all the way to the floor and then over my feet.

His palms touch either of my thighs, sliding up and over my belly as he rises to his feet. Those emerald eyes of his, they're on fire.

"Are you sure about this? It doesn't mean anything." Maxx is panting. He's also lying to me. I don't care. I know that it does, in fact, mean a whole lot of things. If it didn't, he wouldn't bother trying to convince me otherwise.

I wrap my arms around his neck again, kissing him as he grips my ass and lifts me up against the wall. *Oh. That's unexpected.* I mean, I knew Maxx had it in him—he's certainly strong enough—but it's a whole other ballgame to experience it in person.

There's no hesitation whatsoever before he slides into me. He goes in all the way, too. Just one, hard thrust, and I'm squeezing him between my thighs, panting for breath against his shoulder, inhaling him. He makes this sound, this one, small sound, that tells me everything I need to know.

"Dakota, do not ever lie to me again. You have to trust me. You have to trust us. If we do this thing, what I need from you is pure honesty at all times. Unless Justin has a gun to your head or the head of somebody you love, talk to us."

Maxx ... has a gun to his head.

He's been into me for a long, long time. Since the coffee shop. I'll tell you how I know: because we belonged to each other from that first second, when we glanced over and spotted one another in line. When he said 'hi' and I said 'hi'. Love at first sight. I've never experienced that with anyone else, not even Parrish or Chasm.

Maxx exhales against my hair, pressing a kiss to the side of my head that's worth a thousand words—easily. Ten thousand. A hundred thousand. It's an entire novel of devotion, that one kiss. And then that's it. The affection is put aside in favor of need.

All the things that Maxx promised me—all the warnings he gave—come rushing forward. He slams me into that wall, drives deep, and moves hard. I'm barely able to catch my breath, holding onto him, biting his neck. He seems to like that, squeezing my ass harder, fingers digging into the soft flesh.

The sounds he makes are wild, too, and I love it. I love everything about him in that moment. He's come completely undone. His body is still warm from the shower, a sheen of water on his impressive muscles, and I can feel all of his strength and power in the way he moves. Pretty sure I'm making some crazy sounds of my own.

"Maxx," I breathe, and he goes still for a few seconds. Just a few. And then he starts up again, harder and faster and crazier than before. Now it's *me* who's coming completely undone. I can feel him hot and bare and hard inside of me, thrusting fast and deep until I'm sure that I'm the one who's going to climax first.

He ravages my neck, revealing yet another lie of his. Didn't he say he'd never make the mistake of leaving visible hickeys? It feels so intentional right now, too, like he's marking me.

There's a sharp knock at the door and Maxx gives me just enough space so that we can look at one another, panting hard and sweating, clinging to each other. The door cracks open and I can hear Parrish, tense with either jealousy or worry or both.

"Tess is pulling into the driveway. Hurry up." Parrish closes the door again, but Maxx doesn't give me the time to wonder why she'd be back after only an hour or so of being gone.

He grinds me into the wall again. This time, his mouth is on mine, tasting

me, savoring me, like he's committing me to memory. *He knows something I don't. He's afraid of something.* Those thoughts cross my mind before they're obliterated by pleasure, and then I'm climaxing and he's cursing even as he's trying to kiss me.

"Oh god." Maxx pulls my pelvis tight against his, moving inside of me as my body tightens with orgasm and then releases in a sense of pure relaxation and satisfaction. He comes inside of me then, but he doesn't do it with his eyes closed or his attention on my sore neck: he looks right at me. "I love you."

Maxim Wright stares into my eyes as he finishes, and I see everything. I know him completely. I worry about him. He wraps me in his arms for several, tense minutes and then he carefully pulls out, setting me gently down on the floor and grabbing onto my shoulders.

Our eyes meet.

"Tess is looking for you, Naekkeo." It's Chasm this time, calling through a crack in the door.

"Here." Maxx bends down and grabs my pants, helping me back into them, yanking them up. He can't seem to resist curling an arm around my waist and pressing another kiss to the side of my head. "Go, go, go." Maxx pushes me out the door and then slams it behind me.

I'm just standing there on shaking legs, panting hard from the rush of pure adrenaline that has become my Sunday night when I look over and see that Chasm is still waiting for me.

"She's in the kitchen, but she seems nervous; she'll come looking for you soon enough." He gestures for me, and I relax, letting him fold me in his arms. He stiffens up right away and then pushes me back a few inches so he can peer into my face. "Did you guys just—"

I smile back at him, and he blinks a few times in surprise before murmuring something in Korean. Chasm pulls me into another hug and holds me there for a few minutes. When he releases me, he takes me by the hand and drags me into the kitchen.

Only one thought occupies my mind: *I knew Maxx was full of shit.*

I've just proven myself right.

I want nothing more than to have a conversation with him, but I suppose that'll have to wait. A conversation with Maxine is also in order, but again ... not right this second.

We move up to the kitchen entrance to find Parrish watching his mom from outside of it. She's in the dark, hunched over, hands on the countertop, and she looks absolutely beautiful in crimson fabric and moonlight. We all stay silent, watching, waiting, until she finally stands up and notices us there.

"Have fun at the party?" Parrish queries absently, but Tess just smiles back at him.

I'm guessing that if she did try to kill Justin tonight, it didn't work out the way she planned.

"Murder, I have often noticed, is a great matchmaker." Tess sighs softly and reaches up to push some hair back from her face. I recognize the words as Agatha Christie's. I'd enjoy them more if Amin Volli hadn't soured me on literary quotes earlier in the evening. As Tess moves her hair aside, combing through it with her fingers, I notice long, red scratches on the side of her neck. "Caroline and Justin, what a pair."

"Mom, what the hell?" Parrish moves into the kitchen as footsteps sound behind me and I look over to find ... Maxx. My heart clenches strangely, and I look away sharply even though looking away is the literal last thing I want to do. He's so handsome, dressed in a red t-shirt and black sweatpants, barefoot and coiled. That's the only way to describe it, like he's waiting to strike.

He comes to stand beside me, and I become acutely aware of how much easier it is to have quickies when condoms are involved. I'm going to need another shower.

"Oh." Tess puts her hand against her neck and shakes her head. "I may or may not have started a fight with Caroline." Parrish appears disturbed by that statement, a strange flash of guilt coloring his face before it disappears. I get it: Caroline's his bio mom. Tess is his real mom. It hurts to know that the former attacked the latter. That's how I felt when Tess came after Saffron in court, won't lie about that. Or I how feel now about Justin and his urbane revenge plot. "Don't look so upset, honey. Her dress was ruined from the nosebleed I gave her; this is nothing."

That pleases me, the idea of Caroline suffering. But where was Justin during all of this? Probably getting off on it, which is gross.

"How did that happen?" I ask, putting some distance between me and Maxx by walking into the kitchen. Chasm stays alongside me while Maxx leans up against the wall near the door, silent but staring.

I can feel his gaze like a physical touch.

“How else? She’s helping my ex-husband hurt my children.” Tess does her best to maintain her calm, but there’s an undercurrent of anxiety there that she can’t hide. “If I could’ve killed him tonight, I would have. I want you to understand that.”

We just stare at her.

“Was everything okay here while I was gone?” she asks, and then *she* is the one staring and the rest of us are fidgeting in discomfort. Okay, fine, I’m the only one fidgeting in discomfort.

Parrish’s gaze slips past Tess to land on me.

He wants to tell her right now. He wants to say that Mr. Volli was in my grandparents’ room with a rifle, that there’s a dead person of unknown origin buried outside, that Veronica Fisher is in his grandmother’s secret vault.

“Everything was fine. Why? Did you hear something?” Parrish looks sidelong at his mother, but I guess we’re not the only ones keeping secrets because she looks supremely uncomfortable.

“Justin may have insinuated that there was going to be trouble here tonight; that’s why I came home so quickly. I’ve been calling and calling you guys, but I suppose I can’t blame you for not answering your phones.” She laughs softly. “So much for the security team I hired; they say there’s nothing to worry about.” *Does that mean one or more of those people is in Justin’s pocket? Maybe.*

Maxine appears in the kitchen doorway, bleary eyed and squinting at us as she shuffles over to stand beside me.

“Is something happening?” She looks around, her attention catching on me for several long seconds. Maxine brightens up suddenly and waltzes deeper into the kitchen, looking over Tess’ dress with an appreciative gaze. “You are absolutely beautiful tonight, Mrs. Vanguard.”

Tess seems confused, but not displeased. *Realizing you totally made the wrong decision by trying to keep Maxine out of my life? It’s okay. I made plenty of mistakes, too.*

Including the one I just made by having sex with Maxx without talking to my sister first.

My cheeks flood with heat as my sister grabs her hoodie off one of the dining chairs and tosses it to me. It hits me in the chest, and I catch it, wondering what it is that she’s doing.

“You’re shivering, Kota. Put a sweater on.” Maxine reaches out and puts a hand on Tess’ shoulder, further disturbing my mother’s sense of righteousness. “Really, you’re gorgeous and that dress is incredible.”

“Thank you, Maxine,” Tess says smoothly, as if she expected to receive such a compliment all along. But her cheeks? They’re pink like mine. Tess moves over to the light switch on the wall, flicking it on before she exits to the hallway. I’m in the process of yanking the hoodie over my head, so I can’t see her face when she adds, “I’m off to bed. I know I might sound paranoid, but ... could the girls share a room? The boys another? Nobody should sleep alone. Please.”

She’s already around the doorjamb when I finally get the hoodie pulled back into place.

“What ... just happened?” I ask, looking over at my sister. Guilt swamps me when I see her staring right back. *She ... I knew she would never date Maxx because he’d slept with me. My sister has some hard-and-fast rules that she lives by. Me sleeping with him would make him null and void forever in her heart. But should I have asked her first? Maybe she did really love him sometime along the way? Maybe she still does?*

I feel sick; I’m panicking.

“Tess beat the crap out of Caroline. This is celebratory news.” Parrish heads straight for the wine cellar as Chasm cuts him off.

“Let me go with you.” There seems to be something—several somethings—happening in here that I don’t get. Chasm opens the vault door and then he and Parrish descend the stairs together, pulling it shut behind them.

They’re going down there to talk, and they clearly don’t want me to go.

“I wasn’t cold, so ... something.” I’m still standing there, completely confused as X leans back with his eyes closed and arms crossed, one foot propped on the wall behind him.

Maxine reaches out with a single finger, hooking it on the edge of the sweater, and tugging my neckline down. Her gaze is fixed pointedly on my throat.

The hickies! I yank the sweater back up with a terrified expression on my face. Upsetting my sister is the worst possible thing that could happen to me tonight.

“Really, XY?” she asks dryly, looking over at him. “What the fuck?”

How does she even know it’s him? I can only suppose it’s because of

Maxx's behavior. He cracks one emerald eye first, staring at us. And then he opens them both and rises to his feet. My sister storms right over to him, pointing an accusatory finger.

"You are a *piece of shit*." She's so angry that she's shaking. "You don't care about my sister at all, do you?" Maxine drops her arm and turns away, looking back at me with an expression of sheer frustration on her face.

"I'm sorry, Maxie," he says, but he doesn't sound sorry. "She didn't know better, but I did."

I have no idea what that means, but it better not mean ... they're talking about a secret in a wide-open way. I'm not supposed to know what this is about.

"And you." She gives me a harsh look as she comes up to me, touching the side of my face. "You are a tragic romantic, you know that?"

"I'm ..." I'm not sure how to explain to my sister what happened with me and Maxx except for this. "It was my fault; I pushed him."

Maxine laughs at that and shakes her head.

"He's a big boy; he could've controlled himself." To an outsider, it might seem like Maxine is accusing her boyfriend of cheating on her but taking her little sister's side. That's not it at all. There's a reason behind Maxx's betrayal of me, and my sister is afraid that if he breaks and gives in, that reason will come out in a bad way.

"Let it go for now, okay, Kota?" Maxx asks, approaching me, but his breathing is unsteady, and his eyes are begging me to step close, put my arms around him, let him hold me. "Just ... understand that Maxine and I need some time to work on our shit."

I purse my lips, but I don't say anything as Chasm and Parrish return to the kitchen and rejoin the group.

"We're all bunking in your room." Maxine points at Parrish, and he frowns at her. He seems more tightly coiled after coming up the stairs than he was when he went down. What did he and Chasm talk about?

"All of us?" X queries, like the idea makes him feel physically ill.

"All of us seems like the right choice," Chas agrees with a tired sigh. He looks to Parrish next. "Where does the maid keep the linens?"

"Oh Jesus." I put my head in my hand. "Just steal pillows and blankets from the other beds. That's what normal people do." I turn and walk away, heading back to Parrish's room with *both* Maxes following me.

Somehow, I make things worse by ending up in the room alone with them. Where I just slept with Maxx. Where I'm going to be sleeping with Maxx in a different way for the entire night.

"You two can have the bed; we'll sleep on the floor." X sighs and looks at the sofa in the corner. "*They'll* sleep on the floor."

"There are three of you and two of us; you guys take the bed." Maxine nods, like that's the end of it, but it's really not the end of it for me.

"If they want to be chivalrous and let us have the bed, shouldn't we just accept it gracefully?" I switch on a pleading stare, hoping we can lie in that bed together and find a way to talk. I'm freaking out here.

"I would never let my girlfriend sleep on the floor while I was in a bed. Honestly, that's gross." Maxx sits down on the sofa, and I wonder if this isn't the best mood I've seen him in since ... he told me didn't love me. *Who is he referring to as his girlfriend in this case? Nice vague wording, Maxim.*

"Fine, let's take the bed. Not because of chivalry, but because you're ... going back to Justin's tomorrow." Maxine adds that last sentence on like she isn't sure if that's going to happen. Hmm.

"He thinks we're weird, you know?" I blurt, and then wish I hadn't said it. We're being put into these *insane* situations where a lot of people—normal, well-adjusted people—would freak out on each other. And it's not happening. We're curbing our emotions and reigning it in, and that's our weird sort of superpower. "Justin, I mean. He says he doesn't understand how we can be told to do these horrible things and still love each other."

I don't just mean romance; I'm talking about my sister, too.

She knows it, giving me a nod and then holding her arms out for a hug. Since I can see Maxx watching us over her shoulder, I close my eyes. I can't handle the glimmer of his gaze.

"It's all going to be okay, baby sister; I'm not angry with you." Maxie rubs my back in comforting circles, and I settle into her familiar embrace. "You're my first priority, always." She whispers softly in my ear. "Don't talk about Veronica at all—nothing."

Veronica. I wasn't aware my sister knew about Veronica.

My eyes open and catch on Maxx's again, but he turns away.

Parrish and Chasm return with their bedding, tossing a pillow and blanket Maxx's way. We all settle down in the dark, but it's hard to sleep. I'm not the only one staring at the ceiling. But with Volli roaming around and the threat

of cameras and Justin's overconfidence ... nobody seems willing to talk about anything.

After a while, there's some light snoring and peaceful breathing in the room. That's when I get up and walk over to the sofa.

Maxx is awake, lying on his back and staring at the ceiling. He sees me standing there, but he doesn't move. He stays completely still as I crawl onto him, putting my head on his chest. That's when his arms go around me, and he sighs, a mixture of contentment and utter, devastating melancholy.

I can't ask about it, so I don't, but I know that I need to keep a closer eye on him.

Maxim Wright is indeed Justin's latest kidnapping victim.

The title 'CHAPTER 19' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '19' is in pink. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a large drop, set against a light pink background with dark, branching, tree-like or root-like patterns.

“Can you gather the boys in here?” Tess asks when I appear in the kitchen, all dressed up and ready for Justin’s. It took me four TikTok tutorials, two hours, and three total do-overs on my face before I managed to apply my makeup in such a way that Justin won’t immediately slap me. It’s getting tiring, trying to please him. “No phones please.”

“Uh, sure.” The last thing I want to do is go back to the bedroom when I just escaped it. I came out of the bathroom to find three shirtless men standing in the room and staring at me. Parrish and Chasm, I could’ve handled. But Maxx? Either I dreamed about cuddling him last night or else he picked me up and tucked me in at some point.

I wander down the hallway as slowly as I can, hoping that they’ll come out on their own.

Instead, I end up outside the door feeling silly. I’m going back to Justin’s in a few minutes, so any extra moment I can share with the people I love is worth it. My hand lifts to the doorknob when I hear a creak from behind me.

My entire body whips around, but I don’t see anybody, not on either side of the hall. The sound freaks me out enough though that I turn back and yank Parrish’s door open, stumbling inside on the strappy green wedges that Maxine gave to me.

X is the one who catches me because of *course* he is. His hands are hot on my sides, and his gaze is molten. When he pushes me back a step and

releases me, I visibly shiver.

“Tess wants to see us all in the kitchen for some unknown but likely nefarious reason.” I sigh.

“She’s going to ask you to stay here,” Parrish suggests, moving up to stand beside Maxx with both of his hands tucked into the pockets of his jeans. He’s wearing navy blue leather slip-ons and an oversized gray sweater with a silhouette of a leafless tree on it. It’s surprisingly nice for such a preppy outfit. “Alright, go ahead.” He gestures at me. “Ruin the serious nature of the moment by making a comment about my clothes; I know you want to do it.” Parrish leans down and tickles my chin with his fingers.

“I was actually thinking how effortlessly nice it was, but you’ve ruined the comment by acting like an ass.” I slap him away and sniff indignantly, but that only makes him smile in a seductive, imperious sort of way. Can’t hide the flash of genuine pleasure and surprise that lights his gaze either. He can pretend to be cool all he wants; I’ve just flattered him.

I turn to Maxx, but he’s far too serious to take part in the conversation. He tucks his hands into the front pocket of his robin’s-egg blue hoodie with the stars all over it. His sweatpants are cream-colored with more of the same stars.

“Let’s talk about what Parrish just said: if Tess tells you that you have to stay here, what are you going to do?” Maxx pauses as Chasm exits the bathroom, coming over to stand beside us in all white. White sweatshirt, white sneakers, a massive white hoodie. The only color in the whole ensemble comes from the cuffs of the sweater’s sleeves and its zipper: a brilliant red, like blood.

“If Little Sister goes, I go with her. I don’t feel like we’re ready for a showdown just yet. If Tess makes a stand here today, we’re in trouble.” Chasm gives X an odd look, like he’s sizing him up in a way. “We’re in Laverne’s house, and she’s either an oblivious friend of Justin’s or else she’s an accomplice. She’ll let Justin walk in here, those bodyguards outside be damned. It could get violent, the police could show up, they could actually take Justin’s side seeing as he’s the custodial parent.”

“I agree with Chas; you have to go back with Justin.” Maxx looks at me with a silent pleading in his gaze. *Do not let her keep you here.* It’s a strange miracle that Tess hasn’t demanded such a thing just yet. The night we kidnapped Veronica, I was convinced she wasn’t going to let me leave.

“I *don't* agree. I don't think you should go.” Parrish crosses his arms and looks away. But he's not the cautious one in the group. He was a big advocate of the ‘take guns to Justin's house and see what happens’ camp. “Make a stand here and be done with this. If we refuse to give into his demands, he'll snap and he'll make a mistake like he did with the judge.” He turns back to me, but I don't have an answer for him or Chasm or Maxx.

I want to hear what Tess is going to say, and then decide if I should tell her about Veronica and the dead girl and Mr. Volli.

“Let's hear Tess out.” I lead the way back to the kitchen, and we all take our spots around the table. Tess' gaze drifts to me, and I hope like hell that I did enough with the makeup that she won't see the hickeys. “Peppermint tea for you.” She points at a mug in the center of the table. “One for Maxx.” Another. “And two coffees for the boys.”

“You're up to something,” Parrish accuses. We all accept our drinks with murmured thanks, even if it's highly likely that Parrish is right.

I blow on the hot liquid to cool it down, my eyes meeting Maxx's from across the table. *Oh my god. How have we managed to coexist for this long without ...* Yeah, it's a lot. Tess notices us staring at each other and then narrows her eyes slightly. Last she heard, Maxx was suddenly dating my sister out of the blue. *She definitely knows we're still lying.*

“We have so much to talk about,” she whispers under her breath, and then sighs heavily, focusing her attention back on me. “You going back to Justin today, I don't like it.” Tess folds her hands together on the table. “But legally, my hands are tied. Here's the thing.” Tess sits up again, shifting uncomfortably. “If something happens, and you need my help, I don't necessarily feel obligated to follow the law in order to intervene.”

“Um.” I bite my lip. It's a habit of Maxx's that I picked up, kicked out of frustration with him, and somehow started all over again. “How should I signal you? He has me completely and utterly blocked over there; I can't access the internet whatsoever.”

Tess runs her fingers through her hair, shaking out the espresso brown waves that so closely resemble my own natural color and texture. Now that I'm thinking with a bit more clarity about Tess—more accurately, since she changed her behavior—I'm glad that I have her blood running through my veins. She's in her mid-thirties, but she has a timeless aura about her. She could be a hundred and still have this charisma. It's not all that surprising that

Justin can't seem to let her go.

"Have you spoken to Agent Takahashi?" I ask, simultaneously hoping that she has and also that she's got another plan to save me. It certainly feels like Tess Vanguard is keeping secrets.

"I have," Tess admits, and my eyes go wide. She has? I mean, of course she has. This is Tess Vanguard. How could we have expected anything less? I suppose then that she didn't tell us for a reason. "Dakota, I owe you an apology."

"For what?" I ask, taking a sip of my drink. The ratio of tea to honey is perfect, and it was clearly steeped at just the right temperature. It's fresh and sweet, and I feel like I want to be able to do this every day. I want to sit and have tea with Tess in the morning, and I don't want to worry if we're not going to get the second chance together that we deserve.

If you really think about it, it's more like a fourth chance. Justin ruined the family Tess tried to build with him, I was kidnapped, we found each other and fucked up. But now? We could have a really good life together.

"I went to Agent Takahashi the very second I suspected Justin." Tess sighs and then rubs at her forehead, closing her eyes like she's in pain. "Even before I spoke to you about my suspicions."

"I was right," Parrish mutters, sipping his coffee. Chasm kicks him under the table and they glare at each other. "Well, I was."

But if she went to the FBI then ... that means ...

I was right, too. It means that I was right, that they can't find evidence on Justin, that he's going to get away with everything unless someone kills him and then ... that person could end up in jail for murder.

"They didn't believe you." I fill in the silence for her as Tess reaches out to take my hand, giving it a comforting squeeze.

"Overall, no. But Agent Takahashi does. Or, at least, she's willing to look into it. Before Agent Murphy was murdered, she explained her suspicions about Justin to her partner. That's the only foothold we have." Tess releases me and sits back in her chair. She's all dressed up today, likely because she doesn't want Justin to see her vulnerable, quirky author side. He doesn't deserve that, seeing as it's the best, most authentic part of her. "If I could figure out a way to kill Justin, I'd do it. I *will* do it, if I can. I looked for an opening last night, but as always, he's far too careful."

"Just don't make an attempt until you're *positive* you can get him." I choke

on the words, but the confession is halfway out already. “I tried it once, and he beat me until I couldn’t stand.”

Tess stands up so suddenly that she spills her coffee, knocks over her chair, and sloshes half of my tea onto the table’s surface. Maxx immediately gets to his feet, gathering wet paper towels to clean the mess up. Chasm is buried in his own head, plotting. Parrish seethes.

“Dakota, when did this happen?” She’s got her ‘mom voice’ on now, but I’m not sure that it isn’t indistinguishable from her ‘bestselling millionaire author’ voice.

“The day after the last court hearing,” I whisper, and Tess puts a hand out on the tabletop to steady herself. “I tried to shoot him, but it didn’t work out. All I’m saying is, please don’t make a move before you’re positive you can finish the game in a single one.”

Tess curses as she looks out the window to see Justin’s black sedan rolling in. He doesn’t get out though. Instead, he just honks the horn a couple of times as I swallow a lump of dread. Maybe he senses that if he walks in here gloating the way he always does, Tess truly will kill him.

“I can’t let you go,” she says, staring down at the table. “I can’t. I don’t care what the police or the FBI or anyone else has to say about it.” Tess looks up, determined and resolute. “Pack your things; we’re getting on a plane and we’re leaving.”

“Can we take Maxine with us?” I ask hypothetically, knowing that we can’t run from this. I’ve already thought about it. Speaking of Maxine, I should at least say goodbye to her if I’m going to go. Am I though? I have to. “What about my grandparents? Maxim? Chasm? I know what he’ll do to Sally, to Danyella and Lumen, probably to Delphine. We can’t run from this.”

“Tell her,” Parrish commands, but both Maxx and Chasm tense up, and I find myself trapped between their opinions. If I tell Tess about last night, she absolutely will not allow me to leave. She might call the FBI over. Or release Veronica right in front of Justin to bait him into action.

“Tell me what?” Tess whispers urgently, reaching her hand out across the table. Then I look up and I see Mr. Volli, standing right fucking there in the entrance to the kitchen with his gun at his side. He’s wearing the stag mask and smiling at me. He even lifts up a finger to his lips before stepping out of sight.

Parrish sees him, too, shoving up to his feet, but when Tess looks back, there's nobody there.

"I can't run away from this, Tess. Not at the cost it'll come with." I stand up from my chair and start for the door.

"At this point, your safety is more important to me than anyone else's," Tess says honestly, standing up and cutting me off before I can leave the kitchen. "My kids' safety. If it means saving the lives of his children, Paul will agree to it, too." Tess sounds firm in her belief, but I highly doubt Paul Vanguard would give up his freedom for little ol' me. Anyway, it doesn't matter: I'm not running.

"He had one of his lackeys here with a rifle last night." Parrish blurts that bit out which, if you think about it, is a really smart move on his part. If Justin hears us talk about last night with Tess, we're in trouble. But this? He won't care if we tell her this. He'll probably like it. "His lackey is *still* here; I just saw him."

Oh boy, the sheer alarm in Tess' face as she moves to the kitchen entrance and looks out, finding nothing but likely undeterred. She's going to tear this house apart when I leave. Because I am. Leaving, I mean.

"Dude." Chasm gives Parrish a look before turning to Tess again. Meanwhile, Justin continues to slam on the horn outside. Over and over and over again. X's teeth are gritted and he's staring out the window with his hands clenched into fists at his sides. "We talked about this beforehand."

"Talked about this?" Tess asks, her voice high-pitched and panicked. "There's *nothing* that you guys should be talking about or doing if I *do not know about it*." Her eyes are like daggers, and I'm so floored by the intensity in her expression that I take a step back.

Whoa.

Now, this is the Tess I've known all along. It's only in this moment that I can appreciate her tenacity.

"Mom—" She ignores me.

"She's not leaving this house, and neither are any of you." Tess makes her way toward the front door, as if she's planning on storming up to Justin's car and shooting him in the face. I try to catch up, jogging after her with the boys on my heels. She pauses only briefly in the foyer to remove a small handgun from her purse.

This is escalating more quickly than I expected.

“Tess,” Maxx is trying to reason with her. “I don’t think you want to do this right now.”

“Mom, please.” I am not above begging. “Don’t do this. If you provoke him, he’ll retaliate. Think about the trial, about the custody agreement, about Judge Kim.” That slows Tess’ steps a bit, but only a bit. She continues out the front door and across the driveway. Several of her hired bodyguards make themselves known in the trees and bushes around us.

Justin pauses his frantic honking, both hands on the wheel, staring absently at Tess through the windshield.

And then he hits the gas. He hits it so fast that a dust cloud forms, white gravel flying everywhere. The Black Lexus lurches toward us as Tess comes to an abrupt halt, reaching out to grab me. One second, I’m standing next to her and then I’m on the ground, nursing a bruised and bleeding elbow.

The car has stopped less than an *inch* from Tess—with the boys standing right behind her, mind you.

We all go dead silent as Justin shuts the car off and climbs out, feigning shock.

“Oh my God, Tess, I am *so sorry*.” And now he smiles, bright and happy and completely unconcerned that he might’ve just killed—or at least seriously injured—all four of them. “But hey, it was an accident. What can you do?”

Maxx is the one that helps me to my feet; I don’t think he can help himself. He releases me like I’m on fire soon after, and I notice that Justin is frowning severely at the pair of us. *He knows! He knows and whatever Maxx was doing was keeping us all safe and oh my fucking god, what have we done?*

I clutch my elbow in my hand as Chasm and Parrish move up beside me. Although Maxx has released me, he hasn’t gone anywhere. He’s standing right behind me, staring at Justin. Tess ... pushed me out of the way because she believed Justin was going to hit her. She’s squeezing the gun so tightly in her right hand that her knuckles are bone-white.

“Do it, Tess,” he taunts, still smiling at her. “Try to kill me. I’d absolutely love to see you try. Which one of your bodyguards do you think is loyal to me? Or maybe it’s more than one?”

“Why would I try to kill you?” Tess responds mildly, but her shoulders are taut, her breathing erratic. She looks to the right, at one of the men standing near the tree line and then relaxes her grip on the gun. Her gaze is fury and

fire as she looks to her ex-husband. “That seems like an odd question to ask after nearly killing five people with your car.”

“Accident,” Justin repeats, shrugging his shoulders. “So, are you going to try for it or not? As you mentioned, there *are* five of you. Maybe you could overpower me? Or shoot me? Maxx, I know you have a gun, too.” Justin laughs and shakes his head, turning to look at me and then sighing in annoyance at the mark on my elbow, my ruined clothes. “You look like shit—as usual. Get in the car.”

He climbs into the driver’s seat and slams the door as I stand there staring after him.

“Do not get into that car,” Tess instructs me, but she seems helpless to stop me as I walk around the rear of the vehicle and climb in.

“Smart move.” Justin puts the car in reverse and gives me an irritated once-over. We’re rolling back nice and slow, and then he comes to a stop again. “If she keeps you from me, I will not hold back. Do you understand that, Mia?” He reaches over and snatches me by the back of the head, yanking me forcefully over to him. Tess and the boys are too far away to get to the car in time to stop him, but they’re close enough to see.

“I understand.”

Justin shoves me aside, reverses into the street, and then shifts into drive. He sends us flying down the road at such rapid speeds that I question yet again if this is my last moment on earth.

Am I about to be driven off a cliff and into the sea by my biological father?

That’s the only question on my mind as we drive and listen to—of all things—a song called “*Dearest*” by a Japanese singer named Ayumi Hamasaki. Justin even seems to know the lyrics which freaks me out even more. Does he speak Japanese, too? Wouldn’t surprise me.

“Reminds me of my teenage years,” he explains when the song ends. The sun is sparkling on the water, and Justin is dressed to kill in an off-white sport coat, khakis, and designer tennies. He looks fantastic, happy, all smiles and charm. Huge change from trying to run us all over on the driveway. “Watching *Inuyasha* reruns at night on Adult Swim.” He chuckles at the confused expression on my face and mistakes it for something else. “Adult

Swim was a cable channel back in the day.”

Erm. I knew that. I’ve also personally watched the anime he’s referring to; it’s a classic. Anyway, I think it’s weird that he watched it. Hits far too close to home for my liking.

“I’ve seen *Inuyasha*,” I add hesitantly, hoping to keep him in a good mood. If he’s in a good mood, he isn’t beating me. Then again, in the past, each time he’s miraculously switched moods, it hasn’t boded well for me. If Justin is happy and putting on a show, something bad is coming.

I think of a chess game, of what step in the process we’re in. The endgame. Few pieces on the board. What would be the next best move? Getting rid of one of my pieces. Yikes.

But ... if that really is the next move, shouldn’t *I* take one of his pieces first?

Like Raúl. I couldn’t kill Justin, but why couldn’t I get the jump on one of his cronies?

I nibble at my nail the way Tess and Parrish do.

“Have you?” Justin asks, drawing me back into that absurd fairy tale where he’s the father I’ve always wanted, charming me as easily as he charms his investors. I’m proud of Milk Carton in this reality. Hell, I’m heir to an app that could change the world. My father has a sense of humor, apparently watched anime growing up, and enjoys spending evenings binging old fantasy films in the living room.

“*Sesshomaru* was always my favorite.” I’m telling the truth, revealing the character I loved most in that series, but my heart just isn’t into this conversation. Last night, this man ordered me to dig up the body of the girl I was supposed to kill. It’s so beyond sick, I can hardly fathom the mind behind the order.

“I don’t remember any of their names, but I was a fan of the girl with the boomerang.” My father glances over at me, reaching out to touch the side of my face. I’m proud of myself for not flinching. “What’s the matter, sweetheart? Are you angry with Daddy?”

Gag.

“The last time we drove on this particular road, you threatened to drive off the edge and kill us both. So, yeah, I’m a little angry with Daddy.” I cross my arms and exhale, staring at the lake instead of his face. He takes his hand back, and then turns the music down substantially.

“Why don’t we go to breakfast together?” he asks me, and I look back with skepticism in my face.

“What’s the trick here? What’s the angle? What do you want me to do next?” I can’t help the questions. They come out one after another, too fast to keep track of.

“Nothing. Just breakfast with your old man.” Justin flashes me an award-winning smile. “Afterward, maybe we can take the boat on the Sound? I think the next step for Milk Carton is adding an animal identification feature. Snap a pic, get a full write-up on whatever creature. We could birdwatch and see what apps are out there right now, do a little market research. What do you think?”

Tears sting my eyes, but I nod.

I nod, and I know I’m going to regret this, but what choice do I have? Go to breakfast or drive off a cliff? Take the boat out or be beaten until it’s all over and done with?

Monsters aren’t pure shadows and darkness. We are all the sum of our parts. Justin might have some good parts—some really, really good parts even—but he also kills people. His good moments do not make up for the bad. If the worst parts of someone are heavy enough, they drown all the good.

That’s my father.

How many times have I said this? But really, it bears repeating: I. hate. being. right. all the damn time.

Especially this time.

It’s early evening when we get back to the house, an entire day spent with Justin at his best.

I’m exhausted, ready to collapse.

“Welcome back, baby sister,” Delphine says, prancing out the back door to give Justin a kiss on his cheek. “Welcome back, Daddy.”

He puts his arms around the pair of us, guiding us into the solarium and away from a scowling Raúl. We end up at the table, already set for dinner.

“Take a seat, girls. It’s just going to be us tonight. I’ve asked Kwang-seon and Caroline to give us some space.” Justin sits down, still smiling, and waits for me and Delphine to join him. *No Chasm? Shit.* “What have you been up

to today, Delphi?” He spares a glance for his eldest daughter as I pretend to be interested in the vegetarian fajitas on the table. Must be Memory-Lane-Monday today; Justin had vegetarian fajitas at the very first restaurant he took me to.

“Shopping with Caroline, mostly.” Delphine shrugs her shoulders and then leans toward Justin as he fills his plate with food. “Actually, I’m looking forward to the hunt on Friday. You’re going too, right?” Delphine looks back at me as I blink in confusion.

Oh. Yeah. One of the items on Justin’s itinerary. Sounds like great fun. Only question is: should I pack an axe, a garrote, or an assault rifle? All three? Which would present the most dramatic picture? Because that’s the one Justin would want me to use.

“Absolutely.” I smile prettily, forcing my way through more inane conversation until I can escape upstairs. There might not be anything fun to do in my room—certainly nobody to talk to—but it’s better than being with Justin all day, walking on eggshells, cringing each time he clears his throat. What’s he going to announce this time? Who is he going to kill?

When I move over to the window (the very firmly nailed-in-place window) I notice a small piece of paper stuck in the sill. Hm. Part of me wonders if this isn’t a trick. After all, who could get up to the second story and leave something like this without being seen?

Saffron could, that’s who.

I turn away from the window, snagging the small, rolled piece of paper with my fingers. As I make my way into the bathroom, I tuck it between my thumb and the palm of my hand, and then go about running a shower.

I’ve learned over the last few weeks that if I hang my towel just right to cover the glass door, and climb in, there aren’t any cameras in there. How do I know? Because Justin taunts me about all sorts of things I do in my room, but never anything I’ve done in the shower: like flip off every wall, just in case he was watching. He’s not mentioned it once and trust me that it’s something he *would* mention, if only to chuckle about my pathetic attempts at rebellion and humiliate me.

I turn away from the spray, unroll the small tube, and read it before the water messes with the handwritten ink.

Stay strong even if it feels impossible. I’ll be right behind you. Love you.

That doesn’t feel at all ominous, does it? With a curse, I rip up the tiny

piece of paper into even tinier pieces and let them go down the drain. What does Saffron—because it had to be Saffron who left the note—mean by that? Right behind me?

I guess in order to deliver the note, she'd have to be on the property somewhere.

I don't like the idea of that, not at all. Saffron on Justin's property, well, that seems like a recipe for an early death.

One good thing about my gilded cage? The water never runs cold. I'm able to sit in the hot steam until my skin hurts, and the temperature hasn't changed a degree from scalding.

Could Saffron really have climbed all the way up to leave that piece of paper? If so, how did she get it inside? It was between the window and the sill, but it was poking out into the room. That wouldn't be easy even if it were possible.

So ... someone in this house is leaving the notes for me?

Or a worse thought yet: Saffron is already inside the house. If that were the case, it's only a matter of time before she's caught and killed.

Because I'm prepared for trouble, I don't dress in flimsy pj's that night.

No way in hell I'm being woken up for a disaster while wearing a designer silk chemise.

I put on sweatpants, a hoodie, and leave a pair of sneakers beside my bed. With nothing else to do, I dig into Tess' newest novel—*Sex, Silk, and Suicide*—and find myself falling for my mother's writing all over again. Justin keeps a full set of her work stocked in here for me which totally isn't creepy at all.

In this particular novel, Tess is doing what she does best: true crime. It's a sensationalized story about a famous lingerie designer who would start affairs with his victims and then kill them. He orchestrated every death to appear as a suicide and was only caught when an astute detective realized all the women were murdered while wearing his clothing line.

Human beings are so fucking gross, right?

I'm tossing and turning on my bed (reading on my stomach, on my back, with my head near the footboard, upside down with my head hanging off the mattress) and reading lines so quickly that I'm skipping words. A clever bit

of foreshadowing has me thrumming with anxiety (even if I already know how the story ends).

And then somebody knocks.

I rest the book on my belly, still lying with my head on the edge of the mattress. I stare at the bedroom door upside down.

“Come in.” It’s laughable, acting as if I have agency over my bedroom. What happens if I say *go away and leave me alone*? Nothing, that’s what. Or worse: something painful. I sit up and shake the dizziness out of my head as Delphine walks in, smiling sadly at me.

She sits down beside me on the bed and reaches out to take my hand, pulling it into her lap. The entire gesture is just plain weird, but what can I do? I sit there and stare at her, waiting for the bomb to drop. It can’t be good, her coming in here unannounced.

I wait patiently for Delphine to say whatever it is that she’s going to say.

“If Caroline or Raúl or Amin or Jack or anyone else hurts you when I’m not around, you’ll tell me, won’t you?” She’s looking imploringly at me and, personally, on the inside, I’m freaked out by such a bizarre question. What is this girl planning? *Who the fuck does this girl work for? Who the shit is Jack?*

“Alright, Delphine, I’ll tell you,” I agree, shocked as hell when she kicks off her shoes and crawls up into the bed with me. She steals another book off the Tess Vanguard stack that’s perched on my nightstand and cracks it open.

“You’re okay if I read in here with you, right?” she asks me, and I agree because ... why not?

I still don’t trust her, but I suppose she can sit there if she wants to.

Is Delphine planning on doing something about one or all of Justin’s favorite lackeys? Sure as hell sounds like it.

If I hadn’t had that breakthrough with Maxx, I’m not sure I’d be holding up so well. Chasm said he’d be here with me, but he’s not. Justin claims that he’s with Seamus, even going so far as to show me Milk Carton footage of Chasm working on a computer in his bedroom. Seems sus as hell that Justin would care to show me that—it certainly wasn’t for peace of mind.

I think a lot about the boys while I’m there, lying on my bed and staring up at the ceiling. I knew who they were, had truly and utterly glimpsed their

souls, but then I let Justin break me anyway. How? It feels stupid now that I ever doubted them.

Maxx is still mine. They're all still mine. I always did have this romance thing in the bag.

That's what I tell myself to get through the next several days, working towards 'the hunt' and a possible visit with the boys. That is, if Tess doesn't stop them from sneaking out. I'm not entirely certain I want them there anyway; I'm sure Justin will give me a new directive by then.

Kill Antonio, Gavin, or Philippa. The order is coming and even if it doesn't, I agreed to have it done before school started.

Fuck.

The days in this place drag on like eons, completely cut off from the world at Justin's whims. I miss gaming. I miss streaming. I miss hanging out with people and doing nothing *together*. Doing nothing alone is decidedly different.

Every damn day is spent in the studio writing. In the evenings, Justin forces me to play chess over and over again. That's all I do: eat meals with him, Delphine and/or Caroline, write by myself and get critiqued by Mr. Volli, play chess. Even when the weather is warm and the sun is sparkling on the water, I'm trapped much of the day in my bedroom with a window that's nailed shut.

When Friday does roll around, I'm ready for whatever is coming. Anything that can break this stasis that I've been trapped in.

Justin presents me with a very strange outfit: black boots with silver buttons on the sides, a red wool jacket, a crisp white dress shirt, and dark brown breeches. There's a logo on the jacket that I squint at, one that matches the logo burned into the leather of the gun holster that's on the top of the stack.

"Medina Country Club Youth Hunting Elite" is what the patch says.

I look up at Justin to see him smiling at me.

"You go hunting like ... like British people with hounds and horses and foxes?" I ask, completely and utterly confused. Justin laughs at that, clapping me on the shoulder and *squeezing* so hard that I have to grit my teeth. He used to find my sarcasm and snark amusing enough that I could get away with it. Not anymore. He backhanded me yesterday for making a joke about his ugly tie; my jaw is still swollen.

“No, Mia, you delightful idiot. It’s the start of black bear hunting season. No bait or hounds allowed.” He walks over to his desk and opens his safe by punching in a key code. “I’ve taken the liberty of purchasing your big game hunting license.” Justin draws out a revolver which I’m pretty sure is *not* for hunting bears—but what the hell do I know?—and brings it over to me.

It’s the same gun that I tried to shoot him with.

“Not today, sweetie,” he oozes in that patronizing way of his. Justin leans in and kisses my forehead, giving me these cold chills down my spine. “You’ll get the ammo at the camp, not beforehand.”

“Why do I need a revolver to hunt black bears?” I ask and he levels another look on me.

“Any legal weapon is permitted. Besides, you’re not concerned with hunting bears tonight.” He perches himself on the edge of his desk, dressed in these brown cowboy boots, pale blue jeans, and dark green dress shirt that look surprisingly good on him. “You’re going to get my shotgun back.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I ask as Justin texts me a picture on his phone. Some sort of ancient looking shotgun is pictured with a long, metal barrel and a dark wood grip. I look back up at him, thoroughly confused.

“This gun is worth nearly a million dollars.” Justin grits his teeth and then cracks his neck by stretching his head from side to side. “It was given to me by my father for my sixteenth birthday.” He stands up and moves back over to stand in front of me. “This gun belonged to Teddy Roosevelt—that’s a president, Mia.” Now it’s my turn to grit my teeth at the slight. Justin leans down, palms on his thighs, and gets that patronizing look of his on his face. “He took this gun with him when he went on an African Safari in 1909. I want it *back*. It might be worth a million dollars, but it’s priceless.”

“And why would this gun be at the hunt tonight?” I ask, still not understanding. The summer events in Medina are a bit different from what I’m used to back home. Summer activities for me used to include some mixture of the following: hot sticky days at the lake with snacks and sunburns, filming viral videos at the beaches in Massachusetts, late movie nights with popcorn, campouts with stars and bonfires.

But here? We have garden parties, ice cream socials, yacht parties, hunts, and operas.

“The Rossi family has it; they take it to the hunt every year either to spite me or because they’re idiots. You’re going to find that gun and get it back—

at any cost.” He stares me down. “I don’t give a shit if you have to blow the boy’s brains out to get the gun. If that’s what you need to do, that’s what you’ll do.”

Great.

Now I know what the revolver is for.

“What if he chooses not to bring it tonight?” I ask, and Justin stands up straight, waving my question away with a dismissive hand.

“After you’re done with that, you’ll follow the instructions that I give you. It’ll be fun, like a quest on one of those brain-rotting video games you love so much.” He returns to his desk and begins sorting mail, a very clear dismissal of my presence.

Fine.

I’m glad to be rid of him.

I go upstairs, dress in the outfit, and then stand there, staring at myself in the mirror. Huh.

How ... um ... fun. A country club youth group for killing bears. Exactly my sort of jam. /s

Oh wait. I can’t use /s to mean sarcasm in my writing. Mr. Volli told me that using silly internet slang to prop up my work made me look like a member of the proletariat. Now who’s been using the thesaurus too much? I had to look that shit up.

“Hair and makeup has arrived,” Delphine calls with a sharp knock on my door. She’s got the same outfit on, and I wonder if Justin hasn’t given her a gun, too?

“Aren’t you a *little* creeped out by the idea of this hunt?” I ask her, turning around in my chair to give her a look. Now that I’m staring at her and I’m seeing her blond hair, perfect makeup, and carefully selected influencer outfits, I’m beginning to wonder how much of that is due to Delphine’s desire and how much is Justin’s.

“It’ll be fun. From what Daddy tells me, it’s rare to see anyone snag a bear. Mostly, it’s a social gathering.” She shrugs her shoulders and steps forward to fuss with my hair, but there are some very important components that were left unsaid. *A social gathering full of Whitehall teenagers with grudges and guns.*

Delightful.



CHAPTER 20

Delphine drives us both to the hunt in her new car, taking us on these winding backroads into the middle of nowhere. My skin prickles with ominous goose bumps. That's a thing, you know? It's possible to predict how an evening might unfold based on one's goose bumps.

"Where are we?" I ask, finding myself sans phone signal and sitting in a gravel parking lot that's swarming with luxury vehicles. At the edge of the lot, a hulking lodge crouches in the darkness. It's massive, with soaring log walls and like fifty chimneys. There's a lit stone pathway leading through a well-manicured garden area and around to the opposite side of the building (even though the front entrance appears to be on this side).

Delphine gives me a strange look as I adjust the empty revolver in the holster at my hip.

"Where else do you find bears?" she asks, climbing out. She heads for the trunk, popping it open and taking out her gun—it's a rifle. I wonder if she knows how to use it? There's a bag in there full of various supplies: an emergency flashlight, bear spray, a large metal water bottle that ironically says *Save Our Sea Life*. As if Justin gives a shit about sea life or any life in general. No ammo though. "The answer to that question, baby sister, is that you find bears in the woods."

She smiles at me and then takes off down the path, assuming that I'll follow.

I do, leaving my phone on the passenger seat and then trailing behind her until we get to the oversized rear patio of the building. Lit up with torches and strings of Edison bulbs, red party tents with the hunting club's logo, and tables full of food and drink, it looks more like a wedding reception than a gathering for teenagers.

There are various firepits outside, clusters of Whitehall students dressed in the same outfit as me ... almost. Some of the coats are navy blue while others are white. Red, white, and blue hunting attire. As if a single person here wouldn't sell the good ol' US of A out for money. Very patriotic, these Medina folk.

Nobody pays us much attention as we approach, but I hear snippets of conversation in passing.

"Veronica? Everyone's convinced that the Slayer got her." A dark-haired girl is whispering this to a friend, and I cringe. She's not entirely wrong with that bit of gossip.

"Somebody told me that she got pregnant with the Slayer's baby and moved away to give birth," another whispers as we head for the open back doors of the building, and it's only by the grace of the interior that I don't roll my eyes so hard they fall out of my head. It's absolutely breathtaking inside: soaring wood ceilings, antler chandeliers, hunter green wallpaper and dark wood wainscoting. There's a fireplace on either end, various seating areas taking up the space between them.

The gossip follows us inside, bits and snatches carrying over to me through the chatter. I assumed that since Paul was arrested, I'd be even more of a pariah. I was right (again). I realize as I walk that the discussions are specifically targeted toward the Seattle Slayer. It seems unfair that I'm being blamed for my stepdad's arrest, but then I remember that my actual bio dad is the murderer, and it fills me with relief that they don't know.

Yet.

Hopefully, one day they will—even if it means they'll hate me even more.

"He didn't kill her with his own hands, obvs. Didn't you hear the news? The Slayer's, like, a bunch of people all wrapped up in one psycho package."

"Like DID or something?"

"No, like literally. A bunch of plebeian douchebags who hate rich people. That's what my parents said."

"But the Vanduears are old money, big money. Why would they hate their

own kind?

“Whatever. Wherever Veronica is, she’s dead. I guarantee it.”

Okay. Now I *do* roll my eyes. Hard. My eyeballs stage a mutiny and I bet I’m showing so much of my whites that I look possessed. Can’t help it. The gossip is just too dumb to take seriously. They were just like this when Parrish went missing, and it was just as unpleasant back then. Not a single person here seems to give a shit that Veronica Fisher is missing. I’m not sure that she’d have a cadre of loyal friends to chase her ass down.

As Maxx said (*oh, Maxx*), Philippa seems absurdly pleased by Veronica’s absence, preening and moping in the corner as she eats up the false sympathy given to her by the other students.

“Why don’t you grab yourself something to eat, Dakota? I’ve got some social calls to make.” Delphine winks at me and kisses me on the forehead before taking off. I stare after her bouncing blond ponytail, the rifle slung over her shoulder. I’m certain that she’s up to no good. Also, she called me Dakota, not Mia. *Where does your allegiance lie, Delphi?* My attention shifts to the other students in the room, wondering who it is that my sister might be paying a visit to. More importantly, for what *purpose* she’ll be visiting.

No sign of Danyella or Lumen.

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” Parrish asks, surprising me. I whirl around on him halfway across the room, finding him dressed in the standard Youth Hunting Elite uniform, complete with a woolen, white coat. It looks so much better on him than it does on anyone else, and I find myself slack-jawed and staring. He was born to lounge in expensive clothes, one hand tucked into the pocket of his jacket, the other holding a drink that he promptly offers to me. “All of these people prancing around and showing off expensive guns they don’t even know how to use, all under the excuse-umbrella of murdering black bears. How gauche.”

“Speaking of gauche,” Chasm breathes, appearing behind me and winding his arms around my waist. My spine goes ramrod straight before the rest of me melts into a puddle against him. “Have you seen who’s chaperoning tonight?” He nods to his left, and I look over to see Mr. Volli, dressed to the nines in a brown tweed suit jacket, perky red bow tie, and tasteful slacks. He lifts a glass of champagne in our direction and maintains his usual unobjectionable smile.

If he’s here, then is everyone at the house safe for the time being?

I wonder then if Raúl couldn't have taken Amin's place, and that scares me even more. He would absolutely *delight* in murdering my entire family. I'm going to follow my orders tonight, retrieve Justin's stupid gun, and go home without incident. Period.

"Where have you been all week?" I add, feeling this pang of loneliness in my chest. Not having Chas there was hard. I slept in his bed one of the nights, just to see if I could smell him. But nope. The maids had so thoroughly scrubbed and polished the room, there was no sign of him. "Not blaming you, but I missed you. Did Justin keep you away?"

"He ... worked me to death, Little Sister. It wasn't really a choice." Chas holds me tighter, whispering softly in my ear. "*Mianhae*. We'll talk more later, okay?" That works for me: I trust Chasm to tell me whatever truths he can, whenever he can.

"What is this?" I ask finally, looking down at the drink Parrish gave me and trying not to obsess over the thought of Raúl in his hot pink suit and white cat-eye glasses slinking around Laverne's house in the dark. I try to redirect my brain to a different obsession.

Maxx. We literally had sex and talked about *nothing* that we needed to talk about. As angry as I am with him, I'm aching for him, too. I want to see him. That's it. If we can't have the deep discussion we so desperately need until after Justin is dead or incarcerated, fine.

I just have to see him. Is he coming? I'm almost afraid to ask.

"Iced tea because I know you like it and because there are too many old people clustered up near the alcohol." Parrish sighs and slips his free hand into his other pocket, glancing casually over his shoulder in the direction of the door before he turns back to me, honeyed eyes blazing with hatred. "You're sure Justin isn't coming tonight? I don't give a shit about the consequences: if I see the bastard, I'm shooting the bastard."

"Tact and strategy were never your strong suits, were they?" Chasm asks with an exasperated sigh. "Do you think he's not listening to our conversation? Don't be a grandstanding idiot."

Chasm holds out his hand, likely asking for phones to be deposited.

"Dumped it," I murmur, sipping my drink and knowing full well that not having my phone doesn't mean Justin isn't listening. He gave me this outfit; what if it has a mic or camera sewn into it?

"I don't even carry my phone with me anymore. I can at least thank Justin

for curing my addiction to TikTok.” Parrish sighs heavily and then pauses, looking to the side like he’s spotted something interesting.

“Don’t lie: you scrolled your phone for at least four hours yesterday,” Maxx says dryly, appearing on my right side on too quiet feet. How someone that tall and muscular can move around without making a single sound or scuffed sole is beyond me. I feel my face flushing, gaze fixated on the ice cubes in my drink. “Left my phone in the Jeep. Are you okay, Kota?”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” I ask with a strange, falsetto laugh that makes me want to cry. Why do I have absolutely zero chill when it comes to Maxim Wright? I glance over to see that he’s got one dark brow lifted in bemusement. “You think your presence is that magnificent? That I’d faint at your arrival? I’m not happy with you, X.”

“I was talking about Justin.” He almost smiles, but then he swallows hard and it’s like the smile goes right down his throat along with all the soft, sweet caring I swear was in his eyes. He ate it. He just ate his own feelings, and I want to freaking choke him. “We all saw him grab you by the hair; we were all there when he almost ran us down on the driveway.”

“What else would you guys be talking about?” Parrish asks coolly, giving his friend a sharp look. Of course, Maxx can’t and shouldn’t respond to that question, so he doesn’t. What he does do is purse his lips and then sighs heavily. “Nothing romantic, surely. You and Maxine, like this.” Parrish crosses his fingers together and then winks theatrically.

Chasm scolds him in Korean, and Parrish lifts the corner of his lip in an urbane growl.

“Are you here to schmooze the locals?” Maxx asks, turning to look at me directly. Chasm stays where he is, wrapped around my midsection like a koala, his chin resting on my shoulder. I can’t see his face when he turns to look at Maxx, but I can feel the tension in him. He’s irritated with his friend, for multiple reasons, I’m sure. Did Maxx finally spill the beans to Parrish and Chasm? Do they know we had sex that night (they can’t have missed it, too obvious)? Did he tell them who the dead girl is, where he found her, or how the hell he pulled off the bait and switch? “Or are you here on Justin’s business?” Maxx allows himself a low, angry laugh before raking his fingers through his glossy dark hair.

This uniform on him, while attractive, seems out of place. Parrish is a blue blood, born and raised. He’s the very definition of Justin’s ‘blood and

diamonds' description of Medina. Maxx is different, a salt-of-the-earth kind of guy. He's more in touch with basic human needs and wants. *And he can prove it by lifting you up and slamming you into the wall.*

I choke on my next sip of iced tea and Chasm untangles himself so he can move around to my left and look me in the eyes.

I take another sip of my drink to fortify myself against his handsome face. He's got just the barest dash of liner at the edges of his amber eyes, his black hair shiny and freshly trimmed, the yellow dye in his lightning bolt streak bright. Somebody's been to the stylist this week. The navy blue jacket, tight pants, and boots are as anathema to Chas' personality as they are to Maxx's. Only Parrish looks at home in the clothes.

But do they all look equally gorgeous in them? Oh yeah.

"Gamer Girl." Parrish snaps his fingers in front of my face, frowning hard. "You're getting lost in dreams of dick. What does Justin want from us tonight?"

"I am not lost in dick!" I hiss at him, and X stifles a snort, turning to survey the crowd and adjusting a silver button on his red jacket. *Oh, we're matching. Cute.* I turn toward him, but he doesn't look at me. I decide then that I'm going to take a chance. We've all ditched our phones, and there really is like, no service at all out here. I step in close and lower my voice to a whisper. "You are not going to stand there and pretend like we didn't have sex."

"Kota." X turns toward me sharply, standing far too close, face lowered so that he's within kissing distance. He turns his head and puts his mouth near my ear. "Sex doesn't mean we're back together."

I shove him back, sloshing iced tea all over his jacket, and he comes away with pursed lips but a look of smug surety that he can't quite wipe away. He still believes he's the hero.

By the end of the night, he'll be bleeding to death, so I guess that's a fair assumption for him to make.

"As I said." Parrish gestures at me. "Lost in dick. Dakota, what's up tonight?"

"We have a quest," I respond with an absurd amount of false cheer. *Stupid Maxim Wright. Who does he think he is? He's named after a men's magazine for god's sake! He should consider himself lucky that I even halfway sort of believe in him.* Really though, if I didn't believe in him, I wouldn't have slept with him the other night. "We're here to find a stolen gun."

I don't have my phone on me, so I can't show the guys the picture that Justin texted to me, but I describe it as best as I can. I've barely said a full sentence when Chasm snaps his fingers and flashes a cocky grin.

"Yeah, I know that gun. Antonio's dad used to bring it to every hunt. When he turned fourteen, the asshole was given it as a gift. Could not stop gloating about it." Chasm looks toward the crowd that's milling half in and half out of the doors.

Something occurs to me at random, and I can't resist bringing it up.

"Wait. It's nighttime. Can people really hunt bears at night?"

All three boys stare at me like I've spontaneously shapeshifted into a centaur.

"This isn't about hunting bears, Kota," Maxx says softly, almost endearingly. See? He can't help it. He wants me. No one could convince me otherwise. "These people are here to make social connections and business deals." He narrows his eyes as he takes in the group of Whitehall students nearest us. "They're barely fucking human."

The way he says that, a low, deep grumble ... I'm dying on the inside.

"Some people stay the night and hunt in the early morning." Chasm points a finger at the ceiling, like he's indicating the rooms above us. "But yeah, most people only come to the opening night. Maxx is right: they're here to show off their guns and cars and to brag about shit."

Figures. Just like nobody eats ice cream at the ice cream social. Don't these Whitehall brats do anything just for the hell of it?

"Got it." I pretend to write on invisible paper. "Cannot hunt bears at night. Check. You learn something new every day."

"Dakota Banks, *please*," Maxx whispers roughly, and he looks like he's having a heart attack. "Stop being weird and cute." He holds up his hand, palm out toward me. "Just don't."

"Why? Does it make you want to cuddle me all night, and then pretend like it didn't happen in the morning? Better yet: does it remind you that you act like an animal with your clothes off?"

Maxx groans and leans his head back, putting his hands over his face.

"My ears are bleeding," Parrish says blandly, putting his right arm over his chest and resting the elbow of his left arm in his hand. He puts his chin against his inked knuckles, peering at me in a *peremptory* sort of way. *That means haughty, Mr. Volli!* "Do you want to come up with some elaborate

plan to convince Antonio to hand over the weapon?"

I shrug and pretend like I seriously didn't call Maxx a naked beast in front of my other boyfriends.

"I was honestly hoping you guys could just sort of drag him into the woods and beat him up."

"Finally, a plan that makes sense." X takes off and I follow after him, weaving through the crowd until we spot Antonio. He's sitting on the edge of a stone half-wall with a bonfire in front of him, surrounded by his awful friends.

"Basically every guy that beat me up during finals week," Chas mutters when he sees them all standing there. "Plus a half dozen extras."

"We need to lure Antonio away," X admits, almost like it hurts him to reveal that he can't single-handedly beat up twelve guys with just himself, Parrish, and Chasm. Although, he *has* been doing Krav Maga since he was eleven. *Maybe my life isn't a murder-mystery, but a romance? In which case, you can't have a proper romance novel without Krav Maga.*

"You have any girls that owe you favors still or did you blow them all when you had them beat Lumen up?" Parrish asks, directing his question to Chas. The latter boy gives the former a scowl and a prideful lift of his chin.

"Do you know how many girls I've helped over the years? Lots of repeat customers, too. Yeah, I can get a girl to help us out. You think Antonio will fall for a hot girl decoy?" Chasm looks skeptical, but Parrish seems less concerned.

"Antonio is the biggest slut at Whitehall; there's nothing that grabs his attention like a pretty girl." Parrish crosses his arms and then notices that I'm staring at him. "You're not going to give me some lecture about how we shouldn't shame people for sleeping with half the school?"

"You said it; I didn't." I look at Chasm and lift an eyebrow, and he at least has the decency to appear mollified by the memory of his faux playboy days.

"Can I clarify something out of context that's really been bothering me?" I ask, and they all peer at me expectantly. It's not *exactly* out of context: the playboy memory stirred it up for me. "You were all virgins when we slept together, right?" There's been so much lying and secret keeping, so many directives from Justin, it's hard to say where the truth ends and the bullshit begins.

"Seriously?" Parrish looks appalled that I'd even ask him that. Or

embarrassed. He might be blushing. “You know damn well that I was.”

Chasm shakes his head with a sigh, rubbing at his forehead with two fingers. Shame colors his expression.

“I deserve to be asked this after what I said to you.” He looks up at me and meets my eyes. “You were my first, Naekkeo. No worries. I shouldn’t have thrown that in your face, no matter the circumstances.”

Everyone goes quiet until only Maxx is left. He’s looking at me, too, just fucking *staring* at me in that way of his. My heart skips a beat the way it did when we sat in front of the waterfall and he gave me legendary life advice.

“Not everything I said and did was a lie.” He tells me this with a deep, wild sort of melancholy. Why is he acting like this? What the hell is going on? “Yes, I was a virgin. I’m sure it’s hard to believe that I didn’t sleep with Maxine before then. Maybe sometime, we can talk about it. Not right now.” He throws his hand out to indicate the other hunt participants. “So, who’s it going to be?”

The virginity subject is abruptly dropped. Back to business. I try not to feel too excited by their answers.

“Keep an eye on Antonio and give me twenty minutes.” Chas presses a kiss to my cheek and then takes off, disappearing into the crowd.

“Twenty minutes,” I repeat, trying not to feel awkward in Maxx’s presence. He’s looking at me now like maybe he feels the same way.

“More iced tea?” Parrish plucks the cup from my hand and leaves before I get a chance to respond. He smirks at me as he goes, and I can see he’s trying to give me and Maxx a minute to work things out between us.

X looks supremely irritated, staring after his friend, but then his green eyes drop to mine and somehow, it’s just the two of us standing next to a flickering bonfire. Something about the strange lighting changes the expression on his face, softening it just enough that I feel it’s worth the risk to challenge him.

“After what happened with us, you can’t—”

“We fucked,” he clarifies, trying and failing to harden his voice. He seems so damn tired tonight, wary, too. Also ... afraid. There’s that lingering fear I saw in his gaze last week, and it doesn’t seem to have lessened. When I really look for it, I swear that there’s rampant terror in his eyes. “That’s all. Just two bodies and lots of misplaced chemistry.” He looks away from me, but I reach out and grab onto his jacket with two hands.

We're in a relatively private place, locked in shadows at the edge of the stone courtyard, outside of prying eyes, distanced from technology in such a way that we could really talk here if we wanted. We could. I believe that.

"Maxim, *please*." I don't mean to sound like I'm begging, but maybe I am? At first, it made some sort of perverse sense for him to be doing what he was doing. But now? I can't take it anymore. "Life is so much better when you're around."

"Kota, stop." He tries to take my hand in his and push it away from his jacket, but he can't seem to do it. Instead, his fingers curl around my wrist and he ends up yanking me closer to him. Maxx's eyes search mine, and then he's cursing and dragging me into the woods.

I trip and stumble behind him, but he never lets me fall. Instead, he guides me far enough away from the lodge that the sound of conversation dies away. It's dark, too, but with enough moonlight that I can see the expression on X's face when he releases me and turns around.

A gunshot explodes in the distance, and I cringe. It's followed by another, and then there's a raucous of gunfire before all goes quiet again. Nobody hunts bears at night, eh? So what are they doing exactly?

"A hunting accident would be an easy and explainable way to end one of Justin's targets, wouldn't it?" Maxx asks, almost absently. He looks away from me, through the trees and back in the direction of the lodge. There are tiny, white, bell-shaped flowers dotting the undergrowth near his feet. I stare at those instead of him. He's talking about Justin, but it feels like he wants to talk about something else.

"I'm guessing that's what he wants me to do," I whisper, choking on a gasp when X reaches out and tilts my chin up with two fingers. I've never seen him look so serious before, and we've been through plenty of serious things in the last six months. Life-and-death serious things.

If he's *more* serious now than when Parrish was kidnapped, what does that mean?

"You have to let me go, Kota."

Ouch.

That's not what I was hoping to hear him say. His words are telling me to go away, but his touch ... it lingers. I close my eyes as he slides his fingers across my cheek and buries them in my hair. It's up in a chignon instead of hanging loose around my shoulders. That's Justin's preference, not mine.

“Your hair ...” he starts as I keep my eyes squeezed shut. I don’t want to see his expression right now. “He always makes you wear it up.” That last sentence is pure steel. Maxx is *pissed*. “That son of a bitch. How am I supposed to pull it when I’m riding you?”

Okay, now my eyes are wide open and I’m gaping at him in utter disbelief.

“You can’t keep doing this hot/cold bullshit with me, X! I’m dying on the inside.” My first sentence comes out in a shout, but the second one? It’s my final plea. If he doesn’t come to me now, all I can do is wait for him to make a move on his own.

“Dakota, I don’t know where my dad is,” he tells me, and my mouth drops open in shock. “Laurent has been MIA for the entire week; he’s been sending bare-minimum text messages to Hamilton and me and Tiff. I think ... I’m worried about him.”

“Maxx, what the hell?” I whisper, but he just looks away, dropping his hand from my hair. I thought he was going to kiss me. He walks a few steps deeper into the woods, squatting down by a cluster of furry white mushrooms.

“Lion’s mane,” he says as I squat next to him and he turns to look at me. “Maxine likes—” I shove my face forward, slamming my mouth into his. It’s not very romantic, and it sort of hurts a little bit, but the end result is the same. May as well have thrown a match onto some gasoline.

Maxx returns my kiss with equal force, shoving me back into the dirt and climbing on top of me. His hands press my wrists down, one knee firmly positioned between my legs and teasing me through my pants. He kisses me so thoroughly and possessively that I stop breathing. It’s only when he draws back and I suck in an involuntarily chest full of air that I realize how dizzy I am.

“I’ve been over and over and over everything in my head: you are lying to me in order to protect me, and I hate it. X, I’m not a child. Tell me the truth.”

He releases me like he’s been poisoned and sits with his head in his hand, staring down at the dirt between his legs. The mushrooms cling to the trunk of the tree in front of us, watching our strange human mating rituals with a level of detachment that I admire. Life must be so much easier in fungi form.

Apparently, I say that last bit aloud because Maxx turns a strange look on me and then he laughs.

“Fuck.” That’s all he says, and then he turns and stares at the mushrooms

again. I'm not half bad at recognizing them but, as I told Tess before, not sure that I'd eat any of them either. I don't trust my skills *that* much. "Why are you so stubborn? I've been horrible to you, and you still won't leave me alone."

"Because I know you, Maxim Wright." I get up on my knees and shuffle toward him, fully and completely aware that my jacket and now my pants are dirtied and that everyone—especially Parrish and Chasm—will notice and deduce my activities.

"You've only known me for six months," he says, but even he doesn't sound convinced. That's a true statement of fact, but it's nowhere near the reality of the situation. I don't even have to say anything; he knows what bullshit he's spewing.

"Remember when you thought I was hiding Parrish from you? And then you changed your mind and said that because you thought I was a good person, it must be true. Well, I'm confident in my judgment of your character." I poke him in his hard, firm chest, and even with the red wool jacket he's wearing, I can feel his muscles. "You reconfirmed everything I thought by sleeping with me the other night."

He looks askance at me, a bit of playboy alpha asshole in his face.

"Lifting you up and fucking you against the wall in your stepbrother's room amounts to reconfirming my good character?" He sounds flirty as hell, but I'm not even sure he knows he's doing it.

"Exactly. If you were in love with Maxine, you would not have slept with me."

"Maybe I'm just a bastard, Kota? There are plenty of guys who would've taken advantage of both you and your sister that way." He reaches up and combs his fingers through his hair again before he offers up a telltale sign by nibbling on his lower lip. Yep. See that? Anxious tic.

"Sure. Plenty of guys. But not you." I crawl into his lap, straddle him, and put my hands on his shoulders, and he just lets me do it.

"How do you know when I started lying to you? You saw the video: Justin gave me a directive and I followed it."

I groan and let my head fall back, digging my fingers into his shoulders in a way that I hope is painful as hell. And then I growl as I drop my chin back down to glare at him.

"Yeah, but like, Justin is an idiot who retcons his own storyline. Remember

when you punched him in the face? He might be a good actor, but he didn't fake that cold, angry detachment. That was a punishment aimed directly at your heart." I'm feeling hot now, and I can't decide if it's because of my rage or because Maxx's erection is grinding into me through our pants. I rock my hips, and he curses colorfully, an entire rainbow of sin. "Chew on this for a second: Justin was in that video with you, right? No way in freaking hell that he would've revealed himself to you before he introduced himself to Tess and me. So, obviously, that video was filmed later. Pure pageantry, X." I sit back slightly and glare at him, pleased to see that his face is at least neutral now and not hostile. "Besides, even if I didn't trust any of you boys as far as I could throw you, I trust my sister."

Now that one hurts him. He turns away again and sighs so deeply that he may as well be signing his own death warrant. *He totally knows something that I don't. Something bad.*

"Can we just pretend for the rest of the night that things are like they used to be?" he asks absently, but almost like he isn't sure he should be asking the question at all. X laughs as he looks back at me. "Retconning, huh?"

"Justin totally retcons, and he thinks I don't notice. But I'm a gamer first and maybe I'm also sort of, a little bit of a burgeoning writer, too, and I see it plain as day. When did you make that video, Maxx? Because it wasn't at the beginning of our relationship."

He settles his big hands on my hips, and it feels right. It feels like we were meant to be together, like that day in the coffee shop was fate screaming at the top of her lungs at the both of us. No matter how or why we came together—Maxine or Maxx's parents or Justin—it was meant to be.

"Let's not talk about that, okay? We're not going to talk about any of that stuff." X leans forward and kisses me, his tongue sliding into my mouth, capturing me in this slice of moonlight and forest and mushrooms and bell flowers. I want to stay here forever.

His hands begin to roam, and I begin to rock, and I'm pretty sure we'd have sex in the woods (again) if Chasm and Parrish didn't come tromping through the trees to find us.

"Seriously? You're finally giving in after all of that nonsense?" Parrish asks, planting his hands on his hips as he glares down at us. "Frankly, I was sort of excited to be rid of you both. In the end, Dakota will always be mine."

"I'm not giving into anything," X growls right back at him, but he must

know the gig is up.

“It’d be nice if you just admitted it.” Chasm *glares* at his friend with a look of pure, love-filled frustration. “If we were all properly informed, it would help us help you, dipshit.”

X hefts me into his strong arms and stands up from the forest floor with me cradled to his chest like it’s no trouble at all. He doesn’t seem in any rush to put me down either. He keeps me tucked close, the rapid-fire sound of his heartbeat next to my ear. He’s nervous, even if he refuses to show it.

“Did you find the girl?” he asks, ignoring Chas’ statement entirely.

“Yeah, sure, we’ve got someone lined up. You ready?”

X nods and then (sadly) sets me on my feet.

Parrish leads the way back to the lodge, staring across the crowded courtyard at a girl with raven hair and a bright smile. She’s leaning in toward Antonio, whispering things in his ear.

“They hooked up sophomore year, and he’s stupid enough to believe that she’d actually want a second go-around with his prematurely ejaculating ass.” Chasm reaches into his pocket like he’s going for his cigarettes, and then curses. “Damn it, why did I choose a battle royale with a serial killer to go cold turkey?”

“Because you want to be able to kiss me more often,” I clarify, and Chas snorts.

“I suppose that’s motivation enough.” He nods his chin when the girl glances our way, and then she’s grabbing Antonio’s hand and leading him into the woods.

We circle around the courtyard and head in their direction. Doesn’t take long. Antonio is loud and honestly halfway to being drunk. Even better: teenagers with guns and alcohol. Also, also, these are not normal teenagers. These people wear ten-thousand-dollar dresses to pool parties with actual bartenders. Hollywood teens, that’s what they are.

“Couldn’t get enough of me, huh?” Antonio is asking, but the girl looks entirely disinterested, more like she’s annoyed at us for having to wait this long in the dark with such an aggravating asshole. “I’ve been told that once you go Antonio, you never get over the rodeo.”

Chasm snorts, and I giggle. Not because it’s funny, but because it’s so sad. Did he really just say such a horrific and cringey tagline?!

“How on earth does this guy ever get laid?” X mumbles, but Parrish

doesn't respond. He just walks into the clearing, looks Antonio over, and sighs.

"How drunk are you that you'd think that line would work on a girl? I imagine it dries them up like a California drought."

"Don't fucking diss on LA, man! I'm so tired of hearing you diss on my hometown!" Antonio is the one who swings on Parrish first. Meanwhile, the poor girl slinks away while she has the chance. It's not a fair fight. Like Veronica, Antonio is too drunk to be much trouble.

"Antonio moved here from LA when he was six, and somehow he thinks that makes him a Beverly Hills resident for life." Parrish moves easily out of Antonio's way, reaching for the duffel bag near his feet. He hefts it up, unzips it, and peers inside as Antonio squints at him from across the clearing.

"Don't touch my shit." He's slurring as he stumbles back over to Parrish, yanking the duffel bag from his hands.

"Where's the gun?" Parrish asks, looking over at his classmate like he expects him to answer the question without complaint.

Antonio snorts, swaying where he stands as he lifts an accusatory finger in Parrish's direction.

"I knew you were here to steal that gun." He turns to me and smirks, reaching up a hand to smooth back his unruly brown hair. "My dad's a smart guy; he knew Justin would try to get that gun back. It was owned by President Reagan, you know."

"Actually, it belonged to Teddy Roosevelt," I correct, looking Antonio over with a sigh. If I come home without that shotgun, I'm in big trouble. "Where is it?"

"Like I'd tell you," he snarls, spitting at me. "Next time you think about insulting my sweater, maybe you'll think twice." With that devastatingly clever and unfailingly witty commentary, Antonio turns to go, and Maxx rolls his eyes, giving Chasm a look. They communicate a plan without words, moving up to grab Antonio by either arm. He's dragged backward and thrown into a tree with Maxx's arm at his throat. "You fucker ..." Antonio chokes out, clawing at Maxx—rather unsuccessfully, I might add.

"Where is the gun, Antonio?" X asks, leaning in so close that the two boys could kiss if they were so inclined. But gross. Who could kiss someone with such poor fashion sense as Antonio Rossi?

"Screw—" Antonio doesn't get the chance to finish his sentence, choking

as Maxx presses harder against his throat. Chasm waits off to the side, crossing his arms as Parrish stands silently beside me.

“He might be a useless asshole, but he’s a strong asshole,” Parrish admits and X laughs.

“Keep insulting me, Pear-Pear, and you’ll see just how strong I am.” Maxx releases his arm just enough for Antonio to suck in a ragged breath. “If you don’t tell me where the gun is, I’ll strip you naked and drag you to the lake. Not only will I throw you in, but I’ll break your legs first.” X’s smile gets wicked sharp, and I feel my heart jump a little in my chest. I should not be getting turned-on by seeing him act cruel, but I guess there’s a little rebellious streak in me somewhere. Okay, fine, a big rebellious streak. I should rightfully give myself credit for backtalking a serial killer, right? “Based on our time in the locker room together, I know you’ve got a small dick. And that water?” X leans in even closer and lowers his voice to a menacing whisper. “Ice-fucking-cold. Everyone will see your shame when they fish your corpse from the water.”

“My dad has it, you asshole!” Antonio chokes out, and X releases him suddenly, letting him fall to his knees as he grips his throat. When the boy turns a glare on him, Maxx plants his booted foot on Antonio’s back. Damn. He really is ruthless, isn’t it?

“Where is your dad, Tony?” he asks, voice low and cold.

“I hate when you call me Tony, and you know it,” Antonio snarls back, but then Maxx is pressing him flat into the dirt and holding his struggling form down with little effort. “He’s a chaperone tonight! Fuck!”

X releases him suddenly and looks back at me.

“Is that enough?” he asks, and I nod, liking the pretense of control over this beast of a boy. We both know that Maxim Wright will do what Maxim Wright wants, when he wants, how he wants. Whatever he believes to be the most righteous path, he’ll walk it. Even if it hurts. Even if it kills.

“That’s enough,” I admit with a sigh. Of course a drunk Antonio was too easy of a target. “Is your dad back at the lodge?”

“Eat a dick, you ugly dog-faced bitch.” Antonio has the unfortunate sense to say this just as he stands up. It’s not much of a surprise when Maxx punches him square in the face and drops him like a sack of bricks.

Chasm kneels down to roll the guy over and make sure he’s okay. Then Antonio snores and we all sigh a little in relief. Well, except Maxx. Not sure

if he cared or not if his former classmate was okay.

“Pretty sure I saw Antonio Senior at the lodge,” Chasm says as he rises to his feet, brushing dirt from the knees of his breeches. “But luring Antonio into the woods is one thing. His father isn’t going to be so easily tricked.”

“He’s the judge, right?” I ask and Chas nods. Hm. How am I supposed to steal a million-dollar shotgun from a judge? “Fantastic. Another question: why do rich dudes always give their eldest son their own name?”

“Excellent question,” Chas says, reaching back to pull the pins from my hair. It tumbles down on either side of my face as I blush. “Glad to have escaped that fate. And don’t worry about your hair: I’ll put it back up before you leave.”

Guess Maxx isn’t the only one who likes it. He is staring at me though, and then he reaches up to rub his jaw in such a way that I know he’s remembering the comment he made to me in the woods. “*How am I supposed to pull it when I’m riding you?*” Eep. Big talk.

“We might just need one of your elaborate plans, Gamer Girl,” Parrish drawls as he takes my hand and leads me in the direction of the lodge.

“We might just need the same plan.” Maxx walks quickly past us and disappears inside as we jog to catch up.

“Show off.” Chasm snorts as he unbuttons his jacket as well as the top two buttons of his shirt. I see tattoos. *Yes, please.* “God, I want a cigarette so fucking bad right now.”

“I’m proud of you.” I pat him on the shoulder, offering a pretty smile to go with the praise. It seems to work, and he runs his tongue over his lower lip. Wow. Yum. I slap myself in the forehead and Chas chuckles. “Alright, *oppa*,” I say, hoping to butter him up a little. “You know everybody in this town: tell us about the judge. Any weaknesses we can exploit?”

“He’s pretty buddy-buddy with everyone in Medina,” Chasm starts, mulling the thought over as we approach the lodge. Maxx pauses beside Gavin, ignoring the fact that the guy is sitting there with a dude kissing on his neck.

“Your jackass of a friend is drunk off his ass in the woods; deal with him.” X strides off and the rest of us follow. Gavin scowls at us as we go and makes absolutely zero move to assist his bestie. I prefer my boys’ bromantic relationships with each other.

Lo and behold, Judge Rossi is inside the lodge. I’m surprised we didn’t

notice the shotgun before. Now that I'm looking for it, I see that he's got it slung over his shoulder. *Goddamn it.* He's even clutching the leather strap like a lifeline.

Mr. Volli notices us milling near the refreshments table and approaches with a smile on his face, lifting his drink in greeting.

"*If you expect nothing from somebody you are never disappointed.*" He pauses in front of us, sipping whatever it is that's in his cup. Looks like water honestly. "Sylvia Plath, again. I know, I know, I'm obsessed but how could I not be? She stuck her head in an oven and committed suicide at the end. How dramatic. She's a favorite."

"I'm shocked," Parrish murmurs, his lip curled as he stares at his former captor. I notice that he unconsciously raises his hand to his chest and rubs at his scars through his shirt. "What do you want?"

"I'm just here to keep you in line," Mr. Volli replies easily, turning his attention to the crowd. "How's the weapon acquisition coming along?" He laughs, as if he finds that question hilarious.

"It's not coming at all; I'm not sure how I'm supposed to get a million-dollar shotgun away from a judge." If I sound frustrated, it's because I am. I was under the impression that *Antonio* was my target tonight, not his father. Mr. Volli seems to mull that over for a moment, glancing in Judge Rossi's direction.

"What an entertaining conundrum," he muses, turning back to us. "You're a smart girl. You'll figure it out." At that, he leaves us standing there so that he can go get a refill on his lemon-cucumber water.

"My brain hurts from trying to be clever," I mutter in frustration, cracking my knuckles and sighing.

"Then stop trying so hard." Maxx is watching Judge Rossi head toward the restrooms. Alone. "This is our chance." He takes off without saying a thing about my hair, but I let it go. I didn't know about Laurent. I'm assuming Parrish and Chasm do though.

"Did you guys know about his dad?" I ask, and they exchange looks before nodding.

"Laurent took off in the middle of the night without telling Hamilton anything." Parrish raises both of his brows. "He had a bag packed, and he's been texting, but something is obviously going on."

Goddamn it.

I feel helpless all of a sudden, like there's nothing I can do to stop this runaway train that we're on. If even Tess knows about Justin, if the FBI knows, and they can't do a damn thing, then maybe there's nothing to be done but try again?

I think back to Saffron's note in my windowsill; she's our best hope at this point to kill Justin.

We follow Maxx to the restrooms, only to see him emerge with the gun—and with blood on his knuckles.

“Here.” He hands it over to me and strides past us as I gape, stumbling down the hall and reaching for the handle of the bathroom door. It won't open; it's locked. I keep the gun clutched in my hand as Chas chases his friend down, grabbing him by the shoulder and pushing him back against the wall.

“What did you just do?!” he hisses under his breath, teeth gritted, eyes darting nervously back in the direction of the bathrooms. “Did you just beat the fuck out of a judge?”

Maxx lifts his emerald eyes to Chasm's amber ones. Parrish's shine like tiger eye gems. It's a treasure chest of pretty-eyed boys with cruel-streaked hearts and pure-perfect love. I can't breathe. *This night will have consequences. Big ones.*

“I did what had to be done. Justin wanted Dakota to get the gun; she's got the gun.” He shoves Chasm and heads for the back door, slipping outside. He's not getting away that easily. We follow him, finding him at a bank of outdoor sinks. They're made of stone with metal faucets that require a bit of cranking to get the water flowing.

X is washing the blood from his knuckles with a detached expression on his face that I don't like.

“You've been acting weird as hell for *weeks* now,” Chasm snaps, slamming his hands down on the edge of the sink and leaning in to look at Maxx. Parrish stays back with me, lips pursed tight. “What is going on? There's something you've been hiding. I knew from the very second you claimed to love Maxine that you were plotting behind our backs. It pisses me off. It makes me think you're lying and scheming so that you'll take the brunt of the hit, sacrifice yourself, whatever. So tell me. I want to know everything.”

“Keep your voice down,” Maxx whispers, but I think Chasm is just done

pussyfooting around. As I stand there, he starts to talk and he doesn't stop.

"All of this shit that we've been doing behind the scenes, it doesn't mean a thing if we don't all make it out of this okay. What do you think is going to happen to you when Judge Rossi is found bloodied and beat up in the bathroom? You'll go to jail, Maxx. At the very least. The Rossi's are a powerful family, one of the richest in Medina. He could have you *killed*."

"Or Justin could have me killed," Maxx continues blandly, staring down at his hands as he works the blood out from under his fingernails. "Or my dad killed." He snaps his fingers and then points over at Chasm. "Oh wait, but that might've already happened." He turns fully to face Chas, breathing hard and squeezing his wet fists at his sides. "He could force my dad to move money from Paul's account to Delphine's. Oh, already done that, too. He could threaten to kill either or both of my parents. Check. He could ... you and Parrish and Dakota ..." X turns away and then shoves both of his wet hands over his hair. It looks sexy as hell like that, slightly damp and falling over his forehead.

"You know I've been playing around with hacking into Justin's systems. On top of that, he has a safe in his office that I am *this* close to cracking." Chasm tries to get around in front of Maxx as I stand there with my mouth agape. "It's where he keeps his trophies, Maxx. Trophies. From people that he's *killed*."

"Wait, what?" I ask as Parrish lunges forward suddenly, grabbing Chas by the shoulders and slamming him back into the row of stone sinks.

He growls something out in Korean that gives Chasm pause.

And then we all look over to see Mr. Volli standing there with his drink in hand, smiling at us.

It's that creepy smile again, the one that means violence.

"Did you kill Judge Rossi?" Mr. Volli asks, tilting his head slightly to one side.

"Of course not," X scoffs back at him, but there's this undercurrent of terror in his voice. He's not even trying to hide it right now. Or, if he is, it's slipping past his careful guards anyway.

"Are you *sure* about that?" Amin asks, clearly baiting us. I notice then that he has blood on his own hands.

No. No freaking way. No, no, no.

"Did you ...?" I can't even make myself finish the question. I clamp a hand

over my mouth as I stare at my app development teacher/writing instructor.

“You killed him?” Parrish asks, almost lackadaisically, as if he doesn’t care. It’s when he’s at his most listless that he’s nervous about something.

“If I did, then who will be blamed?” Amin asks with a long sigh. He looks at the boys and then turns to me. “Go inside and make nice with the other children.”

“Is this an order from Justin?” I ask, my palms sweating like crazy.

“Do you want to leave the body inside the building for somebody else to find?” Amin asks, and Maxx turns to me suddenly, grabbing onto my shoulders.

“I didn’t kill him,” he tells me, looking me straight in the eyes, like it’s of grave importance that I understand that.

“I know,” I whisper back. I imagine that Amin, like, strangled the judge ... or something. *I feel sick. I feel like I’m going to be sick.* I move to push Maxx aside, but he keeps hold of my shoulders, searching my face, *memorizing* me. I hate that. I really fucking hate that.

He finally releases me, and I turn to Volli with my chin raised.

“I’ll help with the body.” Holy shit. Can’t believe I’m even saying that.

Hah.

And I thought it was messed up when I was only pretending to bury a body. And then digging one up that wasn’t murdered, only moved. Now? This is insanity.

“You’ll do what you’re told to do.” Amin gestures in the direction of the building with his chin. “Inside. Now.” He’s got that voice on, the one he uses in the videos he makes for Justin.

I look at the boys, but X is already grimly nodding.

“Go, Kota. We’ve got this.” He gently pushes me toward the back door as Chasm and Parrish exchange another look.

The last thing I want to do is walk in there and leave the boys behind. I’ve got the revolver on me, but no ammo. Could I borrow or steal some from another student? Borrow Delphine’s gun? Should I shoot Mr. Volli now and see what happens?

That’d get the attention of the fucking FBI.

I decide that finding Delphine and taking her gun would be the easiest way to go about this, but only if I can find her relatively quickly. If not, I’ll jump Philippa and steal her gun if I have to. Anything to put a bullet in Amin Volli.

The first thing I do is run back to the car and pray that it's unlocked. Delphine doesn't really care to protect her belongings seeing as Justin is rich, everyone else here is rich with little reason to steal, and maybe also because she's the Seattle Slayer's daughter and would have no trouble hurting a thief. Killing a thief, I wouldn't put it past her either.

The car is open, so I grab my phone and then jog back inside, connecting to the Wi-Fi. There are no messages from Justin, and that calms me down a little. If something were wrong—other than a dead, rich, powerful judge—then he'd have called or texted. I try Delphine next, and she answers on the third ring.

"Hey, baby sister. Are you okay?" She sounds like she might be on the patio. I can hear bonfires and laughter, the sound of boots on stone.

"Can you meet me near the bathrooms?" I ask, my voice stronger and steadier than I feel. I'm proud of myself for that. "I need your help with something."

"On my way." Delphine stays on the line with me until we see each other, ending the call as she jogs up to me. She's smiling, too, which is honestly freaking me out. "Here. I've been working on these all night." She hands me a note written in red ink. More theatrics, more pageantry.

Alarm bells sound in my head.

"I'm curious: how stupid do you think I am?"

Find my notes as quickly as you can and bring the shotgun.

If you don't find your boyfriends in time, all three of them are dead."

That's what the note says.

I stare at it, and then I look up at Delphine. She seems unconcerned, putting a hand in the pocket of her jacket. I'm holding my breath again without meaning to. Sometimes, I think I do it because it feels like if I don't breathe, time will stop. It'll stop and all of this will stop, and I'll be standing in the hallway at Whitehall trading sexually charged insults with Parrish. Tutoring sessions in the ice palace with Chasm. Gaming with Maxx in the evenings.

"Can I have your gun?" I whisper, even knowing that she's not going to give it to me. Delphine looks briefly pained, but she shakes her head slightly. Then she takes a step back, and I know she'd fight me for it if she had to.

"Better hurry," is what she says, pointing in the direction of the back doors. I stare at her for several seconds, but I don't have the time needed to process

this. There's no standing around and asking for clarification—*Delphine, are you on Justin's side?* There's only time to run. "I'd use those doors if I were you."

I keep the shotgun thrown over my shoulder as I sprint past the bathrooms and shove my way outside, the shotgun's heavy barrel hitting me in the spine as I stumble to a stop and look around. It's pitch-black beyond the lit pathways of the garden and patio area. There's not much to see over here except for the sinks.

There's another note stuck to the faucet where Maxx washed his hands.

"Zwischenzug. Do you know what that is, Princess? It's an in-between move in chess where a player, rather than make an uninspired and expected move (like a recapture), takes a route that creates a prompt threat that their opponent must answer.

Happy zwischenzug."

I crumple the note up and shove it into my pocket. Where do I go from here? My mind puzzles through all the chess games that Justin and I have played together, all of the video games I've conquered.

"How stupid do you think I am?" he asked me. Meaning he knows something that we don't want him to know. I exhale, inhale, exhale. Slow, deep breaths to force my frantically pounding heart to quiet.

Veronica maybe? But Raúl and I dug up a body, so he can't know about that yet. What else then?

I move around the bank of sinks and walk through the last of the lighted areas into the darkness of the trees. It takes a minute, but I spot a small light glowing at the base of a tree. It's a flashlight, stuck in the dirt and pointed at the note, highlighting it like a painting in a gallery.

I snatch the off-white page, tearing the paper on the nail that was used to hold it up. I'm trying to stay calm, so that I can find the boys, but I'm panicked, too. My hands are shaking as I read the words printed in careful, flowing script. I doubt it's Justin's handwriting. It looks more like Mr. Volli's. I've seen it plenty in my writing edits. He uses a computer, yes, but he handwrites all his critiques with a stylus.

"Do you remember the initial signal jammer at the cabin with Kwang-seon, when you made soybean paste soup (yum!)? Maxx and Parrish paid you a surprise visit after they put out the fire at the Deveraux home. Did you think I didn't notice?"

Shit.

That note is shoved into my jacket pocket along with the last one, and I snatch up the flashlight that was left, shining it through the darkness. The trees look like bars in a jail cell, cutting off the light as I swing it slowly from left to right.

There.

Another note waits on a tree deeper into the woods, flashlight illuminating it from below. I jog through the debris, snapping twigs and moving like an elephant through the brush. Don't care. I know exactly who the monsters are out here tonight, that they're already watching me, that I'm already being hunted. As far as wild animals? They don't scare me at all.

Human monsters are more frightening than an animal could ever be.

This one reads: *"You've been lying to me, so doesn't it seem fair that I might lie to you?"*

A small sound escapes me, and the urge to run from here and call Tess takes over. She said she didn't care if she had to follow a legal route, that she would come anyway. But is it worth the risk? The boys are with Amin Volli right now in the middle of the dark forest.

None of them copped to having a gun, but I know that Maxx got ahold of one of his dads'. What if they've got a plan? They've always got a plan, those boys. Amin could be dead already, couldn't he?

I keep going, crushing pine cones and storming through moonlit clearings filled with wildflowers and ferns. Water trickles in a nearby creek, and the sound of an animal rustling in the brush accompanies me to the next note.

"Parrish is a bad boy. Chasm is a bad boy. Maxim is the worst boy.

What if you had to pick just one? Could you do it?"

"Jesus, Justin." I'm running now, stumbling through slivers of silver moonshine, obliterating the gloom with the single, golden beam of my flashlight. I trip and stumble, falling hard against the next tree, scraping my palm on the bark. The note rips cleanly as I tear it down.

"What if you had to pick one to die?"

Sprinting, falling, hitting the damp forest floor, up again, another note.

"I promised not to harm Parrish, but maybe I lied because you lied? Maybe it's self-defense? Maybe I don't give a shit if you pick between all three or you pick between Chasm and Maxx."

To my credit, I'm not crying. I'm not screaming. I'm still running. Note

number eight.

“You are not a choice. Do you understand? If you hurt yourself, I’ll kill them all.”

My breath is fogging in the dewy night as I find myself lost in the woods with only the glowing beacons of these hellish notes to guide me. But these next thoughts? These frantic, flickering fragments of prose, these are all mine. I dream them up even as I run.

The air is perfumed with the scent of wild violets, but underneath it all, there’s the natural aroma of decay and decomposition. These are the woods; the smell is welcome here. Moldering leaves and fallen nurse logs with parasitic saplings, mushrooms breaking down the bark of old trees. But somehow, even this innocuous and natural scent feels like a metaphor.

Sweet flowers. The stink of death.

If I was ever afraid of the Seattle Slayer, it was in that moment.

That was the most afraid I had ever been, up to and including my own possible death.

Because I was in love. And love makes fools out of us all. And love is a great strength. And love is a profound, tender weakness.

And love, it’s two sharp sides of a double-edged sword.

The jacket feels stifling as I run, and I frantically pop the buttons as I go, not caring when one of them bounces off into the creeping miasma of the forest. The stupid shotgun is bruising my back, but I don’t dare drop it. I’m still telling myself that I can salvage this situation, that I can come up with one of my crazy plans and make it through the night with all three of my boys at my side, just as we’ve always done.

Justin has threatened us so many times, but we’ve made it this far, haven’t we?

Next note: *“Pick a boy, shoot him, or they all die. This is a consequence of your combined actions. Oh, and when you get there—look up.” ;)*

Yes, there’s a winked face drawn onto the note. That’s a true fact, not something cheekily embellished in my mind or penned in some fantastical, future novel that I may or may not write. It’s pure truth, a rare thing in my world at the time.

“Fuck.”

More running, falling, bleeding from the knees, the palms, bruised in the shins, stabbed and scratched in the face with sticks.

Another note, impossible to miss, nailed to a tree like the others, but with a box of ammo for the revolver sitting beside the flashlight. I kneel down beside it, finding another piece of paper stuck to the box. It's a set of instructions on how to load the gun.

Maybe it's best if I don't?

Two sides of me war: load the gun in case I can fire on Mr. Volli or whoever else might be lurking in these woods or leave it empty so that I definitely cannot be forced to fire on the boys.

I rise to my feet without having made a decision, taking down the note and studying it with a nauseous roiling in my stomach. While the other notes were written in red ink, this one is not.

This note is not a joke; it's written in blood.

I stare down at the words scrawled there in Mr. Volli's elegant handwriting. I can only imagine the blood used belongs to Judge Rossi.

"It's game over, boys."

It's a poignant sentence, isn't it? Oh so apropos.

I drop it by my side, lifting my head up to stare through the trees in the direction of a large clearing. There's a gravel walkway with solar lights on either side, a lake just beyond it or maybe a pond, sparkling with moonlight and looking far too beautiful on a night such as this.

It takes me a moment to spot them, but I do. How could I not? The boys belong to me in a way that isn't simple possession or biology, but a joining of hearts, a tangle of precious, life-giving arteries and veins, a connection that transcends description through mere words.

But I try.

In my head, I try. Because I don't want to move from this spot. Because I'm afraid of what's coming next.

Were we always fated so poorly? Were we always on a crash course for a happily-never-after? I inhale sharply, shifting the shotgun on my shoulder, the revolver burning hot in the holster at my side. Our time together was vivid, bright, happy memories in brilliant color, accessible nostalgia that burns away the fog of despair. I could live in endless darkness and find reason to keep going because the boys gave it to me, through talk and touch and tenderness, through resilience and strength. If I could go back and erase it all to keep them safe, would I? Or would I crave those experiences so strongly that I'd falter in the final hour?

“Load the gun, Dakota. I’m sorry, but you have to.” It’s Delphine, standing just behind me in the shadows of the trees. I’m not even surprised, but I am disappointed. I want to cry. I wanted to like her. I wanted her to be my sister. I guess I’m greedy because I already have an amazing sister, but why not a few more? Maxine, Kimber, Amelia ... Delphine. *Please don’t do this.* “If you don’t load the gun, you’ll lose them all. You know that he’s watching.”

I look around, but there could be cameras anywhere. Drones. Another pair of spying eyes.

Doesn’t matter: I’ve decided that having a loaded gun only helps me. I was going to do it anyway. I follow the instructions, fumbling through the process a bit, and then I stand up and turn to my sister. She doesn’t look happy about this, but she is waiting there with a rifle in her hands. She never points it at me or threatens me with it, but its presence is noted.

“I’m disappointed in you.” The words are soft, but there’s a heat in them that I don’t think Delphine was expecting. She cringes, but doesn’t respond to me, staying where she is as I turn around and start forward, trying to perfect a calm, easy stride but failing miserably. It’s as if my limbs are infected with my emotions. I stumble on a root, crash through the leaves, and catch myself only when Maxx puts his hand on my elbow to steady me.

Our eyes meet.

He knows.

I don’t know how or when or why he didn’t say anything, but he knows why I’m here and what I’m supposed to do.

“You know,” I whisper, but he just blinks at me, as if he has no idea what I’m talking about. “Did you guys get it taken care of?” I ask loudly, referring to the now deceased judge. I don’t care about that at all, not anymore, but I’m stalling for time. I’m planning. I’m plotting.

“We took care of it,” X replies easily, rubbing his fingers on the elbow of my jacket and lingering there until he finally, reluctantly draws his hand away. “What’s up?”

What’s up? He knows and he’s asking me *what’s up*, as if nothing is wrong when everything is?

Behind him, Chasm and Parrish wait, but more like they’re giving me time to reconcile with X and not like they have any idea at all as to what’s going on.

“Pick a boy, shoot him, or they all die. This is a consequence of your

combined actions. Oh, and when you get there—look up.”

So I do. I look up, peering into the boughs of the pine tree that borders the lake. A flashlight flicks on and off, highlighting a masked face.

Mr. Volli is there with his rifle, waiting.

I have the revolver—the gun slung over my shoulder is a useless relic (I think)—and limited ammo. Hard to believe that I could shoot Amin from here. Not only am I a terrible shot, but I don’t think a revolver has much range. On top of all that, what if I find out the bullets are fake? Like what if they’re rubber bullets or something? What if the gun doesn’t work at all and this is a test placed before me by Justin?

The wind blows the long tails of my jacket, the air perfumed with violets and the vaguest hint of wet earth and blood. *Because the boys buried a body. Because somebody died tonight.* And Maxx could very well be blamed for it—if he even lives through the night.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

Has Justin finally cornered us into an impossible situation, a harsh reality where one of us dies or all of us die? I have no doubt he’ll carry that plan through.

I look to Parrish as he makes his way over to me. He seems annoyed, but it’s a farce, as it always is. There’s no way he buried a body in the woods and walked away without suffering some sort of emotional or spiritual or mental trauma (probably all three). But as for my gruesome task? He either has no idea what I’ve been sent here to do or else he has the wrong idea.

“You have to make a choice.” He waves his hand at me, as if this is yet another mental game put forth by Justin. Parrish knows that I have to choose a boy, but he has no idea what I’m supposed to do with the one I pick.

Chas climbs onto the old moss-covered wooden fence that serves as a barrier between the pathway and the lake. He crouches there, a long grass stem between his lips. He plays with it, as if it’s the cigarette he’s probably wishing with all his heart that it was. He smiles nervously as he casts a look in my direction. Pretty sure he believes this is a test, too, that I’m supposed to pick him because it’s what Justin wants.

Most definitely he doesn’t believe that one of us—or all of us—is supposed to die.

“It’s time, Naekkeo. Pick one of us,” Chas says, yawning and then looking pointedly at my hand. The moonlight catches the glint of the diamond ring, as

if the night knows exactly why we're here and what's going on.

Three lovers stand before me, all of them looking my way, none of them smiling.

Behind one of those brassy gazes, a man is screaming in silence.

Alpha asshole, ever-so-sure of himself, pillar of rigid morality ... the boy known as X is terrified.

The girl known as Dakota Banks is *furious*.

I never wanted to be a character in this fairy tale, but if I had, I wouldn't have chosen the role of the villain. No, my father chose that one for both me and himself; it's no small wonder that I plotted his murder. I wanted to be the hero. Some part of me still believes that I am.

"Kota, this doesn't even deserve a discussion: choose me." Silver starlight speckles the dark hair of a one, Maxim Wright, failed romancer, beautiful liar, the very definition of good guy gone bad. He tilts his head to the side, sliding his hands into the pockets of his red jacket. There's a resigned look in his eyes that terrifies me. Does he ... does he think I'd actually pick him? That's insane.

"You are not a choice. Do you understand? If you hurt yourself, I'll kill them all."

That was about as clear as a directive could possibly be.

X smirks at me then, so full of himself that I want to scream. *Is this what your plan was from the beginning? How long have you known about this? If I shout at them to run, will we be able to move quickly enough to avoid being shot?*

Maxx might be able to pretend that he's confident in himself, but he is. full. of. shit.

All of that growing anger builds to a boil inside of me, and I pull out the revolver.

I am *not* going to shoot one of my boys—even if one of them is still pretending to be in love with my sister. Even if Maxx were the absolute bastard he's pretending to be, I wouldn't do it. If we all go down fighting, so be it.

There must be something in the set of my face that gives away my intentions.

Like I said, terrible actress.

We lock eyes, me and Maxim.

The sweet smell of the flowers becomes strangely less pleasant as we stare at each other, the cloying nature of it reminding me—not surprisingly—of death.

I look back up at the boughs of the tree where Mr. Volli is hiding. How he even got up there is anyone's guess. Do I believe he'll snipe the boys if I don't do what I'm told? Yes, yes, I do.

"It's game over, boys."

No doubt that's what Justin truly believes, that this is the moment he breaks me for good. Nothing else has worked—not the infidelity or the lies or the beatings or the hit list. He's grasping at straws which, if we can get out of this alive, is a good thing.

He likely thought this choice would be the most difficult I've ever made, enough to completely sap what little optimism is left in my spirit. I won't allow that. I will *fight* like hell, and I'll deal with the consequences of that as they come.

"Listen to me," I whisper, stepping in close to Maxx, the revolver still clutched in my hand. I'm improvising as I go. I'll have the boys line up, as if I'm choosing one. Then I'll stand in front of them. There's no way Justin will forgive Amin for killing me, and that man is loyal as hell. "I know you know."

X just stares back at me—cold, hard, impossible.

"If you know why you're here, don't fuck around." Maxim does what he always does, surprising me by closing what little gap is left between us. He wraps my waist with a strong arm and then uses his opposite hand to snatch my wrist.

When he presses the gun barrel to his chest, I know *exactly* what he's doing.

Making the choice for me—this bastard!

He leans down toward me, his hot mouth against my ear. I use all of my strength to pull away from him, but his grip is impossibly strong. His determination is the only thing stronger.

"Don't you *dare* cry over this," he growls, his finger pressing down on top of mine.

I'm fighting as hard as I can, using my adrenaline rush in a desperate, final attempt to sway this bold, brave idiot from his course. But he's so strong. He is so goddamn freaking strong. Strong enough to lift up his motocross bike.

Strong enough to hold me during sex. Strong enough to let himself die to keep his friends and his girl—which is me and has always been me—safe.

“I love you; this will ruin me!” I scream, and something in that statement causes Maxx to falter for the briefest second. That’s the only reason I’m able to jerk enough that as he pulls the trigger, the angle of the revolver changes ever so slightly, pointed up at his shoulder instead of directly at his heart.

The gun goes off, hitting him in the arm and spattering my face with his blood.

The sound of my world shattering is absolutely deafening.



CHAPTER 21

I can quite literally taste X's blood on my mouth as he stumbles backward, his grip on me released in an instant. His green eyes are wide with shock as he falls to his knees, bleeding everywhere. I can hardly believe how much blood there is; it's nearly *spraying* from his arm.

"Maxx!" Chasm is screaming and running toward us. Parrish is running toward us. I'm frozen for a brief moment in time, the gun falling from my hands as someone else fires a weapon nearby.

I don't see who pulls the trigger, but something heavy—Mr. Volli, I believe—plummets from the tree, plunging into the lake with a violent splash. Someone is screaming (pretty sure that someone is me) and then I'm falling to the ground beside my soulmate, hands searching for the wound, trying to stop the geyser of blood. X is collapsing as I watch, falling unconscious in a matter of *seconds*.

There's a thud from behind me, and then Saffron is suddenly there, dropping to one knee and tearing a strip of fabric from the bottom of her t-shirt.

"He needs a tourniquet." She takes over as Chasm and Parrish drop down beside us, helping prop Maxx up enough that Saffron can get the fabric wrapped around his arm. She works diligently, features impassive, focused and sure. I have no idea where she came from—did she shoot Amin Volli?—but I don't care. I only care about Maxim Wright.

He's unconscious, limp, pale. He looks fucking *dead*.

Footsteps sound on the gravel pathway followed by shouts, and then there are people swarming around us. A half dozen, at least.

Tess, being one of them.

She grabs me, pulling me back and into her arms as I fight to stay with Maxx. Someone else gets to him first, kneeling down and checking his pulse.

"We need to be quick," the person is saying, and my mind flickers strangely through a million colors, like I'm short-circuiting or something. A gasp escapes me as I lunge toward Maxx, but somehow recently my mother has acquired superhuman strength.

"Dakota, shh," she whispers as Maxx is lifted up and put on an orange folding stretcher. Four people carry him rapidly in the direction of the parking lot as Chasm and Parrish follow. When I try to go with them, Tess lets me, but she keeps up as I jog alongside him, so beyond confused as to what's going on but not giving a single fuck about any of it.

I just ... shot Maxx. Maxx made me shoot Maxx. Why did he do that?! Is he insane?!

"*Michyosseo?*" Chas is whispering as Parrish, white-faced and teeth-gritted, keeps up with the parade. X is loaded into the back of a vehicle—an SUV, actually—and driven swiftly from the gravel parking lot where Delphine's car is still parked.

I'm left standing there with my boyfriend's blood dripping down my face.

"Seems like we need to have a conversation," Agent Takahashi is saying to Tess, and I just ... I fall to my knees in the gravel, Chasm and Parrish on either side of me. Saffron is there, too, but she's being escorted by two FBI agents, and she isn't putting up a fight. "Would you like to follow me to the station? Or do you want a ride?"

"It'll be okay. I love you fierce," Saffron calls out to me before they put her in the back of another unmarked vehicle. Tess watches her, but though I can see the same shock reflected in her face that I'm feeling, she says nothing to her daughter's kidnapper. She turns back to Agent Takahashi instead.

"You'll do no such thing," Tess is telling her, fury radiating from her quivering form. She's got blood on her now, too. Maxx's blood.

I shot Maxx. I might've killed Maxx. I ... why am I just sitting on the ground? I need to get to the damn hospital!

I shoot up so quickly from my crouch that I knock both Chasm and Parrish

onto their asses.

“We need to go. Now!” I’m shouting at Tess, maybe. Or I could be whispering. Maybe. I’m honestly so shaken up that I’m not entirely sure what’s going on.

Why is Saffron here? Why is Tess here? Why is Agent Takahashi here? Who are all these other people? And if they are here, why didn’t they intervene sooner? Like, you know, before the love of my life shot himself trying to save me and his friends!

“Let me take them to the hospital and then back home. You can interview them tomorrow.” It sounds a bit like Tess is telling the FBI agent what to do and not the other way around.

Itsumi Takahashi and Tess stare one another down, the agent’s long, raven hair blowing in the late summer breeze. The woman’s dark brown eyes shift to mine, taking in the blood on my face, my shaking hands, and what’s likely an expression of abject shock.

“Fine, but we need to take some photos first. We’re also going to need Dakota’s clothes.” She nods to some random woman that’s hovering nearby, and then pictures are being taken of me, of Chasm, of Parrish. Tess stands less than a foot away, her stare as intense and penetrating as a falcon. One wrong move from Agent Takahashi or anyone else and she’ll dive right in.

“Did ... did Maxx just shoot himself?” Chasm whispers as photos are snapped of Parrish’s dirty hands. Does the FBI know about Judge Rossi’s body? What about Mr. Volli? Is he dead in the lake? Was Saffron the one who shot him? I’m just assuming he was shot, but who knows what happened after he fell.

If the FBI is here ... does that mean all of this is over?

“Can we please go?” I’m sobbing now. I’m emotionally destroyed. I’m convinced that I will die without Maxim. My heart knows it; my soul fears it; my brain refuses to accept it. My mother—one of the two of them anyway—gives Takahashi a strong look of disapproval.

“Do you have to take her clothes now? She’s traumatized enough as it is.” Tess looks ready to go to bat for me, but I don’t want to do anything to compromise this investigation. If Justin isn’t taken down by the authorities, he’ll take *us* down.

I force myself to pull together some iota of calm, to stop crying so I can slip out of my jacket and hand it over. Another employee appears with a

large, plastic bag, allowing me to dump the item inside.

“Let’s just do it.” I almost sound like a human being when I say that, instead of a wailing banshee. But it’s not funny. It’s not funny at all because Maxx is ... his blood ...

I’m offered a stack of clothes—dark sweatshirt, sweatpants, and flip-flops—and ushered into the back of an SUV with dark windows so that I can change. By now, people are starting to gather at the edges of the parking lot, but I don’t acknowledge or care about any of them.

My clothes are whisked away as evidence, and I have to sign a form that essentially says I agree that I was indeed wearing all of these items when Maxx was shot. Only then do Takahashi and her boring new partner (I miss Agent Murphy) give us the go-ahead to leave. Tess speaks quietly with them before leading us in the direction of her car. She has to help me walk, that’s how badly I’m stumbling.

“Why did you get the gun out in the first place?” Parrish asks, entirely bewildered but not accusatory. He’s not angry with me, just confused. Mostly, he’s scared for Maxx. We’re all scared for Maxx.

I can’t answer; I don’t know how to answer.

If I hadn’t loaded the gun ... I’m an idiot. This is my fault. It’s all my fault.

Tess helps us into the car, putting me in the back seat with both boys, and then exiting the parking lot with a black SUV following along behind us. The compromised bodyguards? The FBI? I don’t know.

I roll the car window down and then chuck my iPhone onto the gravel of the parking lot.

“Agent Takahashi can have it,” I breathe, slumping back into the seat, staring at my hands. Staring at Maxx’s blood. Still tasting him. Tasting my soulmate on my lips. I’m done now. I’m done. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t play Justin’s games anymore.

Please, Maxx. Please, please, please. I need you. I love you. There’s so much we need to talk about.

“What happened, honey?” Tess asks softly, glancing back at us with a gentle expression on her worried face. Her hands are so tightly clenched on the wheel that they look skeletal in the shadows of the car.

“He was going to make me choose one of you,” I whisper softly to the remaining two boys. Somehow, my teeth are chattering, like even with Parrish and Chasm cuddling me, I can’t get warm. My chill is in the soul, not

the body. Still, Tess turns the heat up as Parrish puts his own jacket over my shoulders. His is marginally less bloody than Chasm's.

"Choose one ... meaning something other than romance?" Parrish clarifies, looking up at the rearview. I think he and Tess are communicating telepathically. A strange laugh bubbles up from inside of me, and I choke on it, coughing and hacking until Tess passes me a water bottle.

It's a white metal one that reads *Piss Me Off and I'll Kill You Off—In My Book*. I chug several mouthfuls and try not to think about why it tastes so ... metallic.

Maxx is in my mouth. And not like the blow job I never got to give him. But his *blood* is on my tongue. On my lips. In my hair.

A whimper comes out, but I manage to summon up a reply.

"To kill one of you. Maxx ... made the choice for me."

"Jesus Christ," Tess swears, shoving the fingers of her left hand through her hair. I want to ask her so many questions—why was she there? what was she doing? what's going to happen now?—but nothing seems to matter. All I care about is Maxx.

Nobody talks for the rest of the drive.

I throw open my door before we've even come to a stop outside the emergency room, stumbling in and asking about Maxx. Tess joins me a few seconds later and we're sent down the hall to a waiting room. Parrish fetches me a stack of warm, damp paper towels from the bathroom and helps me clean the blood from my face. Chasm takes over swiping as much as he can from my hair.

Time literally crawls past as we wait for news.

I'm convinced that I've killed Maxx. Utterly convinced. I sit there staring at the floor and imagining that hours have passed. Only, when I lift my head up to look at the clock, it's been minutes.

Parrish and Chasm sit on either side of me with Tess across from us, watching. Waiting. Patience incarnate.

"Mom, what the hell?" Parrish asks when the silence finally becomes unbearable. Her face softens and she scoots her chair forward so that her knees are basically touching mine. When she reaches out to take my hand, I let her.

"I convinced Agent Takahashi to take a small team to the lodge tonight after you snuck out." Tess levels a stare on both Parrish and Chasm that could

blister; it's as hot as the sun. "I'm not as naïve as you think I am. Do you believe I'm always tricked when your door is locked and your TV is on? I know you've gone to more parties than I care to count."

Parrish cringes and looks away, but only for a moment. Then he's back to facing off against Tess, like she's the one in the wrong.

"How?" I whisper as Chasm squeezes my thigh. I don't look at the dark stains on his jacket sleeve. I don't think about what life will be like if Maxx is really gone. How will I deal with that? How will I deal with knowing there were so many lies between us at the end? I wanted him to hold me and look me in the eyes with that stern but loving expression of his, the one that says *you're mine, and I'll give you everything. You're mine, but if you tell me to go, I will. If I stay, I'm keeping you. You're precious. You'll always have a home with me, Kota.*

I choke on the thought and Tess squeezes my hand a little harder.

"I lied," Tess admits freely. I look up to see her lips pressed into a grim line. "I told her that you'd called me, that if she went to the lodge, she'd find the proof she needed to start looking into Justin. I ... didn't know this was going to be it. I didn't know anything; I had a feeling. He ..." Here she laughs, but it's so broken and bitter that I know she's been struggling for a long time, too. We are not the only ones who are tired, who need a break, who just want to live normal lives. "He taunted me at the party, and I thought about all the things he'd said. I've been in a panic since you left, Dakota. I've been doing everything in my power to bring you back."

The door opens and we all pause, looking up to see Saffron in a leather jacket and boots, waltzing into the waiting room and making a beeline straight for me. Two agents wait outside, like maybe this is a courtesy they're extending to a mother with a blood-covered, traumatized child.

"Kota, my baby girl." She opens her arms, and I leap out of that chair, throwing myself into her embrace and squeezing her so tightly that I hope I'm not hurting her. It's a Banks style hug on overdrive. She strokes my sticky, matted hair with her fingers, murmuring soft things to me.

I can feel the boys watching. Mostly, I can feel Tess staring at us with a mixture of frustration and understanding. This must be a lot, seeing me hug my own kidnapper. Saffron lifts her head up, and I just know that she's looking Tess straight in the eyes.

"Only I can protect her—I've said it time and time again, but you don't

listen.”

“Do not fucking start with me, Saffron Banks,” Tess growls out, like a mother grizzly defending her cub. “I am not in the mood for your shit tonight. Do you understand that a boy I consider a son might die here in this hospital? I’m not arguing with you, and I don’t want you here, but I’ll let you stay. *Let*, being the operative word.”

Might die. Might die. Might die.

I burrow more deeply into Saffron, wishing Maxine were here. If I call her, she’ll come. But I’m so ashamed. Maybe if I’d left Maxx alone, we wouldn’t be here? If I hadn’t loaded that gun. If I hadn’t fallen in love with these boys and dragged them into this mess alongside me.

“Yes. And I *am* sorry. I should’ve shot Amin sooner, but I had trouble finding him in the trees. I knew I was only ever going to get one shot, and it was too late.” Saffron kisses me on the top of the head and rubs my back in soothing circles. “Mommy made a mistake, and she’s sorry, Kota. I’m so sorry.”

Tess makes a sound of pure frustration, but she says nothing.

Eventually, I release Saffron and step back, finding myself caught between two moms. I love them both. I do. I wish we could’ve started out by adding to my family instead of subtracting from it. Like, if Tess had come in and made friends with the Banks and nurtured a slow-build relationship from me straight out of the gate.

But I also understand why she couldn’t do that.

Saffron took her baby, hid her baby, kept her baby. For fourteen years, Tess didn’t know if I was dead or alive, if I was being exploited or beaten or molested or ... if I was dead.

And still, Saffron doesn’t seem all that sorry about it.

Tess was the one who agreed to a plea deal, agreed to let Saffron have a guilty, time-served verdict when she easily might’ve spent two decades in prison. How did I not see that she was trying, in her own way, from the very beginning?

I swallow a lump of emotion, trying to stay in the moment with my mothers and not focus on Maxx. As soon as there’s news of his condition, someone will come. They will. It’ll be okay. It *has* to be okay, or I will cease to exist. I would never willingly harm myself, but I might wither and die like a flower plucked from its stem. Petals are already falling around me, like the

sunflowers Chasm gifted to me so many eons ago, an event that took place in a distant universe.

Saffron is standing there with bloodred hair, gathered up into a high ponytail. She's dyed it since I last saw her, standing next to a stolen muscle car at a remote bike trail. Because she knew Justin was looking for a woman with brown hair? Probably.

Tess is standing now, too, staring back at her, and wearing a bloodied white cable-knit sweater and designer jeans, her red-soled flats a harsh contrast to Saffron's muddied boots.

Parrish glares at Saffron with open hostility while Chasm studies her with a reserved but contemplative expression, like he admires her tenacity and skill. They've never seen her in person, and I know that neither of them is inclined to like her. They're both on Tess' side, and I understand that. Nobody in this room has to like Saffron except for me.

"I have to leave and speak with the FBI, but the lead agent is a nice chick. She said she understood you might want your mom." Saffron puts an arm around my shoulder, unconcerned with the blood situation. She's covered in a fair amount of it herself, reminding me belatedly that *she* is the one who threw a tourniquet on Maxx's arm. It's possible that she saved his life. *Possible. If he lives. If, if, if.* "I told her that I wasn't gonna say shit while my daughter was suffering. Coulda been that, too."

Saffron just keeps on going with the unintentional digs at Tess. I know she doesn't mean it; she truly believes I was destined to be her child. This is just how she's always been, stubborn and strange, existing in a world that's not based entirely on reality. Works for hunting serial killers though.

"Not just *your* daughter," Parrish says, speaking up on Tess' behalf. "My mom's daughter, too." His eyes are a strange color right now, caught up in a galactic swirl of hazel stars and golden planets, of fiery comets and honeyed sunspots.

"It's okay, Parrish," Tess says, but she doesn't sound like she feels it's okay at all. "For now, she can say and do whatever she wants." Tess sits down, and I do the same, but I switch seats with Chasm, Saffron on my left. Can't have my moms too close together. "It's not going to last, after all." This last bit is whispered and likely not intended for us to hear. We do. Saffron pretends not to.

"Are you okay to be here?" I ask, a nervous energy prickling up my spine.

Panic, that's what it is. Pure panic. "If Justin finds out you're here, he *will* kill you. I think you're his unicorn murder, like he'd do anything to get his hands on you, Mom."

Tess flinches a little when I call Saffron that, but she doesn't argue because she's matured a lot in the last few months. Same as I have. Same as we all have—out of pure necessity.

"I know. I won't stay long." Saffron pulls me into another hug, letting me rest my head on her shoulder and rubbing my back. Somehow, I fall asleep. I would never have deemed it possible, but there must be something about Saffron's familiar scent, about the sheer exhaustion I've been feeling the last few months, about the rise and fall of adrenaline.

When I open my eyes, I panic.

The door to the waiting room has just opened and there's a doctor there, calling Tess over to speak with her. I'm immediately on my feet, dizziness sweeping over me. I stumble and it's Parrish that catches me, pulling me close and tucking me in against him. Chasm is at my side, Saffron just behind me.

The seconds that pass between Tess' wide-eyed facial expression and the revealing of Maxx's fate, those remain some of the most traumatizing ticks on the clock that I have ever experienced or will ever experience.

What do I do if he's dead? How do I function? Will I still have the energy to fight Justin, or will the death of Maxim Wright break me?

My brain flickers through memories, desperate to experience them before I hear the verdict, before I know that he's dead and gone and buried. Never coming back. Killed by my own hand.

Maxx's bright smile, his killer gaming instincts, the way he held me when we watched Dirty Dancing, the movement of his body above mine in the woods, sunshine dappling his handsome face as I chuck a handful of leaves into his hair, his laughter, his resolute determination.

I hug myself, squeeze my eyes shut tight, brace for impact.

"He's alive," Tess breathes, turning back to us as the doctor retreats from the room.

My knees actually collapse, and Parrish catches me, helping me into a chair so that I don't hurt myself. I think he's on the verge of tears, but they never fall. Instead, his eyes shimmer with unshed feelings. I know he loves Maxx; I know all three of these boys love each other as much as they love

me, just in a different way.

“Thank fuck.” Chasm puts both hands over his mouth, closing his eyes before he, too, falls boneless and limp into one of the chairs.

I can’t breathe; I can’t think; I need Maxx.

“He’s stable,” Tess continues cautiously. “But we won’t be able to see him until tomorrow morning, at least.”

“I’m not leaving the hospital,” I declare, standing up so quickly that my head spins again. I bet Justin is already aware of tonight’s catastrophe. What the hell is going to happen to me this time? He’ll kill me. Trust me: I am a dead woman walking. Before that happens, I have to see Maxx. “I’m sleeping here.”

“Hamilton and Tiffany are on the way; I’m not sure about Laurent.” *Ouch.* Tess checks her watch. It’s an old-fashioned sort of thing, not a smart watch. I imagine nothing about that is unintentional. “They’ll be here soon to take our place. For now, we should get some rest.”

“No, I won’t leave.” I’m being stubborn even though I know that I should shower, eat something, rest my battered heart and soul. I need to be in peak condition to see Maxx as soon as he wakes up. Because it could be one of the last times we ever see each other. *Justin is going to go ballistic. He’s going to kill us all. We are all fucking dead.* “Please let me see him before we go.”

“Dakota, it’s not an option,” Tess says as nicely as she can. “We’ll come back first thing in the morning; I promise.”

“Gamer Girl,” Parrish whispers at the same time that Chasm says, “Little Sister.” They exchange a look and then they each take one of my hands in theirs.

“Come home with us; we’ll take care of you.” Parrish finishes their shared thought, but this is a battle that I *have* to win. Just in case. Because ... because Justin ...

“I have to leave anyway,” Saffron says with a sigh. “I don’t like the idea of you being without my protection.” She gives a soft, jaded sort of laugh. “Hopefully that weirdo teacher is dead. That’ll solve one problem.” She turns to Tess then, meeting her rival’s eyes. It’s hard to imagine that they made friends in a women’s shelter once upon a time. “Please be careful with her. He’s going to be in a mood after all this.” Saffron swings her finger around in a circle, gives me another kiss on the cheek, and heads for the door where the two agents are still waiting for her.

To her credit, Tess closes her eyes, inhales deeply, and gathers her self-control into a tidy bundle. It can't be easy to spend time around your daughter's kidnapper, but she's handling it with grace. It might sound strange, but being kidnapped was the best thing that ever happened to me: I have not one but *two* amazing mothers, incredible grandparents, and plenty of wonderful siblings.

Just not Delphine.

I thrust her from my mind. I don't have the mental capacity to deal with my feelings toward her just now.

"Mom, please." I look Tess dead in the eyes, and she relents. Like I've seen her do with Parrish, with Kimber and Ben, with Amelia and Henry. *I belong here now.* I almost cry, but I can't. Maxx is alive, and that's a blessing I don't even feel like I deserve.

"Let me talk to the doctor." She gives us a collective look of confusion when we don't immediately move to follow. "You're not staying in here alone. Come on." Tess drags us with her in search of the doctor, briefly stepping aside to have a conversation we can see but can't hear. When she comes back over to us, she has a tentative smile on her face that must mean good news. "I can take one person into the room with me; the other two have to wait outside the door," she says apologetically, and my boys exchange another look before gently pushing me forward.

"Go see your asshole boyfriend," Parrish says with an exasperated sigh. "And tell him that I'm furious with him for trying to kill himself."

"Tell him that I love him," Chasm adds softly, and then Parrish is glaring daggers his way. "What? You can say it, too, if you want. Don't be embarrassed: he almost died tonight."

"Fine. Tell him ditto." Parrish crosses his arms and turns away with a stubborn moue. I lift up on my tiptoes, giving him a kiss on the cheek, and then gifting one to Chasm. I don't allow my mind to consider the time I told Maxx 'ditto' in response to 'I'm falling in love with you'. Yikes.

We follow a nurse through a set of double doors and down a long, sterile hallway, pausing outside a room with a wall of windows to look through. As soon as I set my eyes on Maxx, sleeping peacefully in a hospital bed, the floodgates open.

Tears are streaming down my face, but I'm unashamed. When you love someone with your whole heart, emotions like this aren't shameful. Love,

caring, tenderness, concern. Those are priceless feelings.

The door opens and the nurse allows us to step inside.

My second time in as many months seeing Maxim Wright in a hospital bed for being the hero.

His eyes are closed when we first enter the room, but they open at the sound of our footsteps on the squeaky-clean hospital floors.

Oh.

His face. Those eyes. Parted lips.

I clamp both hands over my mouth.

“Kota.” The sound of my name on his tongue, it undoes me. It breaks me in places that needed breaking, cracking hard, ugly shells around my heart, snapping my anger in half, shattering the lingering sense of hopelessness I’ve been nursing.

“Maxx ...” That’s me, sounding like I’m praying, quivering in place and wondering if I should go to him. Am I allowed to touch him? Does he want me to touch him? I did shoot him, after all. Kind of. I guess if you’re technical about it, we shot him.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me.” Tess gracefully takes her exit, closing the door softly behind her. And bless her for that. Fucking bless her for considering how I might feel. She truly deserves the title of ‘mom’. My emotions multiply exponentially, turning my body into a thrumming wire.

I stand there for a moment breathing hard, one hand resting on my chest to take stock of my overactive heart. It’s beating so ridiculously fast that I’m wondering if the room isn’t spinning around me. One step forward. Two. Three.

Maxx doesn’t look sick, more like he’s sleepy and I just interrupted a casual, afternoon nap.

“Kota,” he repeats, but then it’s like his memory comes rushing back all at once. Maxx’s eyes widen considerably, and he grasps at his shoulder as he sits up straight in bed. He winces hard and his attention shifts, from me to the wound he’s just accidentally punched.

I can’t take it anymore.

I close the distance between us, bracketing his gorgeous face between my hands so that I can look at him, really look at him. Thinking he might be dead for even three seconds was too much to bear. My broken heart is rapidly healing while I stand here, but it hurts so bad, and I love him, and I’m angry

with him, too.

He looks at me, but he says nothing with his words. It's all in his emerald gaze, sparkling like gems in a warm, flushed face. So much better than the pale ghostlike pallor he was sporting before. Gently, softly, reverently, Maxim lifts his own hands up and presses them over mine.

"I love you, Maxx," I tell him again, wondering if that phrase changed the trajectory of the entire night. I startled him when I screamed it, and only then was I able to shift the gun. "I love you so much that it's hard to remember that I'm angry with you, too. I'm *sure* you're angry with me. I almost killed you." The words are garbled, choked, but at least I'm able to get them out.

"I love you, too, Kota." He takes my arms and tries to haul me up in the bed with him, but he doesn't have the strength. I humor him, crawling up to straddle his large body.

"You're hurt, X. You can't do things like that until you recover." If I sound annoyed, it's because I am. It's also because I'm struggling to control the overwhelming sense of passion that I feel toward him. He's alive when he might not have been.

"The doctor told me if I wasn't such a strong, healthy, young man then I'd be dead." He works his jaw, like he's frustrated by his current state of temporary weakness. I don't let the phrase *strong, healthy, young man* make me fidget. It's triggering my basic instincts for whatever reason. "I can at least pick you up."

"You're saying you're only alive because you're a jock?" I ask, and he gives me a look. On the surface, it's casual and cocky, but underneath it all, Maxx is not okay.

"Athlete, not jock." He hesitates, like he isn't sure if I'll be okay with him joking around. I narrow my eyes to see what his reaction might be.

"How long have you been awake?" I demand, and he swallows hard. Yep, definitely nervous. It's a rare trait for Maxx, and he doesn't seem to know how to process it.

"Five minutes?" He says it like it's a question, like he's asking me. "Right before you came in here, I woke up and spoke to the doctor and then I fell asleep again." He seems shamed, like how dare he fall asleep after nearly bleeding to death. "The bullet went straight through, but there was a nick in my brachial artery. I was a minute away from being dead, I guess."

"Saffron saved you." That seems to surprise him, and he looks away from

me toward the wall. That shame in his expression intensifies, and I decide there's more to this story than first appears. "Did you know she was going to be there?"

"No, but I should've guessed she'd show up." It's a statement that he doesn't seem to know how to process. Huh. More secrets? "Anyway, I won't be in here for long. A day or two at most." Slowly, almost like he's afraid, Maxx turns his face back to mine.

We stare at each other's mouths before locking gazes.

"I thought you were going to die tonight," I breathe, choking on tears again. I stroke the side of his face and he lets me. No snarky comments, no mentions of Maxine, no worrying about Justin. I touch him, and it feels right, like this is how it's supposed to be. How dare he break up with me? Even for pretend. It goes against the laws of the universe, us not being together.

"Laws of the universe?" he asks, and I realize I've accidentally said that weird, simping stalker shit out loud.

"Damn it," I whisper, wrapping my arms around myself. My eyes water again, but that has nothing to do with my big mouth and everything to do with Maxx being alive.

"I thought I was going to die, too," he admits, and I whip a sharp look back at him. I don't acknowledge the heat of him underneath me or how much I want to kiss him, how I wish I could stay in this bed with him all night. He's alive, but he's also in trouble.

"Were you *trying* to die tonight? Because the more times I replay that scene in my head, the more certain I become." My voice is flat, and it makes him cringe again—worse than when he hit his own gunshot wound. I'm not trying to be mean, but ... I want to understand. I need to.

Maxx gives me an admonishing alpha-hole look, a righteous frown resting on his pretty lips.

"You equate *trying* to die with *wanting* to die, Kota; they're not necessarily the same concept."

My turn to frown right back at him.

"So, if you *were* trying to die—self-sacrifice was off-limits, remember?—then you were doing it for Maxine, I presume?" I'm challenging him, curious to see if things have changed. It certainly feels like *everything* has changed. For me it has.

I will *never* allow myself to be tricked by Justin like that again. I'm

ashamed of myself that it got as far as it did, that I let a monster into my head for even a minute. *Parrish is a better person than me. He went through all of this while kidnapped, while he was tortured daily, while he was alone. He survived it and he never doubted. My love/hate stepbrother boyfriend is a better person than me. OMG.*

I adjust myself and end up wiggling on Maxx's private area.

He goes still. I go still. It's not appropriate to be sexual here, but it was an accident.

Maxx just looks at me, and that's when his hands start to tremble. He digs his fingers *hard* into the mattress on either side of him. And then he stares at the door across the room and not at me. A bead of sweat gathers on his temple. The moment is *that* tense.

"Dakota ..." He trails off and closes his eyes, reaching up to rub his forehead with the base of his hand. His right eye cracks open to look at me. "I did it for you."

Several moments of silence follow. Literally. Maxx keeps his hand to his forehead the entire time, just the one eye cracked, like he's frozen. I'm pretty sure that I forget to breathe.

I knew it, but it's nice to hear it being said aloud.

"You and Maxine ... did you ever have sex?" It's the only question I can think to ask. Is it an inappropriate question in the scope of the moment? Maxx might've died. Maxx was *willing* to die for me, for his friends. That's a lot to process. But I still need an answer because I want to know that he's giving the pure and honest truth to me tonight.

"No." He finally drops his hand to his lap. Both green eyes are open now, shadowed to a dusky color in the half-light. Only one lamp is on in the room, and it's barely enough to kill the shadows in the corners. "But if I'd had to, in order to save you, I would have." His mouth purses into a ragged line, and a haunted cloud covers his gaze. "Shit, this is awkward."

"Only for you," I retort, but that isn't true. I'm hoping that not only will the statement make me seem cool to Maxx, but that maybe I'll start believing it myself. *This is so fucking awkward.* He seems to take that as an invitation to stare at me. And then he smiles and it's breathtaking. Heartbreaking, too, if I'm being honest.

"I don't expect you to forgive me."

"Of course not: you expected to be dead." My words are a breathy rush.

The urge to throw my arms around his neck is strong. I swipe my hands down the front of my ugly sweatshirt, knowing I'm not going to last. Maxx Wright deprivation sucks ass.

He turns away from me again, and I realize the determination on his face is the same as I wore on my own when I poked and prodded Maxine to punish me for stealing her boyfriend. I felt I'd done wrong, and I *wanted* her to make me hurt for it.

This jerk is sitting here hoping for the same.

"You've seen me at my worst," he whispers, a tense admission that causes me to bite my lip. I want to hear what else he's going to say before I forgive him. Because I'm going to—obviously. This person was willing to die to protect the people he loves. Was willing to lie. Was willing to be the bad guy.

With Maxine's help. These two are in huge trouble. Freaking hero types.

"I don't *want* you to forgive me," he continues in apparent self-flagellation. "Pick Parrish. Or Chasm. Yeah, if I were you, I'd pick Chas—"

I cut Maxx off by putting my arms gently around his neck, careful to keep them away from his shoulder. He's so startled that he just stops talking, and that's when I take his mouth. I take it as fiercely as he's taken mine, like I own him, like he better shut up because he's just wasting his breath.

It only takes three-point-two seconds for his hand to wrap in my bloody hair, for his tongue to take over. He even half-rolls me, in the direction opposite his IV. A harsh exhale of breath escapes him—a pained sound.

My turn to reach up and snatch him by the hair, pulling back so there's a bit of space between us.

"I'm not picking; you three are either going to have to leave or else you can duel one another with swords." I release his hair just as the hospital door opens and there's Tess, giving me a look with narrowed eyes and pursed lips.

"I recognize that the threat of tragedy is a powerful aphrodisiac, but I cannot in good conscience allow you to take this any further. Maxim Wright, if you keep facing death in the name of protecting my family, I'm not going to forgive you. Do you understand me?" Tess' voice catches a little on the last question before she softens her expression slightly. "We'll be back in the morning, but for now, you most definitely need some sleep."

She steps back, but leaves the door cracked. This is our chance to say goodbye in private. Only, we haven't resolved anything, and I don't want to leave him.

“I’ll be okay tonight. But will you?” X looks around like Justin might be lurking in the walls. There’s no camera that I can see in this room, but it doesn’t mean the Slayer isn’t watching. “Everything will be different from today on out.”

“More dangerous you mean,” I whisper, because whether I want to say it or not, that doesn’t make it any less true.

Justin is going to lose his fucking *shit*.

I look back to Maxx, face serious, words adapted from Parrish. Nobody is better at describing their feelings in simple, easily understandable, and completely bald-faced ways.

“If he does kill me”—X grits his teeth at my statement—“then I don’t want to regret anything. You’re mine, Maxim Wright.” I kiss him again and he exhales softly against my lips.

“More accurately: you’ve always been mine, Dakota Banks.” He adjusts himself so that he’s sitting back against the pillows, watching me as I climb off the edge of the bed. We stay like that until Tess comes to get me, just staring at one another.

I need to make sure that each time I leave the people I love, I’m clear about how much I love them.

“Time’s up. I’m sorry.” Tess actually does sound sorry this time, pausing as Parrish pushes his way in and points at Maxx with a tattooed finger.

“I don’t know what Dakota remembered to tell you—she’s clearly dick drunk again—but you’re in trouble.”

“Parrish Vanguard,” Tess hisses, grabbing his arm and yanking him back into the hallway. Only Chasm is here now. I walk slowly over to stand beside him, and he takes my hand.

“There are FBI agents in the hospital, but that doesn’t mean you’re safe,” Chasm says softly, and Maxx nods, looking for all the world like he’s not afraid of anything. But that’s not true because I saw it in his eyes: he doesn’t want to die, not at all. This beautiful boy wants to live. “I’ll make Tess wait until your dad and Tiff get here before we leave.”

“Laurent?” Maxx asks hopefully, but the look Chasm gives him ... they’re both shutting down about something. “Alright. I love you guys.”

“Love you, too, bro.” Chas pulls me into the hallway and gives Tess a look. She was clearly in the middle of chastising her son, which is almost funny. Almost. Nothing is really funny right now. “We need to stay until his

family gets here.”

Tess agrees and we steal the chairs in the hallway outside Maxx’s room. It’s not long before Hamilton and Tiff are walking briskly past us, pausing only briefly to talk to Tess.

“Thank you for being here with him,” Tiff tells me as she slips by, and my cheeks flush.

If anything, it’s my fault that he’s in here, but I don’t have the energy to explain that now.

On our way out of the hospital, Parrish decides to drop one last bomb.

“Uh, Mom.” He clears his throat and lifts his chin proudly. “Before we go, there’s something I want you to tell the FBI agents about.”

Chasm doesn’t argue, and I know then that he agrees: we were all wrong and Parrish was right. We should’ve told Tess everything at the kitchen table on Monday morning, and maybe none of this would’ve happened.

Guess I’m not *always* right. Just mostly.

“Oh god.” Tess waits in tense anticipation, breathing hard as she stares at the three of us.

“Judge Rossi—Antonio’s dad—he’s dead, and we buried him in the woods tonight.” Parrish looks at his mother unflinchingly, delivering this news as easily as he might tell her about a bad grade in school. “Maxx punched him, but it was Amin Volli who ended his life. Don’t let anyone believe otherwise.”

Tess stares at us for a few seconds but then she lets out a small sigh of relief, and I realize that’s how fucked our world has become. Someone is dead, and her children were involved, but at least that someone wasn’t a person she cared about. Low bar for relief, eh?

“I never liked him anyway,” Tess admits, reaching out a hand to stroke Parrish’s cheek. “But I’m sorry you had to experience something so horrible.”

“As long as Maxx is okay, we’ll get through it,” Chasm assures her, and he’s right. Not all horrors are created equally.

We exit the hospital together, but not before running into Agent Takahashi in the parking lot.

“See you bright and early?” she asks, but Tess isn’t intimidated by her or anyone else.

“After we’ve visited with Maxim, sure.” Tess continues on past her

without waiting for an answer and we follow. Itsumi's eyes track me as I go, but I'm not worried about her. At this point, I feel like she might be my only chance to escape this situation with my life intact.

When I talk to her, I'm going to tell her every single fucking thing I know.



CHAPTER 22

The boys gather some clothes from Parrish's room and then escort me upstairs. I shuffle to my bedroom doorway and look down the hall at the darkened lights in the Banks' respective bedrooms. They have no idea what went on tonight. That I might've died. That *Maxx* might've died. Parrish, Chasm.

That we could all still die.

Just because Amin Volli was shot doesn't mean there isn't another head on the Seattle Slayer hydra that might come out to bite us. Raúl, being my main concern. I tiptoe over to both Banks doors and peep inside, just to make sure all is well.

Chasm stays beside me, like he doesn't want me alone for a single second.

There are police all over the yard outside, combing through the bushes and the trees, searching the garden. It feels relatively safe at the moment since I find it hard to believe that Justin owns dozens of police officers and federal agents combined. He can't possibly be *that* omniscient, can he?

Are they looking for Justin? His cronies? Evidence against Paul?

We head back to the bedroom to see that Parrish has already started the shower and is now laying out pajamas on the bed for me. Also, he's shirtless, tattooed and scarred body on full display. He notices when I get caught in the doorway, mouth agape.

"What? You're not the only one covered in blood." He turns to me, licking

his lower lip, and then flicks the button of his pants open with a single thumb.

“Gross.” Chasm looks his friend over with a sigh and then turns to me with an expression of apology on his face. “Sorry about him. No manners.” And then he reaches down and gives his own pants the same treatment. It’s all meant to be a joke, both of them trying to cheer me up.

But I don’t need cheering up: Maxx is alive.

What I do need is yet another plan for Justin.

I pretend not to notice how attractive they both are. My body doesn’t particularly care that a tragedy was narrowly avoided tonight. She’s more interested in figuring out how to soothe our worries with sex.

“You guys—” I start, but Parrish cuts me off, stalking over to stand in front of me. He puts his hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eyes.

“Did you two make up? Please tell me you finally snapped him out of his bullshit.”

Chasm steps a bit closer, slipping out of his jacket and shirt. There’s a strange sense of anticipation in the air. I can’t decide if they *want* me to have broken up with Maxx ... or if they’re hoping we’re officially back together.

I raise my chin.

“Nothing is settled,” I claim, but that’s not true, and they both know it.

“Damn it,” Parrish grumbles, and Chas scoffs. Well, he scoffs but he *looks* immensely relieved.

“I wouldn’t want to win by default,” Chas says, looking me directly in the eyes. “I want to be the one you love the most.”

“I would’ve been happy to be rid of him,” Parrish remarks, waving his hand around absently. What a liar. He’s so full of it. For whatever reason, he’s happy that Maxx and I are going to make up. Probably he feels the same way as Chasm but is too prideful to admit it.

“We should shower before Tess finds us all naked together,” I say with more flirtatious confidence than I feel. I’m jittery and nervous, and I have no idea what’s going to happen from today on. My life could either get much better or it could get much, much worse.

As of now, Tess is talking with some of the agents outside and then she’ll be up to see us.

I’m scared, won’t lie.

We take a platonic shower together, and I dress in the comfy pj’s Parrish picked out for me: black joggers and a bright green tank that says *G.O.A.T.*

GAMER on it to match my hair. He and Chas wear loose t-shirts and sweatpants. Nobody here is trying to look fancy tonight. We're all exhausted.

We manage to find the energy (barely) to do the bug detector routine, check under the bed and in the armoire, and confirm that the signal jammer is indeed on and working. What more can we do?

"Now what?" Chas asks as he sits down on the edge of my bed, looking at the floor like he's trying to puzzle out the answer to that question all by himself. The curse of being smart—it's hard to ask for help or admit that you might need it.

Tess appears in the open door with ... Saffron following behind her?

"Mom," I blurt in surprise, and both women turn to me as called. "I, uh, Saffron ... weren't you supposed to be in an interview with the FBI?"

"I was. But then they told me Volli was missing, and I knew I had to get over here." She shrugs her shoulders, but I'm panicking on the inside. He's *missing*?! What the fuck does that mean? Guess I know why the police are combing through the yard. "They can't force me to do an interview; I'm not under arrest." She smiles at me then, a very cheeky sort of smile. "I slipped out under the radar anyway."

"How did you get in the house?" I wonder, imagining the FBI combing the bushes for her, too. Is she *really* not under arrest for shooting someone? I guess Mr. Volli is MIA, so nobody knows what exactly happened. She could be telling the truth about not being a suspect. Could also be that she ran away. Running away has always been one of Saffron's strong suits. Sticking around Medina to help me out is the most dedicated and consistent I've seen her my entire life.

"I rang the buzzer thing at the gate and walked in?" Saffron replies, like she doesn't understand the question. "They're not looking for me, cutie. I don't think they really believe that I set up an LRSR and shot Amin. *Boom*." She makes a gun with her right hand and pretends to pull the trigger. "They can't find his body, but they did find prints in the mud. Bad news for us."

"What's an LRSR?" I ask, and Saffron grins.

"Long-range sniper rifle." OG Mom looks pretty cool, standing there with her bloodred hair and talking about sniping serial killers in the trees at an exclusive hunting lodge. Without both her and Tess' interventions, this night might've ended very differently.

Saffron moves into the bedroom, checking the ensuite bathroom with a

whistle before bending down in front of the fireplace and adding wood to it. Tess watches her warily, holding the signal jammer to her chest as she comes in and perches on the edge of my desk.

“Now what?” I repeat Chasm’s question for my moms as the room falls silent, the tension heavy and morose.

“Now we wait for the authorities to do their jobs,” Tess declares, as if that’s the end of it. Saffron snorts in disbelief and shakes her head, swiping a match with the sharp stink of ozone, and lighting a fire starter at the bottom of the log pile. She stands up and turns around to look at me, acting as if Tess doesn’t exist. Ouch.

“Nothing changes. Well, besides the fact that the entire situation puts you and your sister in even greater danger.” Saffron sighs heavily and starts to pace, Tess watching her with narrowed eyes and a burning distrust that I understand but don’t share.

These women are never going to be friends—not even an apocalypse could bring them together.

“What do you mean nothing changes?” Tess asks, her voice laced with distaste. Parrish and I exchange a look. Chasm is fascinated with the exchange and doesn’t even glance our way. Now that I’m looking at him, I think he might be open to getting to know Saffron. *At least I can have one husband who likes his MIL.* Err. That was a weird thought. It was weird, right? So why does it feel so natural? “It’s over for Justin tonight.”

“How so?” Saffron asks, pausing with her back to the fireplace. She blinks big, brown eyes at her ... coparent? Frankly, I have no idea how to explain their roles in my life to the average layperson. *Well, you see, one of them is technically my kidnapper, but she’s trying to kill my biological father which makes me feel truly loved. The other one is a stranger that I met four months ago and pretty much hated the entire time but think I could grow close to if given the chance.*

Mom seems a suitable word for both women.

“Justin has a solid alibi; he wasn’t at the lodge.” Saffron cocks her head, like maybe she thinks that Tess is the crazier one between the two of them. “He has no connection to what happened. For all the authorities know, your husband is the one who told you about tonight, who told you all the things you know, and you’re just trying to frame an innocent ex-husband that you don’t like.”

Tess just stares at her, but the way her lips purse ... I know she's already thought through that harsh reality. She knows as well as I do that Justin isn't going to catch heat for tonight's events—not at all. In her heart of hearts, Tess must be an eternal optimist and dreamer the way that I am. She *wishes* the FBI would arrest Justin and make life safe and normal again.

It isn't happening that way.

Justin will not go underwater without dragging others along with him.

"It's going to get bloody," I whisper as an idea occurs to me. I make sure to mull it over in silence for a minute to assess its validity. *Uh, this could work, right? It has to. We need a win here.*

"I'm going to have to kill him—it's been the plan all along." Saffron adds this last bit almost as an afterthought for Tess. "I'm willing to put that man in the grave to protect my daughter."

"Oh, shit." Parrish gets off the bed to grab Tess' arm, but my bio mom doesn't move. She just sits there and hooks a sardonic smile. But Parrish knows her better than I do. Whatever he sees in her expression is making him worry that she might verbally attack Saffron. Or ... physically? Nah.

Maybe ...

"You didn't think that I'd kill him, too, if I had the chance? *Have* the chance, as it may be. If I *ever* find myself in a place to murder that man, I'll do it. But how easy do you think that is? I've already tried."

Chasm is finally looking at me, studying my face like he can read my idea before I even say it.

"We need to get online." I glance back at the desk where my laptop should be (it's still in a drawer downstairs), wondering how much I might be able to say on livestream before Justin shuts me down. He could stop me at every turn online, couldn't he? But I only need, like, ten freaking seconds. "I'd say we should make a new social media account to broadcast from—something that isn't already on Justin's radar—but we won't get enough views. *We need* access to my channel."

I turn fully to face Chasm, his brow already pinched, mind fixed on the problem. If anyone can buy me the time I need to stream, it'll be him.

"It's *possible* that I could get you into your account and keep you live for a few minutes." He doesn't sound entirely convinced, but he also downplays his abilities a lot. I bet he could do it.

"Your channel?" Saffron asks, because she knows even less about the

internet than my grandparents. She does not a great Millennial stereotype make. Like, Tess and Justin can be funny in that way, but I'm not sure that Saffron subscribes to many generational quirks. She is and has always been her own person.

"You want to tell the world about Justin?" Tess clarifies, thinking it over. It's not a bad idea, right? At this point, Justin is going to be so unbelievably pissed that we may as well write our own epitaphs.

"We have to get the word out. He can shut me down online; he can shut us all down. He can't stop the entire world from talking about him." I tell myself that's God's honest truth. Justin isn't as powerful as, say, an established government, is he? He can't actually prevent whole countries from seeing content online that he doesn't want them to see.

Right?

"Did you guys hear that?" Chasm asks, and we all turn toward the door in time to see Maxine shuffle into view. Saffron is already smiling and nodding, like she knew her daughter was coming before anyone else did.

"Baby sister?" Maxie asks groggily, rubbing her eyes. When she looks away from me and toward the fireplace, it takes her several seconds to realize who it is that she's staring at. "Mom?" Maxine's eyes go wide, and then she's sprinting into the room and throwing her arms around Saffron.

Tess watches them hug before glancing over at me; I pretend not to notice. Maxine and her bio mom. Me and my bio mom. I don't know. The feelings are as weird and foreign as they ever were.

"What are you doing here?" Maxie breathes, pulling back and looking Saffron over. "How ... how did you get in here?" My sister looks back at me and then over at Tess. Immediately, she recognizes that something is wrong. "Oh my God, where's XY?"

Hearing her call for him like that ... I think she really did love him once upon a time.

"He's okay," I tell her right away, forcing a sad smile. I point at myself. "And I know everything. You double Maxes are in deep shit." *Well, not everything, but enough of it.*

"Everything?" Maxine questions warily, her gaze shifting to Saffron. "All of it?"

Saffron's mind is in an entirely different galaxy. Not unusual for her. You get used to it after a while. I sometimes wonder if she just partially exists on a

different plane. Like, maybe she sees things that we can't even fathom? She's smiling at my sister, ruffling her hair affectionately.

"Always a pleasure to see you, my eldest." Saffron gives Maxine a kiss on the forehead as my sister's brow scrunches up in confusion.

"Your parents are here, you know," Maxine adds, almost as an afterthought, but Saffron ignores her. "What the hell happened tonight and why doesn't anyone ever wake me up?"

"Long story," Parrish drawls with a sigh, giving me a look. "You want to fill her in?"

"I'd appreciate it if someone would do the same for us. I'd love to know what Maxx's gameplan was." Chas' words are a muttered sigh as he gives his pretty hair an anxious tug. I put a comforting hand on his knee before hopping off the bed.

"Or, you know, you could tell the adults in the room so we can act accordingly." Ah, what a very Tess thing to say. But she deserves a bit of grace, doesn't she? Her kid's kidnapper is here, slingin' barbs, and she hasn't retaliated. I'm proud of her.

I pause beside Maxine, unsurprised when Saffron pulls us into a double hug.

"Nothing's changed, Maxie. I've got this." That's what Saffron tells her. It's a statement that makes me question what Maxine might've meant by 'all of it'.

"There's no doubt that we're all due to have a long conversation, but there's something we need to do first," I explain, giving my sister's hand a squeeze. She looks back at me with perfect love, and I know that despite any secrets she might have, it's going to be okay between us. It was always going to be okay between us. "Let me get my laptop—we're ratting Justin out to the world."

"Whatever you need, Kota." Maxine nods and escorts me downstairs, Saffron watching our backs. She's comforting now in a way I'm not sure she ever was while we were growing up. I had no idea she knew how to use a sniper rifle either, so ... learning new things about my loved ones every damn day. My grandma used to call her a 'wannabe flower child'. The knowledge of advanced weaponry must be new.

I retrieve my computer from its drawer hiding place and return to the bedroom, handing it over to Chasm while Tess eyes the signal jammer on the

desk.

“I’m not sure that I like this idea,” she admits, looking up and over at me. “Maybe it’s better that we wait this out.”

“Why is that?” I ask, knowing that I’m going to make the video anyway (unless Tess physically holds me down or something). If we don’t spread the word now, and Justin really does have more control over the FBI than we hope, what then? He can do whatever the hell he wants, and we might only be able to stop him *after* he wipes the floor with the people I love.

“At this point, he knows that Saffron and I intervened tonight; the blame doesn’t necessarily fall on you.” Tess stands up from the desk as Maxine and Saffron fill the doorway behind me. “If you make this video, then he’ll be after *you* specifically.”

Damn. Tess really does understand exactly how Justin’s mind works. But in this, I won’t let fear control me.

“He’s not going to accept that I had nothing to do with tonight’s failure. If he gets ahold of me, he’ll punish me.”

In my mind, I’ve convinced myself that this is it, our final hurrah. Tonight, it’s not *game over, boys*, it’s *game over, Justin Prior*.

It’s game over, Seattle Slayer.

Apparently, I share Tess’ wishful optimism.

“I’m in full agreement—*this time*,” Parrish tosses out with a lofty air. “Put the bastard on display and see what happens. He came after us tonight in a big way. What more can he do?”

It seems like an open-ended question that I don’t want answered.

“Dakota, this isn’t your decision to make,” Tess says, and she at least tries to break that news as gently as she can. “I’m the adult here, and I’ll decide what happens next.”

“You go ahead and make your video, Kota. Won’t change things.” Saffron winks at me as Maxine purses her lips, gaze shifting to Tess. I can see it, the way my bio mom’s anger rises to the surface like a tidal wave. I’m surprised at the level of self-control that she exerts over such an extreme force.

“Saffron, this is *not* your decision to make,” Tess asserts, facing down her rival with fire dancing in her eyes. I can see it in my head now, an epic old-school *Mortal Kombat* style battle. *Famous Authoress vs Wily Kidnapper, Round One, Fight!* Hopefully, there’s no *fatality* at the end of their match.

“Hard to believe they were friends for even five seconds,” Parrish stage-

whispers to me, obviously intending for his mom to hear. “Seems like a bit of an embellishment to me.”

“We *were* friends until she stole my baby,” Tess says matter-of-factly, looking said stolen baby in the eyes. “I’m not saying a video is a bad idea; it’s too dangerous for *you* to be the one making it.”

“Not to be rude, Mom, but we’ve been battling Justin for months—alone. I’m not saying that it’s your fault, but if you’d given me the benefit of the doubt, it’s possible you could’ve caught on sooner. Let me do this. I *need* to do this. I should’ve done this a long, long time ago.”

Tess looks like she might protest, but then Chasm speaks up, and I can tell he’s been mulling the idea over this entire time.

“If we put Justin out there, then at least people will be looking at him. It’ll make it harder for him to move, harder for him to hurt people. I say we do it.” Chas sits back against the headboard, arms crossed, and stares at the covers before looking up to Tess. “And it has to be Dakota. You’re married to Paul. Dakota might be his stepdaughter, but if she’s accusing her own dad? I’d give her story more credence than yours.” He cringes a little, like he isn’t used to talking to Tess so frankly. “*Joesonghamnida.*”

“Like I said, it won’t change things either way,” Saffron reiterates, shrugging her shoulders.

Tess blatantly ignores her this time.

“I agree that getting the truth out there might slow him down, yes. It’ll put more eyes on him which isn’t a bad thing, but I can’t let you kids take any more risks.” Her eyes water, but she dashes the drops away. It hits me then that while she might be an adult, she’s only one person. Here’s this thirty-four-year-old woman trying to untangle the horrible mess her family’s in, trying to extricate them from true mortal danger. She has no living parents or grandparents. Her husband is in jail. Her mother-in-law is hostile. And she has a ton of kids to worry about—six of her own plus Chasm and Maxx. Maybe she even considers the Banks to be under her umbrella of protection.

That’s a lot of people to worry about.

“Going online won’t make him any angrier than he already is,” I promise. It won’t. I’ve already broken too many of Justin’s rules to believe I’m escaping this nightmare unscathed. My eyes meet Tess’ and we spend several, silent minutes staring at each other. “After what happened tonight, he’ll probably want me dead.”

It's Parrish who clears his throat and breaks the tension.

"I'd argue that it makes Dakota *safer*. If she posts about her dad trying to kill her, and then something happens to her, it'll point the finger straight at him. He obviously cares more about revenge and grandstanding than he does killing people or else we'd all probably be dead already. He doesn't want to get caught. He wants Medina to worship him like a god."

Tess paces for a second, and then she heads for the door and disappears. Parrish scrambles after her, determined to protect his mother, and the rest of us wait.

"XY got shot?" Maxie murmurs, like she's still processing that information. "How?"

"In a stupid bid to save everyone else's lives," Chasm snaps, and then he yanks on his hair again. "Always trying to be the hero."

"Sounds like him," Maxine adds with a slight smile, and then our eyes meet, and I blush profusely. "You know that he's yours, don't you? That he's been yours since he first saw you. I could sense it, I think. I probably should've let him break up with me after the coffee shop, but I begged him not to."

"You loved him?" I ask, choking on the words. Saffron smiles at the pair of us, like she approves of such a deep and embarrassing conversation. The Banks family likes to get it all out there, no matter how hard it is to talk about certain things.

"I needed his help," Maxine replies, which is sort of a non-answer. I'd press her for more details, but Tess returns with a wine bottle in hand. She doesn't even have a glass. She just chugs straight from the bottle before offering it up—grudgingly—to Saffron.

"I'm good. Not a wine drinker, personally. More of a whiskey gal myself." Saffron tucks her hands into her jacket pockets and Tess shrugs.

"Suit yourself." She tries to take the bottle back, but Parrish reaches for it, and Tess gives him the side-eye. "Young man, you are pushing all my boundaries. You think a serial killer gives you free reign for sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll?"

"Red wine is a drug?" Parrish asks, blinking innocently at her, but despite his clever comeback, Tess steals the bottle away and returns to her spot, perched on the edge of my desk.

"Alright. I'm a reasonable person. I can be swayed." Tess sets the wine

aside and reaches for the signal jammer, pulling it closer to her. “I’ll let you make the video because I’m not going to allow Justin to see you ever again. Period. I don’t give a fuck about the custody agreement.” She looks to Chas with a soft half-smile. “And you’re right, Kwang-seon: the more people who know his secret, the harder it’ll be for him to keep it. Let me know when you’re ready.”

Chasm nods at her, hitting the keys of that laptop at a pace that even I find miraculous. It sounds like rainfall as he types, a flurry of code and clicking and scrolling. He’s grumbling in Korean, staring unblinkingly at the screen as he runs through whatever it is that he needs to do in order to get me online.

Saffron settles down on the sofa near the fire, Maxine tucked close. The two of them whisper as I pace beside the bed, trying to conjure some sort of script in my head. I’d love more time to prepare, but I wouldn’t put it past Justin to make a big move—and soon. I need this done before he sends his cronies out after me, guns blazing.

I shiver with a sense of foreshadowing.

What if he has a couple of would-be mass shooters in his arsenal? I could be anywhere, and I could be gunned down, and nobody would even know that he ordered the hit.

Fuck.

Parrish grabs me, stopping my frantic pacing with a hug. He even tucks my head under his chin and rocks me slightly.

“Shh, Gamer Girl. I’ve got you.” He strokes my back as Tess stares at us and then takes another sip from the bottle.

“I need to be lucid, but I’m also on the verge of an anxiety attack,” she mumbles, as if she feels the need to explain herself. I don’t blame her: the authorities are swarming the yard, we’re all here together, and for tonight, at least, I don’t believe Justin will retaliate.

He’ll wait because after fourteen years of doing just that, he’s proven what a patient monster he really is. Acting on his rage tonight would only serve him poorly if he plans on remaining a free man.

“Ready.” Chasm spins the laptop around and presents it to me. “You have maybe ... three minutes at most?” He gestures for me to sit beside him, and I do, Parrish taking up my other side.

Deep breaths, Dakota.

Tess sighs, grabs the signal jammer, and shuts it down as Saffron closes the

bedroom door and Maxine waits with a stiff spine on the fancy antique couch.

I bite my lower lip in honor of Maxx and then hit the streaming button.

We are live in three ... two ... *now*.

“Who wants to help me catch a serial killer?” I ask, smiling tightly. “Remember when I asked you guys that?” I lean in toward the laptop that I have balanced on my legs, working up what I hope is a pretty epic speech on the spot. Heh. Maybe I should’ve asked an AI chatbot for help?

Kidding.

I’m an old-fashioned writer, just like my mum. One-hundred-percent human-created and written content, thank you very much.

“Well, I know who the bastard is now.” I force myself to breathe through the sudden panic, looking over at Parrish on my right, Chasm on my left. They’re visible on camera, too, which scares me, but they were never going to let me do this alone.

Together, we are stronger.

Thirty seconds, gone already. *I need to hurry this up.*

“Justin Prior. The CEO of Milk Carton. My biological father. He’s the Seattle Slayer.” There. At least it’s out there. Now, even if he shuts me down, over seven hundred people are watching my livestream currently. Given the internet’s intense love of drama, this clip should go viral by morning.

The Lost Daughter of a Serial Killer.

My life presents an interesting story, don’t you think?

“Only, knowing who he is doesn’t mean I don’t need help catching him. More than ever, I need you guys to have my back. He’s going to stop this broadcast; he’s going to do everything in his power to delete this video. I haven’t been able to access the internet in weeks, thanks to him.” I pause there, shocked and impressed by Chas’ ability to thwart Justin in cyberspace. Like, damn.

I forge on, heart beating wildly.

“Tonight, the FBI raided a lodge owned by the Medina Country Club. They’re tracking one of Justin’s accomplices, a man named Amin Volli. He’s one of the many people who make up the identity of the Seattle Slayer. I

don't know who they all are, but I can name a few others: Caroline Bassett-Prior, the now deceased Heath Cousins, another dead guy known as Mr. Fossier, his personal assistant Raúl ..." I trail off because I don't know if Raúl has a last name. I mean, I'm sure he does, but if I've been told it, I don't remember.

Also ... I'm still live. The number of viewers is skyrocketing, but I can't bear to glance at the comments as they pop up on the side of my screen. Only, I'm stupid so I do anyway.

*OMG what a clout chaser
as if any of this is real LOL
(a string of skull emojis)
isn't her stepdaddy in jail already?
tess vanguard f*cks serial killers XDDD
who the hottie next 2 u?
make me the meat in that fuckboy sandwich
i followed u 4 gameplay, not this crap*

Yikes. But okay, so I do sound insane. I try to figure out what to say next, but I honestly didn't think we'd be live for this long and ... is this really not the end? Isn't tonight the long overdue final blow?

"Talk to Agent Itsumi Takahashi; she's on the Seattle Slayer's taskforce." Parrish leans in and takes over briefly, buying me some time. "If we let Justin make one more move without at least trying to warn the world about him, it's going to end badly for us. Hell, because of this video, it *will* end badly. Someone is going to die because of this."

"If you don't believe us now, you will—when one of us is dead," Chasm adds, and the two boys exchange a look over my lap. I'm impressed by their quick thinking: will calling Justin out for murder keep him from acting on it?

A message pops up on the right side of the screen.

It's an anonymous WhatsApp message from an unknown number, a single shortcut link to ... something. I don't want to click it. More than anything in this world, I don't want to click it.

I click it.

Burying my head in the sand won't help me escape Justin.

"I know you're mad, Princess." It's Justin, replying to me on a livestream of his own. He looks hurt, emotionally devastated. All a part of the act. Just like his carefully combed and styled hair, his dress shirt with the top buttons

undone, his pale blue sport coat. “I’d be angry with me, too.” He looks up from his lap with a half-smile just barely touching his lips. To anyone else, it probably seems like a sad, droopy moue of disappointment. As for me, I see pure glee. He is *loving* this chance to make me look like an idiot. “You’ve been acting out lately, and that’s understandable. After the things Paul Vanguard put you through, you’re struggling.”

Shit.

Shit, shit, shit.

Tess steps forward, but Parrish gives her a look, silently warning her to stay out of this. If she gets on camera, it’ll only make her look worse, not better. How did I not expect this?! That man can twist anything, and he absolutely excels at making sane people look deranged.

Case in point: someone in the comments posts a link to another video, and people start discussing it right away.

“I know you’ve been under a lot of pressure from your mom; I know that Paul has been blackmailing you. I’m here for you, and I love you. Say whatever you need to say about me online; I can take it. And when you need me, I’ll be here waiting for you.”

He blows me a kiss and then ends his livestream, leaving me on my own, just hanging out. Pretty sure my mouth is gaping. Especially because I’ve just opened that second link in a new window.

It’s a lovely compilation TikTok featuring some of my finest moments, caught on camera—obviously.

The typewriter incident, the theater fire, the Whitehall student parking garage with yours truly smashing up cars, me and Parrish in bed (no nudity), me and Chas in bed (no nudity), me and Maxx in bed (you get the point). Me, stabbing Heath Cousins. Me, slapping Veronica in the face. Me, shooting Maxx mere hours ago.

I’m proud of myself for remaining neutral through all of that.

Oh, and the captions are great, too.

Destroying her bday present. Destroying her bestie. Destroying her classmates. Screwing her brother. Cheating with his bestie. Sleeping w/ her sister’s BF. Murder. Rage. Psycho.

The account that posted said video? Lumen. Fucking. Hearst.

“He’s ...” I’m not even sure what to say anymore. Chasm takes care of that for me by reaching out and slamming the lid of the laptop closed, severing

the connection.

There are no words; I have no words.

We all just sit there in silence for several seconds.

“Did that just happen?” I ask, pointing down at the screen. “Did I just try what I should’ve tried a long time ago ...?” It seems like such an obvious solution *now*, telling the world about Justin. Truthfully, it’s something I should’ve continued to avoid.

Then I wouldn’t have to know how hard it would fail.

There’s no one left to help; we’ve tried everything. How is it that nobody can stop this man?

“I know it doesn’t feel like this is going to help, but ... I’ve changed my mind.” Tess seems absurdly confident for someone whose daughter just outed her serial killer father online. She turns the signal jammer back on before continuing. “I think that it will. Not now, but eventually.”

“I’m still going to kill him,” Saffron says easily, and Maxine gives her a sideways stare like I’ve never seen. I mean, I know I *told* her what Saffron was like now, but it’s a whole different thing seeing it in person. Our mother—mine and Maxine’s, I mean—tosses her long red ponytail and gives Tess what I think is a wry smile. “If you can beat me to it, you’re welcome to the kill.” Saffron looks over at me as Maxie chokes on her words. It’s a rare thing, to see my sister speechless. “I’ll be close for a little while—just in case you need me.”

“You’re leaving?” Maxine asks, sounding hurt. My poor sister. She reaches out for Saffron’s sleeve, like she’s eight years old all over again. “Are you sure you can’t stay a night or two with us?”

“Somebody’s gotta track Volli, eh? Be safe.” Saffron gives Maxine a kiss on the cheek before blowing one to me and waving. “Make smart choices. Miss you and love you fierce.”

“Miss you and love you fierce,” we reply in unison, also while sighing.

In a blink, Saffron is gone. I mean, I’ve seen her disappear, but I haven’t seen her disappear like *that*. How she even did it, I don’t quite understand.

“I take it she was never around much?” Tess asks, crossing her arms and glancing over her shoulder in the direction of the doorway. “My mother wasn’t either; I understand.” She stands up with a sigh as I gape at her adorable empathy, still wondering how stupid I could’ve been to let Justin discredit me online. Because I spoke up first, *I* look like the crazy one. If he’d

been outed by someone else (or arrested), then I would've appeared as the victim.

Great.

"*Now what*, I believe was the question," Parrish begins, his face pretty damn close when I turn to look at him. He flicks his eyes down to me, and I can feel his words when he talks. "What do we do *now*?" He draws back, out of respect for his mom and my sister.

And also because Tess is grabbing his ear and yanking him back.

"We're all going to sleep together tonight." The expression on her face ... fuck. I'm so sorry, Tess. She's trying to pretend to be stern and motherly, but she is *terrified*.

Because she knows Justin is going to kill us.

Not everyone is making it out alive; I can feel it.

I exhale at the same time that she does, and we both look away.

"Sleep together?" Parrish asks, and Tess nods. "I'm guessing you don't mean me, Chas, and Dakota naked in this room?"

She looks back at her son, eye twitching dangerously, wine bottle held by the neck in her right hand.

"Everyone together. Just as a precaution. One can never be too careful." She starts for the door and pauses to look back at us. "I'm collecting your siblings, and we'll all drag our stuff to the living room." Tess plasters a faux smile on. "It'll be fun, like a sleepover or something."

She leaves then, and Maxine creeps over to the bed, an uneasy expression on her face. She wants to know what happened tonight, I'm sure. Everything has changed now. We're not even playing the same game anymore.

Secrets are out; truth is in.

"Justin ... made me shoot Maxx." That's the easiest way to phrase it without having to go over the whole thing. Maxine's eyes widen as she climbs onto the end of the bed. All of this happens without Chasm saying a word, just staring down at his phone. "What's ... what's wrong?" I ask, trying to keep my voice as steady as possible.

Chas doesn't look at me, not for a really long time. Parrish stares at his friend and then hops out of bed, sprinting around to the other side and stealing the phone from Chasm's hand.

"What is ..." Parrish doesn't finish his question, staring at the screen with pursed lips. He looks over at me and then turns quickly to his friend. Chasm

lifts his head up and makes eye contact with Parrish. He says something in rapid-fire Korean ... which means, of course, that he doesn't want me to understand.

Chasm shoves up from the bed and steals his phone back, pushing it into his pocket as he storms out the door and into the hallway. I start to follow after him, but Parrish won't let me go. That freaks me out, and I yank my arm violently away.

"What happened?" I ask him as Maxine waits patiently on the bed, as if she somehow understands more than I do.

"I don't know yet." Parrish pushes my hand down gently and then releases me. "Can you wait for him to talk to you? Please?"

How else am I supposed to respond other than to agree?

"You can tell me the details later," Maxine offers, putting a hand on my shoulder and sparing me the pain of any further explanation. "I better go wake up Grandma and Grandpa ..." She trails off, a slight cringe to her face. "Um. Like, they might not notice right away that you posted online about Justin, but ... this is going to be so viral, even they'll know about it."

"Gee, thanks Maxie," I retort dryly, pretending like I'm okay when I am most certainly not. Wait till my grandparents see Lumen's video. Not that I blame her: I'm sure Justin blackmailed her into posting it. Or he posted it from her account without her permission.

Why is Chasm that upset? Is someone hurt? Is someone dead already? I get a violent shock of panic through me when I realize that we've tried pretty much everything to beat Justin Prior. Everything. And it doesn't feel like we're in a much better position than we were the day Parrish was kidnapped.

We are so fucked. So fucked. So fucked.

My stomach turns over.

"Just ... get them," I whisper, and then I turn and start collecting pillows from the bed while Parrish stares at me from behind. Maxine reluctantly leaves the room, and the air shifts.

Parrish grabs my shoulders and whirls me around, his face red from frustration that he's clearly been holding in. I think there's a bit of sweat on his forehead, too.

"What was your plan tonight? Yours and Maxx's." He laughs dryly at that, looking up toward the ceiling in frustration before he drops his gaze to mine. "He knew what was going to happen, too, didn't he?"

“I ...” I’m not even sure what to say because I wasn’t sure in that moment what I was going to do. I mean, I had a stupid, circuitous plan—as usual—and events went an entirely different way. As they always do. “I don’t know, Parrish. I was thinking of taking a cheap shot at Volli and screaming for everyone to run.”

“We all might’ve died tonight, huh?” he asks me, like it’s just fully set in. I know, I know. Here’s what you’re thinking: how could these idiots not have realized this was serious from the get-go? There was a kidnapping. There was a dead girl in a box. There was a murder—that you committed. But I think we’ve finally reached the end of a very, very long rope. “We might all still die.” He adds that like an afterthought and then sighs, putting his forehead to mine.

We both close our eyes.

“I wouldn’t have been able to choose,” I whisper, and then we’re opening our eyes and staring at each other. A pause here. I try to look away, but Parrish grips the side of my face and kisses me so hard that I actually forget where I am for a minute. “I think we might’ve had to all die together.”

“I’m weirdly okay with that.” He releases me and stands up, stepping back and giving me a strange, sad smile.

He’s not the only one who thinks we’re getting close to the end; we can all feel it.



CHAPTER 23

I open my eyes to golden sunlight slanting across my lids and making me feel stabby. Somebody else moans from behind me and rustles around, tossing their covers back so that they slide off the couch and onto my face. I bat them away as I sit up, glancing back to see Kimber looking pissy on the sofa.

“I can’t believe I just spent the entire night on the *couch*.” She tosses her hair bitchily as Maxine sits up beside me and joins in staring at Kimber. My little sister has a silk eye mask pushed up into her mussy bangs and the indent of a button on her cheek. Guess she was laying in just such a way on the fancy tufted couch that one of the decorative buttons engraved its mark on her skin. Kimber lifts her hand to touch her cheek and then blushes all over.

I smile.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I offer, knowing without a single shred of doubt that Kimber will see my video as soon as the signal jammer is shut off. And Justin’s. And the precisely—this is an exact number—three trillion comments, replies, and reaction videos that’ve already followed it. “About my dad being a serial killer and everything.”

Kimber almost smiles back, but she makes herself frown instead.

“Better than *my* dad being a serial killer,” she quips, pausing as Tess walks into the room, coffee in hand.

“The Banks—” Tess forces herself to stop and take a breath. “Your ... your grandparents are in the kitchen.” She spins on her heel suddenly and

disappears back the way she came.

“That was a good sign, right?” Maxine asks as butterflies swarm in my stomach and my palms begin to sweat. My grandparents know about Justin now. That means they’ll then know how poorly I treated Maxine, all the other horrible, unspeakable things I did (besides, ya know, the self-defense murder they already know about). They’ll know I slept with all three boys, two of them under duress. That I got engaged under duress.

I’m not sure how I feel about all of that.

“Do they know Saffron was here?” I ask instead, crawling around to peer at the people still sleeping. Both of my boys are out cold, and I wonder with a sudden, aching heart when I’m going to see Maxx again. We have a hell of a lot to talk about.

“They do.” Maxine rises to her feet and holds out a hand for me to take. I glance at the antique grandfather clock against the wall and see that it’s barely seven in the morning. Fantastic. I hate getting up early.

Amelia, Henry, and Ben are all still sleeping, and I wish suddenly that I was, too.

“Maybe I should catch a few more Z’s before we talk?” I start to turn back toward my blanket pile when Maxine reaches out to grip my wrist. When I look at her, I see that she’s taking me into the kitchen even if I lie slug-like on the floor and force her to drag me.

“You’ve grown up a lot since February; you’ve impressed me, Dakota.” She releases my hand and walks away, knowing that she’s guilt-tripped me enough to follow.

With a long sigh, I do, peeping into the kitchen before I walk in.

The Banks are sitting across from Tess, all of them quietly sipping coffee or tea and saying nothing. Occasionally, Tess’ eyes drift to the wooden shutters she’s closed over the windows. They’re slightly slatted, allowing in the barest glimmer of light.

“Afraid he might snipe us right through the window?” I ask, making a gun shape with my hand and pretending to pull the trigger. It’s so absurdly not-even-remotely funny that I almost die right there on the floor—of embarrassment, not Justin. Heh. See, I can’t resist the dark humor.

Carmen stands up from her chair as Tess offers a soft smile and Walter looks like he’s wondering where he can get a gun on short notice. Everyone looks like they feel *sorry* for me, like that joke was a simple display of how

messed-up my life has become.

Only ... there's another person in the kitchen. I sort of thought I saw him when I first walked in, but Maxine is blocking my view ... I move further into the space, just far enough around the corner to see—

“Maxx.” His name feels strange and foreign on my tongue, but the way he holds his arm out—just the one, since the other is in a sling—like he's actually willing to hug me in front of everyone, that's priceless. I'm over there before I remember that we're being stared at, and then I find that I don't care as his big arm comes around me, and he's suddenly holding me. “I've missed this so much,” I whisper, hoping only he can hear.

“Me, too,” he breathes back, and there's a certain ... undertone there. I wonder if he's thinking about sex all of a sudden. I'm not going to lie: I am. A little. Sort of. But we can have sex before we talk out our problems, right? Maybe.

I pull back just enough to be appropriate, staring at the green sling that's cradling his arm.

“You don't need to be in the hospital?” I ask, surprised, and he shrugs one shoulder.

“I checked myself out.” Maxx tries to make himself smile as he says that, but I can see the darkness in his expression. He was *this* close to being gone forever. “The injury I sustained, it can be deadly, sure, but if they can get the bleeding to stop, there's not much downtime involved.”

Sounds like a lie to me. Sounds like you checked yourself out against the doctor's orders so we could be together. Stupid, self-righteous hero type alpha ass.

He flexes his hand as I grab the electric kettle in the corner and fill it, turning it on to make some tea for him. He deserves to be babied; I want to take care of him. Might also be that I'm nervous and trying to commit myself to mundane tasks.

“Kota ...” It's Carmen, trying to gently grab my attention. “If you don't want to talk about it all right now, you don't have to.” She hesitates there slightly as I watch the bubbles in the water churn faster and faster as it heats. When I go for the mugs, Maxx puts a hand on my wrist.

“Let me do it.”

I look up and narrow my eyes on him.

“Let you do it? You almost *died*.” I stretch that word out, so much so that it

sounds like a hiss. “No. I’ll make your tea for once.”

He stares at me for a long time before moving around me and heading over to the table. I hear footsteps in the doorway and glance over to see Parrish and Chasm—one shirtless, the other tugging his tee over his head but not fast enough to hide his droolworthy abs. They crowd in and then stand there, waiting for X to finish what he’s doing and acknowledge them.

“I’m sorry about the way I treated your daughter, your granddaughters.” X drops his head, and I resist the urge to dropkick him in the ass. *What the hell is he doing?!* Maxine snorts and covers her mouth, glancing away sharply in shared embarrassment. “The horrible things I said to them ...” He trails off and lifts his head, meeting Carmen’s gaze first, then Walter’s, and lastly ... he looks to Tess.

“The age difference is bothersome to me,” she admits, and Maxx nods, face slightly flushed. “But I don’t blame you any more than I blame Dakota.” She hazards a glance at my grandparents who are watching him with mild distrust.

“You’ve been dating both of our granddaughters?” My grandfather’s voice is tight and low, like he really doesn’t like Maxx anymore.

“Even if he was, I’m dating three guys.” I point this out, but nobody pays attention to what I just said. Well, except Parrish. He snorts. Chasm looks as pale as a ghost, but there’s a hope in his face that makes me optimistic that whatever he saw on his phone last night wasn’t as bad as it seemed.

“I ...” Maxx doesn’t seem to know what to say, but now I’m waiting with as much anticipation—more anticipation, actually—than anyone else. “Maxine and I haven’t been an item for a while.” He doesn’t look at her. Instead, he stares at a framed picture of a pear behind Carmen’s head. Heh. Pear-Pear? Parrish notices me look at the pear painting, then at him, and he curls his lip at me. “My parents were ... are ... being used by Justin; they asked me to seek Maxine out in the beginning.” He exhales heavily, and my heart sinks. “At first, we liked each other, but then I met Dakota and ... it wasn’t the same after that.”

I’m not the one being played: my sister is.

That could bring me comfort, but it doesn’t. It hurts me, to know that she was used that way. I look over at her, but she doesn’t seem surprised.

“We never would’ve gotten along long-term anyway.” Maxine smiles softly and looks down at the floor. “That day, coffee shop day, we had a huge

fight about Mom the night before.”

“About Saffron? Why?” Carmen seems genuinely dumbfounded, but as soon as Maxie’s burning gaze reaches X’s, I can see it. Dueling moralities. Even if they hadn’t told me all this before, I’d understand based on those expressions alone.

“Because as far as I see it, she stole Tess’ baby; I could never forgive someone who did that.” Maxx sighs again and stands up straight. “I meant that at the time. Maybe I still do. But now, I ... she saved our asses last night.” He reaches up to rake his fingers through his hair, using his one, good hand. I hope the other’s okay. I mean, it would be, right? “Maxine is a wonderful person, but Dakota is the one I’m in love with.” Maxx looks down at the table and then turns back to glance over his shoulder at me.

Why does it feel like the talk between me and him is the most important thing in the world? There are far more important events at play ... aren’t there?

Maxx looks back at my mom and my grandparents, but Tess is already reaching out for his hand.

“I owe you for my family’s lives, not once but twice. If you and Dakota need space to talk, that’s fine. Just ... keep the door cracked? For safety reasons.” Tess smiles tightly into her coffee as she lifts the cup to her lips.

I can see that my grandparents are practically shaking with the need to talk to me. They must be floored by the information. I know that I was. I hate that I have to steal their normalcy the way mine was stolen from me, the normalcy they tried so hard to give me (and succeeded well at, too).

“We won’t be long.” I take Maxx by the good arm and drag him back in the direction of Chasm and Parrish. They both stare at him as we pass, but they move, and they don’t say anything.

I take Maxx upstairs and—despite Tess’ warning—I close and lock the door.

“Shit.” X is already rubbing his hand down his face as I come around to study his expression. “It felt easier last night somehow.”

“What felt easier?” I ask, but I don’t need an answer because I already know what he means. I stare down at my bare toes. “Yeah, it was easier to talk for sure.” I lift my attention up to find him staring sideways at me, like he doesn’t dare move. His green eyes seem extra vibrant today. “You’d think if Justin were going to kill us, he could at least get it over with *before* all the

awkward conversations needed to take place.” Maxx smiles at that, but I lift my chin in his direction. “Is your hand going to be okay?”

A shift takes place in his face as he turns and walks toward the fireplace. He crouches down in front of it, his right hand raised, fingertips resting against the bottom of the mantle as he peers into it.

“Do you think if we lit a good fire, it’d keep Justin away? Like Krampus?” He looks over his shoulder at me and smiles. *Devastating*. I struggle to catch my breath as he stands up and turns around.

“What happened to your hand, Maxx?” I’m whispering now, watching his muscles tense beneath his t-shirt.

“We won’t know for a while. Maybe nothing? I’m going to make some PT appointments as soon as this crap is over.” His words are hesitant, like he doesn’t want to admit this possible weakness to me.

PT. Physical Therapy. Shit. What about motocross? More importantly: what about being a doctor? If I hadn’t fired that gun ... I mean, X wouldn’t let me *not* fire that gun, but still.

We stand there, staring at each other like strangers. Worse, I guess, because we’re anything but. We’ve shared experiences in this life that few others will ever understand.

“You dug up a corpse for me.” I don’t mean to say it aloud; it just happens. Maxx offers me up a tight smile in response.

Then he takes a step closer to me, and the tension winds tight. I can feel it wrapping around the pair of us, bands of want cutting off circulation to other parts of the body. Namely, the brain.

Brain is not involved in this moment ... unless it’s mammal brain we’re talking about. I clear my throat dramatically.

“Yes,” Maxx says finally, using his good hand to muss up his hair again. “I did.”

Another long pause.

What happened to the desperate, emotional intimacy from last night? It was delicate and sweet and so much less awkward than this.

“We need to talk, don’t we?” he asks. Doesn’t sound like a legitimate question to me. His voice is thunder. I shiver all over and wait for lightning.

“Strike me,” I say, and then just in case he doesn’t understand my odd, internal metaphor, I state the rest of it out loud. “Like lightning.”

His green eyes are wide, his right hand flexing by his side.

“Thank fuck.” Maxx closes the distance between us, hard and fast and hot, just like I asked. He takes my mouth with confident surety, like he knows exactly who he is and what he wants. He’s brutal with his tongue, all of the pretense and bullshit finally stripped away. His hand holds me by the back of the head, fingers kneading my scalp.

We part for breath, but he doesn’t go far.

“Maxx Wright, you and I were written in the sky,” I pant, and he nips my lower lip, making me groan.

Please, please, Tess, don’t be waiting outside the door!

“The sky and not the stars?” he whispers huskily, walking me back toward the bed.

“Deep storm clouds and sunshine, X.” My thighs hit the edge of the mattress. His finger traces my collarbone above the neckline of my shirt. “Pounding rains and hurricane gusts.”

“Pounding?” he queries in a deep growl.

I swallow as his lids lower, bedroom eyes at half-mast with glorious lashes.

“Soft, sweet snow.” Thump, thump, thump goes my needy heart. “Hot lightning.”

He gathers me roughly against him, obliterating my mouth with his feral lips until we’re both breathless and sweating.

“I need you naked.” He takes a sudden step back, shoving his pants down faster than I can process what he’s even said. *Or that I said something very similar to Parrish recently.*

“We don’t need a condom,” I remind Maxx, and he looks at me like I’m insane.

“Oh, I remember. I’ve thought about your bare heat every day since.” His mouth tightens, and he fists his, ahem, well, his dick. Then he lifts a mocking brow. “Clothes?” As if to emphasize his point, he carefully removes the sling and sets it aside, reaching back with his right hand and tugging his shirt over his head. He tosses it aside before replacing the sling, but I can’t seem to stop staring at the bandage on his shoulder.

Death was hovering that night, seconds away from pulling the man I love beneath the cold ground, trapping him in dirt and leaving nothing but bones, dust, and memory. A small whimper slips out, and he leans down again, mouth hovering over mine.

“Need some more encouragement?” he asks, and he kisses me again. I’m

completely locked into that kiss as Maxx wraps his good arm around my waist, lifting me from the floor. He holds me against him, my toes just barely touching the rug, and he climbs onto the bed with me beneath him.

“Maxx, you’re hurt—” I’m stopped in my tracks with another kiss as he uses his elbow to hover above me.

“Right. I’m hurt, so I should get to fuck you before we talk, right?” He kisses me again, the force of his mouth on mine causing my head to fall back, my spine to arch, my hips to press up against his. I can feel the thick, hard length of him between my thighs. Maxx grinds himself on me, and I gasp against his lips, making him laugh. “What happened to the lightning thing? It this too much too quick?”

“Is that a serious question?” I retort, wrapping my arms around his neck. I’m careful not to brush his shoulder or left arm. He punishes me for that, for being tentative and tender around him. His lips bruise mine as his fingers fist in my hair, tugging just enough that my scalp tingles.

“Naked.” He rolls off of me, keeping his left side elevated, a nude god in my borrowed bed. “Undress for me, Kota.”

I sit up, tearing the tank top over my head and throwing it onto the floor. My joggers are next, and I make sure my panties go with them. Then I’m sitting there completely naked and suddenly unable to look at Maxim.

“When did you first fall for me?” I ask, wondering about that second video, the one where Justin ordered X to ‘*convince Maxine’s little sister that you’re in love with her*’. Way too hammy. Justin loves his pageantry, but sometimes he gets carried away with it. His need for theatrics will be his downfall.

“If I’m brutally honest about it, will you like me more or less?” he wonders, gently pushing my shoulder back until I’m lying flat on the bed. Maxx adjusts me so that I’m cradled in the center of the mattress with his massive form poised above me. My hands trace his face, the sling tucked against his chest as he balances on his right arm. “I meant what I said: when I first met you in the coffee shop. Maxine and I had broken up and then made up, but ... then I found you.”

I don’t want that to be true because I love my sister, and she deserves so much more. At the same time, Maxx and I are ... sky bound.

He leans down and puts his mouth against the side of my neck.

“I’ve been obsessed with you ever since, Kota. Couldn’t you tell? We flirted shamelessly in the Jeep that first day, and I hated myself for it. I

wanted to break up with Maxine then, but she ... asked for my help.”

“With what?” I ask, but Maxx is kissing me again, and I suddenly don’t care. My legs spread, wrapping around him, encouraging him to press closer to me. He obliges, lowering himself to his forearm, the sling trapped between our bodies. My hands roam his broad back, fingers tickling over the angel wing tattoos that I can’t see but like anyway. Knowing they’re there, it turns me on.

I accidentally brush my fingers on his bandages, and I freeze, the memory of his blood in my mouth temporarily paralyzing me. He notices because of course he does. This is Maxim freaking Wright. He notices everything—including a lonely girl who just wanted to be called Kota, who just needed a friend.

“If I make love to you first, you’ll know for sure I’m alive.” He kisses my neck and my toes curl. “If I fuck you after, you’ll know for sure that *you’re* alive.”

Maxx reaches between us and fits himself to me, but he doesn’t force me to look into his eyes this time. He worships my bare throat with his tongue, the fingers of his right hand teasing my hair as my body tenses up a bit at his size, and then relaxes. I’m ready for him. I’ve been ready for him since last night.

Tess was right: *The threat of tragedy is a powerful aphrodisiac.*

I exhale, releasing any remaining tension in my muscles, and then I let X set the pace. He moves inside of me until we’re both breathing hard, and then I join in, trying to match his pace with my hips. I decide to look at him, turning my head voluntarily to meet his gaze. He slows, and he smiles.

“I knew you couldn’t resist,” he teases, and then he’s moving with stronger, deeper motions, pushing my ass into the mattress with each thrust. The build is low and slow, and it makes me ache in my inner core. Maxx and I make a beautiful contrast together, big and small, athlete and gamer, male and female.

He rides me into release, into these slow, euphoric contractions, and he slides out while I’m still climaxing. It’s a horrible sensation, an emptiness that he creates (because he’s an asshole) and then satisfies (because he’s *my* asshole), turning me over and propping a pillow under my hips.

“Do you believe I’m still here? Are you going to stop giving me a pass for being a total prick?” He takes my long hair in his hand and pulls on it. I arch

my back in response, fingernails digging into the blankets. “I’m alive, and I’m okay. You can believe that, right?”

Blood. A hot spray. Maxx’s collapse.

But now? I can feel blood where it belongs: pumping through his body and keeping his skin warm, his heart beating, his cock swollen. I’m surprised that he’s feeling this good after checking himself out of the hospital. What a stupid, silly thing to do.

But I’m so glad he’s here.

“I believe it.” I swallow down my need, waiting patiently for him to satisfy it. He doesn’t disappoint, pushing his hips into me and entering me from behind. It’s so much more intense this way, and I find myself thrusting back against him, bracing myself so there’s less give and more impact.

He’s as rough as he promised he would be, pounding in until there’s no space between us, until he’s fully sheathed inside of me, until he pulls my hair just a little harder and brings me upright and onto my knees. His naked front is now molded to my naked back.

“You’re my motivation for every single fucking thing I do.” He kisses the side of my neck as his right arm slides around my waist. I can feel the sling against my back, but I don’t jerk away or fight his hold on me. If he says it doesn’t hurt, I’ll trust him. From now on, I’m going to trust his actions over his words.

Words are worth pennies; follow-through is worth billions.

An adage—even better because it’s a family adage—that I should’ve followed.

“You’re my motivation,” Maxx repeats in a come-hither growl. His hips move up and against me, highlighting the absolutely shocking level of strength in his toned body. Movements that are hard for me are effortless for him, and he only sweats because he fucks hard.

Oh my god, what the hell did I just think?!

My palm slips down my belly, finding that constant ache between my legs, fingers working my clit up into a hot frenzy. My other arm lifts up, hand sliding back along the sides of Maxx’s face, fingertips teasing the faint dusting of stubble that he hasn’t had a chance to shave off. It makes me realize that we’re both young adults, on the verge of an entire life where we can be together, love each other, grow with one another.

But only if we live.

Maxx finishes me with a particularly hard thrust, but he isn't patient or kind while I'm climaxing in his arms. He pushes me back down to the bed, my cheek pillowed on my own arm, and he rides me *rough* into the mattress until he comes inside of me.

"Now, do you believe that you're alive?" he whispers after as he leans over me, fully and completely enjoying what he's done to me. I'm boneless. I'm panting. My brain is broken. I nod, but I don't move and X smiles, pushing hair from my sweaty forehead. "Good. Because if we're alive then there's always hope. Always."

"I've been lying for so long that I'm not even sure where to start." Maxx sits back with a sigh, eyes closed, fingers tousling his pretty hair. It's still mussed from sex, and he's still way too naked with only a scrap of sheet over his massive—

"Mm. Let's start with Maxine. When and how did you meet, were you ever dating, when did Justin start blackmailing you. That's what I need to know." I snuggle into him, head on his chest, and I know that the answers to those questions only matter a little. Because while I need to know, while they could change the dynamic between us, I'll still love him and want to be with him.

He doesn't need to know that yet, though I'm sure he probably suspects given the sex and all.

I clear my throat and Maxx pauses to look down at me. When I shift to look back up at him, there's too much tenderness for me to bear. I sit up suddenly and scoot away, and he smirks.

"Can't handle it?" he asks, but I pretend not to know what he's talking about.

"Don't change the subject." I keep the sheets pulled up because it's hard to have a conversation in the nude. At least for me. Maybe that'll change eventually, but it's certainly difficult right now. *I wish Maxx would put on some underwear.* "Maxine. Start from the beginning."

He sighs and stares up at the ceiling, an entirely different smile taking over his face. It's woeful, at best.

"You look like you're preparing for the afterlife," is what I tell him, and Maxx turns fully toward me, propped by an elbow against the headboard.

“I can’t contact Laurent, and Chasm can’t contact Seamus. That’s fucking scary.”

I didn’t know all of that.

Is that why Chasm had a strange look on his face last night?

I nearly bolt from that bed to find Chas, but I can’t move. Maxx’s stare has me trapped. I made him drop his role as my heartbreaker, and now all of this is happening. I’m being too hard on myself, I know. Tess told the FBI; she brought them in and interrupted Justin’s plans. It would’ve happened eventually, if not last night at the hunt, then sometime soon. At the opera. Wherever.

It’s not my fault, and I can’t keep letting Justin make it my fault. He’s been winning by doing that to each and every one of us.

“If we die, it was worth having loved you,” I tell Maxx, and he exhales sharply. I know he thinks his dad is dead. I think his dad is dead, too. But neither of us admits or acknowledges that our once perfect and pristine sense of hope has been tarnished somewhat. We’ve grown, too, and I’m sure down the line, all that we’ve learned will pay off.

“If we die, you were worth dying for.” Maxx takes in a sharp inhale and looks toward the door, like he expects Tess to break it down. Also, like I expect he would tell her to get lost, and then maybe he’d even get up and push her out, shove the armoire in front of the ruined doorjamb, make us stay here together until we sorted this out.

It gets too serious too fast, and he tries to lighten it up, raising both brows at me.

“What I said before: my parents encouraged me to seek Maxine out on campus. They’ve been blackmailed by Justin from the beginning, all the way back to when Laurent was working for Paul as his office accountant. Did you know that Laurent was Justin’s secretary before, way back when? Justin’s been on him this whole time as one of his revenge quests.” Maxx gives me a humorless smile as I stare wide-eyed back at him. “Why Justin wants me with Maxine ... that’s a whole different story.”

“It gets worse, doesn’t it?” I ask, and Maxx nods. Before he can continue, I butt in again. “Don’t say anything until you answer this: when did you film those videos?” I literally cannot breathe as I sit there and wait for him to respond. He takes a really long time, too, staring at me like he isn’t sure he wants to answer this.

“The night you caught me disappearing from bed,” he says, voice thick with shame. Maxx closes his eyes, and I can see all the stress he’s trying so hard to hide in the tightness of his forehead. “I tried to kill Justin.”

“You *what?*” I ask, and then I realize that freaking everyone I know is trying and failing to kill that bastard. He’s like a volcanic microbe, some extremophile organism that thrives in magma pits at the bottom of the ocean (blame Danyella for this metaphor).

“I tried to stab him in his sleep and ended up assaulted from multiple angles.” Maxx opens his eyes again, and the memory, it simmers there in his deep green irises. “He has his people *everywhere*, Dakota. All the damn time.” X leans in toward me, expression urgent. “I’ve been following Amin Volli all over this house; I can’t figure out where he’s getting in or how he gets back out.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to talk to me?” I ask, and a bit of hurt creeps into my voice that I can’t control. Maxx’s face softens again, like all the emotion he’s been feeling for me over the last few weeks is pouring out. He doesn’t seem to have any control over it either.

“That, and Justin’s been taunting me with all sorts of shit that he shouldn’t have seen or known about but did anyway. Nowhere is safe, Kota. Your dad’s got tentacles wrapped around this town and everyone in it.” X turns so that he’s resting on his back in the pillows, staring up at the ceiling again. “After I tried to kill him, he took me to his office and put me on my knees. I was convinced he was going to execute me on the spot, but he didn’t.”

“You’ve escaped death more times than I care to count,” I sniff, my gaze landing on Maxx’s hard, warm chest. I’m *this* close to curling my naked body up against his again, but I’m afraid that if I do that, we’ll ... We need to talk. Sex can wait. “Why didn’t he kill you?”

“He told me to give him one reason why he shouldn’t kill me.” X turns to look at me, like he needs to see my face when he says this. “I gave him two: Saffron and you.” He reaches out his right arm, hooking me under the waist and dragging me against him.

The chemistry is instant and impossible.

Before I can convince myself to be rational, he’s on top, and we’re making love again. Slow, this time. Slow but no less hot. I can’t get over the way he looks above me, his expressions, his mouth, his body with a fine sheen of sweat across tanned skin.

Afterward, I struggle to remember what we were supposed to be talking about or how long we've been in here. I'm shocked that nobody's bothered us yet.

"Shit, what was I saying?" X scratches at his temple with two fingers and then snaps them together in remembrance. "Right." His cocky grin fades a bit at the edges. "The videos that Justin showed you ... One of them was filmed that night. The other was filmed a few days after the fire."

After the fire.

I knew it!

I sit up, still breathing hard, and I *glare* at him. I glare at him in such a way that I hope his skin prickles, that it turns red like the imprints of his fingertips on my hip.

"Justin staged it to look like it was forever ago, but like I said, not only was the dialogue cheesy as fuck, he would never have shown himself to you before me and Tess." I push my long hair back, realizing how many mats I'm now going to have to brush out. Totally worth it. "But why ask you that in the first place? Just to drive a wedge between us? Between me and Maxine?"

"Because I've been talking to Saffron." Maxx surprises me with his answer, but I don't quite understand it. "Since that fight with Maxine before the coffee shop. Saffron's been warning your sister about you for a while, before she even got to Washington. Talking to me, too. Maxine's been ... well, she didn't know it was Justin at first, or that he was the Slayer, but she knew something was happening to you because Saffron told her."

"Come the fuck on. Seriously?" I blurt, knowing that if my sister doesn't tell me the whole truth and nothing but the truth (and soon), that I'm going to draw a Sharpie mustache on her face every night until she does. "You've been working with Saffron together?" I think for a minute about that. "What was on the video that Raúl showed you, the one that made your face turn all white?"

"Amin. Volli." Maxx says the man's name with a distinctive pause between the two words. His hand clenches into a fist, and I recall the fond memory of blood spraying from Justin's nose after X punched him. Seems to me that's the closest anyone's been able to get to the man since, before, or after. If only Maxx had punched him a little harder. Maybe he'd be dead. "Standing over you with a gun while you slept." He looks at me almost sadly then. "You know that he has no qualms about killing you, right Kota? You're

not off-limits. You act like you are, but Justin doesn't see it that way."

"I'm not under any delusions that he cares about me," I promise. It's sad, but it's true. In the beginning I told myself the same thing, but underneath it all, *some* part of me must've believed I could defeat him with love and hope, that I could change him, whatever. None of that was true. "I know he'll kill me."

Maxx purses his lips because he doesn't believe me. I don't blame him. I've been throwing myself in front of Justin all this time, and nothing truly terrible has happened to me personally (well, except for the beating). Maybe that's why I keep pushing the envelope?

I steer him back to the Saffron part of the equation.

"So, you and Maxine, how long did you date, like for real?" I comb my fingers through my hair, trying to work out the worst of the knots so I can plait it. Maxx watches the simple action like he's been given the world's greatest gift. I can hardly stand the intensity, so I look away, but he draws me back with a single finger on my chin.

"A couple of weeks, casually. I think I liked all the parts of her that are most similar to you. Then I saw you, and I knew you were going to be mine eventually." He's such a cocky bastard, but I'm so happy that he's alive that I decide not to strangle him for that comment. "The day Maxine came to Tess' house to give you that letter, we decided we had to find space to talk. We pretended to keep dating so that we could meet in private, and Justin would think I was cheating. You should watch the videos he sent you. You'll see us going into closets. Getting under blankets. Disappearing into the woods." He exhales and looks longingly at my lips before lifting his eyes back to my face. "Ask me anything, and I'll tell you everything." He's as resolute now as he was when he was deceiving me.

Once Maxim makes a decision, he sticks to it. There's no point in pretending anymore because Justin is done with giving us any chances; he's going to nail us to the wall if he can.

"When and how did you know that Justin was going to ask me to pick a boy to die?"

Maxx swallows hard and turns his gaze down to the blankets again.

"It wasn't that I knew *exactly* but I figured he'd pull something like that," Maxx grinds out, jaw working as he lifts his eyes to mine. "He'd made some comments, and then we ... yeah, well none of us pulled off our roles very

well. I understood that hard choices were going to have to be made. Just in case, I kept it up. Because I knew that Amin was watching, that Justin was listening, that he can read you like a book. Well,” Maxx gives a harsh laugh, “he seems to be able to read anyone like a book.”

“Do you think he’s watching now?” I ask, and Maxx sighs, settling down beside me and waiting for my hair to be braided so that I can join him. He pulls me close and tucks me under his chin.

“If he is, he can go fuck himself.” Maxx is saying this, knowing that his dad is missing. Because he knows that blackmail goes on forever, that a stand must be made somewhere. Would making it sooner have saved more people? Hurt more people? It’s a what-if without an answer. “We sent you back with him last time and look what happened? It doesn’t get worse than that.”

I nuzzle into Maxx, letting the questions flow. I ask everything that I can think of about the situation, about him and Maxine and Saffron, about Justin and his threats, about the damn coffee shop. I realize now what was happening there: Maxine was still smitten with him, but the feeling wasn’t mutual.

Because of me.

X changed his mind that day because of me.

I learn a lot of secrets during our conversation, but one thing remains abundantly clear throughout: Maxx, he loves me. Also, my sister is as selfless and amazing as I always knew she was. She’s also a liar—with proper reason to be.

“You’ve seen the worst of me. Can you really forgive me?” X doesn’t sound like he wants me to forgive him. No, he sounds like someone who feels he should be punished and wants it, even if he doesn’t really want it at all.

“If this was the worst of you—lying to me to save my life along with my family’s lives and my friends’ lives—then I’m pretty sure you’re one of the most remarkable humans to ever exist.” My words seem to make X’s face flush, but he doesn’t seem to want to let on.

There’s a sharp knock on the door, and I jump. Maxx doesn’t. He turns very slightly to look in the general direction of Tess’ voice. *Tess. Oh crap.*

“I’ve been patient, but I’m done now. If this were any other situation, Maxim, you would be sent home and banned from the house for a while. This is a wartime courtesy that I’m extending to you. Get dressed.”

X looks back at me with a mildly bland expression, his eyes far too dark to be human.

“What if I tell her no?” he asks, lifting a brow. “We belong to each other more than you belong to her.”

“Maxx,” I breathe, completely and utterly aghast. “Stop it.”

He smiles at me, but he definitely doesn't take it back.



CHAPTER 24

I sneak out of the room first, fully dressed and showered and acting like nothing at all happened behind those closed doors. *Shit, I've been gone for almost two hours!* I realize that only when I stumble on the grandfather clock—and Chasm sitting sprawled on the sofa with one knee up, elbow resting against it.

“Look at that swagger,” he teases, a hint of jealousy in his voice that makes me smile. I move over to sit beside him, taking his face between my hands and kissing him. I don’t know what’s going on with Seamus, but Chas is holding it together the way Maxx is. That makes me feel unbelievably sad.

“Dakota.” Tess is standing near the backdoor—with *Saffron* beside her yet again.

I shoot up from the sofa. I hadn’t expected to see the Other Mother (*Coraline* reference, score for me) so soon.

“Amin Volli is still on the run,” Saffron warns me, as if she’s the ultimate authority on everything related to the Seattle Slayer. Guess since she knows something I don’t, she must be.

“What do you mean *he’s still on the run?*” I ask, narrowing my eyes to slits as my hands curl into involuntary fists. “You mean the high school teacher with a love for poetry outwitted the *FBI?*” Come to think of it, it does make sense. Amin Volli always had the greatest bow ties and really, it’s his pageantry in the stag mask that really set the stage for Justin. “Never mind: I

think Mr. Volli might be as suave as Justin if not more so.”

“So, should we expect a late-night visit from him?” Parrish asks, and I look to see him leaned up against the wall on the left side of the living room. Footsteps precede Maxx coming down the stairs, his clothing rumpled and a frown on his face. He probably doesn’t like that I left him. Shit, I thought I was being nice (he, um, had a hard-on he was taking care of in the shower), but maybe I just put his life in danger? I can’t do that anymore. Nothing is casual now; everything is an emergency.

“If he comes close to the house, I’ll kill him.” Saffron pauses, looking at Chasm and Parrish, at Maxx. At me. “All three in one room? I never allowed my boyfriends to meet each other. Times sure have changed.”

“Christ.” Tess exhales, hand to her forehead. “That’s completely inappropriate. Do not speak to the children like that.”

Saffron turns a startled look on the woman whose baby she kidnapped. Pretty bold, don’t you think?

“Children?” She looks back at us and then laughs. “When I was Maxine’s age, I was already pregnant with her. These aren’t kids; they’re young adults.”

“Right. Emphasis on *young*. Just remember: I’m the parent now. You’re straight-blessed for not being in jail.” Tess’ face darkens for a minute as she scopes out her competition. It’d be funny if the rest of the situation weren’t so tragic.

“It’s just nice to see that nurture is as important as nature, that’s all I’m saying.” Saffron chuckles and gets out a cigarette, lighting it before she even bothers to open the back door. “Dakota takes after me some, too, you know? Better me than the serial killer though, right?” She steps out and closes the door behind her as Tess considers homicide.

“At least the rest of your family is babysitting the kids,” Parrish offers, looking up at Maxx but speaking to me. Seems like Pear-Pear and Chas could use a moment alone with their friend, too. “She doesn’t hate *all* of the Banks family anymore.”

“I don’t hate anyone,” Tess says loftily, but then she frowns and mulls that over for a second. “No, that’s bullshit. I hate Justin. I hate Caroline. I’m not sure how I feel about Saffron.” She comes over to stand with us, her brow twitching slightly as she looks at Maxx. “You *are* nineteen; that bothers me.”

“I’m sorry.” Maxx doesn’t sound sorry. When I look at him, he doesn’t

seem sorry. “It’s just, you have such an incredible daughter.”

“Please.” Tess snorts and shakes her head. “Just ... leave it at that. Agent Takahashi will be here soon. For now, she’s got people watching the house. If Justin moves on us, he’ll only give himself away.”

“Oh no, he’ll wait.” I don’t know why I say that. It’s just that I know Justin too well at this point for speculation. “You can’t keep me here forever; he’s going to play nice for a few days and then leverage the custody agreement against you. He’ll call the police on you, I bet.”

Tess is staring at me and saying nothing, but she knows that what I’m saying is true. Her face reads like a novel, something tragically titled that you know is going to be sad. *A Grave of Roses Weeping Blood Tears*.

“He’ll wait?” Tess scoffs and plants her hands on her lower back, stretching and groaning. “Fuck.”

“Cursing around us children? You really *are* stressed, aren’t you?” Parrish asks dryly, but Tess ignores him.

“Let’s see what Itsumi has to say, shall we?” She purses her lips and breezes past us into the kitchen.

“We’re going to have a long conversation where you apologize to me.” Parrish tickles Maxx’s chin, causing the latter boy to scowl. X slaps his friend’s hand off of him, looking to Chasm instead.

“We’ll talk later,” Chas agrees, shrugging and turning to me instead. “After we get grilled by the FBI. Are you ready for this?”

“I’m ready.” I *sound* confident, but I don’t feel that way. I’m nervous. Why shouldn’t I be? Agent Takahashi is a scary-ass chick.

“She’ll be fine,” Maxx agrees, smiling at me. “That massive orgasm she just had should keep her relaxed during the interview.”

“If Justin doesn’t get you first, then I might very well kill you.” I give Maxx a dry look, but he doesn’t relent. Instead, he stares at me like he’s had an appetizer and is now ready for the main course. *Eep*.

“You better have a good reason for trying to die or it’ll be *me* that ends you.” Chasm stands up from the couch, shakes out his hands and turns to look at the rest of us. “When I brought my duffel over here, I packed it with as much food as I did clothing. I’ve got all the stuff to make *kimchi jjigae* if you guys want.”

“That’s kimchi *stew*, for those of us who don’t speak the language,” Parrish purrs, and all three of them chuckle at me.

At this point, I'd chow down on some of Justin's snails if it meant getting to eat a meal with my boys.

As long as they live through this—even if I don't—then I can die happy.

“That's ... pretty much it.” I laugh when I say that. I'm exhausted, sorry. Also, when I say 'that's it', it's sort of ironic because there was a lot.

Agent Itsumi Takahashi—she's forty-two, born in Osaka, lived in the US since she was twelve, and I know all this because I forced as much small talk as I could to break up the tragedies—stares at me in silence.

A blond man sits beside her, but he's got as good a poker face as I've ever seen. He gives me nothing to work with. I turn back to Itsumi. Tess is sitting behind me in another chair, watching and listening. I'd thought I'd told her most everything up until this point, but there was a lot of gasping and cursing when I mentioned certain events.

“Can you, like, arrest him now or something?” I ask, wishing that she'd just shoot him instead and save us the trouble of a trial. Justin will drag it out. Hell, he'll probably win it and be declared innocent of all charges. That's how good he is, but unless Saffron can deliver on her promises (never happened in the past, so I won't hold my breath) then this is our only remaining option.

“I have your story—and it's well-corroborated by the boys' stories—but that's all I have.” The agent folds her hands on the table's surface, studying the ring she's wearing. I guess she's married, but I don't know. She wouldn't answer that question when I asked. “That, and Agent Murphy's final reports.” She sits back in her chair with a sigh that reminds me of Tess. “There's absolutely zero evidence that backs up any of your claims thus far.”

“Thus far?” I ask, and then I remember that Tess has been talking to the FBI behind our backs. Good on her, I mean, it was the right decision. But still.

“Tess has been wearing a wire for us,” Takahashi admits, and my mouth drops open.

“A wire?! So he knows everything I've said?” It shouldn't matter though, should it? Seeing as I called him out online like an idiot who knew better and didn't listen to that smart inner voice of hers.

“This.” Agent Takahashi puts ... something on the table. I’m not sure what it is for a minute, but I’m a dork at heart, and I’ve seen tape players like this. It’s made of off-white plastic and it’s ugly as hell, outfitted with a clear plastic rectangular drawer that has a white cassette tape inside. “This is a Realistic brand portable cassette tape recorder, circa 1988. There’s nothing here for Justin to hack into.” She pats the item, offering a sideways glance at the signal jammer.

There’s a knock at the door, and one of the agents—there are two others in here with us—moves over to open it. He speaks softly to whoever is outside and turns to Takahashi.

“One of the children is asking to see their mother.”

“Bring them in for a minute.” Agent Takahashi sits back in the leather desk chair with a sigh, reaching up to push her bangs from her forehead.

Kimber is allowed into the room, her eyes drifting to the tape recorder on the desk.

“What is that?” she asks, and I think she genuinely doesn’t know what a tape player is.

“Doesn’t matter. What do you need?” Tess asks, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees.

“There’s a car pulling into the driveway. Thought you might want to know.” Kimber’s gaze tracks over to me again, and I smile wanly back at her. I’m impressed with her, I’ll admit. I thought she’d blame me for all of this shit, seeing as Justin is only in her life because of me. Maybe. Maybe not, though. Because Tess seems to be his target. I’m just a means to an end.

“Thank you, honey. I’ll be right down.” Tess’ cheeks flush slightly as she looks to Agent Takahashi. “It’s him, isn’t it?”

“Him?” I almost panic, but Tess quickly reassures me.

“Not Justin,” she promises, holding her hands up placatingly. I nearly fall off the chair in relief.

“Not Justin,” Takahashi agrees. The agent nods before turning her dark eyes to me. I miss Agent Murphy. This new partner is much less interesting. He just sits there beside her with bright blue eyes and a generic half-smile. I think he was introduced as Agent Sam or something? Is that a first name or last name? Does it matter? Am I just beyond hysterical now?

“That’ll be all for now, Dakota.” Takahashi moves to stand up and I do the same, panic racing across my skin in the form of goose bumps. My hands

might be shaking, too.

“You don’t have evidence *yet*, but I can help you find some. Let me take the tape recorder with me.” I gesture at it, knowing that wearing that thing into Justin’s house is akin to signing my own death warrant. But I have to try something. Anything.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not using a minor for undercover work.” Takahashi sighs heavily, putting her hands on her hips. I can see that she *wants* to believe us, but when it comes to the law, belief isn’t enough to act on. We need hard evidence and Justin is oh so careful. “If it weren’t for Agent Murphy, I’m not sure I’d even be going this route.” She lifts her thumbnail to her lips but doesn’t chew on it, almost like she’s fighting a bad habit she knows that she has. “I’ll be in touch.”

“You’ll be in *touch*?” I ask, coming around the side of the desk. The other agents don’t seem to like me getting that close to her, and I realize that regardless of who the real culprit is—Justin or Paul—I’ve clearly shown myself capable of being manipulated by the Slayer. Who’s to say I might not try to attack her? “We can’t live our lives with him hunting us!”

“I’ll put some officers on the house, but I can’t arrest a man on words alone. I’ll be bringing him in for an interview, but you have to understand: Justin Prior was seen in public by dozens of people, let alone security cameras, last night. He wasn’t personally involved in any capacity.”

I want to scream. I want to knock everything off the desk and onto the floor. I want to kill Justin. That impulse hasn’t faded. Seeing as literally nothing else has worked, I might still try. What else can I do at this point?

“Who’s here then?” I ask, just as a knock sounds at the door. It opens shortly after and then—color me surprised—Paul Vanguard enters the room. He looks ... oddly more buff than he was when I last saw him?

Something strange happens in the room as Tess rises to her feet.

Uh-oh. I smell romance. Lately, I’ve gotten used to being the one experiencing these sorts of moments, the ones where time stops and the world falls away. I guess I never realized how gross it looks from the outside.

Agent Takahashi clears her throat, but that doesn’t stop Tess and Paul from slowly walking toward one another. He cups her face in his hands and gives her the most genuine smile I’ve ever seen on him.

Parrish is right behind him, standing in the hallway with his mouth hanging open. He looks past them to me, and his expression says something like, *I am*

so sorry you have to see this, *Gamer Girl*. Also, I think, weirdly enough, Parrish picked up some of his romance skills from his dad.

“You’re my heartbeat, Tess,” Paul whispers as she gazes up at him, covering his hands with her own. “It feels like I’ve been in a deep sleep all this time. Only your face could wake me up.”

“Oh my god, *sick*.” Kimber turns away with her hand pressed over her mouth, like she’s holding back vomit. Parrish gags, but his parents don’t seem to notice either of them. Instead, they kiss, and while I’m sure it feels *amazing* to them, it looks gross to me. I turn away, and so do most of the other agents. It gets worse when their arms wrap around one another, and I’m pretty sure they’d move into sex territory if there weren’t so many other people around.

“I’ve missed you,” Tess breathes as they reluctantly pull apart. “God, Paul, you’re my world.”

“You’re my universe,” he whispers back, and Parrish facepalms hard. But like, haven’t we said similarly cringe things to one another? “*You’re the only real thing that I have.*” Yep. Like that.

Takahashi-*sama* clears her throat again, moving over to stand beside the fawning couple. I think I hear her murmur something like *hazukashii* under her breath, but I might’ve misheard.

“Nice to see you out on bail, Mr. Vanguard.” She gives a tight smile before flicking her gaze down to the weird bracelet on his ankle. “I’ll be seeing you around again soon enough.”

She moves past the couple and into the hallway as I study my stepfather and what I think is, like, a house arrest bracelet? So he can’t flee or whatever.

But ... Paul was denied bail before. What’s different now?

“How did you get out?” Parrish asks, moving into the room as the remaining agents gather their things and head for the door. Kimber scoots closer, too, but not too close, pretending to be disinterested while desperately wanting to be a part of the team.

“We had a bail hearing, and we won,” Paul declares with a bright smile for his son. When he reaches out to pat his head, Parrish allows it with a slight curling of his lip. I’m beyond shocked when Paul turns to me. I assumed—like with Kimber—that he’d hate me even more after all this. Justin is my father, after all, a fact that I’m sure I’ll never be able to get over. It’ll haunt me with every step I take for the rest of my life. “Dakota, I’m so sorry; I had

no idea what you were going through.”

“Me? What *I* was going through?” I point at myself. “You were framed by my dad.”

“Which is not your fault,” Paul tells me, swallowing like he feels guilty. He adjusts his glasses nervously as he looks back at Tess. “What’s our next step?”

“Your lawyers will be here soon.” Tess checks her watch. Apparently, the one she’s wearing is from the 1950s and belonged to her grandmother. “We’ll talk things over with them and then ... I don’t know.”

“Are we actually moving back home?” Parrish asks, staring down at his dad’s bracelet. “What about that thing on your leg?” He gestures at it.

“We’re still moving back. Your father got permission from the judge. Besides, I don’t think staying here a moment longer with your grandmother will do any of us any good.” Tess looks at me and Parrish, over at Kimber. “Stay in common spaces together. If somebody goes to the bathroom, take a same-sex buddy to stand near the door.”

“Mom, seriously?” Parrish asks dryly, but she ignores him, holding hands with Paul as they walk down the hallway. We follow after, but at a much slower pace.

“What are you going to do with your victim when we move?” Kimber whispers conspiratorially, but it takes me like three heartbeats too long to remember what she’s talking about.

“Oh, shit.” I give Parrish a wide-eyed look, and he cringes in response. He forgot about Veronica, too?! Who’s been feeding and watering her then? Should I run after Agent Takahashi and tell her about the teenage girl trapped in a secret vault or will that make us (and Paul) look like the guilty ones?

“Relax, guys, I took care of it.” Kimber saunters past us down the hallway as I gape at her back.

“I totally forgot about that particular clusterfuck,” Parrish murmurs, looking over at me. “Should we just tell Tess about her and be done with it?”

As far as I can tell, this is the last secret we have as a group.

But if we tell Tess about Veronica, the pissy little brat might end up dead. On the other hand, we might actually get in trouble for kidnapping. It’s one thing to claim that Justin made us do it, but who stole the Benzos? Who squirted them down her throat? Who’s been keeping her captive?

Us.

“Probably. But not right this second.” *Not with the FBI around.* I want to tell Tess without them, so she can help make the final decision. This is a big deal. Justin is playing around with me right now which means he still feels like he’s got some control, but if he learns that we fucked with him on the Veronica thing ... I can barely fathom his rage.

“Well, my vote is that we tell her. Talk to Chasm and Maxx, see what they think. Just remember that when I said you shouldn’t go back to Justin on Monday, *I* was the one who was right.”

Finding time to take care of Veronica isn’t easy with Tess on high alert. She spends a lot of time in the kitchen, making phone calls, using her laptop, and talking with Paul and his lawyers. Once all of that is done, we’re corralled into the living room and forced to eat a meal together—even my grandparents are there.

I’ve been tiptoeing around them all day which isn’t fair, but I’m afraid to sit down and really talk about Justin. I might break down, and I don’t have time for that right now.

“She’s in the bathroom—go!” Parrish hisses, glancing back into the kitchen and waving at me and Maxx. Chasm is watching the other doorway, buying us the briefest of moments to get into the cellar.

The atmosphere in that dark room is decidedly different than the last time we were in here. I can feel Maxx at my back, and all I want to do is turn and kiss him, let him lift me up and make love to me against the wall. *Oh. Wow. Racy.*

My face burns as I key in the code. X slides his arm around me from behind, and I go completely still.

“I’ve never ached for someone the way I ached for you,” he whispers to me, kissing the side of my neck as I fight to stay on my feet. My knees are so weak, I’m not sure I’ll be able to stay like this for long without melting into a puddle. “I’ve never hated myself the way I did when I was hurting you.”

“That’s how I’ve been feeling about myself since the day I first spoke to Justin via Mr. Volli.” I turn suddenly, and Maxx leans in, pressing me against the hidden door with his muscular form. Even though it’s hard to see his face in such low light, I can read his intent in every line of his body. “Don’t let

that hate fester. Forgive yourself. I've already forgiven you."

Maxx drops his face to mine, sweeping his tongue across my lower lip but withholding the kiss I so desperately want.

"Let's go feed our pet," he quips with a wry twist of lips. X releases me, leaving me cold and hot all at once. I curse him out inside my head as I turn and head down the steps.

Veronica doesn't even look up when we come in, her elbow propped on her knee, a *Goosebumps* book in her hand. I may or may not have stolen some of Ben's books to give to her. Tess has been ordering crates of them to keep her son occupied. I've been sneaking a few here and there. It's better than Veronica deserves.

She's twisting her hair around her finger with her free hand, deigning to look at us only when Maxx puts the bag he had slung over his good shoulder down and starts unloading food.

"Wow. I'm fed worse than a convict." She snorts at the array of sodas, water bottles, and prepackaged foods that he tosses over to her. We rarely get within touching distance of Veronica—for obvious reasons. If she could get me in a chokehold, she'd go in for the kill.

"Nice to see you, too." I sigh heavily as I work myself up to go for the toilet. I dart forward and snatch it, dragging it across the floor and out of her reach. She seems to like that, smirking at me from her position on the air mattress.

"At least I can get some pleasure out of the fact that you're cleaning up after me," Veronica quips as I remove the inner chamber of the toilet. The way this thing works—according to Maxx—is that the inner chamber is filled with microbes that break the waste down until it can be safely composted. This model has a removable inner chamber so that we don't need to even open the lid. It's set aside until it breaks down to a proper level, then it can be dumped and reintroduced into the system. All I have to do is put the new chamber in and take the old one away.

For now, it'll sit in the corner of the vault. We have four total chambers, which seems to be plenty. I'm not sure how long they take to break down before they can be used again.

"Seems a suitable place for you considering that you're related to the help. Disgusting." Veronica chuckles and then throws the book at me. She hits me right in the back with the corner and it fucking *hurts*.

“Touch my girlfriend again and I *will* break your arm.” Maxx moves up to the edge of the air mattress like he may very well carry through with that threat. “I was all in for killing you in the first place. You are *far* more trouble than you’re worth.”

“Then let me go. I’ll take my chances with the ‘Slayer’.” Veronica makes air quotes and rolls her eyes. Maxx gives a low laugh and turns away, shaking his head at our colorful captive. I can’t blame her for being vile; we *did* kidnap her. But how is it that her personality seems much the same as always? “Did Daddy manage to scrub that nude video of you from online?” she asks, trying to taunt me into committing violence.

I ignore her.

We’re supposed to wait for the all-clear from either Parrish or Chasm. With the way things are right now, we can’t risk Tess seeing us leaving the cellar.

“Why do you hate me so much?” I ask, tucking my hands into the pockets of my Whitehall prep sweats. Ahh, good ol’ Whitehall Prep. We’re so close to the first day of school. I’m so excited I can barely stand it. *Sarcasm*. “I mean, before I kidnapped you. I get why you hate me now, but why did you do that to me at school?”

“Because she has no heart, just an empty cavity where one might’ve been.” X answers for her, slinging the empty backpack onto his shoulder. He’s surprisingly able-bodied for somebody whose arm is in a sling, who almost died, who lost more than a third of the blood in their body before reaching the hospital.

“Your father is scum; you’re scum. That’s how it works in Medina. A person is defined by their blood—and their bank account. The whole world works this way. It’s only do-gooder losers who want to pretend that it’s possible to live in, like, a nineties cartoon about peace and justice.” Veronica takes another book off the stack and flips through it.

“If that’s the case, then it’s *you* who should be ashamed. Your mother helped her asshole friends take everything that Justin had.” I can’t believe I’m standing here and defending the guy, but I guess some strange part of me sort of did want him to get revenge on the Medina blue bloods.

“The strong survive. Nobody ever said the world was fair, *Mia*.” Veronica pretends to be reading, but I know she’s waiting with bated breath for me to retaliate. I don’t. I’m not sure I have enough fucks left in me to react to some

snotty comments. I have way bigger fish to fry. “Seeing as I’m here, I guess I was right about you.”

“Malding much?” I ask, when I see that she isn’t just twirling her hair around her finger, she’s actually pulling clumps of it out. I taunt her, but then I feel bad about it. She must be so stressed.

“Malding? What the fuck? Go die on a Twitch stream.” Veronica stops messing with her hair and turns away from me, gaze fixated on the book in her hands. It’s titled *Say Cheese and Die!* by R.L. Stine. Probably about her reading level.

“Don’t engage her anymore,” X warns me, but I’ve already decided that I’m not going to. He gives me a look of dry amusement. “What does malding mean anyway?”

“Uh, it’s Twitch-talk for *mad and balding*.” It’s not funny at all to me now. I feel sorry for Veronica Fisher.

“As soon as I get out of here, I’m going to make it my life mission to see the pair of you rot in prison. Hopefully, you’ll get assaulted while you’re in there.”

Yikes. Never mind.

“Definitely a malding bitch,” I mumble, and she throws another book. Maxx catches it and hands it over to me.

“I told you not to Twitch-talk at me when we were at the barcade, but ... I regret saying that now.” Maxx steps forward and brackets my face with his hands. “It’s too damn cute.” He kisses me, making my body ache as I lean in toward him. X doesn’t let me keep kissing him though. He draws back slightly and frowns as he tosses a look over his shoulder in the direction of the door. “Maybe I should head up and peek out? It seems like they’re taking a while.”

I nod. We weren’t supposed to be in here more than five minutes. I’m starting to worry that something’s gone wrong.

X very slowly cracks the door, peeking into the cellar. He gestures for me to join him just as Veronica opens her mouth to scream. She lets out this bloodcurdling wail as I slip out and Maxx slams the damn thing shut behind us.

The sight that greets me next is Tess, opening the cellar door and staring down at the pair of us like she’s once again entertaining the idea of homicide.

“Where the hell have you two been?” she asks suspiciously, and X and I

exchange a look.

“Just trying to find some time to be alone in the chaos,” he lies, looking back up the steep set of stairs. I can see Parrish just behind Tess, a *guys, what the fuck?* look on his face. Chasm is on Tess’ other side, expression grim.

“Except, I just looked down there and you weren’t there.” Tess folds her arms and stares us down, but we haven’t decided what we want to do just yet. Seems like the decision could be made for us.

Tess doesn’t bother arguing further, stepping aside and gesturing with an angry arm in the direction of the kitchen.

That freaks me out. Each time she’s let us off easy in the past few weeks, she’s been plotting. This situation is no different, but what can we do? Even if she discovers the secret door, she won’t be able to get in.

God, I’m still so naïve.

The boys and I are sitting in my room together. The door is open, but just a crack. It’s the best we can do for privacy right now.

“I told you not to come out until I came to get you,” Parrish mutters as X carefully removes his sling and then his shirt. I watch in disturbed fascination as he unwraps the bandage on his shoulder and uses the supplies he got from the hospital to change his dressing.

“I could do that for you,” I offer, but Maxx just shakes his head.

“I can do it, Kota.” Even with his injury, even with possible damage to the nerves in his hand, he’s brimming with confidence and control. It’s mesmerizing. I find myself rooted to the spot, watching. “Future sports medicine doc, remember?”

“Don’t get distracted from the problem,” Chasm mumbles, head thrown back, eyes closed. He looks exhausted, and I remember the expression of fear on his face when he checked his phone. He must be so worried about Seamus. Chas cracks an amber eye and tilts his head in our direction. “Tess knows something is up with the cellar.” He sits up the rest of the way and crosses his legs, fingers woven together behind his head. “We need a plan for Veronica. I get what you’re saying about Tess, Little Sister, but we’re running low on choices.”

“I’m also voting to tell Tess,” Maxx agrees, finishing up his bandage and

putting his arm back in the sling. He leaves the shirt off though. “I’m not saying your worries are unfounded—it’s possible that Tess lets Veronica go and the bitch ends up dead—but that wouldn’t be our fault.”

“You’re not worried about legal repercussions?” I ask, ashamed to find that I’m less concerned about Veronica’s life and more concerned about what this whole situation looks like from the outside. “The four of us drugged a girl, kidnapped her, and chained her up. Maxx dug up a dead person and buried them in the backyard.”

“Who is that, by the way?” Chasm asks casually, giving Maxx a hard stare that proves that while he might be nice on the outside, he’s our dark knight underneath. “Like, seriously, man, who the fuck is the dead girl and where did she come from? Also, why wouldn’t you ask me and Parrish for help?”

“No. After moving and burying Judge Rossi’s body, I can tell you that I am *never* doing that again. Corpses are not a part of my aesthetic.” Parrish lounges in the pillows on my bed like he was born to luxuriate.

“What do you think might’ve happened if I hadn’t put a body there? Hmm? Do you think Raúl might’ve killed Dakota on the spot, or would Amin Volli have walked around this house with a rifle, executing people?” Maxx shakes his head at his friend, but he knows that Parrish is joking.

If X had asked, both of his besties would’ve stepped up.

“Not an answer to my question, X. Let’s hear it.” Chasm twirls a finger around in the air and leans back so that all three boys are in a row with me facing them. I’m sitting cross-legged at the end of the bed, fingers twitching to touch them all. *I could crawl over there and sort of roll my body across all three of them, get some poly love in my life.*

“She’s from two counties over, a seventeen-year-old girl who committed suicide via an overdose. Maxine and I spent a lot of time searching for someone that might fit the bill, and then we drove over, waited until the funeral was over and the cemetery was closed.” Maxx closes his eyes, like he’s trying to shut out the image. Or the smell. Or the absolutely fucked-up nature of the entire event.

“Maxine helped you with the body?” I ask, feeling shame color my cheeks. How could I have ever doubted any of these people? I’m an idiot.

“She did.”

“Why were you chasing Lumen?” I ask randomly, because the thought’s popped into my head. Well, it didn’t appear out of nowhere. I saw the

diamond ring on my finger, thought about the diamond ring that should also be mine, wondered if Maxx could get me a ring also because I'm thirsty like that. And then I wondered if Lumen wouldn't just give the ring back to me seeing as she must know the proposal was a lie by this point.

"Ah." Maxx sits up fully, still shirtless. Still gorgeous. Still making my fingers twitchy with the need to touch. "I was trying to get her phone from her."

"Why?" Chasm sits up fully, throwing an arm across his knee and staring at Maxx. He was right to be worried about him all along; his anger makes a lot of sense now. We might actually have lost this man. "She a liar and a double-crosser like I always said she was?"

"She's been recording shit and feeding info to Justin and his serial killer collection," X grumbles, looking to the side. There's a darkness in his gaze that makes it easy to imagine that he drove a guy to drop out of school. But when he holds me? Oh my god. When he gazes at me with so much tenderness that I feel like I might burst open? That intensity works for him in the bedroom and in romantic affairs as well as it does for revenge and retaliation. "I always wondered how Mr. Fosser found us on that trail back then, when he hit us with the walking stick. Lumen told him where we were."

"Yeah, well, fuck. I am not surprised." Chasm raises a sardonic brow. "Are you done with your *Sailor Moon* love and trust bullshit?"

"My *Sailor Moon* outfit smelled like dead people; I threw it away." *That's* my response. I can't think when they're all looking at me the way they are. "We know that Lumen's been blackmailed, that she's probably still being blackmailed. She's a Hearst; Justin was never going to leave her alone. She's a victim, too."

"She's a snake," Parrish hisses, eyes narrowed as he stares up at the ceiling. "And I bet she's pawned that ring already. It was worth millions."

Yeah, I'll bet it was.

"Before we started using the bug detector—and anytime that we didn't use it, like on your drive to the hospital after the fire—she was recording. When you and Chas went down to the hedge maze to have sex, she filmed you going in. That sort of shit. I just wanted to see if there was proof on her phone and get her to admit it." Maxx turns back to me, as if he's waiting for me to condemn my friend.

But I can't do that.

“Look at that compilation video—” I start to explain, but Chas cuts me off.

“That *Lumen* posted.”

“If somebody judges me by those actions—which, really, actions are all we should judge people by—then what are they going to think? That I’m an out-of-control monster? Justin is brilliant when it comes to destroying a person’s character. *Lumen* is suffering just like I am.”

“Snake in the grass,” Parrish repeats, but I wave him off.

“We don’t have to trust her. She might not be a ‘good’ person, but she’s not a ‘bad’ person either. She’s just a person making hard choices in a shitty situation.” I stand my ground on the subject, but not a single one of the guys looks like they agree with me.

“What about Danyella?” Maxx fires back. “Don’t you think she seems suspicious as hell? *Lumen* made all these claims about keeping her out of this, and yet there Danyella was in the hallway after the girls beat you up, at the house after the fire, on the hike, at the park. I don’t trust her either.”

I don’t have answers for Maxx. I have no idea what’s really going on with *Lumen* and Danyella, but what I do know is that they’re not doing this by choice. They’re not part of the Seattle Slayer collective. No, they’re just teenagers like us, trying to make it through this alive.

The subject drops and the room falls silent. We’re not done talking about this stuff by any means, but I think we could all use a break. I’m still missing pieces of the story, but they’ll come in time. I’m not rushing them. I’m trying to enjoy this brief, glorious slice of downtime before I’m inevitably drowned by the whitewater rapids of hell.

My eyes meet Maxx’s.

“I need you,” he says, and both Parrish and Chasm scoff and groan in response. “Come here, Kota.” Maxx holds out his right arm, inviting me in. I can’t resist. We’ve been apart too long, and I’m not willing to play coy. What’s the point? I crawl across the bed and lay on top of his shirtless body, pressing my lips to his.

The magic is still there, butterflies and swirling gusts of autumn leaves and rides at the fair with blinking lights that drop you so quick that you lose your stomach. I taste it all on Maxx’s primal mouth.

We make out like this is our last day on earth, Maxx’s hand roaming naturally down to cup my ass, my body heating and readying for his.

Chasm clears his throat.

“Don’t you think that Parrish and I deserve whatever explanation you gave Dakota? Must be a good one because she’s all over you.”

“Are you jealous?” I ask, turning to him and finding those bright eyes of his on my face. With a grin, I crawl from Maxx’s body to his, sliding my fingers into his hair and kissing him next. I like that, being able to switch from one lover to the next. Does that make me a hypocrite? I was a royal bitch when it came to the double Maxes, to Chas/Lumen, to Parrish’s proposal.

“I was, but not anymore,” Chasm purrs, putting his hands on my hips. I’m fired up now, my nipples hardening, my thighs clenching together. I’m kissing his neck when Parrish reaches out for my arm and pulls me on top of him.

“Last but not least,” he mutters, and then he takes my mouth like a prince who’s just found his princess in a tower (a consensual kiss though because, like, *Sleeping Beauty* was way gross). His arms are fully wrapped around me, his hard length straining at the fly of his twelve-hundred-dollar pants (no joke). Kimber remarked on their impeccable quality and price, and I can’t unhear that someone would pay that much money for what seem to be light brown pants with a few pockets. “You and Maxx, I was assigned to listen at the damn door earlier to make sure you were safe. I feel like a thank you is in order.”

“Payback for when I had to listen to you guys at Camp Kellogg,” Maxx growls out, and I remember clue number nine: *this entire vibe*.

“I’m sorry, I guess you forgot that I was kidnapped and forced to watch my girlfriend and my best friend make sweet, gentle love.” Parrish’s words are haughty, playful, but with a *teeny* bit of real jealousy buried underneath. Personally, I’m stuck on the *sweet, gentle love* part and find myself struggling to avoid Chasm’s searching gaze. “I guess you also forgot that once I escaped being sliced open every morning for nineteen days—and nearly dying—that you told me you *also* slept with my girlfriend. Have some tact, Maxim.”

“Dakota and I are soulmates; I hate to tell you that.” Maxx is unapologetic, but not unsympathetic.

“If so, she must have more than one soulmate,” Chas counters, and our eyes meet, and I know that my skin probably looks sunburnt from all the blushing.

“Must have,” Parrish agrees as I sit up, straddling him and wondering if he’s not wrong though. Could we shut the door and do ... something together? A foursome instead of a threesome? *Oh wow*. I turn an even more brilliant shade of red, like crushed rubies sprinkled over my face, neck, and chest. Glittering shame. Also, want. There’s plenty of that, too.

“I missed this, the four of us. We work well together, like I was meant to be a part of your friend group.” I smile, but Parrish cocks an arrogant brow.

“So you’re just a buddy of ours that we fuck?”

I slap him. I don’t mean to; it just happens. His eyes are wide as he stares back at me, and I put a hand over my gaping mouth. Oops.

“Gamer Girl, did you just *hit* me? She’s abusive. First, she pushes me down the stairs. Now this?”

“It was an accident!” I wail, scrambling off of him to sit like a crouched horny gremlin at the end of the bed, knees tucked up to my chest, arms wrapped around them. “I’m sorry, Pear-Pear.”

“If you’re sorry, get back over here and kiss me again—and stop calling me Pear-Pear.” He pushes himself up to rest on his elbows, hazelnut eyes shimmering.

“Don’t be so sensitive, Pear-Pear,” Chasm teases as Maxx chuckles, and they exchange a few quick quips in Korean that I don’t understand and maybe don’t want to. I get the sense they’re saying dirty things about me.

“Would you guys actually do it?” I ask, and they all turn to me with three equally intense but radically different stares.

Parrish, lord of the sloth manor, his tongue tingling with rapid-fire quips, his heart brimming with romantic truth.

Chasm, the dark knight who serves revenge as an ice-cold dish but caresses his woman with the gentlest of hands.

Maxx, the brutally righteous alpha boss with a claymore of moral ambiguity and way too many muscles.

“Actually do what?” Parrish asks, tilting his head at me. “Not Gamer Girl talk, but plain English.”

“Have a foursome with me.” I can’t believe I say that with a straight face.

Oh, you should feel the way the atmosphere in that room changes. If Maxx is hot lightning then all three boys plus me, that’s a cataclysmic storm, a once-in-a-millennium weather event that reshapes the landscape. I suddenly want it so badly that I can’t breathe, me and the three men that I love coming

together in a vibrant, explosive surge.

Could I ... with one of them ... and the next ... and then the last ... Is that too much?

There's the sound of someone in the hallway and we all go very still, listening. We've been playing this secret keeping game for a while now, and we're pretty damn good at it. *But I need to hear their answers! What crap timing is this?*

Note to self: if I ever write a book, I'll be *kind* to my characters. No way I would mess around with them like this. We could've been interrupted *after* they all told me their thoughts. Now I have to sit here and stew with the knowledge that I asked but they didn't answer. *Hazukashii* is right (basic meaning in Japanese: embarrassed).

Kimber pushes open the cracked door. Her face is as white as a sheet—especially impressive since she's been desperately trying for a tan all summer—and her hands are shaking. Tess is right behind her, putting a hand on her shoulder and offering a strong squeeze of either support or an implicit threat.

“Your sister here was kind enough to inform me about the wild parties you've been throwing in the wine cellar.” Tess is staring straight through me, her eyes a pair of twin swords aimed for my heart. She tilts her gaze to Parrish next; Maxx and Chasm are not spared. “Come with me *now* and show me which bottles you drank so that I can inventory how much money I'm going to owe Laverne. Mark my words: she *will* make me pay for it all.”

Tess releases Kimber and turns away, not bothering to wait for any sort of explanation.

There are no explanations to give.

This is not about alcohol or the wild parties we are most certainly not having down there.

“Fuck.” Chasm turns to look at the three of us, but what else is there to say? I think ‘fuck’ is the only appropriate word we can use to describe the situation.

We don't talk as we make our way to the cellar, but Parrish does slam his shoulder into Kimber's and growls at her before we leave the room.

“Nice work, shithead. See if I ever trust you with anything ever again.”

“This is Mom we're talking about,” Kimber gushes, and I'm surprised to find that I sympathize with her. “You know how she is! She interrogated me!”

Kimber stays behind as we head down the stairs and into the kitchen to find Tess waiting by the cellar door. Paul is there, too, sitting at the table and savoring a cup of coffee with a look as close to pure bliss as I've ever seen. Guessing the coffee in prison is shit? If ... if there's coffee in prison? IDK.

"I know you kids are going through a lot, but there's no excuse for minors imbibing alcohol," he mutters, but he makes absolutely no move to come down into the cellar with us.

Mm. Seems like he believes Tess' cover story. I pause as my grandmother walks into the kitchen, crossing her arms and shaking her head. I recognize that look: she's disappointed, but not in us. She's upset with herself for not figuring things out sooner, and she feels responsible.

"Kota, boys, your poor things. I don't agree with the drinking either, but I understand why you did it."

My heart warms, but then I look at Tess and it's easy to see we're not about to get a pass from her. Then again, the drinking is one thing, the kidnapping is a whole different animal.

Tess motions us into the cellar's shadows, closes the door behind us, and then we're left to stand there in the dark with her. Awkward silence abounds.

"Have you gone inside the vault yet?" Parrish asks, cutting right to the chase as usual. There are definite beads of sweat on his temples. The infallible sloth prince is terrified of the bestselling author mommy sloth. Later, I'll probably find this all funny. Just ... not today, satan.

"No." Tess is breathing hard now, too. Guess Parrish isn't the only one who's afraid. "Your sister admitted to knowing about the vault, but not what was inside of it."

"We just went down there to have sex." Maxx at least tries to come up with an explanation. Some time ago, that might've worked. Maybe. But definitely not today. My mother simply levels a look on him that promises she will never again buy what we're selling. At this point, there is no lie or game or manipulation we can use on her. She'll always suspect us of working on Justin's blackmail.

"This is what I want from you guys," she says, closing her eyes and inhaling deeply. It's like she's seeking some inner Zen that I never would've believed she had back when I first met her. Now, I feel like she's capable of amazing things. I find that my respect for her is growing back from the withered stump it once was. Tess opens her eyes. "No matter what happened

with Veronica, you tell the authorities that it was Justin who made the killing blow.”

We all go dead silent. A strange sense of relief flows through me. Well, if Tess thinks Veronica’s dead body is going to be in the vault, then she’ll be pleasantly surprised to find that isn’t the case. This could be a good thing.

“You said you didn’t know what was in the vault,” Parrish hisses as Chasm gives his hair a nervous yank.

“What else could it be? I saw Dakota and Kwang-seon with dirty fingernails and clothes. You all were in the wine cellar that night together. There’s no other rational explanation.” Tess gestures in the wrong direction, at a solid stone wall instead of the hidden door. “Just open it so I can assess the situation.”

“As you wish.” Parrish slides the false wine bottle out of the rack, lifts the top half of it up, and keys in the code. The door cracks, and he digs his fingers under the edge, hauling it open. The second set of stone steps descends down into the shadows of the vault itself. We’ve been setting the lights to a timer—on during the day, off at night. We might be kidnappers, but we’re not about to start torturing Veronica with sleep deprivation. Parrish uses the keypad to turn them back on, and then pauses as Tess pushes past him to descend the stairs.

“How is it that your father doesn’t even know about this?” she grumbles, probably not expecting a real answer.

“Laverne hates him, that’s why.” Parrish follows his mom with me behind him, the other two boys taking up the rear. When he gets to the bottom landing, Parrish keys in the final code and pushes the second door open.

We all crowd in at relatively the same time, turning as a group to look at Veronica in the corner. She’s sitting up, red hair mussed, eyes bloodshot and blinking away sleep. It takes her several seconds to recognize that Tess is with us, and her expression is one of absolute shock—and relief.

“Oh my God.” She stands up, running to the end of her chain and tripping so hard that she bangs her knees on the hard floor. “Mrs. Vanguard! Please help me! I’ve been down here for-fucking-ever.” Crocodile tears fill her eyes as she blinks up at Tess with an expression of sheer innocence.

“She’s alive.” Tess’ relief is so great that she sags slightly, putting an arm out to catch herself on the edge of a glass display case. One hand goes to her chest as she struggles to catch her breath. “Oh, thank God.”

“Justin wanted Dakota to kill her. We couldn’t think of any other solution to the problem.” Maxx looks down at Veronica as she waits for rescue, eyes fixed on Tess, hands clasped together in pleading.

“Enough talking. Get me *out of here*,” Veronica growls, but Tess ignores her.

“Amin Volli, you know he was getting in the house somehow. He was going to start shooting people.” I sound like I’m begging, but I needn’t bother. Tess really and truly is on our side. How could I have ever thought otherwise?

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me.” She stands up straight, swiping her hands down the front of her t-shirt. It has some book signing event listed on the back along with the year. I wonder if she’ll take me to her next book signing? That is, if we all live long enough to see one.

“Mrs. Vanguard?” Veronica yanks on the chain and then stares imploringly at her would-be rescuer. “Aren’t you going to let me go?”

“Let’s talk in the cellar.” Tess is the first to turn away, but not before pausing to ensure that Veronica has a bed, a toilet, food, and plenty of reading material. She purses her lips and heads for the door.

“Wait!” Veronica is screaming now. “Where the *fuck* do you think you’re going, you white trash whore!” She’s wailing now, in the midst of a full-blown temper tantrum.

Nobody pays her any attention.

“Tess has changed a lot, hasn’t she?” X asks, looking over at Parrish for confirmation. My preppy prince just shakes his head in disbelief and lets out a small laugh.

“I *told* you she was good. You all doubted me?” He practically puffs out his chest with the implication before tossing his hand lazily. “Next time, maybe you’ll all listen?”

Chas tosses Veronica a wry half-smirk.

“Looks like you’re stuck here for the time being. *Mian*.” He winks and takes off as she gapes after him, throwing out a very informal *sorry* in Korean as he goes. He’s still waving as he hits the steps.

X takes my hand and escorts me up to the cellar as Veronica screeches like a dying rabbit behind us. Do not look that sound up; it’ll haunt your dreams.

As soon as Parrish closes the vault door behind us, Tess starts talking.

“I’m assuming she’s been down here since the day she was reported

missing?” Tess looks at me this time, and I nod.

“We took her from a Camp Kellogg party.” I let that admission hang in the air as Tess cranes her neck so that she can look at her son, narrowing her eyes on him. He pretends not to notice that she’s silently chastising him for sneaking out yet again. “She provided the alcohol herself; we provided the Benzos.”

“Very efficient.” Tess sighs and reaches up her fingers to fluff her hair, eyes closed, one hip popped out. She looks so young right now, like she could be a friend of ours or something. That makes me smile. Only, she might *look* that way, but she acts like a crochety old lady sometimes. “So what was the deal with Justin exactly?” She opens her eyes to look at us, and it’s me that fills in again.

Getting the truth out feels damn good.

“The deal was that if I didn’t kill Veronica, he was going to pick someone in our family to die.” I exhale. That’s still a possibility now, isn’t it? As soon as the FBI calls him in for questioning, I’m going to pay the price. Sooner or later, I’ll end up back at his place. Alone. With nobody there to help me.

My eyes water, but I blink the tears away.

There’s no use in crying about it now—I’ll wait until after it happens.

“If we’re going to tell Agent Takahashi about this,” Maxx begins, adjusting his sling absently, “then we need her to promise to meet us somewhere he can’t see or hear us. Like down here.”

“The police are holding interviews inside an office that functions like a Faraday cage. That’s probably where she’ll take you.” Tess suggests this like she’s been there.

“A Faraday cage?” I ask, beyond surprised. “As in, *blocks signals and electromagnetic waves*?”

“Like that,” Tess says with a smile. “That’s where they questioned me and gave me the wire.” She sighs again, shaking her head in disbelief at the situation. We all know the wine cellar is (relatively) safe, but she must know that, too. I bet she came down here and checked it out with the bug detector, probably crawled on the floors to look for any self-contained cameras that might be stashed. She *is* a crime writer, after all.

We watch her pace briefly, hands on her hips.

“Itsumi will be over in the morning to pick Paul up.” There’s a hesitation there that I recognize from my own mind. This is a tricky situation, one that I

have no clue how best to handle. “Where did the Benzos come from?”

“Dad’s office,” Parrish admits, and now it’s his turn to fade to a ghostly white color. “I stole them.”

Tess says nothing, but she doesn’t have to. We all know what she’s thinking.

“Letting her go might be a worse idea than keeping her here,” Chasm admits, reading Tess’ expression for what it is. Her moral compass is spinning wildly, just like mine is. Some hard lines must be crossed if we want to get out of this without prison time. Or death. Or both.

“Goddamn it.” Tess turns and paces, pausing to run her thumb across the label of a wine bottle. She stares at it for a moment before pulling her hand away, like she’s actively resisting the urge to have a drink. “You *know* how I feel about kidnapped children, but ... this looks really, *really* bad for your father.”

“I know,” Parrish moans, putting his face in his hands in a rare display of vulnerability. We *are* his closest people though, so I guess it makes sense. Nobody else in the world is privy to Parrish when he’s this raw. Not even Kimber or Paul. Just us. Tess, Chas, Maxx, me. I’d feel good about that under different circumstances. He drops his hands. “Do you still think we should tell Agent Takahashi?”

“I’m not sure,” Tess admits. “I really have to think about this. Yes, it looks bad for Paul—for all of us, actually. But if Veronica is released, Justin won’t be able to resist retaliating. That’s how he’s going to lose this. He’s smart, but he cannot fucking *stand* someone else getting the jump on him.” She smiles at us, but the expression doesn’t reach her eyes. “You all handled this well; I’m impressed.”

“You’re praising us for kidnapping a girl?” Parrish asks, dumbfounded, and Tess laughs.

“I’m praising a bunch of teenagers for holding their own against an intelligent and omnipotent serial killer. You’re all doing well. Just hang in a little longer.” Here’s where she pauses, and I know something more intense is coming. A frown takes over her lips and her eyes go dark. “This is the end: no more secrets. If there is literally *anything* else going on, I need to know about it. If he asks you to do something under the threat of hurting people, tell me first. You never know what solutions we might come up with together.”

I wait several heartbeats before exhaling. I'm the first to reach my hand out, like I'm in an old-school Saturday morning cartoon, like this is *Captain Planet* or something.

"I'm in." I look at the others with a dead serious expression.

"Um, I love you, Little Sister," Chasm begins, crossing his arms obstinately, "but I'm not putting my hand in for some team-building exercise." He gives me a more genuine smile to accent the joke.

"I'll pass, too. Thanks." Parrish tucks his hands in his pockets, but Tess reaches out and puts her hand on mine.

"Thank you, Dakota," she tells me honestly, and Parrish gags.

"Now that my mother's done it, I'm *definitely* not doing it." He steps back as Maxx steps forward, adding his hand into the pile.

"As long as Dakota makes it through this alive, that's enough for me."

"Oh my God, fucking overachiever," Chas grumbles, and then he's in, too. Parrish makes zero move to join us, eyes narrowed. "Would this be a good time to say that I kept part of the bloody wedding dress?"

Tess goes still, an unearthly paralysis overtaking her before she sags in defeat.

"What bloody wedding dress?" she asks tiredly, just before Parrish adds his hand to the pile.

"This is the first and last time I'm doing this." He yanks his hand back suddenly and looks to Chas. "Well, where is it? And whose blood is it?"

"I don't know, but maybe if we give it to Agent Takahashi, and she tests it, we could find out. Maybe, just maybe this could be evidence to use against Caroline and, through her, back to Justin." Chasm shrugs like it's no big deal, but holy crap, this is a huge deal!

"Caroline's wedding dress?" Tess confirms, her voice tight with anger. She somehow reminds me of this article I read, about how brown widow spiders from Africa are systemically hunting and eating the Native American black widow spider. Tess is the brown widow ready to attack and eat the black widow. Gross, but an apt metaphor, I'd say.

"Caroline's wedding dress," I agree as we all withdraw our hands. As I stand there and think back on the whole ordeal, I realize there are other missing parts as well. Starting with Delphine. "So, you remember Justin's other daughter, Delphine, right?" I ask, and something odd shifts in Tess' gaze. "She's involved. Not sure if she kills people, but she helps Justin with

small tasks.”

“Lena Shaw’s daughter.” She sounds so sad when she says that, her gaze faraway, mind locked in a different time. She shakes her head to clear the memories and looks right at me. “Lena was raped by Justin; I didn’t find out about that until much later.”

My blood goes cold as I remember his casual smirk, the glint in his eyes, when he told me that Delphine’s conception resulted from a ‘brief high school fling’. *Floored. I am friggin’ floored.*

“Delphine is ...” I don’t have to finish the question. Tess gives me a look that says the answer is ‘yes’. Could this information change Delphine’s mind about Justin? Is this a way for me to get her on my side? Or is it disgustingly insensitive of me to even think about using such delicate information that way?

“What about the affair with Dad?” Parrish asks, and Tess’ face scrunches up. Now, it’s Maxx that she’s staring at.

“I know that my father transferred the money from Paul’s account,” he whispers, sounding horrifically embarrassed by the admission. “I’m sure there’s no affair going on, but I’m also wondering if Delphine has little choice but to play the part.”

That occurred to me, that Justin was blackmailing Delphine the way he’s been blackmailing us. If that’s the case, then I’m not sure that I’ll ever be able to get her to admit it. Whatever he’s holding over her must be huge. That is, if he *is* holding something over her.

Nobody answers Maxx’s question aloud.

I wrack my brain for more secrets that I might need to tell Tess. JJ comes to mind. Remember what I told you when we first met? *There’s always a sense of dread in me when I think about the box. I try not to think of the box very often.*

I clear my throat and look at Chasm.

“The box,” I begin, and he smacks himself in the forehead.

“*Geureom*. The box.” He glances at Tess, but she lifts her hand in protest.

“I have a feeling this is going to be a long night. Let me get a corkscrew.” Tess pads up the stairs and Parrish calls out after her.

“Bring four extra glasses.”

“I’ll bring you some sodas,” Tess says absently before opening the door to the kitchen.

“She might be marginally better than before, but she’s still Tess, isn’t she?” I ask and Parrish smiles. He doesn’t have to answer; we both understand now.

“Should I tell her about the corpse?” X whispers, and Chasm cringes.

“Somebody has to,” Chas admits, but then we’re all looking at Parrish and he sighs.

“I’ve got this.” He fortifies himself for his mother’s return.

When Tess comes back, she has *five* sodas in her hands, and looks a bit embarrassed about it.

“I’m not going to let him drive me to drink,” she declares proudly, passing the cans out.

“Not even if we tell you there’s a dead girl—that we didn’t kill—buried in grandma’s backyard?” Parrish asks and Tess looks longingly at the racks of wine before she cracks her own soda and takes a long swig.

“Okay, guys, start talking.”

And so we do.

The title 'CHAPTER 25' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '25' is in pink. The text is set against a background of dark, gnarled tree branches and a large, dark green heart shape. The overall aesthetic is dark and artistic.

CHAPTER 25

“You can’t call it a gun,” Parrish tells me with a sly smile. We’re in his room, packing up his new tattoo stuff like the ink and the ‘machine’. I called it a ‘tattoo gun’ even though I know that’s not the right term. I can’t seem to stop myself from teasing him though. “It’s for making art not war.” His eyes are hooded, an invitation.

We’ve been in this room five minutes and the tension between us is already making my head spin.

If Justin hadn’t intervened in our relationship, it would’ve been me and Parrish alone forever. There’s a strange sadness to that even as I’m rejoicing at the idea of having Chasm and Maxx in my life. When I’m with Parrish alone though, it seems more like the former.

It hits me that I feel like that when I’m alone with Chasm or Maxx, too. I can imagine being with that one guy and only him. I pull in a sharp breath and Parrish stills, his mouth in a pouty downturn, his attention on my lips. I look up and under my lashes at his sharp face, at the guy I hated so much that I couldn’t stop thinking about him, and I know I’m the only kidnap victim in the history of life who’s glad she was kidnapped.

I have the Banks; I have the Vanguard; I’m not a sibling to Parrish even if we share a mom.

That makes me smile, and I look away suddenly. Parrish isn’t shy about hooking my chin and pulling my face back to his.

“Are you okay?” he asks me, and I have to blink several times to figure out what the expression on his face means. He’s genuinely concerned as to whether I’m okay or not. Guess ... that’s what I get for trying to flirt with him and be all coquettish and whatever.

“You genuinely did not get that I was flirting with you just then?” I ask, and he wrecks me completely with a single smirk.

“Oh, I did. I just wanted to see how you’d react when I questioned you about it. As always, the pissy little gamer girl snob who stole the bedroom with the lake view. No wonder I didn’t like you.” I punch him in the arm, and he grabs me, yanking me roughly up against him.

“You push me down stairs, slap me, and now you punch me? You’re going to pay royally for that.” He cups me between the legs with one hand while his other arm curls around my waist. Lucky for that since my knees sag, and I almost fall to the floor. “How about I tease you until you’re apologizing profusely and begging me to make love to you?”

“Get off of me.” I shove at his chest, and he releases me, hands up in surrender.

“As you wish,” he teases as I gape at him and resist the urge to punch him in the back. What a total dick. He picks up the tattoo machine as I glare at him, putting it into a white leather duffel bag.

Laverne came home this morning from another one of her business trips, bringing the entire staff along with her. She wasn’t pleased that we were all still here, and she looked at her son like he was scum on the bottom of her shoe. No part of her believes he’s the Slayer, but she blames him for being framed somehow. Like, I do not understand that woman at all.

Seeing her makes me feel sorry for Paul Vanguard, of all people, and Parrish, too. Laverne isn’t a very nice person. For example, she kicked us all out of her house, told Paul to handle his shit before he makes her look bad, and scowled at me as she stormed out of the kitchen.

Since we were planning on moving back to the ice palace today anyway, it doesn’t matter. Good riddance. Back when I was so excited about this house, after the fire, the boys warned me that I wouldn’t like living in a gothic palace because Laverne was going to be around. They weren’t wrong about that though I’d be remiss if I didn’t give credit to the secret vault with its keypad tucked inside a faux wine bottle.

They crept down the stone stairs, the sense of someone strange at their

back. With only fat, dripping tallow candles, they couldn't see much. The smoke was vile and dark, and the only things in that damp and dreary cellar that were viler and darker were the spiders that hung from webs in all four corners.

I chuckle. Okay, so the wine cellar and the vault weren't as cool as all that, but the vibe was there.

"What the hell are you doing?" Parrish mumbles, staring at me like I'm crazy. "You're so fucking *weird*." He snaps his hands into the black latex gloves, grabs me by the face and kisses me so hard that my toes curl inside my shoes. I swear that I can *feel* the needle of that tattoo machine digging into my skin, marking me, branding me with his art.

I want another one. Is it because tattoos are addicting or because he is?

"Tonight," he begins, his left hand slipping up and under my shirt to rub my bare lower back. His other one rests possessively on my hip. "Tonight, we'll be back in our rooms." He purrs this last part at me, lifting up a lock of my lime-green hair and twirling it around his fingers. His eyes are, as usual, a mouthwatering feast. Caramel and honey and black tea in a white mug. I put my hands on his chest as we gaze at each other. "What are you up to, Gamer Girl? Checking to see how much heart I have now?"

"Video game references this early in the morning, huh?" I ask, but I'm tickled pink. My body arches toward him, and the newfound intimacy between us sparks, making me feel grabby and needy toward him. My hands curl in his shirt fabric, and I yank him toward me for a kiss.

Parrish groans against my lips, but even the feel of my mouth and the grind of my hips as I lean into his erection, those aren't enough to keep him from trying for a snarky comeback.

"What I meant was, I was born without a heart; I was heartless before you came along." He nips my lower lip, and I swoon. But just a little. Like a tiny, itty-bitty swoon. "You gave me my heart." Now I shove away from him. Or I try to. He doesn't let me get anywhere. Parrish pulls me even closer, putting his mouth up against my ear. "Struggling with the truth?"

"You've always had a heart, Parrish Vanguard." The serious nature of my words causes him to pull back just a bit, frowning prettily at me. He doesn't want to hear this, but it's true. "You and Chasm and Maxx, you guys have the ultimate bromance; there's love there." Parrish curls his lip at me, but he knows it's true. "The love you have for Tess? From the beginning, you put

her feelings first.”

“I—” he starts, but then there’s a loud rap of knuckles against the doorframe. We break apart, but just barely, looking over to see Laverne standing in the doorway. She looks absolutely disgusted to see us in such an intimate position. “Grandmother.” The word is so formal and dry, like Parrish is beyond done with her behavior.

“I see your proposal to Lumen Hearst was nothing but a farce.” Laverne scoffs. “You’re just like your father, you know that?”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing?” Parrish quips back, releasing me and turning around to face his grandma. “He has his faults, but at least he cares.”

This is literally the first time I’ve ever heard Parrish defend Paul; I’m impressed.

“I’d like to speak to Mia for a moment,” Laverne says, and there’s something about her use of the name ‘Mia’ that makes me wonder if I should refuse entirely. I don’t want to make tense family relations any worse, so I step around Parrish.

His hand comes down and grabs my wrist, gloved fingers squeezing hard.

“The pair of you can speak right here. There’s no way in hell that I’m letting you take Dakota away from me.” Parrish maintains his grip, his hazel gaze fixed on Laverne.

She stares at him for a long while, lips pursed tight, and then shakes her head.

“So be it then.” With a tired sigh, she moves into the room, heading for the windows on either side of the bed and yanking apart the heavy drapes. Sunlight floods the shadowed room, and I feel a strange sense of foreboding on such a bright and beautiful late summer day. “You’re aware that if you don’t marry Lumen Hearst, you won’t see a penny of my fortune?” Laverne unlocks one of the old windows and slides it up. They’re beautiful windows, paned with old wavy glass, on a weight and pulley system.

I glance sharply at Parrish as he releases my wrist, grabbing his bag and zipping it up before tossing it over his shoulder.

“If that’s what you came to talk about—to intimidate or threaten Dakota in order to get me to obey—then you’re wasting your time.” Parrish turns to head for the door, nodding with his chin at me to indicate I should follow.

“That’s not what I came here for,” Laverne continues, but we don’t stop walking.

As we're moving toward the door, a portion of the wall—the fucking wall!—swings forward. Rather than a built-in bookshelf, there's a hidden door and a man standing inside the wall.

I don't recognize him at first, dressed in an impeccable suit with his hair slicked back, manner upright and aristocratic. But then I see the smile. I actually see the smile before the eyes, before the stag mask, before the bit of blood leaking through the white of his dress shirt.

It's Amin Volli.

The man is terrifying. He hasn't just changed his hair (slicked back black instead of curly mussy brown) or his clothes (tailored men's couture instead of dorky tweed suit with a yellow bow tie), he's changed his entire fucking persona. His *aura* is different.

But that smile—vicious, cutting, deranged—it's remained the same.

Parrish reaches for my elbow, but then he's stumbling as Laverne stabs something into his arm and injects it. He's only on his feet for a few more seconds. Mr. Volli doesn't just step out of the wall, he runs at me and grabs me around the neck, arm squeezing.

I can't breathe, my fingers clawing at his expensive suit jacket, popping off a cuff link.

Amin doesn't stay still as he's choking me. He drags me back and into the wall with him, pulling the door shut behind us. Then it really is just me and something vile and dark.

My elbow comes back and hits him in the bloody spot that I noticed before he grabbed me, but the pain doesn't do much more than make him grunt.

"Relax, Miss Prior. You'll be home soon enough."

I'm still struggling as he drags me through the dark passage between Parrish's and Laverne's bedrooms. *No wonder that bitch tried to get me to use this specific guestroom! There's a secret fucking passage!*

Guess we know how Volli was getting around the house, how he was hearing things that should've been blocked by the signal jammer, picked up by the bug detector.

Good. Old-fashioned. Sleuthing.

Ugh. Hangovers are the worst. I haven't had very many in my short sixteen

years of life, but the few I've gotten have been brutal—this one especially. An ice pick digs at my frontal lobe, and I half-dream Danyella standing over me, wagging a scholarly finger.

“The prefrontal cortex isn't fully developed until age twenty-five; consider and reconsider every move you make.”

I startle to a seated position, blinking myself back to reality in my fairy-tale princess bedroom at Justin's place. For a whole minute there, I can't remember if I've been here all along and never left, or ... did I forget coming back here? But I wasn't going to come back here.

No matter what: I wasn't going to come back.

Not willingly.

“Good morning, Princess.” Justin is sitting on the edge of my bed, not looking at me. He seems particularly interested in the revolver he's holding in his hand. He smiles prettily as he looks back at me, and every instinct I have tells me that I need to run. *I'm not going to make it out of this house alive.* Every cell that I have agrees with that assessment as well.

“How did I get here?” I whisper, trying to keep the fear from my voice. Justin feeds off the discomfort in others. Fear, anger, and pain are good nutrition in his book.

He laughs at me, like I'm stupid.

Then he puts the gun to my forehead.

My hands curl in the blankets as a gentle sea breeze rustles the lace curtains on my windows. I can hear the waves of Lake Washington hitting the shore, the distant sound of a family on a boat, Caroline's laughter from the garden. I guess the windows aren't not nailed shut anymore. Good sign? *No, very, very bad sign. He doesn't think a secure tower room is necessary anymore. Because—*

Justin isn't smiling anymore.

“How many times have I warned you?” he asks me, but I can't speak. My mouth is too dry—not just from fear but from being strangled to the point of passing out. *Where is Amin Volli now?*

“Warned me?” I ask, trying to decide if playing dumb is even an option. “About what?”

Justin isn't amused by my antics, not anymore. We both know what he's talking about. *“Good girls get rewarded; bad girls are punished.”* I am the latter girl in that statement now. I am a bad girl. I'm going to be punished.

Possibly killed.

Killed. I'm going to be killed. I'm so scared. I've never been that scared for my own life before. Maybe Maxx was right? Maybe I believed deep down that Justin would never actually kill me. Like, I'm a main character in his story, aren't I? You can't kill off main characters.

But I'm not. Tess is the main character. Justin is the main character. Nothing else matters.

"Where should I start, Dakota?" Justin asks with a sigh. He moves the gun from my forehead and rests it in his lap, staring at the floor before he looks back at me. The rage in his face contains depths that rival the deepest underwater caverns in the ocean. No living thing could escape those depths. I'm already drowning in them. "Did I not tell you to choose your pawns wisely? You did the exact opposite of that, using coincidences and crushes to make your choices."

I crawl out from beneath the covers, throwing my arms around the man who fathered me.

It'll be the last time I ever hug him.

"Please, Dad. Fly to another country, somewhere without an extradition treaty. Live there peacefully and start over. Just let this revenge stuff go." I squeeze him even harder, and he lets me. He's not even tense about it. That's how little it matters to him. "It's going to destroy you."

Justin turns to me, his face just inches from the top of my head.

"Get on your knees and beg for forgiveness." He's dead serious. His voice is a cold warning, a threat. My pride is wounded immediately because I know that I'm going to do it. If I don't, he might shoot me. I think he cares less about getting caught than he does about being disobeyed.

I slide down to the floor, still wearing the same outfit I had on at Laverne's. I hope Parrish is okay, but I can't imagine Laverne would allow anything serious to happen to him. What is Tess thinking right now? Will she save me? Will she come here? Or maybe Saffron will break in and rescue me, spirit the princess away from the tower?

"Daddy." It's the only word that'll work on him. If anything will work on him at all. I look up at Justin as I sit dutifully on the rug with my palms on my thighs. "Please forgive me for whatever I've done. If you could explain —"

He places the barrel of the gun against my forehead again.

“Is this your idea of begging?” he asks with a sharp laugh. It’s not the only thing sharp about him today: his outfit, his watch, his hair, his shoes. He’s a thirty-six-year-old self-made multimillionaire. He rose from the ashes of his destroyed life like a phoenix, but instead of embracing his second chance at life, he’s squandering it. “I find it sorely lacking, Mia. Where is your sincerity, hmm?” He puts his finger on the trigger as sweat rolls down the sides of my face. “I *told* you that dogs weren’t allowed at the hunt, but you brought two bitches with you anyway, didn’t you?”

I swallow hard, wondering if it’s best to stay quiet or speak up. I decide on the former. The more Justin talks, the more I can understand which parts of the last few days he’s the angriest with. I don’t want to implicate myself in more things than he knows about.

“Maxim and I had a deal, but he broke it. If you want to blame someone for the events at the hunt, then blame him.” Justin sighs and uses his free hand to push back some of his dark hair. The other hand remains firmly on the weapon. He leans down toward me. “I don’t make empty threats.”

Justin pulls the trigger, and I choke on my fear.

My vision goes white around the edges, and I nearly fall to my side on the floor.

Only ... I’m still here. There was no bullet in that gun.

“Have you ever played Russian roulette, Princess?” he asks, drawing the gun back and opening the cylinder. Justin shows me the five empty chambers ... and the single bullet. He spins the cylinder and then slams it back into the gun before putting it to my head again.

“And then, on top of all that, *you brought the FBI into our game?*” He lets out a barking laugh and pulls the trigger again. I jump and slam my eyelids shut, but nothing happens. I think I might be crying now, too, but I can’t help it. I’m not ready to die. Maybe everyone says that, but I’m only sixteen and there are so many things I haven’t experienced. Why can’t I just live happily ever after? I don’t understand why things have to be this way.

“Please.” This time, the word is a soft, gentle whisper. I force my eyes open, my entire body shaking as Justin maintains his hold on the gun, face impassive. “Daddy, I’m sorry. I didn’t know Tess was bringing the FBI. I didn’t know Maxx had a deal with you. I especially didn’t know anything about Saffron, or I would’ve told you.”

“Sure you didn’t. You think I don’t know what you little bastards are up

to? Did you imagine that dumping the heart pin cam or tossing your phones made you safe? The bug detector was a cute addition, I'll grant you that. Oh, and your hikes?" He laughs hysterically and pulls the trigger again.

I turn to the side and throw up. It's just water, but I can't seem to keep it down. I'm on my hands and knees now, but my pride took off after the first pull on the trigger. It's *not* an empty gun, and Justin doesn't know which chamber the bullet is in.

He really doesn't care if he kills me right now, does he?

"Get up and face your punishment like a real woman." He reaches out and grabs hold of my hair, yanking me back into place. The pain in my scalp is *nothing* compared to the fear of the gun in his hand. "Tess, I might've been able to look past. I find it funny when she rides in on her white horse." He smiles wryly at me. "But the kidnapper? Absolutely not."

Another pull on the trigger. I manage to keep my eyes open this time, tears streaming down my face. Not counting the first shot—since he spun the cylinder and reset the game—that's three shots. Out of six. Half of my chances to live are gone.

"I never know where Saffron is!" I scream this out because, like, fuck this guy. If he's going to shoot me anyway, why should I even try? "I've never in my whole life known where Saffron was or what she was up to. I can't control everything that everyone else does; I'm just one person!"

Justin leans back down toward me again, resting his elbow against the perfectly creased slacks covering his knees.

"I watch you with drones when you're on your hikes." He throws that out at me with another laugh. "Did you know that? I use an aerial zoom cam with superb magnification. A friend in the military sent it to me." He sits up straight again, withdrawing the gun and studying it with a keen eye. "There's nowhere you can go to hide from me."

I'm doing my best to control my breathing, my gaze shifting to the nightstand in search of a weapon. If I attack him, that's better than him point-blank shooting me in the face. He only has one bullet and even if he does fire, it might not hit a vital spot if I'm moving.

"One of the things I like most about the dark web is the freedom of commerce. If someone is willing to sell something, why shouldn't it be up for sale? Organs. Virginity. Sex. Murder. Fair game." He rises to his feet, and I see my chance.

I lunge for the table, but he grabs me by the hair before I can even get to my feet. The gun is jammed against my temple, and the trigger is pulled *again*. I'm still alive, but I can't get free from Justin's grip.

"If I'm murdered, Raúl—or one of my other pawns—will arrange to have everyone you know and love killed. All it takes is money, Mia, and I have plenty of it." He shoots me again, and I'm absolutely convinced that I'm going to die.

I don't.

I'm still fucking here.

But that was the last empty chamber.

I turn my gaze to Justin's, my hands curled around his, still trying to extricate myself from his grip.

"This is your *last* chance. I want you in my life, sweetheart, but I don't abide by disobedience, lies, and disrespect." He tucks the gun in his waistband and draws out a knife. I throw my body forward, and he holds tight to my hair, pulling it taut and slicing the knife through the strands so that the sudden loss of tension causes me to fall.

I stumble and hit the nightstand hard, crashing to the floor and splitting my chin open. When I reach up my hands, I find that I have very little hair left.

"Just like Mulan," Justin says with another maniacal laugh. I turn as he throws the remnants of my green and black hair down at me. They flutter and drift in the breeze, coming to rest in a sprinkled display on the rug in front of me. "Remember when she uses the sword to chop her hair off? No? You Gen Z idiots only know TikTok and ten second attention spans." He scowls at me then, and it's the ugliest expression he's ever worn. "Your generation doesn't appreciate how great Disney used to be." He sighs again and drops the knife by his side. "By the way, you've lost the option of choice. People are dying because of you."

He backs away toward the door where, of course, Raúl is waiting. Just in case. As always, it's never just Justin. Raúl is always fucking there to watch his back. The piece of shit arsonist flicks his lighter and smirks at me. I can see the flame reflected in his gaze, can remember the fire at the house, how I almost lost my new siblings before I ever really got to know them.

I need to kill Raúl first.

That was my mistake: I need to take out the pawns before I go for the king. Or, in this case, his bishop. Just like he did to me, trying to kill Maxx.

“Clean yourself up while I decide if you’re going to be a blonde or a brunette.” Justin heads for the door and leaves Raúl to watch over me.

“I’ll be doing your hair,” he says with an infuriating twist of his lips. “You should count yourself lucky that he’s not shaving you bald.”

I look at the open windows—no longer nailed shut—and I truly consider jumping out of them. Even if I break my leg, I’ll get up and run somehow. I’m pumped so full of adrenaline right now, it feels like I could move mountains. My hand comes up automatically, tugging on the strangely short strands of my hair. My head feels absurdly light, in a way I can’t ever remember experiencing.

I turn back to Raúl, wondering what weapons he might have on him besides the lighter.

“Who has he killed?” I ask, trying to maintain some façade of calm. If I let on how badly I’m hurting, how afraid I am, Raúl will lap it up like a vampire bat sipping fresh blood. Justin’s lackey gives me a sick smile and flicks his lighter again.

“I’m sure you’ll find out soon enough,” he tells me, lifting a brow as he looks me over. “Personally, I don’t think you’re bold enough to pull off being a brunette. Go blonde instead. That vapid heiress look suits your sister well enough.”

“Eat a bag of dicks,” I grind out, standing up and reaching for a ballpoint pen on my nightstand. Raúl sees me go for it, but I wonder if he knows that I’m planning on shoving it into his neck. Blood drips slowly from my chin, running down my neck and staining the t-shirt I’m wearing.

“Did you hear about the fire at Seamus’ cabin?” he asks then, and I almost lose the grip on the pen. “Such a shame that he didn’t make it out alive.”

“What?” I ask, my eyes widening in disbelief. Seamus is ... he’s dead? *Does Chasm know? Is that why he looked at his phone the way he did? No. He can’t possibly know. This story isn’t true; Raúl is lying. Why would Justin kill his own business partner?* I swallow my reaction as Raúl grins at me, absolutely loving the big reveal.

“You know why he died? Because of *you*.” Raúl snorts and tucks his lighter into the pocket of his navy-blue suit with the white polka dots. “How does that feel, knowing your boyfriend’s now an orphan because of you?” Raúl steps to the side and gestures for me to follow him as I shatter and seethe and come apart inside. “One might say that your very *existence* is a

threat.”

It's not true. He's trying to rile me up. Killing Seamus would be the quickest way to get caught.

Justin is far too careful a monster, and Raúl is a *liar*.

“Come downstairs and get your hair done,” Raúl instructs breezily, “or maybe none of your friends will have parents left.” He turns and leaves the way he came, and I follow. I pocket the pen, and he knows I’ve pocketed the pen, but I’m not going to kill him ... today. I’m not going to kill him *today*.

The girl with the short brown hair—espresso dark, like her mom—stares at me from the mirror that also serves as a spy cam. I can’t seem to stop staring at her. The eyes are the same, if a little sad. The mouth is the same, if twisted into a morose frown. But the hair?

I put my hands on the edges of the countertop, leaning over and squeezing my eyes shut.

He was going to kill me today. For real. It's through sheer chance alone that I'm alive.

I open my eyes again and look back up at the freshly cut bob I’m sporting. It took me *years* to grow my hair out, but I can’t even grieve the loss because I’m just grateful to still be alive. *If Seamus is really dead, Chasm will be devastated. And if Seamus is dead, then is Laurent dead, too? And maybe I should spare a thought to my own mortality because it seems like my number is finally up.*

“Mia.” Delphine moves into the doorway behind me, a beautiful pink sundress complementing the delicate diamond pendant at her neck. If she knows that Justin tried to kill me, she doesn’t show it. “Daddy wants to see you downstairs. There’s someone here to see you.”

I look over at her, but I can’t summon the energy to care. Now that the adrenaline rush has faded, the only emotions I feel are fatigue and frustration. How the fuck do I get out of here? When I last looked out the window, I saw Mr. Volli in the bushes, staring up at me.

Wish I’d known then that he was *watching* me more than he was hunting me.

A shudder overtakes me as I stand up straight and then follow Delphine.

I'm not about to resist, not after that display earlier. If I'm going to find a way out of this, I have to hold it together. *I'm so tired. I'm tired of being strong. I'm tired of fighting a losing battle.*

Delphine guides me to the top of the staircase, and that's when I look down and spot Agent Takahashi in the foyer with Justin. She has Agent Sam with her along with a couple of uniformed police officers. My eyes nearly pop out of my head and go bouncing down the stairs. Wouldn't that be a sight? Or ... not because my eyeballs would be in the entryway? *IDK.*

I almost collapse, using the banister to keep myself upright. *This is a good thing, right? It must be a good thing. Tess sent Agent Takahashi after me!* I force my shaky legs to keep me standing and then I walk as slowly and calmly down the stairs as I'm able.

"Hello Dakota," Takahashi says, smiling at me. "Your hair looks nice."

"Thank you." I stand still as a statue next to Delphine and ... I can't even look at him. But I can feel him, that cold rage of his like an ice storm giving me frostbite, killing off little pieces of me every day. How much of Dakota Banks is left? I want to fight for her, but it's so damn hard. "My father forced me to cut and dye it."

That's as much defiance as I can manage in front of him. He seems to find that funny, throwing an arm around my shoulders. I stiffen up immediately, my back ramrod straight, my eyes on the FBI agent standing in the Seattle Slayer's house. How is this happening, and he's not been arrested yet? The culprit is right fucking here!

"You know how kids are: they don't understand the implications of small actions. A woman with an unnatural hair color stands out in a bad way, particularly in Medina. If Mia wants to succeed in life, she's going to have to learn to make appropriate sacrifices."

My heart shudders at that last word. I can feel it digging into me, burrowing into my skin. *Sacrifices. Like Seamus? No. But if Raúl were going to lie, why not lie about someone like Maxine or one of the boys? What if he really is dead and I'm in denial?*

"I see." Agent Takahashi turns to me and tries on a polite smile. It used to work for her, when Agent Murphy was playing bad cop, but not anymore. It looks haunted to me. "I was hoping to get another interview from you back at our office."

"Mia, would you like to go with Agent Takahashi and answer some

questions?” Justin asks as Agent Takahashi’s new partner—this Sam guy—walks in a small circle around the foyer, taking in the art on the walls, peering at the decorative vases, smiling at Raúl. Since Raúl doesn’t know how to smile properly, he gives this bitchy twitch of his mouth and stands there with his hands clasped in front of him, like he can barely resist the urge to play with his lighter.

“I’m not sure I’ll be of much help, but I’ll go.” I try to bite back the wild eagerness that I feel inside. Delphine watches me carefully, but I can’t decide if that’s because she wants Justin to be arrested or if she’s afraid that he’ll be.

“Excellent. Can I give you a ride to the station?” she asks as Agent Sam pauses next to Justin and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“You’ve worked with Amin Volli in the past, right?” He acts like this is a casual question, but I know that it’s not. Justin shrugs, like Mr. Volli hasn’t been a crucial part of his plans. Without the psycho dude in the stag mask, where would he be today? Hmm? Where would we go tomorrow?

“He was one of Mia’s teachers. Seems like Whitehall is really going downhill these days. They’ll let anyone into those four walls as long as they come with a professional recommendation.” He sighs, like the entire scenario is troublesome but not overly concerning.

“You wouldn’t mind then if I took a quick look around?” Sam puts his hands on his hips and offers Justin a patronizing smile. Ah. Innocuous looking ‘Sam’ is the bad cop now? Got it. *Please fucking help me and don’t die this time!* I have a feeling that if Agent Murphy were alive, she’d have caught Justin by now. Takahashi is too by the book, way too cautious.

“You’ve already searched my property twice, but if you find it amusing to do it a third time, by all means.” Justin turns to me, and our eyes meet. I almost throw up again. *Click. Click. Click.* The sound of the empty gun going off, it echoes in my head, it forces me to relieve those gruesome moments of knowing that I was going to die. Being sure of it. “Go on, Princess. But hurry home afterward. We’re having veggie burgers for dinner.”

Justin pats me on the head as he turns and leaves the room, and I find myself standing there in a state of shock. I can’t move. I can’t speak. I don’t know what to do.

“Be good, baby sister. And watch out for the reporters. There’s a horde of them gathered at the end of the road.” Delphine gives me a kiss on the cheek and retreats up the stairs to her room.

I'm alone.

With the FBI.

When Agent Takahashi takes me outside and puts me in her car, I wait until we're completely through the gate before I break down and start crying.

There are no questions asked or answered in the nondescript black sedan that we're riding in. All of that comes later, after we've arrived at an office building at the edge of town. It's set on a nice, wide lot with a grassy front area and plenty of pine trees in the back. It has a dated, seventies sort of look to it, one that carries through to the inside.

We head to a room in the basement that's outfitted with a wooden kitchen table and some chairs. That's it. There's nothing else in the room, not even any windows. Itsumi Takahashi pulls out a chair for me and indicates that I should sit.

I do.

I stopped crying about fifteen minutes into the drive, and I don't think I'll be starting up again.

Agent Sam doesn't join us—I think he stayed at Justin's house—so it's just me and Takahashi.

"Please help me," I whisper, and she sighs so heavily that I consider picking up my chair and throwing it against the wall. She's sighing like she's definitely *not* going to help me.

"Your mother claimed that you were kidnapped by the Seattle Slayer." She folds her hands on the table, long dark hair falling forward to brush her arms. "Is that true? Were you kidnapped, Dakota?"

"Not just that—he tried to kill me." I can barely get the words out. They're small and husky and strange. "He played Russian roulette with me." The tears are falling again, but no sound accompanies them. My melancholy is nothing but salt and water.

"Here." She pulls a small packet of tissues from her jacket pocket and hands them over to me. "What do you mean by Russian roulette?"

I laugh at that. Okay. I see this is what we're going to do.

So I tell Agent Takahashi everything. Every detail. Every single second that transpired between making out with Parrish and ending up in this chair.

I'm *meticulous* with the details.

"Most people who suffer trauma have difficulty remembering details," she says immediately after, and I gape at her. "It's a difficult story to believe."

"Go check the wall!" I'm yelling now, throwing out a hand to indicate the built-in bookcase that I can see in my mind. "There's a passage in Parrish's bedroom. I couldn't even make this shit up." I lean forward and I know that I sound like a crazy person, but I'm sixteen years old and I CAN'T FUCKING TAKE IT ANYMORE. "He kidnapped me, and he tried to kill me, and you're going to send me back there to die." I snarl this last part out, completely past caring.

It's over now. Either he owns the FBI or he's so good at what he does, they can't catch him.

"We have several witnesses who claim to have seen you leave Laverne Vanguard's property on your own—including one of my own agents." Itsumi sits back in her chair and folds her arms. "There's security footage of you leaving."

"Lies. Deepfake video. Or Justin messing with the feed. He could've pulled a different instance of me walking away and inserted it into the security footage. Also, if your agent saw me, why not stop me from leaving?"

"You're not a prisoner and you're not under arrest—yet. Walking off Laverne's property was perfectly within your rights. And no, it's not a deepfake and nobody has altered our camera feeds. The bureau isn't a joke, Dakota. We have the best of the best working for us."

"No, you have good people, great people, but you don't have Justin Prior. I'm sorry, but maybe you're just not capable of catching him." I glare at her, taking out some of my rage for Justin on a person that I know isn't going to kill me. "Show me the video."

She does, and holy fuck, it really does look like I'm walking down the driveway, speaking with an agent, and then leaving through the gate. But obviously that's *not* me. There's a girl in one of my Whitehall hoodies—hood up—with black and green hair hanging out either side of said hood. She never faces the camera, so there's no possibility of seeing her face.

"Your agent ID'd this girl as me?" I ask incredulously and Takahashi nods. That's when I laugh. Because either that agent is an idiot or else Justin paid them off. Or threatened them. Does it matter? The outcome is the same. "Well, she's not me. I told you—"

“Yes, you told me that a man in a sparkly deer mask leapt out of a secret bookcase door and kidnapped you. Dakota, I’m sorry, but I’m struggling here.” She sweeps her hair back from her face as she looks me over. “These stories are quite ... fantastical.”

“Did Parrish back me up?” I snap, losing my temper with this woman. “Did he tell you that his grandmother drugged him?”

“He was napping when we arrived, and when we woke him up, he had no memory of anything but putting together a duffel bag with you. That’s it. Now, I’ll agree that’s a bit strange, but it’s not enough for me to arrest Justin. It’s not enough for me to do anything with.”

“What about this?” I point at the bandages on my chin—Delphine cleaned me up while Raúl did my hair—and raise a brow. “Where do you think this came from?”

“Is there anyone that can vouch for your claims?” There’s not and we both know it. She exhales again and scoots her chair forward. “I spoke with your psychologist this morning as well.”

“My psychologist?” I ask, and it takes me a full minute to grasp the implications. “You mean Philippa Deveraux’s mother? She’s not my psychologist. I don’t even have a psychologist.”

“Dakota, she doesn’t believe you’re mentally fit enough to make these sorts of accusations.”

Silence falls in the depressing, claustrophobic, artless box that we’re sitting in.

So that’s where we’re at. I’m crazy. There are viral videos online showcasing the worst of me. I’m a dead woman.

“Despite all of that, I *want* to believe you. I don’t know why—maybe it’s Agent Murphy’s suspicions, maybe not—but I feel compelled to try here. You have *got* to give me something that I can work with.”

I sit there for a long time, staring down at the table’s surface.

“Did Chasm give you the bloody wedding dress scrap?” I ask, and she nods. She’s already heard the story from me, but now she has physical evidence to go with it.

“I do, and maybe that’ll help, but it’s still not enough. As of right now, it looks like Mr. Vanguard is guilty, okay? I won’t lie about that. I’d say at best, it seems that you’re being manipulated by him. Otherwise ... it’s not looking great for you either.”

“Arrest me then,” I growl at her, but the look she gives back to me, it isn’t good.

“More than likely, you’d be put in mental health facility. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I’m one person, Dakota. I want to help you, but I can’t make decisions based on feelings or ideas.” She gets up from her chair and exits the room, leaving me to sit there and stare at the surface of the table. When she comes back, she gives me a cold seltzer water to drink.

I hold the can between my hands, but I don’t open it.

It seems like Takahashi doesn’t know about Veronica yet. Do I tell her now? I decide against it. If Tess hasn’t felt the need to tell her then I shouldn’t either. I was right to consider if it might make us look like the bad guys.

“I want to see my mom.” I don’t know if I’m talking about Tess or Saffron. I’d take either of them at this point. *Where were you, Saffron? You didn’t save me from Mr. Volli. Tess, you didn’t save me either.* But I don’t blame them. I don’t blame anyone but Justin. Well, him and his cronies. I look up from the can to see Itsumi watching me. “Can I see her?”

“That’s something you’ll have to work out with your custodial parent.” She at least sounds somewhat apologetic about it. “I don’t want to send you back there, but legally, I have no recourse.”

Can she see it in my eyes? I hope not. Because if she’s not going to help me then I’ll have to go back to my original plan: kill Justin. But first, it has to be Raúl. At least if I die trying, Justin will find it difficult to explain away how his daughter was murdered after accusing him online.

The only reason I didn’t die today was sheer chance. Numbers and probability. I had a one-in-six opportunity to make it out alive, and I did. The urge here is to give up all hope, but then I think about my boys. I think about Maxim and what he said to me: *“If we’re alive then there’s always hope. Always.”*

I consider running out the door of the office, sprinting as fast and as far as I can to see if it’s possible for me to escape from here. The FBI isn’t arresting me, so they have no reason to stop me, right?

Then I walk outside and see what a pipe dream that truly is.

Caroline is waiting for me in her new ‘luster yellow’ Lexus (it’s gold but she refuses to call it that), sunglasses on her face, expression disinterested and distracted. I could still run, but she’d follow me in her car, I’d get caught,

and I don't think Justin will play Russian roulette with me again.

He'll just kill me next time.

Agent Takahashi opens the passenger door for me, and I climb in. It smells like leather, wealth, and unspoken threats in this car.

"We'll talk again soon, okay?"

I ignore her and yank the door closed, attention focused on my lap and not on my stepmom.

"Not his precious little princess anymore, are you?" Caroline asks me with a tittering laugh. "You were so high-and-mighty when we first met but look at you now." She reaches out to tickle my chin, but I don't react to that either. "Just a meek, little pet like you should've been from the beginning."

I say nothing. I let her think that. I bide my time.



CHAPTER 26

With a failed FBI interview under my belt, a game of Russian roulette not far behind in the rearview mirror, and a locked bedroom door, I'm convinced that my next few days are going to redefine my definition of 'lonely'.

They might've truly shattered the meaning of that word if it weren't for *them*.

Did I say that my memories of being sixteen are tainted by Justin? I guess that's true. But then, in hindsight, I'll see the dead and dried roses of my youth repurposed into vignettes of daring and risk that could pierce any emptiness. Because of them.

The boys.

I'm sitting in a chair by the window, gazing out at the sunshine and wishing I was in it, that I could smell the flowers, that I could scent the sea. I'm so fixated on this single vista, I notice every change. *Oh, look, the gardener trimmed the hedges. I see, someone planted a new bush over there. The English ivy has been removed from the fence.* Because of that, I spot the ladder right away. It's just barely sticking up above the fence, but I notice it because it's different.

My hands clench on the arms of the chair and I lean forward, a lost breath lodged in my throat.

Please don't come here, I think even as my heart is begging '*please save me*' in the same hopeless sigh.

Chasm's head is the first to show up. I almost sob when I see him, rising from my chair and putting my hands against the glass. Justin came into my room the other day and hit me with a switch on the back of my calves as punishment for smudging the window, but today, I can't help myself.

Because when I need a miracle most, when I'm in the darkest chamber of hopelessness, there they are.

Chas looks right at my window, squinting his eyes in an attempt to see me. It's not easy to look into a dark house when it's so bright outside. I scramble to my feet, turning on every light in the room and then pressing myself to the window that's closest to him.

He sees me then.

I know because his eyes go wide and his face breaks into pieces. He cups his hands around his mouth and shouts something, but this house is an iron ship. I can't hear a damn thing. *If only I knew sign language! ASL should be taught in schools. Ugh.*

When Chas realizes that I can't hear him, he makes a heart with both hands, thumbs at the point on the bottom, pointer fingers curved on the top. He looks like a goddamn K-pop star. I repeat the action back at him, hope swelling in my chest. He makes a heart with his arms next, touching his fingers to the top of his head. I make one back.

A burst of happy laughter escapes me even as tears are rolling down my face. I sniffle as he runs his thumb along his jaw next, offering me an exaggerated wink. I can just imagine him telling the other boys how he knows the family that owns the house next door, how he used to tutor their daughter or something. Chasm knows everyone in Medina; I'm certain this was his idea. And if it wasn't, then I bet it's his connections that made it possible.

I hop up and down, waving my arms, but he doesn't stay. His head disappears beneath the fence line as I choke on my breath, fingers pressed to the glass as I try to crane for a better look.

Parrish comes up the ladder next, an expression on his face that's usually reserved for quiet moments between the two of us. It's the face from the basement, the one that says he's stripped away all of his many masks so that I can see the truth underneath. Only for me. This is just for me.

He bares himself to the world, clenching the top of the ladder and then turning his stricken gaze down to the fence, like he might hop over the top

and make a run for it. One of the other boys must say something to him because he glances down at them before looking up at me. The wind tousles his gold-streaked hair and steals the breath from my lungs in the same gust.

I wave at him, and he points at himself, points at me, and then draws a heart over his chest. He makes this little pinching motion with his right hand, thumb and index finger together. *A finger heart. What a Casanova you are, Mr. Vanguard.* He even makes an 'OK' symbol with his hand and flips it upside down. This last one is supposed to represent money in Korean culture. Cute. Real fucking cute.

Especially with the tattooed hands, with the shine of sunlight on his Baphomet necklace, with the depth of emotion in his candied hazelnut eyes. He's edible in a way he has no right to be, a treat on a shelf that I want but can't have. I bite my lip to hold back the hunger.

He takes his leave next, making room for Maxx.

X's teeth are gritted as he stares at the relatively small space between us like maybe he could kick the shit out of it if only he tried. His hair is milk chocolate in the sunlight, and his eyes are like prisms. I can see my entire future in them if only I look carefully. We lock gazes across the distance and my rebellious heart flutters. How dare she threaten to spread her wings and fly when she knows damn well that we're trapped here.

At a seeming loss for cheesy hand gestures, Maxx lifts up his shirt and flashes me his gorgeous midsection, nipples included. I have a thing for nipples I guess because that gets me going in a primal way that has nothing to do with my own survival and only ensures the survival of our species as a whole.

Heh.

I'm blushing, but he can't see that. Instead, when he drops his shirt, I flash him my bra. That makes him laugh. I can't hear it, but I can see the way he swipes his hand over his lips like he's struggling to contain himself.

It's a moment of lightheartedness that I wonder if I've imagined, if I'm finally starting to hallucinate. That seems like a likely conclusion when Maxx disappears and the ladder is taken away. I wait for several hours, but the boys don't come back that day.

By the next morning, I'm convinced they were just a symptom of my broken heart and withered psyche.

Instead, they show up later that day around the same time. I'm waiting for

them, hopeful in a way I have no right to be. When Chasm first ascends the ladder, he has a sign in his hand. It's drawn up in bright colors and big, block letters, making it easy to read.

It's not game over yet.

He gestures at it and then gives me a thumbs-up that I return, sniffing back a fresh wave of tears. While Justin didn't mention the boys' visit yesterday, there's no way that he's unaware of it. So to see them back again for a second time? Impossible.

I'm absorbing the way the sunlight hits Chasm's beautiful eyes, turns them shades of honey and wheat, of citrine and lemon quartz, when I notice Justin approaching through the grass outside, a gun held at his side. He lifts it up and takes aim at Chasm.

"Chas!" I'm screaming his name and pointing, but I needn't bother. He sees. He sees and he drops the sign as he slips out of view so quickly that I worry about the possibility of him falling and breaking something. The white rectangle drifts slowly down to the lawn like a stray leaf before it's crushed under my father's expensive loafers.

Justin doesn't fire the gun, dropping it by his side as he turns and looks up at me in the window.

When he places it against his temple, I can feel my body begin to shake, an unwanted reaction to the memories that took place in this very room. My father mouths the word *boom* and then pulls the trigger. I flinch, but of course, nothing happens.

He's still laughing as he directs one of his employees to bring a ladder over to my window.

That visit from the boys, that's the last rainbow I see in my sky for some time.

After that, Justin has the outside shutters closed—permanently.

I am denied even the small, brief respite of a smiling face.

There's no word from Tess or anyone else for the next several days; I'm completely and utterly alone in my tower. Delphine tries her best to cheer me up, but all I can think about are the boys. How much I miss them. How guilty I feel. Far too frequently, I obsess over Chasm and Seamus. I want to talk to

Chas so badly that it consumes most of my energy. The rest is spent plotting Raúl's murder.

He's my minder now, following me around and taunting me constantly. Even Caroline remarked on how creepy he's become, but Justin simply laughed it off and winked at me. He knows that Raúl hates me, that Raúl would kill me if given the opportunity; he's counting on me to know how serious this situation is.

In the mornings, I'm locked in the studio until Justin is satisfied with my writing. I'm not sure how Mr. Volli is still around, but I'm getting feedback from him despite his likely position on the FBI's *Most Wanted* list.

What a guy, huh? He has time to critique my work while running from the authorities. Brilliant.

One would think his involvement might lead the FBI to connect the crimes to Justin, but Mr. Volli is apparently an acquaintance of Laverne as well, so much so that he can come and go freely from her house. Surely, his connection to the Seattle Slayer implicates Paul as well. Justin is a very clever man. Bet he even has a backup plan where he pins it all on Amin Volli as the mastermind. Makes sense if you think about the phone calls with the stag mask, the fact that he was Parrish's literal kidnapper, all that.

I have no access to the outside world, but I at least have brief respites from my dark bedroom. During my time in the studio, I've been sitting and staring out at the water, working up various plans in my head. If Tess isn't here—as Justin mockingly stated, '*on her white horse*'—then her hands must be tied. I doubt anyone believes I was kidnapped by a guy in the walls, and Justin *does* have parenting rights. Innocent until proven guilty, right? I'm not against that law, but it sure is working against *me* in this moment.

And the boys? I make my own sign just in case—it simply reads *I love you all*—but they don't make a return visit. Instead, it's me, myself, and I. If I want to have a conversation during the day, and Delphine isn't around, my only choice is to talk to my reflection.

But can I be honest with you? I can't stand looking at my hair in the mirror.

While it's admittedly a very nice cut—just above the shoulders with a sweep of long bangs—and a very nice color—a deep velvety brunette that matches Tess' natural shade—it isn't me.

When I stare at my reflection, I see Mia Prior looking back at me.

Dakota Banks has been completely erased.

There's a soft knock at my door, a telltale sign that Delphine is outside. I hear the key in the lock before she cracks the door to peer in at me, face soft with sympathy. I wonder if Justin made her dye her hair, too? Or if she even prefers contacts to glasses? I wonder a lot of things.

"Hey, baby sister," she says, slipping into the room and closing the door gently behind her. "How are you doing?"

I don't even respond; I've stopped talking to these people unless I'm directly spoken to and I sense a threat if I don't. Pretty sure there's no threat with Delphine. Whatever it is that she's up to, I'm not on her hit list. Maxine might be though. Ya never know.

Delphine comes over to the bed and sits down beside me, picking up the Korean workbook I haven't been doing. How can I focus on learning another language when Chasm is ... when I might've made him an orphan. I sniffle and look toward the window again, wishing the sun was more than a scant few beams falling across my bedroom floor. There are too many clouds out today.

"Everything's going to work out, you know?" she tells me, reaching out to take my hand for a comforting squeeze. I don't pull away, but I don't give any indication that I enjoy her company either. "You know what my mother used to say in situations like this?"

I turn slowly to face her. This is literally the first time that Delphine has ever mentioned her mom. Does she know that Justin raped poor Lena Shaw? Probably not. If she did, she wouldn't defend him so much, would she? Unless she's a damn good fucking actress. She might be.

Ugh. This is the problem with living in a duplicitous world; nothing is transparent. And transparency in relationships is so refreshing. I don't want to constantly doubt and question every person that I know, wonder if each kind word is a lie, if each helping hand is ready to yank me one step closer to the edge.

"Let me guess: some comforting platitude like, '*at least when you're at rock bottom, there's nowhere left to go but up*'?" Not sure why I'm being such a snarky brat. I love comforting platitudes.

Delphine gives me a sharp look, one that reminds me of Justin. I shudder. I've never liked him, obviously, but lately, just the sound of his voice makes me queasy. He played literal Russian roulette with me. How am I supposed to

sit in a room with him day after day and not feel like my soul is withering away?

But I still have that pen. I carry it wherever I go, and I watch Raúl without being shy about it. I've been staring at him so often that he remarked on it to Justin at breakfast this morning. Doesn't matter. Daddy Dearest literally doesn't give a fuck if I kill his pawn. Scratch that: I think he'd like it.

"She'd usually curse up a storm, get the liquor, and spend the rest of the day eating snacks on the sofa." Delphine grins. "She'd say, '*some days aren't worth fighting for; kick your feet up and live to see another one*'. What do you say that for today—just today—we stop fighting?" I blink at her like I don't understand. "I'll bring some of daddy's wine upstairs, some food, and I'll download something we can watch offline. Anything you want."

I think about that for a minute. It seems sacrilegious, that I should be working every angle, fighting against the tide the way I've been doing for months and months and months. I reach up and rub at my forehead. *Damn, I'm tired. I'm tired, and I can't do this on my own.*

I need Tess' help. Saffron's help. I need the authorities to step in and do their goddamn job. The boys and I have done everything we can. Fucking everything.

"Okay." There's that goddamn word again. You remember, right? It's the world's most easily understood word. It means everything and nothing all at once. I acknowledge your statement, but I'm not necessarily agreeing.

Delphine takes that as an invitation, leaning over to kiss my forehead before she stands up and skips out of the room. She's gone for so long that I start to worry about her, moving over to the bedroom door and putting my ear to it.

On a whim, I try the knob and find it ... "unlocked."

The word is a breath, a whisper of awe in a dark, dark place. I crack the door open and peek into the hall to find it empty. Doesn't mean Mr. Volli isn't hiding in the walls or wearing The Cloak of Invisibility or something. I bite my lip until it bleeds, and then I step out, cautiously making my way toward the stairs.

Nobody stops me, but that doesn't mean they don't see me on the cameras.

I'm not going to run—not this time. But maybe I can find Raúl and put this pen through his neck, watch his blood spray the walls, get a little praise from Daddy Dearest for once.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” Raúl asks, standing in the foyer like he’s been waiting for me. He’s playing with his lighter—this one features Jesus on the cross which is just weird imagery for the guy—flipping the metal lid open and striking the flint wheel with a gross smile on his face. “Making a run for it?”

“I wasn’t actually. I’m looking for my sister.” I toss my new hair—I hate it, but Raúl is a decent stylist—and head in the direction of the kitchen. His footsteps are loud on the marble floors as he follows me, catching up and snatching me by my hair.

The lighter comes precariously close to my face; I can feel the heat of the flame as Raúl lifts it to my cheek.

“If Justin knew all the things I knew, he’d have killed you already.” There’s an excitement in the man’s voice that triggers my most basic instincts. Yes, he wants to kill me. Yes, he’s going to try soon. No, he does not care what Justin thinks about that idea.

I drop to the floor, heedless of the pain in my scalp, and then I throw an elbow back, catching Raúl right in the twig and berries. Heh. Okay, whatever, dick and balls. Wasn’t sure he had any. People who set houses on fire with children inside are spineless creeps.

Raúl grunts, but he doesn’t release me. Doesn’t matter. I go for him again, but he blocks the blow, dropping the lighter in the process. This time, when I spin around on the floor, I’m able to wrench from his grasp with a stab of pain in my scalp. Next thing I know, his knee is crushing my nose and there’s blood everywhere, all down the front of me.

“Don’t you touch my fucking sister!” Delphine screams, snatching up the lighter and shoving it into Raúl’s face. Then it’s *his* turn to scream as he stumbles back, clutching at a burn mark on his pristine cheek.

“You little cunt,” he growls out, but Delphine is nowhere near done. She throws the lighter across the room, her breathing heavy, her eyes as feral as I’ve ever seen. *I do not know this person at all. Not even a little bit.* The only thing that keeps me grounded is the memory of her grandmother’s bracelet. Otherwise, I might be afraid of her, too.

“I *warned* you. I warned Caroline. I warned Amin. I warned Jack. If you hurt my little sister, I’ll fucking kill you.” She points at him as she makes her way over to me. “You are dead, Raúl. Remember when I’m strangling you with a garrote, and the darkness is closing in, you’re destined for hell and this

is why.”

She kneels down beside me as I gape at her, holding a hand to my bloody nose.

“What’s all the commotion about?” Justin asks, appearing in the doorway to his office. He takes a look at his scowling assistant, my bloody face, Delphine’s *rage*, and then he laughs. “All this fun without me? What a shame.” My father turns a pointed blue-eyed stare on me, his eyes the icy wind of a loveless, lonely valley. “Get back in your room, Mia. *Now.*”

Delphine helps me up, escorting me back to the room without a word. As we walk by Raúl, she fixates on him in a way that scares me. I don’t imagine anything she’s said to him is a lie.

“Don’t worry, little sister. I’ll get him for you.” She presses a kiss to my forehead and goes about doing what amounts to sisterly bonding between us. Meaning, of course, that she cleans up the blood and checks my injuries. “No break. Let’s get you some pain pills, and I’ll go grab our snacks.”

She helps me get settled in bed, but I touch her elbow when she stands to leave.

“Don’t do anything that’ll end with you dead,” I whisper, and I do my best to reconcile the smile she gives me with her words about Nevaeh. “*It was a long flight, to and from New York, but fortunately for us, Daddy has a private jet. When the truth is all out there, remember who your real sister is.*” She never said she killed my friend. And I think she knew about Maxine, too, about the way she and X were lying to me.

What ... what is Delphine’s ultimate goal?

“Don’t worry: I never make a move unless it’s the last.” She pats my hand and then moves away, locking the bedroom door behind her this time. *Didn’t I say those exact words to Tess? Does she know? Is it coincidence?* Something hits me then, something that I barely dare to allow into my thoughts. One day, Justin might have an app that reads minds.

Those notes in the windowsill ... there’s no way Saffron came in here and left them there. Somebody retrieved the notes from her and delivered them in her place. Delphine. It was Delphine that did it. I know it. I fucking know it!

It takes a concerted effort to keep the shock and awe from my face.

My sister returns in relatively short order, clutching the neck of a wine bottle in one hand.

“I hope you’re hungry.” Delphine lifts up a basket in her other hand. “We

have a laptop with a movie queued up, some sandwiches, oranges, and dark chocolate. Sounds like a picnic, right?” She goes about merrily setting up the bed for our staycation, but I just stare at her, trying to puzzle out this mystery.

I hate you, Agatha Christie, I think, reluctantly relaxing into the freshly fluffed pillows. My summer has been nothing short of a disaster thus far; this might be the nicest moment I'll have for a long while. Seems like I'll be trapped here for the two full weeks of the custody agreement. Yay. I can barely keep up with my own murder-mystery plot let alone write one. I don't know how you did it, book after freaking book.

“I love you,” Delphine tells me, seemingly out of the blue. She unpacks the basket with another adorable smile on her face, and I wonder. I really fucking wonder. *Are you a good guy, Delphi? Please tell me that you're a good guy. I could use an ally in this horrible house.* “You're the only family I have left.” A strange pause. “Besides Daddy, of course.”

Mm. I accept the food and drink that Delphine offers me, and for just a few short hours, I forget the hell that I'm living in.

For just a few short hours, it feels like we really are sisters.

The morning sun is a harsh mistress, stabbing me through my droopy lids and dragging me—unwillingly, I might add—back to the land of the living. Sometimes, it feels like it'd just be easier to be dead. But if that were true, I wouldn't have been so afraid when Justin put my life on the line.

I cannot give up this gift we call life, not willingly. *“You equate trying to die with wanting to die, Kota; they're not necessarily the same concepts.”* Maxx's voice fills my head and somehow, I find the strength to open my eyes. Slowly, I sit up in bed, noticing the empty wine bottle on the floor next to me.

Wow. Did I really drink all that? I immediately think about Maxine. I can't drink myself into a stupor because of Justin; that's a stupid choice to make.

I look over at my bedroom door.

It's open.

Not only that but ... I look back at my windows to see the shutters open once more.

I go completely still, one hand curled in the covers, one leg partially off the

bed. Do I ... do I run like hell? Oh my God, I want to so badly. If I can just get to the gate, I'll climb over the wall like I did with the boys. I don't even need their help this time. I've got so much adrenaline, I could probably jump high enough to grab the edge of the wall.

Then another idea comes to me. This could easily be one of Justin's traps. If I try to run, and I don't make it out, something even more horrible will happen to me. Probably death.

I bite my lip and put both feet on the floor, looking down at my white lace coverlet and noticing just a few scant drops of blood. *Delphine*. I'm so scared that I can't breathe. I didn't think this particular sister meant much to me, but I can see that isn't true whatsoever.

I'm stumbling down the hallway now, yelling her name like a crazy person. My feet even slip on the runner and I hit my knees hard before lunging back to my feet and clutching at her door handle. I push the door in and follow after it, but there's nobody there. I check the bathroom, too, but not only aren't there any signs of a struggle, no blood, there's no Delphine.

Down the stairs I go, my eyes shifting to the front door.

The temptation is so painful that I actually gag as I turn away from it, sliding into the solarium to find Caroline, Justin, and ... "Delphine." I breathe her name, and the laughter stops. Everyone turns to stare at me, but I'm so shocked to find her alive that I don't care.

"Baby sister!" She's so excited that her chair nearly falls over when she stands. She's dressed in a stunning woven organza gown in a brilliant orange. It has a super low back and a large triangle of skin over her midsection. Delphine throws her arms around me and hugs me tight, squeezing me hard but not *too* hard. A Banks style hug.

Something monumental has happened.

Justin chuckles, and I immediately know that it's something *monumentally* bad.

"You really should thank your sister," Justin tells me, trying to catch my attention. I ignore him as Delphine pulls back from me, smiling so prettily that my heart hurts. I wish this were a real smile, for something good. Like, maybe Delphine just booked her first runway show and she's designing a line of summer wear for Neiman Marcus? Sigh. In another life.

"Mia, he's gone," Delphine says, and there's a bit of Justin in her words right there. I blink several times to clear my head. *He's gone* is not a

statement that any sane person wants to hear. Who's gone? Parrish? Chasm? Maxx? I grab onto her shoulders and give her a shake, surprising her. "Oh, not like that!" Delphine hurries to add. "Raúl. I'm talking about Raúl. He's finally gone."

"Raúl ... ran away?" I ask, hoping like hell that's what all the excitement is about.

"He didn't run away; your sister killed him." I finally turn to look at Justin, but he's sipping his coffee and watching Caroline. My stepmother is eating her meager breakfast of a spinach omelet with tiny, delicate bites. I bet she's hungry all the damn time. She doesn't seem remotely fazed at the news of Raúl's murder.

"Come again?" I poke my pinky finger into my ear. Must've heard wrong. "Who killed Raúl?" I look over to Delphine, standing there in the sunshine with her blond hair blowing gently around her pretty face, the orange dress a striking contrast against her pale skin. "*Delphine* killed Raúl?" I can barely wrap my head around the idea. "But I thought ..." I don't even bother to finish what I'm saying.

I thought Delphine, while suspicious, was removed from the whole 'murdering people' aspect of the Seattle Slayer. A strange thought licks at the edge of my mind like flame. On the news report that I heard the day that I learned about Nevaeh's death, the one where they read Justin's letter aloud ... a maid was mentioned in the list of killers.

"He was going to hurt you, Mia," Delphine says softly, reaching out a hand to touch my shoulder. I jerk back from her, feeling betrayed. How could I have expected any outcome other than this? She helped Justin drug me so he could drag me outside and torment me. She put blood in my bed. She's been his inside woman for a long time, and I was naïve and stupid not to accept that this would be the outcome.

"You're one of the Slayer's many heads, aren't you?" I ask, and this supreme expression of hurt flashes across Delphine's face before she blinks through it.

"Raúl is my first kill," she says softly, looking down at the floor before she returns her attention to me. Is this an admission about Nevaeh, too? If Raúl is her first kill then she can't have hurt my friend, right? God, I don't even know anymore. "He was sneaking into your room in the middle of the night. What was I supposed to do? Let him hurt you?"

“I saw it all on the camera,” Justin says, intentionally clinking his mug against the saucer beneath it because he knows the sound bothers Caroline. She flinches and clenches her fork but says nothing. This game she’s playing, the one of the dutiful wife, I don’t buy it. Her tense fingers betray an anger that’s merely set aside, not subdued. “Who knows what that man was up to? He never trusted you, you know.” Justin flashes me a tight smile and then checks his smartwatch. “Not that I blame him: you’re far more of a liability than you are an asset.”

“Where is his body?” I ask. The FBI recently asked Justin in for questioning, didn’t they? How is he going to get away with a missing assistant? How could he even dispose of the body without being seen?

“None of your damn business,” Justin tells me, still smiling as rests his forearms on the edge of the table and folds his hands together while he stares at me. “You have a big mouth, don’t you, Princess?”

I ignore him and look back to Delphine. If Justin gets arrested, it’ll be a dream come true for me. I’m only hoping he screwed up with Raúl’s body. Also, good riddance. The man tried to kill my siblings. And Paul. I don’t dislike my stepdad nearly as much as I thought I did.

“I was going to kill him myself, but your sister saved me the trouble. I doubt you would’ve lived through last night without our intervention.” Justin picks up his fork and eats his breakfast while I stare at my sister, trying to understand why she would get involved like that.

Does she have the same dark desires as Justin or was she simply trying to protect me? I want to believe the latter, but there’s not much blind hope left in me. The world is a much darker place than I wanted to believe.

“How do you feel about ... about the ordeal?” I ask, swallowing a lump of dread. The only ally I thought that I had in this house also kills people. Then again, do I have room to talk? I’m a murderer, too.

Delphine’s face scrunches up, like she’s having trouble processing my question.

“How do I feel? What do you mean?”

Uhh.

“It’s not easy to take another’s life—” I begin, and she laughs at me. She tucks some hair behind her ear and shakes her head sadly.

“Do you think it’s any more difficult than getting on my hands and knees all day, scrubbing the floors and bathtubs and showers of the people who

drove my mom into the ground her entire life? Who treated us as less than human? Who ruined our father's life and tarnished our family legacy?" Delphine lifts her chin proudly. "If I have to kill a person or two in order to maintain this lifestyle, I'm more than willing to do it. Minimum wage maid or rich heiress: which would you pick?"

I open my mouth to speak, but no words will come, so I say nothing.

"By the way," Justin continues, taking another sip of coffee. "Delphine was supposed to kill Maxine, but she was too much of a pussy to carry it out." He looks over at me. "Nevaeh was a suitable backup, but I really would've preferred the blood of the kidnapper's daughter."

I'm proud of myself for remaining still and silent in the middle of the sunny solarium.

The hair. The scissors. Flying to New York to watch Nevaeh drink herself to death.

I let out a shaky exhale and Justin chuckles.

"If you're not a better sister to me," Delphine begins, reaching out to brush some of my newly short brown hair back, "I might change my mind. Who knows?" She smiles as the entire world shifts and spins around me.

"Mani-pedi today?" Caroline asks absently, and Justin nods. All I can do is stand there and do my best not to fall apart. I'd thought I was alone before, but now that Delphine is showing her true colors? I feel like I'm shipwrecked on a windswept island, no trees or fresh water or food. It's just me and the blaring heat of the sun.

"I've reserved the wedding venue for the first weekend in September. That's just a blink away. It's about time you got those filthy, raggedy cuticles in order." The way Justin smiles at me, I have a feeling that even if I am still marrying Chas—Justin expects me to live that long, at least—it's not going to be a pleasant or exciting day for me. "Not to mention the opera next Friday. Don't think a near-death experience will get you out of attending."

Err, that day doesn't sound pleasant either.

Yeah, yeah. Here's me, being right yet again and hating that I have a talent for always knowing that something worse is about to come.

Saturday presents an entirely new level of hell.

I'm standing on a private airstrip looking at a jet. My new hair blows in a sweet breeze, the white midi dress I'm wearing tickling my calves. I have a small backpack slung over one shoulder with rhinestones that spell the word *Bitch*. It was likely meant to sound cheeky or playful, but since Justin gave it to me, I take it literally.

"I've never been on a private jet," Delphine whispers from beside me, eyes lit with excitement as she takes in the scene. I've never felt more like throwing up. Justin wants me to get on a plane? I don't feel like there's anything positive to be gained from a trip with this man. "Aren't you excited?"

I don't know what to say to her. It's like, all the little moments we shared, the small spaces where we genuinely bonded (like when she gifted me her grandmother's bracelet), all of that feels like it's gone. It's as if I've lost Nevaeh all over again, like I've lost a friend.

Caroline is already on the plane, but Justin waits near the steps, something small and rectangular held in his hands. He waltzes over to us in a cashmere-silk sports jacket. He slaps the item against one palm and grins at me.

"Look at this, Princess." He chucks the item my way, hitting me in the chest with the corner of it. Our dynamic has shifted completely since the night he tried to murder me. I stay meek and quiet, and he pokes at me all day. He wasn't like this before. Even if he could be brutal, he would try to be charming the rest of the time. Not anymore.

I bend down to pick up the item as Delphine waits patiently to one side. Justin's been amicable toward her since yesterday, spoiling her and allowing her to give him hugs. She does it *constantly* and it's really starting to get on my nerves.

My hand flips over the blue item on the ground and my heart dies inside my chest, festers, bursts.

"That's your passport, Mia. How exciting is that?" Justin steps aside and holds out his hand, encouraging me to get on the plane.

"We're going to buy your wedding dress, Mia. That's something to be excited about, isn't it?" Delphine tugs on my elbow to help me up, and I stand, passport clutched in tight fingers. She's right: it is exciting. Because I'm supposed to marry Chasm. Because that means I'll actually get to *see* Chasm. I don't even care if we have to consummate our marriage on livestream. Anything to see him, to see Parrish, to see Maxx.

A light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

Are you guys thinking about me? Do you dream about me every night the way I do you? Are you going to come for me? Do you know how much I love you?

I allow Delphine to tug me up the steps and into the luxurious interior of the jet with its dark woods, tanned leather seats, and personal flight attendant. I could be excited in a different world. Old Dakota Banks would say something snarky like, *'is it really a smart idea to use a personal airplane in order to go wedding dress shopping?'*

My quick answer would've been *no*.

Mia Prior isn't as picky. She sits down in her chair, accepts snacks and drinks from the flight attendant, and doesn't think too hard about what's going to happen to her. We're not going to be in Medina anymore, in a place where people I know and love are, where Agent Takahashi is, where I might stand a chance of murdering or escaping Justin.

But overseas?

We arrive in Paris the next morning, check into the penthouse suite of a luxury hotel, and then spend an entire day in an exclusive boutique. I try on dozens of wedding dresses, if not over a hundred. Caroline selects everything for me—veil, shoes, the dress itself, lingerie (gag). Delphine does her best to play along and make things fun for me, but I don't trust her anymore.

The scissors. Slamming her door in my face. Her excitement at the kill.

In the evening, I end up sitting on the sofa in the suite's living room area, looking out the window at the Eiffel Tower—the *actual* Eiffel Tower—and finding myself unable to enjoy it. This is my first time leaving the United States, but the experience is lost because of the circumstances.

This beautiful landmark is only highlighting how lonely I am here.

"Coming to bed?" Delphine asks, padding over to stand beside me in pink faux fur slippers.

We both pause at the sound of a pleased gasp, and I cringe. *Was that ... are Justin and Caroline getting it on in there?* The frequency and intensity of the sound picks up quickly, and I shove up to my feet, rushing past Delphine and into our shared bedroom.

That's not accidental, the sharing part. If I try to run, she'll catch me.

"I'm always watching out for you, you know?" she tells me once the lights are off and I'm curled on my side under the blankets. I don't reply and tell

her that she's full of shit, that she didn't kill Raúl just for me. If she had, she wouldn't be gloating about it and seeking Justin's attention so shamelessly.

I ignore her.

The next day, we're back on the jet headed to Seattle when I feel a lurching in my stomach, like we're coming in for a landing. I'm up an instant, aware that I've been asleep but definitely not long enough to be home. It's, like, a ten-hour flight.

The flight attendant prepares the cabin for arrival, and then we're down on a strip in the dark in what seems like a relatively remote location. There's one tower, a small building with a handful of lights, and nothing else but the runway itself. I squint at the bright white lights that line the edge of it.

Is that ... is that sand?

Justin is the first to rise from his seat, moving across the aisle to pause next to me. His arms fold on the back of Delphine's seat as he smiles down at me.

"Just a quick stop. Come here, Mia." He walks down the aisle in the direction of the door as Delphine turns worried eyes back to me. With a grimness in my bones, I rise from my spot, tossing my blanket onto the empty chair next to me. Caroline is asleep in the back, and the flight attendant has excused herself to the small bathroom near the front of the plane.

There's nobody here that will help me if something goes wrong.

I walk down the front steps and pause beside Justin, a warm but blustery wind tousling my short hair.

It's a desert.

We're standing in a desert on a remote airstrip in ... some country? Who knows where this is?

My despair is so extreme in those few seconds that without my wonderful upbringing, my loving family, and my supportive boyfriends, I would be lost.

Maxx told me to have hope even when he could've died, so I'll have it. I'll do that for him. For Chasm, especially if Seamus is gone. For Parrish, because he was kidnapped, tortured, and cheated on.

"You suggested it." Justin gestures with his hand in the direction of the vast, overwhelming blackness. "A country with no extradition treaty." He turns then and leans down, pressing a firm kiss to my cheek. "Don't forget that I can take you wherever I want, leave you wherever I want, *do* with you whatever I want. In a place like this, nobody fucking cares."

"Yes, sir." The words are mocking, even if he doesn't realize it. He twirls

the short strands of my hair around his finger and then yanks on them—*hard*.

“You’re damn lucky that I was able to flip your stupid stunt on its head. With the FBI watching me all the fucking time, I can prove my innocence. My pawns will take care of what needs to be taken care of, and the only person who will have lost out because of your stupidity will be *you*.”

Justin stands back up and boards the plane, leaving me to stand there alone in the dark with sand stinging my eyes and hot wind billowing my skirt.

I’m surprised that we’re not staying here, that he actually plans on taking me back to Medina.

If he weren’t so interested in the opinions of his Medina peers, we wouldn’t be taking off again.

I turn and climb the steps, settle into my seat, and behave *beautifully* until the following Friday.

The title 'CHAPTER 27' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '27' is in pink. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a large letter, with black, branch-like lines extending from it. The overall aesthetic is dark and artistic.

CHAPTER 27

I've never seen anything more classically 'Medina' than the opera.

We arrive at the Elliott Bay Opera House in a new white stretch limousine that Justin revealed to us with little fanfare. “*Oh, yes, bought a limo. What of it?*” I hate him. When I look at him, I absolutely seethe on the inside. I think about killing him all the time even if I know that it isn't healthy.

My dress is so decadent that I'm embarrassed to wear it, this blue strapless floral-embroidered gown with cheeky cutouts over the belly, thighs, and calves. It's been paired with crystal-embellished stilettos and way too much jewelry. The diamond earrings that I'm wearing are dragging my lobes down, and I especially hate Delphine for covering up the tattoo on my thigh with makeup so I could wear the stupid, gaudy dress.

“At least it isn't pink,” I murmur accidentally, picking at the fabric. Justin slaps my hand away so sharply that I cry out, snatching my throbbing fingers against my chest. When I look at them, I see a vibrant red welt from ... his fancy fucking ballpoint pen.

Still got mine tucked away under the dress, thank you very much. *I'll stab him right now. Without Raúl around to save him, who will have his back?* Ah, yes. My sister and stepmother both. If I can even kill him with the pen. It could very well graze him or bruise him or do anything *but* kill him like it's supposed to.

I glare at him like a feral animal—it's the only concession he grants me

now. That's what I've been reduced to: someone who can only stare. It's this or suffer constant violence. If I want to escape or kill him, I can't have broken legs or arms.

"You're a *brunette*," he sneers at me, like I'm a complete idiot. "Blue is your color. Goddamn, you're stupid."

"Daddy, please," Delphine begs, putting her hand on his knee. He likes her—now that she's willingly killed someone—and he swoons over her the way he used to swoon over me. Back in the very beginning there where he took me to a Mexican restaurant and let me run around, playing detective with the boys. "Let's try to have a nice night, okay?"

My sister is wearing an embellished brocade mini dress—yeah, it's pink—with sparkly high heeled sandals with square toes. Her blond hair is flawlessly upswept, her makeup dramatic and young and exciting. I'd click follow and subscribe, won't lie. Too bad she kills people like dear old dad.

Does she know he tried to kill me? I've thought about telling her, but I'm afraid. Afraid that I'll truly see in her eyes what I'm afraid is in her heart: she doesn't care about me at all. I am *nothing* to her.

"I'm sure it'll be eventful, one way or another." He's staring now at Caroline as she mopes in the corner. She's wearing a red off-the-shoulder gown with a deep V at the cleavage, oddly reminiscent of Julia Roberts' character in *Pretty Woman*. You know the movie: it's about a prostitute who marries a rich guy. The oh so subtle insult isn't lost on Justin's wife. "What's the problem, Caroline?" he demands, and she looks at him like she'd truly enjoy slitting his throat.

"No problems, sweetheart." She adjusts the elbow-length white gloves she's wearing as she glares at him. Only makes Justin chuckle as the car pulls to a stop at the valet. The door is opened from outside and a hand is held for me to take as I climb out.

As soon as I do, I breathe in a harsh, sharp breath of foggy PNW air. It tastes like freedom, like my escape from Justin is right around the corner. I'm in Medina. I'm outside the house. I'm in public. *What if I start running down the street?* I look past the small groups gathered outside the opera house, milling and talking as they ascend the stairs.

"Go ahead." Justin steps up beside me, smiling prettily as he looks down at me like a doting father gazing at his daughter. "Run. Let's see how far you get."

“People will see you kill me,” I growl back at him, but he laughs.

“Would they? Oh no. It wouldn’t be me.” He laughs again as he leaves me standing there, completely alone on the sidewalk. Caroline waits for Justin up ahead, taking his arm when he offers it out to her. Delphine is halfway between them and me. Mr. Volli is probably ... somewhere. Anywhere.

I was *kidnapped* from my mother’s house. I *told* the FBI that I was kidnapped. I’m in a *public* space. I am *still* in Justin’s custody. He has my mind and heart trapped in a gilded cage.

There will be a deep melancholy in me, years later, when I think about being sixteen and hating it. He’s ruining a monumental year for me by showing me how little my opinions, thoughts, and feelings matter. I’m not a person, allowed to make my own choices. I am as trapped with custody and DNA and the law as I was when Tess took me.

I turn and sigh as I stare up at the oversized white marble building with its gargantuan columns. It makes me a bit dizzy, to stare at it like this. *It looks like a snake pit.* The people crowding through the doors are spilling out of Lamborghinis, Bugattis, limousines. Their collective wardrobe could feed a small country for, like, two years.

Most importantly: everyone here hates each other.

People move out of the way as Justin approaches, shrinking from him in a way that pleases him to no end. He is the happiest man in that town when he enters the opera house, that’s a fact. The wealthy residents of Medina, they stay away from Delphine, too. From me.

The crowd parts as I sigh and move to catch up with my sister, ignoring the genuine smile on her face when I pause beside her.

“Look: they’re afraid of us,” she says, and she loves it. No matter what secrets Delphine is hiding, she genuinely likes the feeling of seeing these awful people run. She takes my arm and leads me into the building, catching up easily to Justin at the base of some curving red stairs. They twist up into the private balconies of the city’s most elite members—my father being one of them.

He ascends like a king, this subtle, sideways smile on his face, eyes half-hooded but still brilliantly blue. He escorts his wife and daughters onto our private balcony, and then he locks the door behind him. Is that standard practice? To have a lock on the door like that? I feel like it’s not.

“Take a seat.” Justin waves his hands magnanimously at the row of tufted

red seats. I choose the one on the far right, peeping into the small box attached to the railing in front of me. There's a program and a pair of opera glasses. According to the program in my hand, these opera glasses are sponsored by Milk Carton and designed to enhance the enjoyment of the show by creating an immersive, virtual reality-esque experience.

I lift them to my eyes, and they act like a VR headset, bringing the stage close to my face. I jerk them off again as Justin chuckles from his spot two seats over. Delphine is the only shield between me and him, and she doesn't do much to add to my confidence. Caroline, meanwhile, seems bolstered by all the attention and has a genuine and very creepy smile on her face.

I'm so wary of my companions that it takes me several minutes to look up. When I do, I'm blown away by what I'm seeing.

Tess. And the boys. Sitting in the balcony directly across from ours.

Heart. Slam. Breaking ribs. Shuddered breath. Hot sweats. Cold chills.

In equal parts, I want them to save me and I want them to run. The latter sentiment wins out inside of me and I find myself perched at the edge of my seat, fingers curled on the gold railing, eyes wide. I know I shouldn't focus on them—Justin won't like it—but I can't help myself. A flower inevitably tilts toward the sun, even if it makes the stem crooked. *I'm surprised they even recognize me with this awful hair.*

My mother's dressed in a pale blue V-neck gown whose color isn't dissimilar to my own, her hair sparkling with a bright red clip. She's got the boys on either side of her, all of them dressed like modern-day princes. Three different male gazes land on me all at once. Despairing need. Achy longing. Uncontrollable passion.

That heart of mine, surrounded as it is by metaphorical broken bones, it thumps painfully. Blood shushes through those ice-cold veins and arteries. I'm awake and warm in a way that I haven't been for days.

I can't see specifics from all the way over here—

Wait.

A use for those stupid opera glasses.

I lift them back to my face, and an accidental gasp escapes me.

The boys move into sharp focus, as real as if they were standing in front of me.

I see Parrish's naked fear but unabashed anger, his shameless love. He's a devil in the eyes, the last of his youthful hesitancy smashed to pieces. Today,

he's a fucking Vanguard, and he's not afraid to let that power and prestige shine through. The people of Medina buy and sell in that same currency, offering him respect they wouldn't normally give to the son of a proposed serial killer. He ignores it all in favor of me, his dedication like Cupid's arrow to the heart. Like fire to the rest of me.

Parrish is wearing a white tuxedo jacket with a red cashmere turtleneck underneath. When he stands up from his chair, I see that he's also wearing jeans. It's a beautiful contrast against Maxx's black smoking tuxedo jacket, slacks, and crew sweater. Their faces, too, lie in perfect contrast.

Maxx is as wild and feral as Parrish is concisely savage. That's what makes it so ridiculous when he's the first one to pick up the delicate-looking opera glasses. X's large hand obscures the device as he puts it to his own face, and I'm there to view the privilege of his first inhale. Long, sharp, uncontrolled. His reaction to seeing me is equal parts relief, anger ... and lust.

I fist my hand in my skirts and he shivers. We notice each other in that strange, silent closeness. *These virtual reality glasses are weird as fuck, aren't they?*

And then there's ... brave, glorious, loyal Chasm. *My fiancé. My best friend. Sunflowers.*

He blends the two others together in a dark purple jacket and wrinkled tie. That's what kills me, the tie. It's a gray silk, tossed casually over his shoulder like he doesn't care. Here's where it gets weird with Chasm: he *does* care. He cares so much that he's looking at me with eyes that say he'll pay the price—whatever that may be—to set me free. If that means dying, he'll do it as readily as Maxx. Give me up to Parrish? Only at the end of a sword, and only if that sword were my feelings. He'd do it if it meant giving me what I wanted.

Our connection is tangible, a lifeline, an energy that I can feed off when I need it most.

If I'd have known they were here, I might've run to them. Maybe it's best that I didn't see them until now? I lower the opera glasses to my lap.

My eyes lock with Tess' as the theater fills around us, patricians taking up every available seat. After all, the entertainment tonight is not *The Marriage of Figaro* (or in Italian: *Le Nozze di Figaro*, as Danyella might say). Oh no. The entertainment tonight is a man who was run out of town, who made a

comeback, whose daughter is accusing him of being a serial killer online. The entertainment is the trailer trash waitress turned millionaire crime novelist who's either married to a serial killer now or used to be married to a serial killer. The entertainment comes at my personal expense.

I notice a bright yellow gown from down below, so much prettier and flirtier than most of the other gowns. That would be Danyella, leading Lumen into a row of seats near the front. While Danyella looks perfectly confident down there, Lumen ducks down like she's ashamed to not be sitting in one of the balconies. Her dress is nice—a hot pink tweed mini dress with feather trim—but she seems self-conscious of that, too, repeatedly smoothing her hand down the front.

My attention falls back to Tess and the boys.

Parrish and I catch one another's eyes again, holding our stare for so long that Justin leans past Delphine and whaps me with his program in the face. He raises his brows as I glare at him, rubbing my cheek with my palm. My 'sister' tries to pat my other hand reassuringly, but I yank it away from her.

"Pay attention, you bumpkin-raised bitch: the show's starting." He gestures toward the front of the stage as the lights dim and the curtain opens. With the lights low, I can't see my family anymore, so I look toward the stage for lack of a better option.

On the inside though, my heart still sings for them.

During the intermission, or after the show's over, will they come for me? If so, how? If not, can I get to them? Should I, might be a better question. I can't kill them with brashness and stubborn stupidity. I've failed to best Justin far too many times already. I'm out of chances.

There's an orchestra playing, but it takes a few minutes before an actor appears. He starts to sing in Italian as I lift the opera glasses to my face again. The stage pops out in sharp relief, the English lyrics of the music scrolling across the top of my vision like a news ticker. Ugh. I put them back in my lap as a woman joins in the song, and then there are two nicely dressed people singing in Italian and I'm like ... *I know I've listened to Italian opera plenty of times before with Danyella, but um, this isn't my jam.*

It occurs to me that operas are, like, really shitty old musicals. I'll take *Six* or *Dear Evan Hansen* any day. But I pretend to watch because I know that Justin is watching me. I bide my time, shifting in my uncomfortable dress and wishing for the show to end. And not just because it's bad (and boring) but

because I might make a run for it.

Might, might, might, might, might.

So damn indecisive. *I'm waffling like Hamlet.*

Once we leave, I can find Tess in the crowd and ... The same problems present themselves, swirling around in my mind as I weigh the risks of walking away from Justin in a crowd. It's my best option, really. I'm not going home with that son of a bitch.

Never. Again.

And yeah, I said that before, but I was kidnapped! By a man living in the walls! Cut me some slack.

The opera stretches on *forever* before the curtain swings shut on wild applause, the lights flaring slowly back to life.

"Is it over?" I ask, trying not to sound too eager.

"Intermission—we have another hour and a half to go, sweetheart," Justin schmoozes as he remains in his chair, facing off across the theater against Tess. They're staring at each other now, and the tension there is so rife with violence that it makes me feel clammy. While the rest of the room retreats to the lobby and then—bladders emptied and wineglasses refilled—reappears for the second half of the show, my parents continue to size one another up like circling predators.

Caroline is annoyed with the exchange, but she doesn't get up. I don't think she *dare* gets up without Justin's permission. So, Delphine plays with her phone (hers has a signal unlike mine) and I sit there with a tense back and an aching heart.

The boys are still watching me, taking turns with the opera glasses, and I do the same.

I give them a little wave, but before I can see their response, Justin tears the glasses from my hand and throws them on the ground in front of our seats. He doesn't say anything. Doesn't do anything else. But the shattered remnants of those glasses?

I'm warned for the time being.

I sit hunched in that chair, humble, timid, unaffected.

Seething. Gnashing. Preparing.

The lights go down as the last few seats fill, and then we're off for another hour and a half long adventure. The singers are extremely talented, but the content leaves something to be desired. A three-hundred-year-old story about

—from what I can gather without the glasses—a guy whose boss is trying to rape his wife on their wedding night? I’m ... wow. Some stories don’t age well, eh?

Delphine is in tears by the final curtain, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a fancy hankie.

Yours truly is still sitting there wondering how this opera is considered a masterpiece—and also not giving a shit because it’s time.

Justin rises from his seat and, in a coordinated dance of danger and daring, Tess does the same across the way. *Too bad she doesn’t have an LRSR like Saffron*, I think, and then I’m worrying about Saffron all over again. This entire time—nearly two weeks with Justin—I haven’t seen her.

The boys wait until they see me stand up before they do the same, exiting their balcony as I do mine. I’m the last to leave on my side; Parrish is the last to leave on his.

We look back at one another and lock eyes.

You’re a terror in cashmere, but I love you, Parrish Vanguard.

You’re a pain in my ass like I knew you would be, but I love you, Gamer Girl.

That’s what I imagine he’s thinking; it’s probably true, too.

I’m the first to glance away, sucking in a sharp gasp and breaking our quiet, romantic confrontation. I find Delphine waiting just down the hall for me, a pretty frown on her full, shiny mouth. She doesn’t do fillers—only nineteen, remember?—but she loves lip plumping glosses. Obsessed with them, might be a better way to say it. She put some on me tonight, and I wasn’t a fan.

“If you keep looking at those boys like that, he’s going to move their murders up his list of priorities,” Delphine whispers, taking my elbow and acting like she’s genuinely concerned for me.

“Would you kill them if he asked you to?” I ask coldly, and Delphine shrugs, her own face fogging over with dark emotion.

“I’ll do what I have to do, Dakota.” She releases my arm, but at least she calls me by my real name. Delphine keeps pace with me, but she doesn’t touch me or offer comfort to me again.

The wealthy crowd is already filling the lobby, their glittering gowns and sharply-pressed tuxes contrasted against the muted burgundy colors of the waitstaff. The servers walk the floor with trays covered in sparkling

champagne glasses, oddly-shaped silver spoons stuffed with weird appetizers, and ... hot hand towels? Why do rich folks like hot towels so much? People snatch them up and wipe their hands before tossing the used items on another server's empty tray.

O...kay.

We're coming down the curving staircase at the same time that Tess and the boys descend the matching one on the opposite side of the room. Justin pauses on the landing, mouth spreading in a shark smile, and then he lifts his hand up and waves at his ex-wife. She freezes, too, a beautiful red clutch in her left hand, eyes narrowed, mouth pressed flat.

"Do not get involved with that woman tonight," Caroline hisses, giving Justin's arm a sharp tug. He ignores her, continuing on down the steps as Tess does the same.

It's so obvious to me now, how my parents ended up together in the first place. There's an intensity between them that's palpable. I'm sure they sensed that in the beginning, maybe even craved it. But it's not a healthy tension—this is what true hatred feels like.

And hatred, dark as it is, can be likened to romantic obsession in a way.

To hate someone this deeply requires an extreme amount of focus, thought, and attention.

For Tess, it's unwilling and necessary. For Justin, it's the reason that he breathes.

The crowd shifts apart like a school of fish, dresses and loafers shushing across the carpet as the whole of Medina's elite society turns to watch a clash of titans in their own backyard.

"Hello Tess," Justin says, still smiling at her. He snags a glass of champagne from a nearby tray and sips it, raising it in mocking salute. "I bet you're wondering if I'm going to honor my parenting time commitments. Unlike you, I fully attend to abide by the law."

Tess laughs at that, a harsh, angry sound that's husky with violence.

"You son of a bitch," she scoffs, turning her head to the side as she tries to gather herself together. Parrish is holding onto her elbow, but his eyes are all for me. The Seattle Slayer? Nothing but an obstacle to be conquered until we're together again. Maxx and Chasm eye the cleared space in the center of the massive room before exchanging a look that says, *whatever it takes, we'll get our girl*. That scares me at the same time it bolsters my imperiled heart.

A heavy chandelier hangs above us, big square crystals with an eighties vibe. Doubt it though. The entire place looks like it's been redone recently. It frames the confrontation between Tess and Justin in a dramatic halo of dispersed light.

"Son of a bitch?" Justin allows his face to fall, looking around the room like he's begging his peers to see how insane this situation is. Tess is the one calling *him* names? But, but, *he* isn't the one who's been charged with a slew of serial murders. "Shouldn't you be calling P-p-paulie that? He's the one dragging our family through this hell. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if the courts took away your parenting time entirely. How can my precious daughter stay even four days a month with a *murderer*?"

My mother sighs as she looks back at us, absently opening her clutch like she's looking for something innocuous. Lip gloss. A pair of silk gloves. Her phone.

"You know, I am sick and fucking tired of listening to your bullshit, Justin." Tess' dress drapes the floor around her ankles, the ties at her waist hanging elegantly down her back like a train, one leg exposed through the slit in the skirt, heels a definite focal point of the outfit. She looks like a movie star, not a threat. Even I don't expect it when she pulls a small handgun from her clutch.

The crowd pulls in a collective gasp before the screaming starts.

Panic sets in and people start running in every possible direction, knocking into us, inadvertently blocking Tess' clear shot. Doesn't stop her. She actually moves forward, points it right at Justin, and starts to pull the trigger.

A man in a black tux comes at her from the side, knocking her arm up at the last second. The bullet explodes into the plaster ceiling, powdering the wealthy crowd with white dust.

Security guards and bodyguards—these are rich assholes, remember?—swarm the lobby, and Tess disappears in a sea of uniforms as I stand stone-still, a pillar that even panicked people avoid running into. Delphine is right behind me, and I swear that I hear her murmur, "*fuck.*" But not ... necessarily for the reasons Justin might think she's saying that. Something is off in her tone. *The notes, the notes, she delivered the notes!*

Justin is still just standing there, frowning and sipping his drink.

Where are the boys now? I try to find them in the crowd, but there are too many people pushing too hard in opposite directions. It's complete chaos in

there, like the humans around me have devolved into spooked animals. There's no sense in any of it.

A white-faced Caroline stands in disbelief at Justin's side. She didn't expect that out of Tess either, did she? Does she know that this means she can never rest easy? That my mother will come for her as long as they're both still breathing?

Oh, and Justin can act as if he intended for this to happen all along, but I think that if Tess hadn't been attacked, she would've shot him in the head. That's what it looked like to me anyway.

My father gets out his phone and taps out a quick text. Amongst all the movement, he's one of the only still things in the room. There he is, an island in a violent, foamy sea. He turns to me just as I'm knocked into from behind, stumbling forward and falling, more or less, into his arms.

"Lumen is waiting outside; you go with her while I sort this out at the police station." Justin raises an eyebrow, his lips slowly curving into a smile. Does he expect me to argue? Getting in a car with Lumen is infinitely better than being with him. But I can't leave, not with Tess being swarmed by security officers, not while the boys are lost in a gargantuan crush of glittering debutantes and swarthy gentlemen. Not willingly anyway. Justin's fingers dig red welts into my upper arm as he latches onto me. "I'll escort you."

He drags me through the crowd, and even in this environment, people go out of their way to avoid him. I'm sure he wants to believe that it's because they're intimidated by him, but ... it's more likely they know he's a target (not just Tess' target but probably many people in Medina would like to have him killed) and they don't want to get shot.

Justin shoves me out of an emergency exit, setting off the alarm. He walks me around to the front of the building where Lumen is waiting in her pink Barbie mobile, Danyella in the front seat with her yellow gown frothing around her like golden waves.

"Get in." He rips open the back door and gestures for me to do just that. Am I supposed to resist? Is this a test? Doesn't he know that as soon as I get into this vehicle, that I'm not coming back? I'm going to the ice palace, and I'm barricading myself inside. I'm not sure what that means exactly—could I pretend to run away?—but I'm not leaving until he's arrested or dead. "I'll let you know when to come home. For now, I'll be busy ensuring your mother is

prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

Justin slams the door shut on awkward silence and heads straight for the blue and red lights of an approaching police car. We wait there outside the opera house for about thirty seconds, and then Lumen pulls into the crowded street and forces her way through the dense human crush.

“Um, hey Mia,” she says, and Danyella sighs, turning to look back at me.

“What the hell just happened in there? We left before it got fun.” She sounds relaxed, but she can’t seem to stop her fingers from digging at her skirts.

I’m speechless.

After the last two weeks (okay, fine, twelve days), I am absolutely floored to be sitting in a car with my friends—even if my friends are questionable in character and intent.

I don’t even buckle my seat belt—see, Chas was right, total rebel now. I scoot forward, a hand on either of the girls’ seats, and lean between them. I feel like if I’m not looking Lumen right in the face when I ask this next question, she might come up with an excuse to say no.

“Can you take me”—I almost say ‘to the Vanguard house’ but change my mind at the last second—“home?”

Lumen is gripping the wheel hard. She doesn’t ask for clarification on what I just said. She knows damn well that I don’t mean Justin’s place when I ask for home.

“I’m supposed to take you to my place,” she whispers, and Danyella pulls in a short, sharp intake of breath. Her brown eyes shift over to mine, and I find myself staring at her in the sudden silence. She was the first person in Medina to treat me like Dakota Banks and not Mia Patterson. I appreciated that then; I still appreciate it now.

“What’s going on Danyella? Fuck his tech. He knew that I was going to ask you. That’s why he sent me with you guys. He’s aware that I’m at the point where I might reach over and open this door, roll across the pavement, run with a broken leg, just to get away from him.”

“If you don’t come over tonight, I will *never* see my mother again. Jesus Christ, Dakota, you’re not the only one with fucking family to protect.” Lumen is sniffing, swiping her arm across her face and not caring that she’s smudged her perfect makeup. That’s my first indication of how upset she really is.

Lumen Hearst never allows the world to see her as anything less than perfect.

“If I try to run, what will you do? Chase me down with your car?” I ask dryly, but the look she turns my way promises that she would. It’s not much of a deterrent, but it is an annoyance. I’ve been broken these last few weeks with Justin, but you know what? That’s not the end of everything. Stress can be good for the body. Exercising creates tiny tears in the muscles, forcing the body to heal them so it can grow stronger.

That’s me right now. Torn but healed. Stronger. Better than before.

“You don’t give a shit if my mother dies, do you?” Lumen asks, like she’s not surprised, but maybe also like she’s disappointed. Well, ditto on my end. I’d be a fool to trust her, so I don’t. I don’t trust her, and I know she’s full of shit, and yet I remain a sucker for a sob story. “If it were your mother on the line, you know that you’d do the same. You’d throw me under the bus, too. It’s how everyone is.”

She doesn’t know that there *were* times I could’ve thrown her under the bus for my own benefit. Not about to shove those in her face though. Lumen and I, we have very different values. I *should* hop out of this car and run. That’s what makes the most sense for my own personal well-being. I also refuse to allow Justin to warp me into a selfish primate who cares only for herself.

Also, pretty sure that if I jump out now, there’ll be a pawn waiting nearby, probably foaming at the mouth over the idea of running me down with his car. When I make choices regarding Justin, I check the chamber for rounds—metaphorically or literally.

“I didn’t say that I wouldn’t go to your house; I just need to know what’s going on. All of it. Everything.” I pause there, but neither girl fills the silence. It thickens as we drive, an opaque fog between us. I miss the old days—sure, they weren’t that long ago, but I’m not certain I’ll ever see them again—when we hung out and argued about music, worked on the play together, talked so late into the night that it became morning. “Why don’t we start with this: did you ever really have a crush on me?”

Lumen sighs heavily.

“Don’t take it personally; I hit on everyone to get what I want.”

There’s a profound sadness in that statement that makes my heart ache.

“Are you even really bisexual?” I ask, wondering how far she’s gone for

Justin since I met her. Has she killed anyone? Anyone except Danyella's attacker, I mean. *Ah, the classic question of, 'did my friend kill one person or two-plus?' An age-old conundrum.*

"I am. Even if I weren't, sex is the quickest way to get what you need. If I'd been able to convince you that we were a thing, this all would've been a lot easier." There's a long pause there where I process what she's just said. "Instead, my mom is missing and it's because I was stupid enough to help you."

"This is not Dakota's fault," Danyella argues, and I see the same fatigue on her face that's on all of ours. She's been battling Lumen's self-destructive urges since the beginning. "This is nobody's fault but Justin Prior."

I stay where I am, watching the streets of Medina pass by, grotesque mega mansions and towering trees and intimidating gates with stone walls to keep the peasantry at bay. Not once has Lumen ever invited me back to her place. We always stayed at Danyella's (could've stayed at the ice palace but I never wanted to). When we pull up to a metal gate, filigreed leaves decorating the delicate bars, it swings open automatically and Lumen eases us up the gravel drive.

I haven't been allowed on the internet since I was kidnapped. I don't know anything that's gone on while I've been in captivity. The first move I need to make is to text the boys and let them know where I am. Leaving them at the opera house makes me nervous, but I know they'll be safe there. Security guards, bodyguards, police, probably Agent Takahashi as soon as she gets the news.

Justin can't get them there, and now I'm away from him. That was worth the chaos. Then again ... Tess might be going to jail.

I can't believe she tried to shoot him in the middle of a crowded lobby. She cares more for me than she does herself. That's abundantly apparent to me now.

Goes to show how desperate she is. Justin did kidnap me from right under her nose, after all. *With Laverne Vanguard's help.*

"Can I borrow your phone?" I ask, looking at Danyella and not Lumen. The latter has just parked under a decorative overhang near what appears to be a side door. She shuts the ignition off as Danyella thinks long and hard about my question.

As we sit there, I happen to glance out the window and notice two things.

Firstly, the garden here is immaculate. The flower beds are carefully tended and bursting with color, the hedges are neatly trimmed, and there's nary a weed in the rolling green lawns. To anyone passing by, the Hearst home appears to be as well-kempt and monied as all the rest of Medina. There are even topiaries in the shape of animals.

Secondly (is that a word?), Mr. Volli is standing in the shadows beside the wall, dressed in another well-pressed and tailored suit, still wearing the stag mask. I swallow hard and wonder yet again where Saffron is. I'd be worried she was caught, but nobody's bragged to me about it. I bet Justin would put her head on a pike outside my bedroom door.

Chiiiiills.

If Saffron isn't dead then where is she? Why isn't she coming to the rescue like she promised? I knew better than to get my hopes up, but ... My hopes are sky-high anyway.

"If you're not allowed to give me your phone, can you at least text one of the guys and let them know where to find me?"

"Why? So Maxim Wright can break through a window and decapitate me?" Lumen asks with disgust apparent in her voice. She turns around to look at me. "You know what? You want them to come? I was never told that they couldn't. All I know is that *you* are supposed to stay here tonight. That's it."

"Why are you being so hostile?" I ask, even if I already understand why. She's worried about her mother. She's stressed-out. Justin is pushing us all to our limits. Up to and including Tess.

"Emotions are running high," Danyella begins, trying to alleviate some of the tension in the car. Lumen scoffs at her and climbs out, heading for the front door without waiting to see if we'll follow. If it weren't for Amin, I wouldn't. I'd take off out the gate and run down the street. The ice palace isn't far from here; I could be home in a matter of ten or fifteen minutes. "Please don't blame her for being like this." She looks back at me, gaze apologetic. I wonder if either she or Lumen has noticed Amin Volli or if he only appears for me, like some sort of unwanted haunt. "She's afraid you'll judge her for the state of the house."

That confuses me. Out of everything, *that* is what Lumen is worried about?

"What's really going on with you two?" I ask softly, desperate to finally understand the truth.

Danyella fiddles with her dress and then sighs.

“All of the things we told you—the blackmailing, the incident with the ... the sex offender—all of that was true. I don’t know whether Lumen had a crush on you for real or not. She grew up believing that her body was just one more weapon to use in the never-ending arms race that is Medina. It’s possible she was pretending in order to manipulate you, but it’s equally possible that she’s embarrassed that you turned her down.”

“Danyella, how are you involved in all of this? From what I can tell, your family wasn’t a part of what happened to Justin back in the day. Lumen claimed she didn’t want you dragged into this and yet ... here you are.”

I wait patiently for her to answer me.

There’s no rush: Amin is outside, so I’m not going anywhere for the time being.

Come on, boys! With the four of us (six if you count Danyella and Lumen), we could take him. Couldn’t we? C-could we though? Probably not.

The idea is implausible—even with Maxim’s Krav Maga skills.

“The Fishers are dead.” Danyella’s voice is soft, respectful, but it’s cautious, too, as if she isn’t sure whether to tell me this or not.

That ... that hits me hard.

I turn away from her and close my eyes, fighting back a wave of strange emotion.

“How? When?” *It had to be after my meeting with Takahashi since she didn’t bring it up. Did Tess let Veronica go? Did she escape? Was she turned over to the FBI? Was she with her parents?*

“Their boat capsized.” Danyella raises her eyebrows at me before climbing out of the car. She struggles a bit with her voluminous dress, and a pang hits me when I remember how similar we are, how easily we got along in the past. She’s as uncomfortable in these clothes as I am.

I follow her out of the car, doing my best to ignore Amin Volli as he inclines his chin to me in greeting.

“Was Veronica on the boat with her parents?” I’m stumbling as I try to navigate the gravel driveway in heels. After several frustrating steps that nearly snap my leg off at the ankle, I strip the damn things off and raise my hand to toss them into the grass.

“No!” Danyella rushes forward, snatching the shoes from me before I get a chance to throw them. “Don’t you know anything about shoes? This is a five-

figure pair, custom-made in New York City. You can't disrespect them like that." She cradles them to her chest, looking at me like I truly am the enemy. "Have you changed that much since I first met you?"

Shame rises up inside of me, but I squash it back down. Shame was an emotion that Dakota had time for; Mia Prior doesn't have the luxury.

Danyella ascends the stairs as I struggle to catch up, cursing at the painfully sharp gravel bits digging their way into my feet. I make it clumsily to the stone steps, dragging my blue gown behind me. The front half is bundled in my left arm, but the hem is already getting dirty.

"How do they know the Fishers were on the boat? Was Veronica with them?" I repeat, trying to picture it in my mind. A sunken ... canoe? A kayak? A speedboat? A dinghy? A raft? A cruise ship? ... A yacht? Had to be a yacht. But maybe Veronica wasn't on it after all?

"Same way they know about Judge Rossi—there were bodies. No Veronica though; she's still missing." Danyella reaches down for the handle of the front door, staring at her own fingers instead of the actual handle. I want to ask how she knows about Judge Rossi, but I'm guessing it's big news by now. What a silly question. "The whole town is afraid." She looks back at me. "It seems like a good handful of people were missing tonight at the theater, and most of their families are acting as if they don't know what's happening. More blackmail, Dakota."

I knew Justin's plans for revenge extended much further than me, but it's hard to fathom the scope of his meticulous planning.

Danyella opens the front door and steps aside to allow me in.

My instincts warn me against setting foot in that house, but then I look back and see a flicker of the stag mask in the shadows. *Universe help me. How on earth did I prioritize Raúl over Amin? He's way scarier! Raúl wasn't even a sub-boss, more like ... like ... an annoying NPC. Amin Volli, he's a big bad in all the ways that matter.*

He will change the course of my existence—trust me on this one.

With a great, big inhale, I step into the house and pause inside a small entryway with inlaid patterns on the wood floors, a mosaic mural on the ceiling, and absolutely zero furniture. It's clear that this is a side entrance, but I'd expect a painting, a plant, something, anything.

Danyella kicks her own shoes off and then carefully sets both hers and mine by the door before gesturing for me to follow her. We step out of the

entryway into a large, circular room with a gorgeous chandelier. There's dark wood wainscoting, intricate millwork on all the doors, ornate crown molding, baseboards ... and nothing else.

Yet another empty room.

Alright, fine, it's not *entirely* empty. There are spiderwebs. There's a fine layer of dust that promises the maids packed up and left long ago. And there's a persistent sense of *space*, like standing in an open field with nothing but sky overhead. Only, it feels like there's a storm in here, brewing in each cobwebbed corner and flashing lightning on each miscolored square on the wallpaper. The paintings were sold, the fine artifacts sent to auction. Now here we are, our footsteps loud and intrusive, like we aren't welcomed by the moldering manor.

We head to the right, into a room with wall-to-wall carpet and heavy drapes. It's a gargantuan space, the largest living room I've ever seen (and that includes the ice palace and Laverne's house and even the old Vasquez place), but it, too, is empty save for a single piece of furniture and its lone occupant. The item looks all the smaller for existing in an empty void of decadent deshabille.

Lumen sits slumped on that gold fainting couch.

Her heels are in a pile on the floor beside her, knees together, ankles splayed, head hanging down. She looks defeated, nothing at all like the bouncy girl I met when Parrish and Chasm took me to Whitehall and left me phone-less and shoeless in the parking garage.

I don't ask where all the items in the house are. Knowing what's going on with the Hearsts—as in, they're dead broke—it seems like they might've sold off their things to keep up the charade. Lumen has never wanted for outfits or dresses, never gone without her car, never shown the world anything but liquid luxe and a monied mien. Oddly enough, she's still wearing the ring. I assumed she was going to sell it after she realized a marriage between the Hearsts and the Vanguard was never happening.

"I haven't seen my mother since your father's wedding," she murmurs, lifting up her head and then reaching her hands back to her carefully coiffed hair. Lumen tugs on the pins and clips until glossy blond waves fall on either side of her drawn and tired face.

Since the wedding. It hits me that the bloody wedding dress might have something to do with the matriarch of the Hearst family going missing. *Shit.*

I walk over to stand in front of her, and then I take a seat on the carpet, putting out a hand to rest it on her knee. She slaps the comforting touch aside as Danyella pauses next to me and adjusts her black cat-eye glasses.

“Why couldn’t you let me have one thing?” Lumen asks, voice pained as she lifts her pale brown eyes up to mine. “Parrish is *essential* to saving my family legacy, and you don’t care. You fucked him knowing that I’d find out, that I’d realize I put my ass on the line to help you guys when I didn’t have to.” She scoffs and sits up, turning away like she can’t bear to look at me. “I should never have made that video with Min-su. I should’ve fucked Chasm instead.”

“You never could’ve fucked Chasm,” I clarify, trying to tamp down on my anger. Danyella sighs and fluffs her dress out like she’s about to sit down.

A hard, angry knock sounds at the side door, and the other girls freeze.

Me? I snatch up one of Lumen’s pink designer heels (*ah, red soles, another Louboutin fan*) and leap to my feet like a beast in a ball gown. I’ve been in combat mode for months. I might not be able to kill Mr. Volli with a shoe, but I can gouge his eye out. In that case, it may be the shoes are worth their exorbitant price tag.

“Open this fucking door before I break it down!” It’s Maxx, yelling for me, his voice strained, his rage palpable even through the heavy double doors.

I drop the pink stiletto like a tarnished sword, stumbling over the rug and nearly dying by tripping on the stupid dress. I don’t slow down or question anything, I run, and then I throw the door open and they’re right there.

I’m gathered into Maxx’s big, strong arms, and it’s like coming home. It’s always been coming home, and I never should’ve doubted him, and I think I’m soaking his neck and jacket with happy tears. He smells amazing, too, a tropical vacation spent poolside with the ocean on the horizon, sweet drinks and sunshine and happy lounging.

“Oh, Kota, my heart.” He squeezes me so tightly that I can’t breathe, and I don’t care. I can’t think but for the feel of him, the thump of his heart, his heat, his strength. Before I met Maxim, I didn’t know what it was like not to have him around (obvs), but after I had him, and then thought I could possibly lose him ... it was the worst feeling in the world. *He’s still here for you, even though his father might be dead. He doesn’t resent you; he loves you. How lucky you are, Miss Banks.*

Maxx releases me reluctantly, allowing the other boys the briefest of

contact. His hands remain on my hips as Parrish touches his fingers to my cheek and Chasm strokes a hand over my hair, like they all have to touch me to reassure themselves that I'm alive.

"You guys found me," I whisper, cheeks flushing with pleasure at the idea. Simultaneously, I'm filled with guilt. I don't want them here if it puts them in danger. And with Volli around? Make no mistake: we are *all* in danger.

"Let's go." Maxx yanks on my hand before either Chasm or Parrish has a chance to say anything.

"Wait, wait, wait." I resist his grip on my arm, but he's way too strong for me and I end up stumbling barefoot onto the bricks of the side porch.

"We're taking you home," Parrish declares through clenched teeth, looking past me toward Danyella as she peers around the corner in her yellow dress. Lumen hasn't moved, I don't think, but I couldn't see her from here even if she did.

"No excuses, Naekkeo. We need to go *now*." Chasm grabs onto my other wrist and then both boys are tugging me toward the stairs while Parrish guards the door, like he expects one or both girls to try and stop us. Guess he was right.

"Don't you dare go!" Lumen calls out, and then she appears in the doorway with a red face and clenched fists, slamming into Parrish's chest and forcing him to grip the doorjamb to keep her inside the house and away from me. "Don't you leave me here like this." She has tears pouring down her face, but the boys aren't fazed by the show of emotion like I am.

"Why? Got another errand for Justin?" Parrish asks, voice tight and clipped. Lumen raises her hand to slap him, but he snatches her wrist, yanks the diamond ring off it, and then releases her. She slaps him then—*hard*. He takes it because I think he feels he deserves it, but when she tries to do it again, he stops her.

"Enough with the crocodile tears," Chasm growls out, glaring at her over my shoulder. "We're done helping you, Hearst. You've been recording shit and giving it to Justin? Reporting back to him like a good little lackey? Then don't count on us to have your back."

"My mom will *die* if you leave!" she screams, falling to her knees on the bricks when Parrish steps back. Ouch. That must hurt. I pull away from Maxx and Chasm, but only because they allow it, and I squat in front of Lumen, taking her hands in mine. "My dad hasn't been home in days either. I'm ...

I'm scared."

Lumen is me. Lumen is a blackmailed girl with people she loves. Lumen is trying to protect those people.

I choose not to judge her for the things she's done as I would hope the boys and Tess and my sister wouldn't judge me for the things I've done while under Justin's thumb.

"All I have to do is stay the night?" I ask, and she nods.

Chasm scoffs from behind me.

"For fucking real though?" He snaps his fingers and then tosses a thumb in Lumen's direction. "I don't believe a *word* that this chick says. If Justin wants you to spend the night here, it'll end in bloodshed. We're taking you home even if it means dragging you there while you kick and scream." He looks down at me like he's sizing me up to throw over his shoulder.

I believe that he'll do it, too.

What happened to the cutie guy on the ladder making hearts?! This guy looks like he'd kick the ladder out from under that guy. Chasm is all sorts of dichotomous sexy.

"Mr. Volli is on the property," I argue, trying to keep my voice down and knowing that it doesn't matter. Justin will be able to hear me. If ... if he's listening? Now that Raúl is gone and Mr. Volli is on the run, who's watching the cameras? I work under the assumption that someone is anyway. Caroline? Delphine? Another nameless killer that I haven't met? "I don't think I can leave, and I don't think you should be here."

"We called Takahashi and told her you were here," Maxx growls, moving up so close behind me that I can feel his body heat even as I'm crouched down on the ground. He's like sunshine at my back. Angry, growly, alpha-y sunshine. "If something happens to you—or to any of us—she'll know why."

I know he's saying that all on purpose, his best attempt at keeping us safe for the time being.

The boys are still going to try to make me leave.

"Please don't go," Lumen whispers, taking my hands and gazing into my eyes with such pure pleading that I can't seem to find it in my heart to resist. That's been my weakness from the very beginning of this: the fact that I have a heart. Justin doesn't have one at all, so that's why he has trouble understanding me sometimes. All he knows is that my heart is a leash that he can grab onto and tug, that I'll sit, stay, lie down like a dog for the people that

I love.

I am not ashamed of that.

Lumen, she's trying to do the same right now.

Also ... sort of just realized why Maxx was a consummate dick to me. I would never have even entertained the idea of being angry with him if he hadn't laid it on thick.

"If we leave, Mr. Volli will shoot us." I release Lumen's hands and stand up with a tired sigh.

"Still not convinced, Naekkeo," Chasm continues, gesturing at me like he's trying to get me to cough up a better argument. "Keep trying or it's caveman time. Maxx isn't the only guy here who can devolve like that."

As if in response to his statement, there's a rustle in the bushes to the left of the porch. I don't see anyone, but it certainly seems like someone is there. That sound is followed by a smattering of other noises—like footsteps upstairs—from inside the house. The old, empty mansion groans, and I shudder under the weight of its enigmatic mystique.

"Old pipes," Lumen says dryly, but Chasm unleashes a string of hushed Korean words that obviously mean *yeah, and the guy with the gun is just a lawn ornament*. Or maybe I made that up?

"Old pipes are responsible for *that*?" Parrish asks, voice strained.

And there's Amin Volli, standing *inside* one of the first-floor rooms and peering out at us. He's wearing the stag mask and smiling, the rifle held in white-gloved hands. His hair is slicked back, his demeanor that of a hunter and not a poet. I wonder if any part of his personality was ever real? He seems to have acquired a new one overnight.

"Alright, shit, I get the point," Chas snarls as Mr. Volli continues to stand there.

I have no idea what to do, so I wait in silence until he moves away, like maybe he's walking a perimeter both inside and outside of the house.

I'm not the only one that breathes a sigh of relief when he disappears from sight. He's not far away though. Just a moment later, the bushes rustle again, and I assume he's climbed out of a window or something. Gross.

"Where is Tess?" I ask finally, turning back to the others. Not a one of them looks unscathed by the appearance of my sixth period teacher.

"At the station," Parrish says, his voice strangely hollow. He's afraid of losing Tess, of seeing her taken away to jail for who knows how long. Even if

Justin wants her alive to witness his great feats, I don't think he'd mind seeing her rot behind bars for a few years. "We knew getting to you was more important." His eyes narrow and he looks over at Maxx with blatant distrust. "He ran down the car for a few blocks so that we'd know where you were going. I don't trust people that run that fast."

"Jealousy never did look good on you, Parrish." Maxx gives his friend a raised brow and then looks to me again, flashing the gun underneath his suit jacket. He doesn't say anything aloud, but at least I know that it's there. "What happened to you over the last two weeks, Kota? If you can honestly look me in the eye and tell me that it was nothing, that he never tried to hurt you, then I'll let you stay."

"You'll *let* me stay?" I query as Lumen gets to her feet. It's not that I'm siding with her against the boys, but she needs someone to believe in her the way I trust these guys to believe in me. The way I should've believed in them when they did what they had to in order to protect me. I'm doing what *I* have to do now to protect *them*: if I leave here and head to the ice palace, Mr. Volli will try to stop us. He won't shoot me first either. It'll be one of the boys that gets it. "How about this: *you* three go home." I choke on the words, but I have to say them.

They should go, and I should stay.

That's what makes sense.

"You're fucking with us, right?" Chas asks with a mocking laugh. He digs his hands into the pockets of his slacks as I step forward to fix his tie. He drops his eyes to mine, my hands tangled in the gray silk, his coming to settle gently on my waist. There's a longing and an urgency here that I don't dare examine. "Out of all the possible scenarios, you think that's most likely? *Ani Michyeosseo?*"

"I'm not crazy, I'm rational. This is the rational choice."

Chasm stares at me for a few seconds too long, and I realize I surprised him by understanding what he was saying. He blinks at me and then reaches out to ruffle my new hair.

I'm immediately self-conscious, even with Lumen crying on the ground, with Danyella standing still and silent behind her. Maxx and Parrish are staring at me, too, and I'm sure they're all wondering what happened to my ass-length black and green locks.

That's enough of a clue for them, I'm sure. They know these last two

weeks have been hell.

“What did he do to you, Little Sister?” Chasm asks softly, hand still on my head. He adjusts it so that he’s cupping the side of my face, stroking his thumb over the carefully covered scabs on my chin.

“It doesn’t matter.” I try to pull away from him, but he uses his other hand to grab my wrist. His fingers are so warm, a false sense of security trying to lure me away from this mess. I want to go with them, more than anything. That’s all I can think about, how easy it would be to climb in the Jeep Gladiator that’s waiting on the driveway. “I don’t want you guys here.”

“He tried to kill you, didn’t he?” Maxx asks, his voice so low that I actually wonder if I heard him at all or if I imagined the words. He steps forward and puts a hand on my shoulder, forehead bowed down to touch mine. He even closes his beautiful green eyes, and I can’t decide if it’s because he’s too worked up at the sight of me or because he’s so angry that he wants to chase Amin Volli through the brush. “Kota.”

Maxx isn’t asking anymore: he knows. He just wants me to confirm it.

I nod, and even Lumen’s crying falls silent.

Parrish moves close, slipping behind me so that I’m surrounded by all three boys, a fence of stupid muscles and adorably concerned stares.

“Don’t do this to me right now,” I whisper, but they don’t move.

“Do what?” Parrish queries, leaning down so that when I turn my face, our mouths brush together. “Ask how you’re feeling? Check in with you? Gamer Girl, we thought you were *dead*. For two fucking weeks, we’ve been trying to get you out of there. For two fucking weeks, we all believed we’d never see you again.”

“Now you know what it was like when you were kidnapped.” I’m trying to tease him, to lighten up a dense and dark moment in our shared history, but it doesn’t work. They’re not buying the casual *it’s no big thing* vibe that I’m trying to project. “Justin and I played Russian roulette.”

Those words hang in the air for an inordinate amount of time, and then Maxim is gathering me up again. He’s selfish about it, holding me close and stroking my hair. My feet aren’t even quite touching the ground as I put my arms around him.

It seems impossible that they’re here with me, that I’m not alone right now, that I could escape and yet I’m refusing to.

Later, I’ll be glad that we didn’t try on our own.

It wouldn't have gone well for us.



CHAPTER 28

I eventually convince the boys to come inside—the house. Not me. Inside the house.

My cheeks are flaming as Lumen leads us into the kitchen, this gargantuan affair of navy-blue cabinets that reach the ceiling, an island big enough to feed an army, and a hidden refrigerator filled with ... like three random sodas, two of which are diet.

“I’m sorry, I don’t ...” She doesn’t finish her sentence, just stands there with the fridge open and stares blankly into it.

The kitchen is a little better than the rest of the house since it still has appliances and a set of bar stools at the island. It’s as empty as the rest of the house when it comes to décor or art or anything that’s not heavy, plugged-in, or nailed-down.

“Let’s order pizza,” I suggest, and everyone turns to look at me like I’ve lost my mind. “I’m sure we’re all hungry, and we’re being blackmailed by a serial killer, and I just don’t see why I can’t have a hot slice of pepperoni and cheese to make things better.”

I don’t mention that I’m craving pizza because the last time I was supposed to have some, I tried to kill Justin and ended up beaten black-and-blue instead. So I feel salty about it—the pizza and the beating. Har. Dark humor. I can’t seem to help it.

The world isn’t right, and sometimes, when the world isn’t right, we need

humor to dig our way out of a dark place.

“So, the FBI knows you’re here?” Danyella clarifies as I take a seat on one of the stools and the boys literally take up positions against my back. I can see that as soon as we get some privacy, that urgency and intensity and need that I see in all three of them, it’ll have to be satisfied.

Err, I don’t mean physically! I mean those emotional needs.

“They know,” Chasm agrees grimly, like he’s frustrated by the system and everyone in it. We could tell Agent Takahashi that Amin Volli was on the property, but I doubt they’d show up based on our claims alone. Even if they did, Justin would hear us telling her over the phone and have Amin leave. There’s a slim chance that *might* give us a window to escape, but only if we’re lucky. I can’t bet anyone’s life on luck.

At some point, *Justin* is going to reach his breaking point, give up on the showboating and the revenge, and just slaughter us all. *Probably best to get that foursome in as soon as possible. Can’t cross it off the bucket list if we kick said bucket.*

“Are you okay?” Danyella asks, leaning in close to me. “You seem to be experiencing a severe case of vasodilation.” She waves a hand in front of my face as I try to puzzle out what she’s trying to tell me. When I don’t respond, Danyella sighs and uses two fingers to push her glasses up her nose. “What I mean to say is, your sympathetic nervous system has been triggered.”

Me, still not getting it. Danyella, sighing dramatically.

“Girl, you’re blushing profusely.”

“I’m not blushing,” I assert with this odd, falsetto laugh that shows how nervous I am around the guys. Like, it’s been two weeks. I almost died. I love them. I’m embarrassing myself. I look over my shoulder to see Maxx with a single brow raised in query. “I’m not.”

“You are, and it’s probably because you’re thinking about sex. That’s okay: we’re all thinking about sex, too.”

“I’m thinking about how to not die,” Chasm clarifies with a scoff, but when I look at him next, he flicks his lip ring with his tongue in a very not-accidental way.

“Maxx is right—for once.” Parrish tickles his fingers over my shoulder on my left side, and I shiver violently on that bar stool, wishing my dress were on the floor and that Lumen and Danyella were ... elsewhere. “I was imagining you bent over this—”

“Can you please not?” Danyella asks as Lumen turns around to stare at the four of us like we’ve lost our minds. It seems absurd, maybe, that we can behave this way in these situations, but it’s only because we’re adaptable. Because we’ve been living this high stress lifestyle for months now. If we didn’t have fun whenever we could, then we never would. “I do not need to know about the mating habits of my friends.”

She looks at Lumen (I’m sure she’s heard many stories about Lumen’s own mating habits), but Whitehall’s queen bee doesn’t take the bait. She’s not in the mood for games of any kind. Understandable considering the situation with her parents. *The blood on Caroline’s wedding dress ... it had to be Lumen’s mother’s.*

“Dick drunk when all of *this* is going on around you?” She makes a circle with her finger, indicating the Seattle Slayer and his reign of terror in a very succinct manner. “And you were questioning *my* bisexuality? Such a straight girl move.”

“Don’t deflect,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice soothing but not patronizing. “Help us help you.”

“I don’t trust you anymore. I thought I did—especially after what happened with that cop guy—but you guys betrayed me. You promised me an engagement and cost me my parents.” Lumen snuffles and turns her head away.

“We don’t trust you for shit either, remember? Explain to us what we’re doing here.” Chasm gestures with his hand to indicate the sad, empty mansion with all the cobwebs in the corners. Here and there, a stray piece of furniture is shoved to the side and covered with a sheet. Also ... I run my finger across the counter and see that there’s a layer of dust there.

This place hasn’t been a home for a long time.

“I told you: *I don’t know*. I only know that you’re supposed to stay here.” Lumen leans back against the fridge and lifts her chin, eyes closed in feigned boredom. In truth, she’s terrified and struggling with the situation. She might know what’s coming, she might not, but the fear in her is very real. “So is somebody going to order food? It’s not like I can afford it.”

“How long have you been living like this?” I ask, and she opens her eyes to glare at me.

“Months. Months and months. My room is still relatively normal, but ... we’ve had to sell a few things.” She sniffs derisively, turning her attention to

Parrish. “Why can’t you just be like all the others in Medina? I’m a good catch. My family name carries weight and history, and you have plenty of money. Good breeding belongs together, Parrish.”

Whoa.

I decide not to break down all of the things that are wrong with her statements.

I can also see why Parrish said the things he said to me when we were in Bend, how everything was bullshit but what we had was real. He’s staring unflinchingly back at Lumen, challenging her with that famous stare of his.

“We reneged on the proposal. So what? You’ve been sleuthing for Justin this whole time anyway, even when you were pretending to be truthful. Did he force you to come clean to us about the rapist’s murder? How about your obsession with dating Dakota? How far does your bullshit go?”

Lumen moves over to the counter and slams her palm down on top of it.

“Yeah, you’re right: in the beginning, I didn’t give a fuck what happened to her or to any of you. But then the Heath Cousins thing happened, and I was sure that I was going to die. It’s only because Dakota killed him instead of letting him kill me that I’m still standing here, so things changed. I’ve done the best I could for you guys while holding my own. You know where that got me? A missing mom. A missing dad. Alone in a big, empty house with no money.”

I see now why Lumen is always staying with Danyella. So many things make sense to me all at once.

“But what about you?” I ask, turning to Danyella. “How did you get involved in this?”

“Lumen is my best friend; I’m not letting her go through this alone.” Danyella looks down at the counter and reaches out to write some words in the dust. Her sentence reads, *sorry, not sorry*. “Not for something that was partially my fault to begin with.”

“None of this is her fault or yours—Justin was coming for the Hearsts regardless.” I turn to the boys and offer a cheeky half-smile. “And you guys don’t need to worry: Lumen confessed to not truly having a crush on me.”

Lumen herself sighs and rests her forearms on the island counter, letting her head hang down.

“It’s not that I didn’t like you. I guess I don’t even know what I like or who I like anymore. I had two goals: save my family from poverty and save them

from the Slayer. That's it." Lumen looks up again and meets Maxx's gaze. There must be something in his expression that scares her because her attitude changes in an instant. "Don't you dare come anywhere near me," she growls at him, and he scoffs.

"Please. I didn't even touch you. If you hadn't been guilty, and you'd just handed me your phone instead of running from me, we wouldn't have ended up in a chase at all."

"I see, so when you say *give me your phone*, I'm supposed to say *yes, sir*? Dakota might like that behavior, Maxim Wright, but I'm not a fan." Lumen flips him off, and he curls his lip. I'm still blushing—haven't stopped actually—so nothing changes.

"I don't— Never mind. Can we focus on the pizza situation? I'm starving." I look to Chas and he lifts up his phone, showing me an app for a local pizza delivery place.

"Already ordered, Naekkeo."

"May as well gorge. My diet is ruined anyway," Lumen mumbles, and Danyella sighs, moving into the kitchen to put her hand on her friend's shoulder.

"You are *positive* that Justin asked nothing more from you than to bring Dakota here for the night?" Danyella keeps her voice soft, but not patronizing. The effort seems to elicit a good response from Lumen. She takes her phone out and passes it to her friend.

"All I got was a text message. That's it. Have at it if you want to decipher a deeper meaning." Lumen takes off as Danyella examines the message and then shows it to the rest of us.

Take Mia home for a sleepover tonight. You understand what happens if she leaves. Order yourselves some food, and I'll happily cover the cost (since I know you can't afford it).

Ouch.

Also, makes me wish I didn't order anything. It feels too much like I'm giving into another of Justin's demands.

"I don't want her left alone for even a few moments; I'm afraid of what she might do to herself." Danyella lifts her heavy skirts in both hands. I'm pleased to see that her hem is also dirty. I'm not the only one who can't hack it in a ballgown. "Text us when the food gets here. Dumping your phone won't do much good in this house. The entire thing is rigged with cameras."

Danyella leaves, and I'm lifted suddenly from my seat by Maxx, flipped around in his strong arms, and set on the edge of the kitchen island in my blue floral gown with the numerous, revealing cutouts.

Maxx slides his finger into one near my thigh and strokes that hot tip down my achy skin.

"Tell me about Russian roulette."

"Maxx," I groan, pulling away from him and lying on my back atop the island. Doesn't matter. It's dusty and dreary in here—dead bugs, spiderwebs, dust bunnies—so I take the chance to lie barefoot on a kitchen counter in a twelve-thousand-dollar dress and too many diamonds. Mm. As I'm lying there, I pull the earrings and the necklace off.

There's another chandelier above me, made of black iron and missing some of its bulbs. That's what I stare at so I don't have to look at the collective worry in my boys' faces.

"Maxx, what? You can't tell us that Justin played Russian fucking roulette with you and not explain." He has a panicked sound hidden underneath the rough growl of his voice, one that reminds me of Chasm. *Oh Chasm*. I've been refusing to allow my brain to settle on Seamus, but how can I continue to look him in the eye and not tell him what Raúl said about his dad?

He has a right to know.

"When you say Russian roulette, you mean that Justin loaded a gun with one bullet and took his chances in shooting you?" Chasm asks, and I nod. "How many times?"

Damn.

I was hoping he wouldn't ask that.

Parrish hops up onto the counter beside me, leaning over to look me in the face.

It's impossible to lie with his eyes locked on mine.

"Once." I wouldn't say they all sighed in relief—there's no relief to be found here—but they're all thankful it was just once. Only ... it wasn't. "That was before there was any bullet in the gun. He made a show of loading a single round, spun the cylinder, and then he—"

The sound of the gun going off rings in my head, and I sit up suddenly, heart racing, sweat kissing my temples. I can't breathe. I feel myself getting ready to die on repeat. I'm clutching at the top of my dress like I'm suffocating, even though the gown is strapless and low-cut.

Both Maxx and Chasm join me and Parrish on the counter, and the moment quiets, lengthens, shadows stretching across the floor as sunset peaks and dies. They all sit quietly with me until the panic subsides.

“*Ippeo*,” Chas whispers, which I think is slang for *pretty* in Korean. He teases my hair with his fingers as I blush and look down at my skirts instead of his face.

“You’d look good even if you were bald,” Parrish asserts proudly, but I shake my head.

“It’s not that it’s a bad haircut or a terrible color ...” I don’t finish what I’m saying, but I don’t have to. They know what I mean. I’m not Dakota Banks anymore, the girl with the lime-green and black hair. That was my signature, that was my thing, that was ... who gives a shit about hair when death could be waiting around any corner?

“We can fix the color, can’t we?” Maxx asks, finding the best possible solution in the chaos.

He’s right: we can do that, can’t we? I won’t be able to get the length back for years, but the color can be corrected. I almost smile.

The buzzer at the front gate goes off, and a small monitor beside the kitchen doorway lights up.

There’s our pizza driver waiting outside.

We buzz him in, wait for him to drop the food on the porch and leave, and only then do we retrieve it.

“Could be poisoned,” I admit, but the smell from those boxes is too much for me.

We end up sitting on the living room floor in a circle, eating that greasy food in our expensive formalwear—that’s now very dusty, thank you very much—and trying to plan our next move.

“You can’t go back with him,” Chas says, even knowing that it’s possible Justin can still hear us. Despite Danyella’s warning, we ditched our phones and ran the bug detector (found three cameras, so we avoided those areas completely). Still doesn’t mean we’re safe. As we’ve learned recently, there’s really no such thing as safe from Justin Prior and Milk Carton and especially creepy Amin Volli.

I nip the end off a slice of pizza, staring down at the box and wondering how much longer my cleverness will keep me afloat. How much longer can I toe the line before he gets me? I’m here on a one-in-six random chance. The

odds aren't going to be any better next time.

This might also be my last chance to learn about the boys' pizza eating habits. Like, do they eat the crust or toss it back in the box like mere trash? Do they pick the pepperoni off before taking their first bite? Do they lick their fingers or use napkins? Maybe they're frequent handwashers? Maybe they're pining for a pair of food-safe gloves?

"You keep saying that." I look up to meet Chasm's gaze, finding him leaned over, arm on his knee, *staring* at me. "What? You do keep saying that, but you forget that I didn't have a choice in going this last time."

"What happened exactly?" Parrish asks, wrinkling his forehead in deep thought. "I told the FBI that I might've seen someone other than Laverne, but that I couldn't remember. I also told them that I thought Laverne drugged me."

"She did," I confirm as Maxx hands me a water bottle. "And then Mr. Volli came out of a bookcase door embedded in your wall."

Sounds ... nutty. But it's true. You know what they say: *truth is stranger than fiction.*

Chas shakes his head.

"I might have trouble believing that if I didn't see the FBI come back and check—there was definitely a door there. A door and passageways. Maybe you want to explain that, Parrish? Why do the Vanguarders have to be so fucking extra?" Chasm grabs another slice of pizza, but he doesn't look like he's enjoying it. He's frown-chewing.

Pizza Diaries #1: Chasm is a crust eater, but he eats it first and then consumes the rest of the pizza down to the pointy end, like he's saving the best for last. He's eaten one slice from each box, and he got up to wash his hands twice already. He did, however, dry his hands on his expensive slacks.

I reach over and dab at a tiny bit of sauce on the edge of his lip and he stares at me.

"What?" The word comes out of me in a husky whisper. *Flirty. Too flirty for the situation.*

"We're supposed to get married soon." He's the one that says it, not me. I drop the napkin into his lap and retreat back to my spot, only to find Maxx staring at me.

"I missed you, you know that? I don't remember how I was ever happy without you. I don't want to go through that again." He turns back to the

pizza box, and he also stares at it like it's an oracle. We're all looking for answers in pizza.

"Can you guys stop saying embarrassing things? We're talking about a man who was using secret passages to spy on us. It's an intense subject." I focus on trying to open the water bottle, fail, and then have to hand it back to Maxx for assistance.

He opens it on the first try, tossing a cocky smile my way as he passes over the bottle, letting it dangle from two of his fingers.

"Say *you're so strong and sexy, Maxx*, and I'll give it back to you." He holds it up and out of reach as I frown at him.

"I almost died, and you won't give me my water?" I ask, staring at him like he's crazy. His face pales and then he's desperately pushing the bottle back into my hands. See? He can be intense, but he's a good person. "I was joking, by the way," I tease, chugging the water and then finding myself with a smile. It feels strange on my mouth, melancholy in a way. It feels like a *last hurrah* sort of a smile, and I'm not okay with that.

"Yeah, well, you also have a point." He scratches at his temple with a single finger, closing his eyes so tight that his brow crinkles up. I recognize the look: it's the one that a person wears when he or she is trying not to remember an embarrassing moment. "I'm such an asshole."

"Nice of you to finally recognize that," Chasm agrees, pretending to salute his friend with his own water bottle. Parrish scoffs and gives Maxx a dismissive once-over, but I'm not done with him yet. If he said and did embarrassing shit, he deserves to be called out on it.

"Are you remembering the time you said, *'I'm dating the older sister but can't forget what the younger sister looks like in bed'*? Because eww, Maxx." I point at him with my water. "That's just one of many lines you should regret."

"I was playing a part." He says that like he believes it, but he still won't open his eyes.

"Are you embarrassed because you almost let me give you a blow job next to the Ms. Pac-Man machine?" I'm not sure why I even ask the question because it feels like I'm teasing myself as much as I'm teasing Maxx here. I'm implicated in an embarrassing moment, too. Why would we do that in such a public space? What if Tess had walked in on us? Gross.

"What is it with the two of you and arcade machines?" Parrish snaps,

finally giving some space to his jealousy. He tries to be smooth most of the time and act as if he never gets jealous, as if the concept is a foreign one. Not true. *Pizza Diaries #2: Parrish discards the crust and then some. The choice suits his fussy nature as well as showcases his wealth. Layers parmesan cheese heavily over his slices.* He stares at me as he sucks his fingers clean, and that is in no way an accident.

Maxx finally opens his eyes, but I don't expect him to stare right at me when he does it.

"It was hard to remember that I was supposed to be disinterested in you. No, worse than that, it felt *impossible*." He reaches out and grabs my wrist, tugging me into his lap while I'm still holding my slice and my water bottle. I look back at him, and he gives another one of those heartbreaking smiles.

There's a lot of emotion to unpack there.

It might take an entire lifetime of trying to sort through it. That intrigues me. I reach up and touch the side of his face before a throat-clearing in the doorway draws my attention.

"Nobody thought to get us while the food was hot?" Danyella asks with an annoyed sigh. "We're not all bad, you know. Lumen isn't a demon." She takes a seat between me and Chasm, but he looks at her as if he distrusts her equally as much as he distrusts her friend.

"Definitely not interesting enough to be a demon, I agree." Chasm watches Danyella carefully, eyes narrowed as she moves the three boxes around to see what we ordered.

"A cheese, a pepperoni, and a Hawaiian for Maxx because he's just like that." I smile at her as I gesture at the boxes, and she selects the latter. *Pizza Diaries #3: Maxim Wright is practical, and he's also not rich, so he eats the crust, folding it into his mouth in a single bite. He seems to prefer napkins but did mention with a grumble that no wet wipes were included. Also, loves red pepper flakes.*

"Looks like we have something in common." She uses one of the paper plates that the rest of us didn't bother with.

"Where is Lumen anyway?" I ask, shifting slightly in Maxx's lap and feeling him tense up a bit. I'm tempted to do it again, but that's not appropriate to the situation, so I sit very still. Being in this room—as creepy as it is with only a single lamp and a couch—makes me feel like I'm in another galaxy, like the stuff with Justin never happened.

We're here, we're hanging out, everything is normal.

"Gathering her decorum in the hallway." Danyella eats her food absently, looking up at the ceiling in thought. "Did you know that the opera tonight, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, was adapted from a play? In the original, Figaro offers a compassionate speech against inherited nobility. When it was adapted for the opera, he was given an angry song about unfaithful wives instead. Doesn't that seem like an odd trade to make?"

I laugh at that, can't help myself.

"It sounds like a subtle dig at Tess," I mutter, thinking about Justin and his constant harping on Tess' unfaithful nature. Yeah, she cheated on him with Paul, not cool. Also, *he fucking kills people!* He tried to kill his own daughter. The sins of one against the other are not comparable. Justin wins the bad guy award every time.

"At least it wasn't *Carmen* this time," Chas murmurs, exchanging a long look with his bestie. Parrish's mouth twitches in bemusement. "Remember when we saw that one with Seamus, and Tess freaked out because you didn't ask in advance?" Chasm snorts, and then his face falls and he's staring at the pizza box again, and I'm sure of it: he knows that something has happened to his dad. "Shit." Chas ruffles up his hair, mussing his lightning bolt. He mumbles that last word under his breath, but I catch it anyway.

Do I tell him now?

No, no. Not when something could happen at any minute.

Not when something *will* happen.

"In my opinion, *Carmen* is a long-winded glorification of domestic violence." Danyella shrugs her shoulders as Maxx sighs against my ear, giving me goose bumps.

"Rich people and operas. Doesn't that seem like an odd form of entertainment?" he asks, and interestingly enough, it's Lumen who answers him.

She walks in, still dressed in the pink tweed.

"It's not about the opera; it's a place to gather and observe. Don't you know anything after spending all these years around blue bloods, Maxx Wright?" Lumen gives him a look that he ignores. "Parrish should've taken me to the opera and upheld his promise."

"Yes, well, I lied to you. It's been acknowledged." Parrish sits up on his hands and knees, pushing the pizza boxes out of the way so he can sit in front

of me. He reaches out, takes my hand, and slips the ring on. It fits oddly well against the one that Chasm gave me. "I know you and Chas might still get married, but I hope you'll keep this anyway and know that you're the only girl I'd ever want to be married to. The only girl where it wouldn't be a lie." He releases my hand as Danyella makes a sound of disgust from beside him.

"If it's at all possible, you guys have gotten *worse* than the day we sat on the beach together. I'd thought I'd seen the worst of it then. Romance looks disturbing from the outside. You know that, right?"

"Frankly, I don't understand all of ... this." Lumen points randomly in our direction as she takes a seat, gesturing for Parrish to hand her a water bottle. He ignores her, so I pass one over instead. "This group thing that you've got going on. How long do you think that'll last? I know you'll never love me, but that doesn't mean we can't get married."

"Can you get off a subject that's *never* going to happen?" Chas snaps at her, leaning forward and slapping the top of the pizza box on her hand when she goes for a piece. Lumen looks at him like she wants to kill him. Yeah, believing these two could entertain even a brief sexual relationship seems like a pretty far-fetched concept to me. Not sure how I fell for that even briefly. "You're still completely full of shit. We're only here because Volli's in the yard. I'll be honest: I don't believe your parents are in danger. I think you're more involved than you're letting on."

Lumen snatches the pizza box and then she throws it at Chasm, and he lifts up his arms to block it. Pizza slices scatter across the rug as she stands up and points at him.

"Screw you! Your own dad is missing, and you're questioning *me* about my parents?" She points at herself with an angry finger. "I'm only doing what I have to do. Like Laverne Vanguard, for example." Lumen turns to Parrish and then leans forward, hands on her thighs. "She knew Justin kidnapped you; she *agreed* to it in order to promote Milk Carton."

"You don't know shit about my grandmother," Parrish replies easily, leaning back with one knee propped up, seemingly unfazed by Lumen's rant. "Why would she do that to her heir?"

"Because she cares more about her own happiness than she does yours. I don't care if you don't believe me." Lumen turns to me then, a challenge in her eyes. "When I reported back to Justin, I wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. Like during the hike to the waterfall, he knew your

sister was there, that she knew more than she was letting on. He only lets us think we're staying a step ahead. All I did was reconfirm what he already knew."

The room goes silent and Lumen gets up, taking only her water with her.

"No matter what we do, we're not getting answers from either of you, are we?" Chasm asks with another sigh, and Danyella gives him a look that, while not unsympathetic, doesn't offer any signs that she might relent.

"Are you guys staying the night? There are blankets and pillows upstairs in the linen closet, and some of the guestrooms still have their beds. You could make a few of them up. If you're looking for pj's, come get some. Clothes are about the only thing that Lumen still has plenty of." Danyella gets to her feet and heads up the stairs again. They creak as she ascends, adding to the spooky atmosphere.

We've turned on most of the lights in the other rooms, but the one we're sitting in is still lit only by a single lamp. There are shadows in every corner.

I finish the last of my crust (I'm a practical crust eater like X), stand up, and then flick the light switch, turning on the wall sconces and adding enough light to drive away the last few scraps of darkness.

"If we weren't involved in ... well, you know, it might be fun to play hide-and-seek in here." I say that, but then I look around and shiver all over again. "Or maybe not. Maybe it just sounds creepy?"

"Creepy." All three boys say it at nearly the same time which makes me smile.

I somehow thought I might forget what real smiling felt like.

It's nice to know that isn't the case.

"We're not actually staying here, are we?" Chas asks, subconsciously reaching up his hand to touch his knotted tie. "Once Tess gets out on bail—assuming that happens—she'll come here."

"You told her we were here?" I ask, and Chasm nods.

"Sent her a text," he tells me as Maxx cleans up the last of the pizza and collects the boxes. He carries them into the kitchen and sets them on the counter as I mull that over. If she gets out and comes here ... is that a good thing for me or a terrible thing for her? "Maybe Justin deleted it? Maybe he doesn't care? We sent one to everybody: your grandparents included. We also told anyone we know on our way out where we were going." Chasm unbuttons his jacket and things get weird between us.

Um.

I turn away and head for the stairs, knowing the guys will follow me up.

It's a beautiful staircase, wide and grand, like something out of a movie. I run my palm up the banister and pause on the second floor. The hall is wide enough to accommodate furniture, a few scattered pieces covered with sheets dotting one wall.

"Please tell me why I unbuttoned my jacket and you immediately sprinted up the stairs," Chas asks, and I turn a sharp look over my shoulder.

"That has nothing to do with why I came up here." I'm not even sure if I sound like I believe that. I head down in the hall in my bare feet, searching for either the linen closet, one of the guest rooms with a bed, or Lumen's room. I need to find all three, so it doesn't really matter which comes first.

I stumble on the latter, pausing with a hand on the doorjamb and finding what I'll admit is the stereotypical Lumen Hearst bedroom. Lots of pink. Huge canopy bed. Open closet door with a million pretty dresses.

Open closet door with a comatose person on the floor.

Also, Lumen standing in front of Danyella with a gun.

I didn't expect to see those last two things.

"What are you doing?" I gasp, stumbling into the room but not daring to get any closer to the pair of them for fear of sparking that trigger finger. As soon as I see the gun, I start having flashbacks, but I dig through the trauma to the immediacy of the situation.

Chasm is cursing behind me, Maxx is coiled, and Parrish is assessing.

Me, I try to hop in with some words of wisdom.

"Why don't you set the gun aside, tell us what he's asked you to do, and then we can—"

"If I don't do this, my parents ..." Lumen trails off, her hand shaking as she holds the gun to Danyella's temple. "Do you know what she's been doing? Sending anonymous letters to the police."

Oh. Oh. Oh my. That's a very Danyella thing to do.

I take a careful step into the room as Maxx moves to the left, positioning himself to tackle Lumen. He could *probably* get to her before she pulled the trigger. 'Probably' being the key word there.

"It was the only thing I could think to do to help *all* of you," Danyella explains calmly, her demeanor entirely different than mine was when Justin held that gun to my head. The difference? She doesn't believe Lumen will

shoot her.

I'm not sure if I share her faith in Lumen Hearst.

There's a phone sitting on the dresser—it's got to be Lumen's—and it's going off with a series of messages that I just *know* are intended for me. With a deep sense of dread, I reach out and pick the phone up, turning it over with an anxious twist in my stomach.

Maxim has a gun, does he not? It'd be easy to save Miss Schaffer. Either way: only one of them is making it out alive. You can do it, or I can handle it for you.

I look up, imagining Amin Volli creeping through the halls in the stag mask.

Ah, well, this 'sleepover' makes much more sense now.

Justin has wanted me to kill Lumen from the very beginning.

"Lumen, your mom is already dead," Chasm whispers, surprising me. I whip a look at him as he approaches slowly from my right side. Maxx is on my left, and he's just seen the text message. He does not, however, offer me the gun or remove it from under his jacket. He must think it'll make this situation worse, and I agree.

"No, she isn't," Lumen says, sniffing as she stares at her best friend. "I've seen video of her recently; she's alive."

"She's dead. She never made it off the yacht after the wedding." My eyes shift to his and he meets them. The bloody wedding dress. Does he know that or is he just making the same jump of logic that I did? I look back to the girls, desperate to salvage this situation with as little violence as possible.

I don't know what Amin will do if we defuse the situation, but at least Maxx has a gun.

Livestream it. That's the first thought that comes to mind. Police corruption is one thing. Corruption in the FBI. But if we got the word out, spread the video far and wide, it'd be hard to hide from it. Only, Justin was playing around before; he won't let us stream this, and Chasm is in no position to try to out-hack him right this second.

"Even if shooting Danyella tonight saved your parents' lives, you'd never be the same again. Lumen, you'd be killing yourself at the same time. You can't do this; you don't *want* to do this." I can see her hand shaking as it's wrapped around the weapon, and I see what Danyella sees.

Lumen isn't going to do it.

This is the last act of a hopeless procrastinator.

Every second that she plays this game delays the inevitable a few more desperate seconds. A few more desperate seconds that her parents are alive. A few more desperate seconds where reality doesn't hit quite so hard.

Lumen doesn't move, but I can see that the decision has been made. Tears are rolling freely down her face. Carefully, I creep across the plush white rug in the center of her bedroom, bare toes sinking into the fibers. My footsteps are silent. Lumen's wails are not as I extricate the weapon from her fingers and then stumble backward.

She hits the floor in her pink dress, sobbing and shaking, hands over her face. Danyella is right there, throwing her arms around her friend and proving that she's always been one of the bigger people in this game. A game that she wasn't even invited to play. *Anonymous letters?* Oh Danyella.

But Justin knew.

Because he always knows.

Maxx moves past me and over to the closet, staring inside with a darkness etched into his features.

"Fuck."

Right. Forgot about the person in the closet.

Still holding the gun—and still wearing my ridiculous dress—I walk up beside X with Chasm at my back, and then all three of us are staring at Veronica Fisher.

Err.

"When ... when did you guys let her go?" I whisper, struggling to catch my breath. *She's not dead. She's knocked out. She's still alive. She has to be alive.*

I've never liked Veronica, but here's something that I think our world desperately needs to learn: you don't have to like or even respect someone in order to appreciate their humanity. The last thing I want right now is to find out that the girl we tried so hard to save is lying lifeless on the floor in a decrepit mansion.

"We didn't," Chasm breathes, looking to Maxx to confirm the story. They stare at each other in disbelief and ... where the hell is Parrish? "Tess invited her to stay with us as a guest. She ... she, like, smooth-talked Veronica into believing she'd be safest if she stayed at the house."

"How did she get here then?" I ask, turning to look at Lumen in question.

She's in no place to answer any questions. No, she's a complete and utter mess. A few things are starting to occur to me: Justin *never* intended to allow any of his perceived wrongdoers to escape the noose. Also ... if he's killing people so readily, then is he giving up?

Is he gearing up to something new and horrific?

"Don't forget that I can take you wherever I want, leave you wherever I want, do with you whatever I want. In a place like this, nobody fucking cares."

"She didn't hurt Veronica," Danyella assures me, rocking Lumen and rubbing her back. I'm not sure I'd be so kind to someone who just threatened to shoot me. Maybe I would've in the past, but I've changed a lot since arriving in Medina. "She was already in the closet when we opened the door, and Lumen ... snapped."

I stare down at Veronica, her head turned to one side, eyes open and staring at nothing.

It's obvious that she's dead, but it's so surreal that I'm having trouble processing it.

This is a girl that Chasm, Maxx, and Parrish have known their entire lives. She's our peer. She's just a teenager. And oh my God, I try not to think about the box, but I think about Veronica so very often. I miss Veronica in strange and unfathomable ways. I mourn her potential. I wish I'd never teased her and called her malding.

It seems like she may have had her throat slit, but there's not much blood on the floor here. *She was murdered elsewhere and moved here. But ... but this could be good in a way, right? If we call Agent Takahashi—*

No.

We kidnapped this girl, held her hostage, and now she's dead? With all of us here and present? Never fucking mind.

I notice a small piece of paper attached to Veronica's wrist, and even though I know I should just leave it alone, I can't resist creeping forward and crouching down for a look. Later, I'll curl up in the bathtub and cry. I'll think of Veronica's red hair and the way she sat clutching a *Goosebumps* book in her hand.

But not now.

Grief is a luxury to those in the midst of a crisis.

"I am the ghost of an infamous suicide."

Slowly, carefully, I remove the note and tuck it into my pocket before standing up.

“Volli,” I whisper, recognizing both the handwriting and the Sylvia Plath quote. I move out of the closet, closing the door on Veronica’s silent form. Old Dakota Banks would be having a total breakdown over seeing her dead classmate on the floor of her other classmate’s bedroom. Mia Prior is, well, not apathetic per se, but distanced emotionally from the scene.

As situations require, we evolve.

One thing Justin has taught me well is that I am much, much stronger than I ever believed I was.

“Parrish?” I call out, moving back to the bedroom door to find him standing in the hallway and staring at a closet. He looks over and motions for us to join him.

Maxx and Chasm are right there, taking up positions on either side of him.

Parrish reaches out suddenly and yanks on the door handle, but it won’t budge. Maxx pushes him to the side, lifts his foot up, and kicks the damn thing in.

There’s a man standing in the closet with his phone clutched in his hand. He looks as surprised to see us as we are to see him.

Chasm recognizes him right away,

“Jack Larae?” he asks, face stricken with shock. “The Emerald City Podcast guy?”

“Oh, I *knew* something was up with those fucking podcasts.” Parrish grabs the man by the arm and yanks him out of the closet, throwing him up against the wall with Maxx’s help. Together, the pair of them pin the brunette bro against the wall with little effort. “I wondered where you were getting all your inside info from. How many murders have you watched from the safety of a hidey-hole, you spineless little shit?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” the man says, making a face when Chasm snatches his phone from his hand, checking to see what he was doing with it. I’m not particularly shocked to see that he was filming the confrontation between Lumen and Danyella. Which, of course, means that somebody tipped him off that such a confrontation was about to happen. “Don’t shoot the messenger here!”

“The messenger?” Maxx asks, exchanging a look with Parrish. Only then does Maxim Wright pull out the gun, putting it up to the side of Jack’s head.

The man is wearing an emerald-green sweatshirt advertising his own podcast, and he doesn't seem bothered by the threat to his life.

Hmm. That's not creepy at *aaaaaall*.

I knew I didn't like this Jack guy! He has a weird murder-porn voice, and he doesn't seem afraid when he should be, and I knew-knew-knew that he worked for Justin. Damn I'm good at this gumshoeing thing.

"I'm only here to record history. What's so wrong with that?" he asks, looking between the four of us like he expects us to be reasonable people. I'm not so sure that my boys *are* reasonable people. Looking at the three of them now, I do believe that they'd execute this man, Amin Volli, and anyone else involved in Justin's plots.

Does that make them good guys? Bad guys? Or just ... people. It's a question I've been asking myself a lot recently, but I can't say that I've managed to find the answer. When it comes to survival, maybe there isn't an easy or clean response to such questions?

"You just so happened to be hiding in the closet with a prime view of the action?" Maxx asks, his voice edging on a threat. "I guess this explains how you always have the most up-to-date info on the Slayer. He send you *thank you* cards for all the coverage you give him? Or do you suck his dick as repayment for the tips?"

"Shoot him." That's Parrish, completely and utterly devoid of emotion. "He's guilty; he's an accomplice." He looks to Maxx, and I can see that he means it, too. "Pull the trigger."

"Wait, wait, wait," Chasm says, always the one willing to wait and serve his revenge cold. "We can't just shoot a guy. That's *exactly* why Justin sent him here, I'll bet. Do you want to play into his hand like that?"

"Being nice hasn't worked," Parrish growls out, looking at his friend with a frustration on his face that I feel to my core. He's right: it hasn't. People are dying. It hasn't mattered that I've tried to play Justin's games, tried my hand at being clever. Here we are in Lumen's empty mansion with a dead girl in the closet, a gun in my hand, one in Maxx's, Danyella narrowly escaping death. "Make hard choices."

Something pops into my head—a quote from Delphine, actually.

"If Caroline or Raúl or Amin or Jack or anyone else hurts you when I'm not around, you'll tell me, won't you?"

Jack.

“Delphine knows about Jack,” I mutter, and all three boys turn to look at me. Jack, too, for that matter.

“Oh, well, then she can vouch for me. I’m not here to start trouble. I’m a reporter; I’m a journalist. I don’t interfere; I observe.” He sounds so goddamn smug when he says all of that, too, like he’s proud of himself for hiding in a closet while a desperate girl held a gun on her best friend in fear for her parents’ lives.

I slap Jack Larae in the face.

Childish, maybe, but it makes me feel better. I’ve had a bit of a week, okay? For the last few days, Justin’s been teasing about how he’s collecting videos and sound bites of me so that he can upload me into AI, have the perfect daughter he’s always wanted even after I’m dead. How messed up is that?

“That’s how you got the manifesto so quickly,” I breathe, and I hate that even in such a high stakes situation, I get a little thrill when pieces of the puzzle come together. I’m so tired of living in a murder mystery novel. I just want answers. I want to know how it all ends.

“Look, I get anonymous messages from the Slayer, and I follow the clues. What else do you think I should do? Let him kill me for some antiquated sense of justice? The world is a jungle, and people are animals—”

Jack never finishes his sentence.

A hand wraps over mine, extracting the weapon before I can process what’s happening. And then a gunshot is going off and Jack Larae is slumping to the floor with a stain of red on the wall behind him.

“Mom.” I look over to see Saffron holding the gun, her face expressionless. Until she looks at me, that is. And then she smiles warmly and reaches out with a free hand to touch her knuckles to the side of my face.

Jack is coughing on blood, hunched on the ground and holding his stomach. I can’t decide if it’s a fatal wound or not. I seem to be the only one who cares. All three boys are looking at Saffron like they’re grateful they didn’t have to make the final choice or pull the trigger themselves.

“The guy’s one of Justin’s pets,” she says, turning back to the podcast host coughing blood up on the floor of a creepy mansion. Danyella and Lumen are now in the hallway with us, gaping at the scene in their beautiful clothes.

Dressed for the opera, dressed for murder. Is there a difference? Not in the world of Medina, Washington where all that glitters is either blood or

diamonds.

Amongst it all? The one woman that Justin Prior cannot pin down, wearing that wrinkled old leather jacket, some faded jeans, and hair that matches the blood on the wall.

Saffron squats down in front of Jack and smiles strangely at him.

“Which ones did you kill? Francisca Cortez and her boyfriend?” She reaches out with the gun and puts it to his forehead, but I’ve seen far too much violence as of late.

“Amin Volli—the weirdo teacher—he’s here.” I put my hand on Saffron’s shoulder, and she pauses to look up at me, a frown marring her pretty face.

“He’s been dealt with—but only temporarily.” She retracts the gun and stands back up, turning to face me and then reaching out with a hand to touch my face again. “I’m so sorry that I didn’t protect you before. He got the better of me, but it won’t happen again.”

“Do you think you could get us out of here?” Maxx asks, his voice tight with tension.

“I know that I can, but we should hurry.” Saffron tucks the gun into her waistband and turns to the girls. “Hello ladies. I’m Dakota’s mother.” She reaches out a hand for them to take, but neither of them moves. Not at first. Danyella is the one who bridges the gap, reaching out and returning the handshake in a hallway where a guy is bleeding to death on the floor.

Sometimes you’ve got to roll with the punches.

“Nice to meet you. Saffron, right?” Danyella withdraws her hand, putting her arm back around Lumen’s shoulders. I’m not entirely sure that the heir to the crumbling Hearst throne is all there. She’s staring at the floor with a blank expression, a depth of melancholy to her gaze that echoes a similar look I’ve seen in my own.

“Should I kill the worm or leave him to writhe?” Saffron asks, but I’m already yanking on her arm and doing my best to distract her from Jack Larae. Leave him here. Let nature take its course. I just want to *go*.

Also ... never thought I’d see my mother shoot someone.

Well, both my mothers. Too bad the first one missed.

“Let’s get out of here while we still have the chance,” I beg and Saffron nods, inhaling and turning in the direction opposite the staircase.

“Follow me.” She leads us to a narrow servants’ staircase (OMG these Medina folk are weird as hell) and walks us down to the butler’s pantry, out a

side door, and over to a vintage SUV that looks like it's from the sixties or seventies. I think. Maxine would know from first glance. Saffron opens the back door and encourages us to crowd in. It's a seven-seater—and there are seven of us—so it's a tight fit. Makes me wonder though if Saffron didn't select this car for this express purpose.

She is much more meticulous than I ever imagined.

As the engine starts, as we roll toward the gate of the Hearst estate, I have to wonder: what's next?

Because Justin will not let this go.

Think about it: Saffron didn't just kidnap me once. Oh no. She's kidnapping me a *second* time.

I thought I understood the depths of his fury, but I didn't understand anything.

Not until the day of my wedding anyway.



CHAPTER 29

The feeling of coming home, it's not an easy one to capture. Since the moment I arrived in Washington state, I knew I'd never feel it in this house, with these people.

Today, I find out that I'm not *always* right (just mostly).

I feel it now.

I'm home.

My knees are so weak when I step into the ice palace that I actually sit down on the marble floors of the entryway, staring at the spot where I first saw Parrish, chugging milk from a carton with a missing kid's picture printed on the side.

I close my eyes, hands fisted in my skirts, and I hang my head.

For the first time in nearly two weeks, I feel like I can breathe. It won't last, I'm sure, but I'm able to let my guard down for a brief instant, a flicker, and that's enough. It's enough to bolster me, to encourage me to keep going, even when it feels like it'd be so much easier to give up.

"What happened?" Paul breathes, standing in the foyer and staring at us with an expression of terrified bewilderment. His wife is at the police station for trying to shoot her ex, his son didn't come home when he was supposed to, and now his kidnapped stepdaughter (I seem to get kidnapped a lot, don't I?) is sitting on the floor in a ball gown flecked with blood.

Good on him for being awake and prepared. He's the one that buzzed us

into the gate, gave the order for the security guards (none of whom I trust) to let us pass, who unlocked the garage door. Saffron is good, but I'm not sure that she'd have been able to sneak the four of us into the house alongside her.

Danyella and Lumen, they were dropped at Danyella's house with the entire Schaeffer family (including the foot doctor older brother) in residence. I have no idea what she's going to say to them or what she's going to do, but at this point, it doesn't really matter. Let her have at it. Let her tell them everything. Tell the *authorities* everything (and not just through some anonymous letters).

At some point, Justin will make a mistake.

That's all it will take: one single goddamn mistake.

As soon as he does, his entire tapestry will come unraveled. I know that as surely as I know that the sun will rise.

Maxx kneels down on the floor beside me, gathering me into his arms, and then he just holds me in the way that we both so desperately need. The feel of his warm hand on my back is the boost of energy required to lift my head, to open my eyes, to look at him.

I go to stand up, but he beats me to it, helping me to my feet and then tucking me against his side. He doesn't seem to want to let me go, and I don't blame him.

"Can we explain later?" Parrish asks, trying desperately to achieve a preppy prince vibe and failing miserably. It sounds more like a plea.

"Your mother ..." Paul trails off, adjusting his glasses as he studies Saffron. I wonder what he thinks of her, the woman who kidnapped his wife's child. Whatever his feelings, he seems mature enough to push them to the side for the time being, turning back to Parrish as Chasm pops into the kitchen and returns with a pitcher of water and some glasses. He pours them and hands them out, and it's not until I take the first sip that I realize how much I needed it. "She won't be home until tomorrow morning—at least. That's *if* we can get her out on bail and *if* we can find a judge who works on Saturday."

Paul closes his eyes and reaches up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

It's late now—probably close to three in the morning—but from the looks of him, I don't think he was getting any sleep. I can only imagine how hard it must be to know that his wife is in jail for doing something that really, by any stretch of the imagination, should be counted as community service, and

finding himself unable to go to her.

“I know,” Parrish replies sadly, but with a bit of pride in his voice, too. “But she was brave. She almost got him, too. For shame.”

There’s a moment of silence before Saffron breaks it.

“I’m heading out, but I’ll check in regularly.” She comes over to stand beside me, giving me a kiss on either cheek. I’d ask her to stay, but I know that she won’t. She holds my face and looks into my eyes. “You *will* survive this, do you hear me? You and your sister, you’re my only priorities.”

I nod as she draws back, giving Paul a dip of her chin in acknowledgement, and then she’s slipping into the garage to do God only knows what. After what she’s done for me thus far, I’m not going to question her decisions.

To get back to the ice palace without being seen by either the cops posted at the end of the road or the massive swarm of reporters, we dumped the stolen car several blocks away and hiked through the backyards of Medina’s finest to get here. My princess dress has certainly seen better days.

“Maxine? My grandparents?” I ask as Chasm turns to me and collects my empty water glass. He points in the direction of the pool.

“There’s a large suite down that hallway; they’re all bunked up together. We don’t sleep alone in this house. We don’t do *anything* alone in this house. Three people together at a minimum.” He exhales and gives both of his friends a dry look. “I’ve seen far too much peen this week to survive into adulthood unscathed.”

“Please,” Parrish teases, tossing out an insouciant air that I’m sure he doesn’t feel more than skin-deep. “Don’t act like you didn’t like it.”

“Don’t act like the two of you don’t know the answer to the question: *who has the biggest dick?*” Maxx mumbles, but then all three of them seem to realize this isn’t the time nor the place, and they all fall silent.

Makes me smile though. Just a little.

“I’m glad that you’re back, Dakota,” Paul tells me, which is a surprising revelation in and of itself. I look up and meet his eyes—so like Parrish’s—and I see in them another apology, like he knows we started off on the wrong foot, like he truly is happy to see me again. “Your family has barely slept while you were gone. Tess has been ... It’s all been a horrible mess without you here.”

“Everyone thought you were dead,” Chas adds in a low whisper, and I realize there are so many things the boys didn’t say to me at Lumen’s

because they couldn't, things that are twisting the tension like a screwdriver in a tourniquet, cutting off blood flow to the extremities.

They all believed Justin was going to kill me.

They were mostly right.

"I want to see them, but not ..." I gesture at myself. *Not like this. Not covered in the blood of some random guy, another one of Justin's many, many pawns.* I didn't see that one coming—a voyeuristic podcast host with a taste for influencer blood—but maybe I should have? It's right on-brand with Justin Prior.

"I'm sure they wouldn't begrudge you a shower or some sleep," Paul says softly, moving over to Chasm and taking the empty glasses from him. "But are you sure you don't want to at least get your sister, so you have someone to watch your back in the shower?"

"Dad, please." It's Parrish again. He gives his father a sharp look. "I know you guys don't like the fact that we're all dating Dakota, but we can watch out for her while she showers."

Paul stares at us for a long, long while before adjusting his glasses again.

"Alright, well ... Just don't tell your mother." Paul yanks at the ties of his robe with nervous hands. "I suppose I can at least make you some snacks. I've got the only buddy I need to watch my back." He pats his leg to indicate the ankle monitor, and I realize what a brilliant move it was, letting him out on bail. If he dies, it's a clear indicator that he is *not* the Seattle Slayer.

I wonder if Agent Takahashi did that on purpose?

"No snacks, Dad. We're not six." Parrish pauses next to his father, looking decidedly nervous all of a sudden. With a tentative hand, Parrish reaches out and pats his dad's shoulder. "But thank you for the offer."

He draws his hand back, but not before I see a small smile light Paul's lips. Doesn't last though. In the time and space we occupy, everything is fleeting. *Oh, that's good! I should write that down.*

The boys escort me up the stairs, and it's a surreal experience, ascending that spiral staircase and finding it just the way it was on my very first day here. No sign of soot. No ash. No leaking ceilings.

I pause briefly in the hallway to look down at Tess' office, spying the typewriter sitting in a pool of moonlight. Pages are strewn about the desk, across the floor, stacked haphazardly here and there. I can't resist going to them. It's like, that first time I pulled a page from her typewriter and read

things I shouldn't have read, this is a redemption of that.

I know that I'll like what I see here.

"She's been a madwoman for the last two weeks," Parrish admits, following along behind me. Chasm and Maxx stay with us, moving as an unbreakable unit. I'm sure they've been blaming themselves for not being in Parrish's room that day, when Mr. Volli appeared from the bookcase door. They were in the kitchen instead, just down the hall from us, maybe thirty or forty feet away. I could hear them talking even as I helped Parrish pack his bag.

We won't be separated again.

"Tess has been writing everything down, organizing it into a book," Maxx tells me. "I think she was intending on publishing it to help with the case. She interviewed me, Chas, Parrish, your sister, even Saffron." X returns my stare when I look over at him, stunned at the idea of Tess Vanguard and Saffron Banks sitting down and having a civil conversation of any sort. "She's been doing her best to get you back, and when conventional methods didn't work, she ... I guess she picked up a typewriter and then a gun."

I turn back to the desk and grab a page from the closest stack.

"Thirteen murders?" I repeated the agent's words, stunned by the news. I remember sitting down hard in the kitchen chair and thinking that this must surely exonerate my husband. How could he carry out thirteen murders while sitting in jail? But then I realized there was more to it than that.

This wasn't simply a case of mistaken identity.

This was a frame-job.

It made me sound crazy to even suggest it, but there it was, the not-so-logical-but-oh-so-obvious answer staring me straight in the face.

Who would frame Paul Vanguard?

Well.

My job is to answer questions like that for my readers. Why not in real life, too? Why not when it really matters?

I knew I'd solve it even before I heard the final piece of damning evidence: the death of my daughter's childhood friend, Nevaeh Schrier.

Thirteen murders became fourteen murders in a single night.

Prior to that, the Seattle Slayer had claimed fourteen victims.

Withheld from the public? The knowledge of fourteen marks on the chests of every victim but my son. He had been cursed with nineteen of them. How

was Parrish Vanguard—Paul’s child, my daughter’s boyfriend (a fact I still struggle with to this very day)—the only young adult to break the pattern? Recovered safely via the Milk Carton app.

It became too obvious to ignore.

Once the idea hit, it was a sudden storm. A flash flood. I drowned for tense, long minutes in those thoughts.

Shame was the first emotion, but it was quickly followed by rage.

How dare he use that number in the name of violence? It’s a number I know well, have always known. It’s the number of years where my heart was torn from my chest, where thin filaments of veins and arteries connected me through impossible distance to my stolen child.

Oh, my sweet Dakota.

...

Tess’ words are so engaging that I find myself extracting the unfinished page from the typewriter, so I can keep going. I need to see the last words she wrote before carrying out such an extreme act.

...

She was first tortured by my hands though I did it unknowingly. I did not deserve her love. Was still working to regain her trust. But now? My ignorance astounds. Tortured by me, tortured by him.

The Seattle Slayer.

The culprit could be one person and one person only.

There was a time when he worshipped me the way the sun worships the earth, rising hot and brilliant, stirring me to life. But at sunset, when he sank beneath the horizon like clockwork, the cold, gray surface of the moon became his face.

My ex-husband, Justin Prior, was the killer.

And it would be up to me to break his hold on our child.

Hell or high water, blood on my own hands, a cold prison cell.

Death.

For us both, if need be.

“Just let her live a beautiful life,” I whispered on a warm August night some weeks after my initial discovery—the night of the opera. How dramatic. How apropos. “Just let her live.”

All I had ever wanted was to spend my remaining time on this earth getting to know my child, learning to understand her, loving her. Apologizing to her.

But some decisions are hard ones. Some decisions break us. They must be made anyway.

The gun—my grandmother’s, newly restored after the fire—was an easy fit for my Valentino Garavani clutch.

Either I would finish writing this story after a landslide victory where he died and I was vindicated; I would finish it in jail; or my strong, beautiful daughter would finish it and lay a copy on my grave.

One way or another, it would be finished.

I put the pages back where I found them, turning to find Parrish standing far too close to me. With the lights off, with the moon, with the sense of creeping unease ... it feels like I really need to kiss him. I try for the first move, but he’s a step ahead, taking me into his arms as I touch my fingertips gently to the back of his neck.

“After this, happily ever after—I promise you that.” He kisses me with a questing tongue, demanding further exploration of both my body and my heart. *How are you feeling after tonight?* he asks with the firm but gentle touch of his hands on my hips, with the press of his mouth, the heat of his body.

The answer: *liberated.*

It’s a feeling that comes with other emotional riders—guilt, fear, worry, desperation.

We pull apart, taking in one another’s faces with rapid flicks of the eyes before I carefully extricate myself. Turning away from Parrish, even if only to walk into another room, feels like saying goodbye. It’s that hard to pull myself from his orbit so that we don’t end up on the floor of my mother’s office. *The mystery novels, the typewriter, and the window with the billowing gauze curtains would make for an atmospheric backdrop to sex.* I hurry for the door before the idea takes root.

I don’t get far. Maxim is *right* there and dressed to the nines. His eyes are hungry shadows.

“We should get you out of that dress,” he says when I pass by him, reaching out a quick hand to snatch the fabric of my skirt. I don’t think he means to take it so forcefully, like maybe the move surprised even him. Our eyes meet, and I struggle to take in my next breath.

I’m not sure he meant it the way it came out either.

“It’s got blood on it,” I agree with a nod, wondering if the Emerald City

Murder Podcast host is dead.

If so, then Saffron killed him. Then Saffron is a murderer. Saffron could go to jail.

“That’s not why I was suggesting it.” Maxx pushes up off the dresser he was leaning against and leads the way down the dark hallway, past Ben’s room, past Amelia and Henry’s, past Kimber’s.

Chasm is waiting at the end of it, cloaked half in shadow and half in silver light. He’s standing in my doorway as I approach, but I don’t head inside right away. I stop and look at Parrish’s bedroom. Most importantly, I look up at his ceiling to find glow-in-the-dark stars.

“Tess never does anything in half-measures,” Chasm explains, coming up behind me. He puts his hands on either side of the doorframe, his body touching mine. I don’t think he means it to be sexual; I think maybe these reactions are on me.

I turn suddenly, and he blinks at me in surprise. When I put my hands on the sides of his face, he gently pushes them off. Can he see the searching tenderness in my gaze?

“Don’t,” he says, but not unkindly. “I know what you want to talk about.” A hard pause. He swallows nervously, eyes shifting to one side. “My dad.”

“And Laurent,” I add as Maxx stops behind him in the hallway. The two of them exchange a look before turning their attention to me. Parrish slips behind them and into my bedroom, leaving the door open as he disappears inside. “I don’t know anything for sure, but Raúl told me that ...” I can’t force myself to say it, but I know I can’t hide it any longer either.

“We’ve talked through it together,” Chasm adds, looking at Maxx again. “We don’t believe he’d kill Seamus or Laurent. It doesn’t make any sense. If you think about it, why them and not someone that would hurt you and Tess more?” Chas looks at me again, and this time, it’s he who touches the side of my face. “For now, we operate as we’ve always done: they’re alive and we’re getting through this.”

Nobody mentions Veronica Fisher. Or her dead parents. Or Lumen’s probably-dead parents.

As Tess said in her writing: the shame hits first followed by the rage.

“I’m—”

Chasm puts a finger over my lips before I can speak.

“No. You’ve been through enough. We can talk about it more later.” He

drops his hand quickly and draws away, following Parrish into my moon-soaked bedroom. Maxx stays with me in the hallway, hands tucked in his pockets, casual but intense, like he's waiting for the right moment to spring.

Any moment later than this will be a million moments too late.

We don't even say anything to one another; we just stare.

His mouth curves in the dark.

I turn away and step into my room, and it's like stepping into a strange time capsule of both my time in New York and my time living here.

My breath is caught, and I'm frozen in place for several seconds as I take it all in.

It seems wrong somehow to turn on the lights, so I stand there in the moonshine. It's more than enough light to see that my furniture was all savable, that the drapes have been replaced, that the windows are new.

Parrish is standing in front of them which makes me nervous. When I made a joke about Justin shooting us through the windows, I was more serious than not. He notices me looking and taps his knuckles against the glass.

"Bullet-resistant," he says with a smile that I can only see because it's limned in just the right way. "Tess turned this place into a fortress."

"Bullet-resistant," I repeat, wondering exactly how far that resistance goes. Parrish seems to sense my anxiety, reaching out and grabbing the heavy curtains. He yanks them closed and the room is engulfed in shadows. I suppose I'll see more of it tomorrow.

For now ... I look down at my dress and give a shudder, remembering the note tucked into my pocket. I can't say why I was compelled to take it; I should've left it there. Only, something about Amin Volli is grotesquely intriguing. Justin should watch his back around that man.

I pull the note out and tuck it into my nightstand drawer, surprised to find a familiar velvet box inside. I crack the box and catch a glimpse of the tennis bracelet that Tess gave me. I mean, it *could* be a new one. I can only see it at all because Maxx is using the bug detector, and it has small green lights on it. As he passes it over the nightstand, I blink through the shadows and then close the drawer on both the note and the bracelet.

From the bathroom, I hear the sound of running water. I move into the room to see that it's exactly as I left it—complete with foursome sized shower. I stop suddenly with my hand on the doorjamb, and it's Maxx that accidentally bumps into me.

“Sorry, Kota,” he murmurs, but he doesn’t sound sorry. I move out of his way so that he can finish his sweep of the bathroom, finally setting the bug detector down on a new decorative table beside the bathtub. With the light coming in the window of this particular room, I can see glass bottles of bubble bath, carefully rolled rags with flower pins holding them shut, a new loofah, a bottle of sparkling water and a champagne glass.

Oh, Tess.

“We sort of skimmed over this before, so let’s clarify,” Chas begins, and I look over to see that he’s already shed his tie, his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt. His tattoos are peeking out at me, reminding me how long it’s been since I’ve seen them. “How do you feel about us in here while you shower? Like, where do you want us to stand? What should we do?”

I pause at the sink in my pale blue gown, putting my hands on the countertop and staring into a mirror that is (hopefully) only a mirror and not a camera.

Maxx comes up behind me, reaching out for the zipper of the gown. With absolute maximum chill (see the pun there?), he tugs it down and the dress puddles on the floor at my bare feet. I can feel his hot fingertips on my lower back, tickling up my spine.

“What ... what is this?” he whispers, sliding his hands up my rib cage on both sides to touch the edges of the boob tape I’m wearing. *Shit!*

I whip around on him, covering my chest up with my arms.

“It’s boob tape,” I mumble, looking down at it. Delphine stuck these, like, rubber cup things over my nipples and then used what seems to be Dakota-skin-colored tape to wrap it all up. She promised she’d help me take it off. I wonder now if I’ll ever see her again outside of a courtroom, a jail cell, or a coffin. It’s a depressing thought. “It’s for strapless dresses and whatever.”

“Shall I take it off for you?” he asks, grabbing my arms and moving them away from my chest. Maxx finds the edge of the tape and pulls on it, gently peeling it off. The first round isn’t so bad. I even do a slow spin to make it easier for him, but then he gets to the part where it’s attached to my skin. It doesn’t hurt, but it’s stimulating in a weird way as he tugs on it. And then we get back around again, and the boob cups ...

I turn to the mirror.

“I can—”

Maxx releases the tape and takes the edges of the sticky silicone pads,

pulling them off in such a way that the entire experience becomes foreplay. Which, I'm sure, was his intention all along. He drops the cups and then takes my breasts in his big, warm hands, our gazes meeting through the dark. Shadow Maxx's reflection peers at me in the mirror, looming over me from behind like a pretty monster with questing fingertips.

"Stay." That's what I tell X, but it's also an answer to Chasm's question and an invitation for Parrish. "All three of you." I clear my throat, but I can't get the huskiness out of it. Could be because Maxx is kneading the heavy weights of my breasts with strong, sure fingers. He hasn't done much more than that yet, but his touch is *hungry*. "I've always said that this shower was big enough for four."

My body trembles as I turn to face him.

Maxx's smile is visible even in the half-light. He leans in to kiss me, and I melt against him. He releases my breasts carefully, shrugging out of his jacket, and tearing his sweater over his head. The move breaks our frantic kiss for a bare, brief second that feels more like an eternity. Missing him for as long as I did, thinking I might lose him, no matter how much time we spend together, it'll never be enough.

He takes my bare hands and puts them on his chest. It's then and only then that I realize he's not wearing the sling. The bandages are still there though. His hand ... I wonder if his left hand might not be shaking because of nerves alone, but for some reason related to the accident.

We don't talk about that.

Not tonight.

I curl up against Maxx's chest, breathing in his scent with my eyes closed. *Sultry, summer heat, that's his smell. Wilderness. Mating rituals.*

"We can start in the shower, but we should finish in the bed," he murmurs against my hair, and I just barely hold back an embarrassed gasp.

"I should've known when they both warned me about you," I mutter, small memories coming to me in the dark. The first day I met Maxx, when I ran into him and Parrish in the hallway on their way to Antonio's party, he was visibly annoyed at the flirtatious banter between me and my stepbrother. Now that I know how he felt about me at first sight, that reaction takes on a whole new meaning.

"Should've. Too late now," he teases, releasing me and stepping back. He kicks out of his shoes and then drops his pants and boxers to the floor with

zero shame. I'm so wrapped up in what he's doing that I've forgotten to check in with the others, to make sure they're okay with this, too.

Parrish is watching us from the doorway to my bedroom, his jacket slung over his arm. When I turn to find Chasm, I see that he's already in the water, lathering his hair with shampoo. I slip past Maxx and step into the foggy glass box to join him.

He looks down at me, arms raised, water streaming down his inked forearms and dripping off his elbows. He's completely naked, but I'm not.

Not yet, I should say.

Maxx steps in behind me, putting his hands on my hips. He scoots me forward to make room for himself and I'm dipped under the spray around Chasm. I lick the water off my lips, blinking it away from my lashes. And then I throw my arms around Chas' waist.

He grunts as I hug him as tightly as I physically can.

"Naekkeo," he murmurs softly, one hand clutching at the back of my head. Chas pulls me hard against him, and I drown in the perfect scent of his body. He doesn't just smell like dark chocolate and mint anymore; this is the scent of home. And soap. Nice and soapy. Slick over his muscles. Slick over his—"Little Sister."

"Both nicknames?" I ask as Maxx dips his fingers under the waistband of my panties. Each simple touch is impactful. Each touch is thievery, stealing away my self-control until all I am is want and need. And love. Mostly that.

"Kota." X kisses the side of my neck before sliding his hand down to stroke his fingers over those sensitive, aching parts of me. We're three nicknames deep into this, and I'm looking into a lover's amber eyes while a green-eyed alpha strokes my heat, and a prince with a hazelnut feast for a gaze taps his knuckles against the shower glass.

"Move." Parrish is just behind Maxx, waiting outside the door and issuing an urgent royal decree. The two of them feud in silence for several, tense seconds before Chas grabs me by the wrist and pulls me away from the romantic melee.

Maxx's hand slips out of my panties, and I end up tucked in Chasm's arms under the spray of the shower. Slowly, like he's welcoming in a rival, X steps to the side and holds out a hand, inviting Parrish in.

"You're lucky that you were first," X tells him dryly, an intrepid daring in his dark voice. "Do enter, my liege."

“Clever,” Parrish drawls in caustic reply, undoing his pants and pushing them to the floor. He walks in fully nude, tugging the glass door shut behind him. I can feel Chasm’s wild heartbeat as Parrish studies the pair of us. Nickname number four incoming. “Gamer Girl.”

Then it’s just me, three guys, hot water, and moonlight.

Now what?

“I’ll wash your hair,” Chas offers first, turning the simple act of squirting shampoo on his palms into a lavish feast for my eyes. He lathers up with strong, slow circles, rubbing his hands together and then weaving his fingers into the short, brunette bob that I wear against my will. Chasm’s fingers massage my scalp, and my eyes flutter closed of their own accord. I wish they wouldn’t. I want to see Chas’ naked body, the ink that Parrish used to decorate his skin, the droplets of water caught on his lip rings.

“Are you sure you guys are okay with my hair?” That question breaks the tension a little, but only a little. It is tense as hell in here with three guys, and they’re all naked, and they’re all hard.

Adding Maxx to the mix is like prom night on overdrive.

I suppose it rightfully should be more dramatic: it’s a night that opened at the opera.

It’s a night that finishes in the bedroom.

“Are we okay with your hair being forcefully cut and dyed by a serial killer?” Parrish echoes and then he laughs harshly. And then he kisses me, and his wet pouty mouth is what dreams are made of. “No, we’re not okay with that part of it, but as far as your looks?” He grips my face with a tattooed hand. “I told you: you’re an eleven.”

“Make me a new fuckability TikTok rating,” I murmur, and he snorts.

“Done.”

“Talking—also done.” Maxx slides me out from between both Parrish and Chasm, pushing my back against the glass wall of the shower. His gaze is painfully human and desperately male. “I don’t know how you three managed last time, but I’m here now. It’s a different vibe.”

“You don’t get to take over everything,” I mumble as Maxx puts his palms on either side of me, studying my body with envy’s eyes. *He’s a pretty green-eyed monster, isn’t he?* His attention continues downward, skimming over my panties to my naked thighs.

“I don’t?” Maxx echoes, and then he drops his right hand down and traces

over my tattoo with a single finger. The makeup that Delphine applied must be waterproof because it's still mostly intact. "Shall I wash this off for you?"

"It's my art," Parrish says, dropping to a squat beside me. He's got one of those flower-pinned washrags in his left hand, a bottle of soap in the other. "I'll take care of it." He lathers up the rag and then rubs it along my inner thigh, trailing it over my wet panties before he bothers to soap up the tattoo. Chas looks on, propped against the wall with his arms crossed, a slight smile teasing his lips when he sees where my attention lands.

That is, it lands on his ... yeah, I'm staring at his dick. Sorry, not sorry. It is mine to look at, isn't it?

"I'll take care of this then." Maxx runs a finger down the front of those fine, silk and lace panties and then nips my lower lip in an aggressive kiss. He curves his fingers under the waistband again, giving the undies a yank and rending the fabric as easily as he snapped that pencil once upon a time. "Oops, did you like these ones?"

"I ... Delphine picked them out." I'm stuttering now, blushing again. Am I ever not blushing? If my palms aren't sweaty and my face isn't red, then the boys aren't doing something right.

"Ah, well. That's good then since I was going to rip them off anyway." Maxx takes the other side and shreds the fabric with both hands, yanking the scrap out from between my thighs. He holds it up in his right hand and Chasm takes hold of it. He rolls the lace up in a fist and winks at me.

"These are ours now; we're keeping them." Chas turns over his shoulder, tapping on the screen that's built into the wall. When I see it light up, a harsh breath escapes me. *Justin*. I don't want anyone to watch us tonight. I'm so damn tired of being watched. All I want is privacy, space to be myself, and the freedom to explore my relationship with the guys. "No signal, no stress," he promises, searching for a song.

"*Hair Cut* by Xdinary Heroes," Parrish murmurs with a slight smile (God, he has a strange sense of humor). I see it on his face when I look down, just before he finds my gaze and then lifts the corner of his lip at me in challenge. That washrag ends up sliding over my heat again as I collapse back against the glass. *Bet I'm leaving butt cheek prints.*

The song starts up, surprising me. If there's no signal, how is it playing? This tells me that the boys made the effort to add some of my music to the system before they disconnected it from the internet.

“Don’t fall, Kota.” Maxx takes my ass in one hand, like he’s pretending a move like that helps me stay standing, like he’s merely propping me up with his grip.

“Especially not when you see this,” Chasm adds, leaning against the wall again. When I see what he’s using my panties for, I almost collapse to the floor.

“What are you—” I start, but X puts his lips to my neck at the same time that Parrish puts his to my inner thigh. They kiss me while Chasm and I watch one another from across the small, steamy space. He puts on a show for me, too, biting his lip and playing with his piercings as I ache for him. Doesn’t hurt that Maxx is still gripping my ass, that Parrish is slowly kissing his way up my body until he, too, is standing, licking and biting my throat.

I find myself pinned between them.

Ah, I see, all three boys are working *together* to tease me.

Chasm reaches out a hand and takes my wrist, tugging me in his direction. He offers me the panties, and I take them, assuming his role without being asked. With a tentative grip, I use the silk on his hard shaft.

“More.” He grabs my hand and encourages a firmer grasp, a *squeeze* really. His lids droop, wet bangs falling over one eye. “*Harder.*”

I work him up until he’s panting, until he’s close. Chasm snags my wrist, and the lacey silk falls to the floor. He turns us both around, pressing my back to the wall.

“If we do get married, let’s have sunflowers at our wedding,” I whisper, and his face breaks like a sunrise. I see every emotional impulse inside of Kwang-seon McKenna. The clouds that are covering his face are blown aside by a breeze, leaving layers of pink affection, the orange of familiar warmth, and a brilliant, blinding gold that chases away the shadows in my heart. “*Oppa.*”

“Sunflowers.” He lifts my wrists above my head and holds them there while he kisses me.

My body relaxes substantially when Chas slides a knee between my legs, and I don’t have to worry about falling. He’ll catch me if I do. He takes note of my relaxation, nuzzling the spot between my neck and shoulder, nipping my wet skin with his teeth.

The situation has shifted: now it’s Parrish and Maxx who are putting on a show.

Parrish is facing away from me, one hand on the glass wall of the shower. He's bent over and using the washrag on his body, running it down his chest and taut belly as he looks over his shoulder at me. He's not shy about teasing it along his shaft either, gripping himself, working his dick with his hand.

Maxx is taking advantage of the built-in bench seat to sit and watch, his stare burning holes right through me. He doesn't touch himself, but he's hard, too. Painfully so. I watch as he leans down, revealing the angel wing tattoos on his back. When he sits up, he has the panties in his hand. He clutches them in a tight fist and then relaxes against the glass to observe for the time being.

He looks like a big cat on the hunt.

I close my eyes, focusing on the feel of Chasm's lips, his teeth, his tongue. He turns to put his mouth near my ear and says something in Korean that's so dirty that even if I don't understand it, my whole *psyche* catches fire. Or maybe it's not the words, and it's the intonation?

Whatever it is—I am officially *wrecked*. And we've barely started. That bodes well, doesn't it?

Chas takes my chin in his hand, and I reluctantly crack my gaze. He's a sunrise again, a galactic event by which the entire universe spins. Including me. I'm spinning in orbit around him.

"What would your grandmother say if she knew you talked to girls like that?" I'm trying to ease the tension, but it doesn't work. Because he's staring at me. Because his eyes are beautiful. Because of the color. I don't imagine that many human beings have eyes like Kwang-seon McKenna. They're a burnished late afternoon sunbeam, that hot stripe that falls between the leaves of an overhead tree, bathing your skin in warmth. That's how I feel when he looks at me. *Warm*.

"You bringin' up my *halmeoni* when we're naked together? Guess I'm not doing something right."

Chasm releases me suddenly and I sag back against the wall. I'm not sure what he's doing until he's on the ground in front of me.

Uh.

"Chas—" That's as far as I get. He lifts my left leg up and props my foot on the edge of the bench next to a one Maxim motherfucking Wright.

"Oh, Kota," he says, and his voice is a deep, low rumble. There's the thunder in him. And his eyes? Lightning strikes. He watches my face as Chasm puts his cocky mouth between my thighs. "Watching you with them

—it kills me.” He looks away suddenly, and I see his body expand with a deep, calming breath. “But I deserve this, for making you feel all of that pain.”

Maxx turns back to me, lips tight with determination, and then he stands up, leaning against his forearm on my left side. I’m not totally coherent, slave to Chasm’s tongue as he proves how good his memory is. Everything I’ve ever told him about where I like it and how I like it, he remembers.

“Kiss me while another guy goes down on you.” Maxx leans in and takes my mouth, and I truly wonder for a few seconds there if it’s possible for this situation to work for any length of time. He’s so aggressive, so possessive. He’s also unfailingly loyal and impossibly kind. That could help balance things, couldn’t it?

We kiss like two lovers coming home, long-parted, and I realize that I still miss him. We keep getting separated when all I want is for us to stay together. The four of us—until the end.

His hand digs into my hair, holding my face to his, so he can get deeper, take control, guide the kiss and steal all the moans and gasps from my lips. I feel Chasm’s hands on my ass as he, too, follows Maxx’s example in a more sensitive area.

When I start to sag, Maxx hooks an arm around my naked waist and keeps me upright, my left leg wrapped around his body.

Parrish steps up on the other side, leaning his own back against the wall next to me. I turn my head, a brief reprieve from Maxx’s kiss, and we look at each other. Parrish very purposefully, very slowly, steals one of my hands and wraps it around his erection, showing me how he likes it. I match the pace he used on himself, thrilled by the connection simmering between us. Having him there raises the tension in the small space, encourages Maxx to bite and suck on the side of my neck like he’s there with a point to prove.

The song’s switched over to something new more than once, but now *Monster* by SuperM is playing.

Ahh, yes, this song fits these guys.

Chasm proves that by adding his fingers to the aching heat between my legs. The penetration pushes me over the edge, and I finally collapse. Maxx catches me, but Chas doesn’t stop, taking it all the way until I’m looking into Parrish’s eyes and having an orgasm.

It’s one of the most powerful and enlightening moments I’ve ever had in

my life, like all of the tension uncoils from me and for a few, precious seconds, I can see everything clearly.

“Come here,” Maxx murmurs, pulling me into his arms. He kisses the pleased whimpers from my lips as he hauls me against his chest, pinning me between his muscular form and the wall. My body’s not entirely finished with those wonderful aftershocks when he pushes his erection into me, taking me up against the slick wet tiles. *Holy shit.*

Somehow, I’m still looking at Parrish.

X notices, carefully reaching out a finger and hooking my chin so he can turn me to face him. Now we’re staring at one another, and he’s driving his hips up and into me. My naked body is molded against his, my shaky hands digging into his thick hair.

“Don’t ... hurt yourself,” I pant, concerned about his shoulder. He laughs at me, this husky, masculine laugh that gives me goose bumps.

“Fucking you, Kota, is anything but hurtful. Don’t worry about my wound. It’s old news now.” He kisses the top of my head, holding onto my thighs as he proves his strength once again by pounding me mercilessly into the wall.

I explore him with my hands, taking in as much as I can. Each moment we have together is something precious to cling to. I’ve always known that, that individual moments can sustain us through long, dark tunnels, but I’ve had that proven to me recently.

I would not have survived the last two weeks with Justin if I didn’t hold such wonderful memories.

Not ... just the sex. Although the sex is good. The sex is better than good.

The sex makes me feel *electrified*.

For a few moments there, the other two boys disappear, and it’s just me and Maxx. Parrish isn’t one to take that sort of thing lying down. He leans in, pressing a kiss to my cheek to catch my attention.

“Take a break, XY,” he teases. “It’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

Maxx goes completely tense, but he ignores Parrish, moving faster and harder inside of me before he comes with a self-satisfied chuckle and a full-body shudder. He kisses my head once more and then pulls away as I gape at him. I’m set carefully down on the floor where my shaky legs cause me to fall promptly into Parrish’s arms.

I know I signed up for this three-boy deal, but *holyhellthisisintensebecauseboysboyboys.*

“Really? You had to come first? What a prick.” Parrish stares Maxx down over my shoulder as I move into the spray of the water and turn the temperature down a few degrees. My skin fucking *aches*. I wash myself with shaking hands while the three of them watch. I like that, too, weirdly enough, the weight of their wonder.

“Get luckier,” Maxx replies lazily, belatedly, and he ends up with me chucking a bar of soap at his chest. It hits his athletic midsection, bounces off, and tumbles to the floor. Soap bubbles trail over his navel and drip onto his ... dude parts.

“I am *not* picking that up,” I breathe when all three boys look down at the soap and then up at me again. “Hell no.”

“Are you *sure* you don’t want to pick it up? I’d appreciate the view.” Chasm is entirely unashamed, the epitome of young and cocky, as his hand traces down his smooth belly. I’m so tangled up in his stare that I don’t notice how I’m being hunted from behind. Parrish reaches out to snatch my wrist with his painted aristocrat fingers, voice like sweet poison.

“Maybe you should sit a spell instead?” I’m tugged to the bench seat and onto Parrish’s lap. He wastes no time in going for my breasts, tucking me tightly against him and dipping his head to my chest. My nipples are mercilessly sucked and teased while I dig my fingernails into his shoulders and try to remember how to breathe. My body feels empty and bare, and I *hurt* in the strangest way.

I want and *need* to be touched more.

“Pear-Pear,” I breathe, and he pauses to look up at me from under thick lashes, heavy with water droplets. His mouth is a menace.

“Pear-Pear? Do you really think you can keep me hard by using that name?”

“Last I checked, keeping you hard didn’t seem to be a problem for me.” I frown prettily at him, and then I reach between us, guiding him to my opening before I lower my body onto his. He curses and then adjusts his hands, grabbing onto my hips and pushing me lower. Our mouths come together in a crash as he splays his hands against my back, and I yank possessively on his hair. My breasts brush the remnants of the scars on his chest, but all the sensation does is make me want him that much more.

Parrish is no longer lost. He’s here. Maxx is here. Chasm is here. No matter the circumstances, we keep finding each other. That must account for

something.

I'm thinking about all that as I ride him, how he was stolen from me, how we should've had a morning after that was just ours. How we might've hugged each other in that hallway, how I might not have been so sad anymore. How these scars prove that he survived. How much I love the way he fucks.

Once again, that orgasm creeps up on me, but X isn't done playing this cat-and-mouse game with Parrish. Maxx slides his hands around me from behind, taking my breasts and kneading them as he leans in to whisper against my ear.

"Marathon, remember?" He hauls me up and off of Parrish before setting me on my feet.

"You son of a bitch," Parrish growls out as I sway, and Chas catches me by the elbow. He leans over to turn the water off and somehow the music goes, too. Then it's just the four of us, some fog, and heavy breathing. I cannot stop myself from sucking a water droplet off of Chasm's lip ring. Or his lower lip. Or his nipple.

"Let's take it to the bed," Chas asserts roughly, helping me out of the shower and using a big, fluffy towel to dry me off. The other boys watch, standing a careful six feet apart and *staring* at me like they're both desperate to stake their claim.

Gross.

Or ... attractive?

I don't know. Depends on how you look at it. Right now, Chasm is in charge and he brandishes that truth with a look of cool superiority.

"Have the two of you figured out yet that Dakota is the boss here?" he asks wryly, and Maxx snorts.

"No, she isn't," he replies, and Parrish laughs.

"If she wanted to, she would," he adds annoyingly. With that smirk on his face, I can easily remember how I thought I hated him. In reality, it was just molten lust streaming through my veins. Paired with his cavalier disregard, it certainly felt like rage on my end.

"What she wants is Chasm." I grab my fiancé by the wrist, wondering why I felt the need to reply in third person. If he smirks and flips his friends off, I pretend not to notice. "You first," I whisper to him, and he grins at me, allowing me to pull him into the bedroom.

It's not that I'm glad that Tess is in jail—far from it—but I am happy that we don't have to worry about her walking in on this. The threesome was bad enough, but a foursome? That's next-level. She might jettison all three boys into outer space.

I crawl into the bed, pulling Chas down with me, looking up at him while he looks back down at me.

"I really do want to marry you, you know," I tell him, and he smiles. It's an expression tinged with sadness, like he knows that in the end, we might get happily-ever-something, but we won't get it all. Something has to give.

"I want to marry you, too, Naekkeo. It can be next week. It can be a year from now. It can be ten years from now." Our kiss this time is slow and sensual, soft and needy and wanting. My hands frame his face, my attention focused on him and him alone as the other two join us on the bed, one on either side.

Maxx lies with his head propped on his elbow, his gaze a form of surveillance that I can get behind. Overprotective. Impatient. Tender.

Parrish, he relaxes into the pillows, one arm thrown behind his head, bedroom eyes and a slothful smile on his vicious face.

The four of us. Back in the ice palace. Naked in my bed.

It's like a dream come true.

"Could be a nightmare," Maxx murmurs in his thunder-and-storm-clouds voice. Oops. Guess I was talking out loud again? Either way, I can't decide if he means it's a nightmare to see me with other men or if he's referring to *himself* as a nightmare.

"Depends on your definition," Chas says dryly, looking up at Maxx first. There's a challenge in his stare, one that he turns to Parrish next. One that I wouldn't mess around with if I were them. "I'm not your fucking underdog or your bodyguard or your knight in shining black armor, got it? I can be those things at other times, but when I'm with Dakota, I'm her lover and her fiancé and probably her future, legal husband. I want that. I *will* have that."

"I can respect at least one of those things," Parrish replies as Chas rolls his eyes and curses him out in Korean under his breath.

"The legal husband part, I'm not sure about. But I respect you as my friend and as Kota's lover." Maxx inclines his chin, like he's offering up some sort of concession.

"Probably the best you're going to get," I whisper, and Chas sighs,

dropping his head so that our foreheads are touching. When I close my eyes and breathe him in, I swear that I can see sunflowers. *That'll be our flower. Forever.*

“Fuck them both. They’ve always needed me for the shit they couldn’t handle. I suppose we’ll see what happens if they piss me off.” The taste of that threat on his mouth is exquisite, drawing me back into the heat of the moment. He settles himself between my legs and I angle my hips to make our joining easier, arching up and into him as he slides his body into mine.

On either side of me, the other two boys take their pleasure into their own hands, and the sounds they make amplify what I’ve got going on with Chasm. He slides his palms up my arms, teasing his thumbs in smooth circles on the insides of my wrists.

We’re a horizontal rhythm of basic needs and desire playing out between my other lovers, his best friends. It’d be an uncomfortable dynamic if there wasn’t so much desperation in the air. They thought I was dead. I’ve worried the same about each of them over the last several months.

I grab Chasm by the ass, pull him tighter against me. I’m determined not to come yet, so I move in such a way that my clit is untouched, focusing on him and his pleasure. He notices, but he lets me do it.

He’s the perfect partner. It’s so easy to imagine growing old with Chasm. He understands me. He knows me. It’s like he’s always known me.

If I had to pick someone in all my life that I thought of as a best friend, it’d be him.

Just ... not right now.

Tonight, he’s a lover first, and the chemistry is a low, warm ember that stays hot even if the flames aren’t roaring. It’s always there. It always crackles. It’s the hearth you find comfort in, and it’s the spark you use to burn the house down. All of those things. *Chas is the one.*

I clutch him close, listening to the double heartbeat between us, a feral wilding of dueling bodies. I want to see him come. I want to watch him without pleasure cloaking my gaze. I do as much work as Chas, lifting up off the mattress to meet him.

“*Fuck, Dakota,*” he groans, and it’s seriously one of the first and only times he’s ever called me by my name. I like it. A lot. We spiral into an endless kiss as Chas gathers me tightly against him, head to toe touching one another. It feels right to be naked with him.

His orgasm is intense, a whole-body experience that I feel as if it's happening to me. Tense fingers gripping mine. Goose bumps. Muscles locked. Hungry mouth. Chasm finishes inside of me with a muttered prayer that might also double as a curse, casting yet another spell that fucking *enthralls*. He's sweaty, and I'm stroking his back, appreciating my handiwork.

"Shit, I don't want to let you go," he groans as we stay locked together. Chas showers my face with kisses, ending with a soft lingering on my lips. "*Ajik baegopa.*"

I'm still hungry, he says. Damn.

Chasm draws out of me, and the sensation is like saying goodbye. I don't like it. I actively frown at him as he rolls off to my left, between me and Maxx.

What if Justin kills me? I wonder. The thought comes and goes. It's a strange moment to have it, but I guess if it's lingering, then my insatiability tonight can be explained. My need to be touched. The desire to revel in this body and my occupation of it.

Since Chas is now between me and X, I ...

"Hi." Parrish is resting on his side, propped by an elbow. He makes a little heart with his fingers, like he did when he was on the ladder. "Want to bend over for me?" he teases, but when I do it almost immediately, he changes his tone. "Damn, Gamer Girl. You're hardcore."

"Only for you guys," I whisper back, biting my lip as Parrish tucks a pillow under my hips.

"Only for us, huh?" he muses, voice a dusky breath. His fingers play with the swollen, aching spot between my thighs. I bite down on the pillow, anticipating fireworks in my body and brain. His fingertips then trail up my spine, wrapping around my shoulder for leverage.

I am not prepared.

Parrish enters me suddenly, and a loud gasp—somewhere between a sigh and a scream—escapes me, the noise buried in the silky pillowcase.

It's at that exact moment when someone knocks on the door.

"I just wanted to check on you guys; I made some snacks." It's Paul.

I bite the pillow harder as Parrish's hand clenches tight on my hip.

"We're fine. Go away." Parrish is panting heavily behind me as he waits for the footsteps to recede down the hall. "Jesus." I almost laugh, but it gets a

lot less funny when Parrish starts to move with these long, deep strokes inside of me, his pelvis slamming into my ass from behind.

With my head turned the way it is, I can see both Chasm and Maxx lying on their backs. The former has his eyes squeezed shut while the latter continues to touch himself, occasionally biting his lip in a way that makes me want to squirm. So I do. I move for Parrish, meeting his powerful thrusts by pushing back against him. Being with him is both new and familiar all at once, me and my first love together again. There's an esoteric connection between us, a core memory that only we share. I love that for us as a couple.

"Of all the stepsisters in the world," Parrish declares with an authoritarian impudence. He slides his palm up my body and ends up with my breast in his hand, fingers teasing my nipple until I'm near to happy tears with the intensity of it.

Like I did with Chasm, I encourage him to hit his orgasm without allowing myself to find my own. He doesn't seem to mind, riding me like a royal on the hunt. I fantasize about him in that red wool hunting jacket. That almost does it for me, that image paired with the painful inhale-exhale of his frantic breathing.

He drops to his palms before he finishes, so he's hovering over me. I turn my head to find him staring at me. *Those eyes, they slay.* Parrish licks his lips and then braces himself on the headboard, making it slam against the wall before he comes. It's like a declaration, that sound of wood-on-wall. The addendums? His moans. His labored breath.

Parrish takes his time moving to the side, sitting with his back against that same headboard, unashamed of his red-flushed skin and nudity. We look at each other as I sit back on my heels, suddenly embarrassed by a mess I'm not entirely used to. Like, the no-condom thing? Yeah, that.

I crawl toward the edge of the bed, intending on heading into the bathroom to freshen up. I didn't realize after Chas that—

"Kota." Maxx is right there, snatching my wrist and yanking me over Chasm and onto him. I end up sitting on his lower belly, looking down at him. When I try to protest, he raises a finger to my lips. "Plus side of us all being virgins. Nothing to worry about."

"But I—"

"Don't leave me, sweetheart," he breathes, his face a mess of beautiful shadows. "Stay right here. You're sweaty, and you need to come. Let me do

that for you.” When he smiles, I can at least see that in the dark. His teeth are such a beautiful white. *Or ... is that not a smile but an untamed baring of teeth?* “I love you, Dakota.”

I swallow hard and nod, struggling to bring the words up in such an intimate moment.

“*Saranghae,*” Chas adds breathlessly, without ever opening his eyes. His lashes look like feathers in the dark and his skin is milky and sweet. *Is he sure that he’s human?* Looks supernatural to me.

“It’s obvious that I love her more than either of you, so why don’t you both shut the fuck up?” Parrish suggests mildly, and I can’t take it anymore. I’m sure my blush can be seen from space—the dark nature of the room be damned. I’m probably glowing. My own eyes are now squeezed shut in embarrassment.

“I love you guys,” I choke out, and X laughs. I can *feel* the vibration of that sound in every part of me—especially between my thighs. I shiver and curse, question my rational sanity. *Am I dreaming? If I am, this is a fantasy and the boys are demons.*

Maxim, especially.

He adjusts my body with sure hands and then lowers me roughly down on his massive shaft. It’s almost enough to make me finish right then and there, especially when he puts his thumb on my clit, using my own excitement as lube to make everything as slippery and delicious as possible.

“Prove it.” Maxx rests his free hand on my hip, and I can feel the quiver in it, the loose grip, the uncertainty. *I might’ve ruined his chances at motocross, at medicine.* That scares me. I put my palms flat on his beautiful chest and I ride him with that in mind. *I’m sorry, Maxx.* “Oh, I’m definitely not sorry.”

Shit! Why do I always say things out loud that I don’t mean to say?!

He sits up on his elbows, his expression a mix of tenderness and need. A little bit of *mine, babe* in there, too. Just a glint. A glimmer.

“But if you want to show me how sorry you are ...” X shrugs his shoulders and then relaxes back into the pillows, putting both of his hands on my hips. I exhale, settling comfortably on the length of him.

In the darkness, with the sound of our collective breath my own personal soundtrack, I grind Maxim into the mattress until he can’t help himself. Because he can’t. Because he’s just that way.

He flips me over without ever losing contact between us, the weight of him

on top of me as comforting and reassuring as anything I've ever felt. He strokes my hair with his injured hand and flashes a smirk in the dark that's like a comet, flaming through the ebon sky in a white-hot streak. X leans down and nips my lobe.

"Goddamn, I'm a dick, aren't I?" he whispers, another laugh shaking me from within. I writhe and clamp down on him, and he bites me again. I throw my head back in sweet surrender as X rises over me, his movements hard and fast. Impossibly deep. Impossibly strong.

I come apart in his arms before he ever finishes, and he slows just long enough to watch me.

"So fucking beautiful." X braces a hand on the wall above the headboard and rocks into me until he's climaxing. It's a powerful sight. His body is big and strong and wide, a deeper shadow against the moonlit curtains that serve as the backdrop to his orgasm.

My fingers touch his lower belly, savoring the clench and release of his muscles.

He leans over me, panting, hand resting on the wall again.

"Um." I poke him in the stomach, doing my utmost to mask the tender quiver in my voice. How embarrassing. "Move."

"Make me," he breathes, kissing me hard before he pulls out.

I roll onto my belly with a groan, pillowing my head on my arms. My lids are weighted, and the sandman is waving a tempting *hello* from beyond the realm of waking. Maxx steals the spot on my left, Chas on my right. I'm a happy girl center in a boy sandwich. My lips twitch in a groggy smile.

Parrish slides lazily off the bed, liquid and lithe, and pads on bare feet to the door, dragging a tray inside with his foot before he closes and locks it.

"My dad brought us sports drinks. You think he knew what we were up to?" Parrish picks the tray up and brings it over to the bed. "And sliced fruit. All my life he's never made me a snack tray before now."

It goes silent in the room, but nobody brings up any of the shitty stuff.

It's just us and cold drinks, hot skin, and mixed fruit bowls.

It's like a fairy tale—complete with villain. All we need now is that happily ever after.



CHAPTER 30

“Good morning.”

There’s a familiar voice drawing me mercilessly from my love nest, surrounded by boys, in the bed my grandmother made, in the bedroom with the lakeview that my mother saved for me. All is good.

I’ve temporarily forgotten about the Slayer.

“Morning,” I murmur, shooting awake violently when I realize who it is that I’m talking to. I scramble up in the bed to find Tess frowning and Parrish tugging on a pair of pants over his boxers. His cheeks are flaming red and he’s not a big blusher the way I am.

“Neither of those fuckers even thought to wake me up,” he growls under his breath until he catches Tess’ sharp gaze and turns away in shame.

It takes me three tries to form words.

“You’re out.” That’s what I say, always precisely and particularly elegant with my words when the situation most calls for it. “You tried to shoot him for me.”

“I messed up,” Tess says, sighing as she comes over to sit beside me. Her hand lifts straight to my hair and my eyes widen. I turn away slightly, but she reaches out and brushes her hand over it anyway. I notice both Maxx and Chasm in the doorway when I glance over. They were smart enough to bail early. “I made a move, but it wasn’t the final move that you asked for.”

She drops her hand to her lap, turning to smile at me at the same time. I can

tell she wants to scoop me into her arms and cry, but she's not Saffron. This is Tess Vanguard. I offer her a hug first instead and she returns it without hesitation. That's a huge step for her.

Of all people, Saffron walks in, parting the boys at the doorway with her hands and pausing to give me a smile.

"You've got trendy digs, Kota. I'll give you that." Saffron walks over to the wall of windows looking out at Lake Washington. The spot where our portrait hung—the one I put on the wall partially to annoy Tess—is filled once again. It's a copy of the same photo in a new frame. Somebody arranged for my room to be put back just like it was. *Tess.*

"I let him steal you right out from under me." Tess stands up quickly, hands on her hips, looking flustered and war-torn with her brow pinched. But she's smarter and tougher than I ever gave her credit for. Tess lifts her head and looks over at Saffron. "Thank you for bringing my daughter back this time."

Saffron turns all the way around to look at us, still wearing that leather jacket and boots, her hair in a high ponytail. She flashes a brilliant, genuine smile (so very Maxine in its vibe).

"We can share her once he's gone. I think that'd be a nice thing to do. Don't you?" Saffron moseys over to my bookshelf, extracting a stack of Harry Potter novels. They're not the same ones that she gave me: those were destroyed by the smoke from the fire. Saffron cracks one open to look inside of it, brows rising. "You'll need new messages then. Anyone got a pen?"

Parrish pulls one from my dresser drawer and Saffron takes a few minutes to scribble inside each book.

"Those were signed," Tess mumbles, and I take it she's the type who reads eBooks but collects physical copies for safekeeping. A signed book collector. *A no-crease in the covers* girl. *A don't you dare bend the pages* girl. Oh, best yet: *an I don't even allow people to touch my physical books let alone read them* girl.

That makes me smile.

Saffron finishes up, shelving the books and then turning to look at me. She points at me with the pen.

"Don't you dare read those until you *really* need them, okay Kota?"

"Okay, Mom." I smile at her and cross my fingers as she tosses the pen back to Parrish. He catches it between two fingers and then bites the end of it.

When I catch his eye, he winks, and I curse him because I'm in sort of an uncomfortable situation here.

I'm wearing a loose tee, but I've only got panties on under the covers. I'd be nice if both moms left, even though I'm really glad they're here.

But ... in this place, the spot that was so alien and foreign and unwelcoming to me, I feel loved now; I *like* it here. Maybe it's possible that if I can keep the Banks in my life, then I might come to like it here as much as I did back in the place that'll always be home.

"Are you going to jail for the rest of your life?" Parrish asks dryly, almost like it's a dark joke. It's not: it's a serious question.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Tess admits, but she doesn't sound defeated, not yet. "I suppose that even if Justin is caught or killed, these charges will still stick." She crosses her arms tightly and smiles at me. "It was worth it though, if it helped get you away from him."

I look her straight in the eyes and make my declaration as Chasm comes to sit on the bed with me and Maxx moves over to the windows. Saffron stays where she is, in that strange three-foot space next to Tess. I never in a million years believed that I'd be seeing bio mom next to adoptive mom. Never.

"I'll use the weekend to ride out your parenting time. On Monday, I'm going to run away." I don't have to specify what I mean. I'm sure she gets it. "I'm not letting him take me again. This last time, he ..." I struggle to find the words as Chas reaches out, gently taking my hand in his. Tess looks like she'd rather he weren't sitting on the bed with me, but she doesn't stop him either. "He was going to kill me. It's only through sheer chance that I'm still alive."

Tess' face remains passive, but I can see the way her shoulders stiffen, the way her jaw clenches. Saffron doesn't seem angry in the same way, more like she's grossly disappointed in herself.

"I'm so sorry, Kota. I should've been there." She looks over at Maxx and then pauses, like she sees something out the window beyond him. She walks quickly over to join him and then they're both staring out. The glass is now tinted on the outside, by the way, making it difficult to look in. Like blacked-out windows on a car.

Tess has done a good job fortifying her ice palace.

"He's here." X looks back at us, lips pursed.

Tess rises to her feet, but I scramble out of bed, too. I'm not letting her face

him alone. Also ... also, I really need pants. Parrish snags a pair from the top drawer of my dresser and passes them to me as Tess covers her eyes with a hand and a curse. Saffron smiles and shakes her head, ponytail swaying. *God, I already miss my hair.*

“Oh man, those days of sneaking around.” She laughs again, as if the Seattle Slayer isn’t sitting in a car just outside our gate, slamming the buzzer down over and over. I can hear it ringing from the foyer. “Although my parents were much less strict than all this.” She twirls a finger around in the air as she saunters from the room.

Tess checks to see that I’m finally wearing pants and lets out a heavy sigh.

“The four of them were in here last night doing God only knows what, and have I said a word? No. I’m a *master* at prioritizing.” She gives the boys a look that promises explicitly that if there wasn’t a mass murderer outside (who has full legal custody of me, BTW), she’d be kicking their asses onto the street. All three of them—even her own son. “No talking to that bastard. If you’re coming, you’re staying quiet.”

Tess heads out of the room as Parrish looks at his friends in disgust.

“Next time we have a foursome, you *warn* me that my goddamn mom is coming up the stairs.”

“How were we supposed to know that? We didn’t get up early because we’re afraid of *Tess*.” Chasm gives Parrish a look as Maxx walks over, meeting my eyes in a way I wasn’t sure I’d be capable of after having a foursome with him. *His hips driving*— Nope. Not going there. Nope, nope, nope.

“What’s up?” I go to faux punch him in the shoulder, but that lame move fails for a million different reasons. My hand is shaking because I’m nervous about Justin. My hand is shaking because Veronica Fisher is dead. My hand is shaking because I almost punched X in the wound he received via my own trigger finger. Lots of reasons.

“If you don’t want anything to do with him—even watching or listening to things he sends—then we’ll handle it. You don’t have to do a thing.”

I appreciate his—and the other boys’—sincerity and consideration, but Justin Prior is my father. I’ll deal with him as best as I can just so long as I never have to be alone with him or his cronies ever again. That seems like a fair deal to make, right?

“I’ve got this.” I snag a hoodie from my dresser—it’s a brand-new

Ashnikko one which is greatly appreciated—and I take the stairs two at a time, hoping I haven't missed much yet.

The guys, they are right there *behind* me.

“There's a sense of *déjà vu* in all this,” Parrish teases, but Chasm flicks him in the ear, and he goes silent. We have a well-honed ability to revel in every spare moment of peace, but this ... is no longer that.

Tess is watching the monitor beside the front door; the security footage from the gate camera is playing. I assume that's a wired camera and this is a closed system. I have got to count on Tess being smart enough to block Justin from spying on us. She's too good not to.

“Where is my fucking daughter?” Justin demands, still seated in his car outside the gate. He's talking to the monitor while Tess does the same from this end. “You shoot her the way you tried to shoot me? Congratulations, by the way, for finding a path to bail so quickly. However did you manage that?”

“It's my parenting time, Justin,” Tess responds calmly, reasonably. There's a thread of cool rage in her voice that reminds me oddly enough of Justin. It's endothermic. If there weren't reporters clustered near the gate, I'm sure Tess would've set a bomb to blow her ex to kingdom come. “We'll see you on Monday; don't come back here until then.”

“That kidnapper bitch is in there, isn't she?” he asks suddenly, a salivary excitement in his words that I've never heard before, like a wolf that's just lapped blood. He wants to *eat*. “She's the only one that could've pulled this off. The rest of you are pathetic.”

Tess laughs and leans in, putting her mouth near the speaker.

“Some poor woman from the gutter bested you for days, weeks ... *years*.” She laughs again, and the sound is nearly unhinged. She's utterly done with this man's shit. Although I'm not sure the ‘gutter’ reference is appropriate. Saffron was raised well, she just ... I guess she did suffer drug addiction and homelessness for a while. This is the most stable I've ever seen her. “A homeless transient mastered Medina's best and brightest. Not surprising, seeing as you were a homeless transient once yourself.”

Tess presses a button to mute herself and waits to see what he'll do.

“Homeless transient?” Saffron asks, appearing beside Tess. I don't even know where she came from. “You're quite the bourgeois bitch, aren't you?”

Justin doesn't move for a long time, doesn't even breathe I don't think.

“You’re going to be quite sorry when I lay my hands on you again,” he warns her in an ice-cold voice. I put a palm over my mouth, trying to block the pathetic sound that wants to come out. I can still see the endless darkness of that desert, can feel the hot wind and the sting of the sand against my bare legs. Can see myself trapped with Justin forever.

“Is that a threat?” Tess asks, holding the button down again. “Are you admitting that you’re the Slayer now?”

“When we get back together, we’ll make love all day and night—for weeks,” he responds easily, and then he laughs. It’s meant to be a threat, but cloaked in such a way that it couldn’t be used against him. I feel sick.

“We will never get back together, you fucking psycho. And you know what? When this is all over, you’ll either be in jail or you’ll be dead.” Tess stands up straight, panting heavily, and I see how far this has escalated. Things are rising to a boiling point. The pressure for something to happen is almost unbearable.

“As long as we share a coffin,” Justin replies, and then he’s jerking his car into reverse and revving his engine so aggressively that reporters dive out of the way. He plows an aggressive course through the crowd without actually managing to hurt anyone. I’m selfish: I wish he had, so that he’d go to jail and maybe all of this fear and worry would stop.

“He knows you’re here,” Tess replies, looking over at Saffron. My mom nods ... at my mom. Confusing, I know, but I think I could get used to this. “What do you want to do?”

“I’m glad he knows I’m here,” Saffron breathes fanatically, her new red hair the most suitable color she’s ever had in her life. It brings out a blue I wasn’t even aware she had in her eyes. They always seemed dark to me, almost black. She turns that wild gaze to me. “If he wants to come for me, I’ll welcome the challenge.”

“Stay in groups, always,” Tess warns us yet again, looking at us with a sadness in her eyes that says she’s failed so many times that she will not allow herself to fail again. “Like I said, don’t even go to the bathroom alone.”

“Eww, Mom, seriously?” Kimber asks, standing in the entryway to the living room with Paul at her side. She hesitates slightly, looking at Tess as if she fully trusts her mother’s judgment. “It’s that serious, huh?”

“It’s that serious,” Tess asserts forcefully, inhaling and lifting her shoulders. We all pause at running footsteps in the hall, and I turn to see

Maxine with tears brimming. She comes sprinting down the length of the foyer and sweeps me into her arms.

“Holy crap, holy crap, holy crap. I thought we’d never see you again. Holy crap.” Maxie pulls back and strokes my face. “Grandma and grandpa?” she asks, but I just shake my head.

“I’ve only been awake for a few minutes.” I purposely don’t mention last night. Can’t tell my sister that I was covered in a podcast host’s blood and then decided to shower it off/have a foursome at the same time. Not appropriate. Maybe later, when it’s dark out, and we’re lying on our backs and staring at the stars the way we used to do at home. Probably Parrish’s glow-in-the-dark stars though. It wouldn’t be safe to go outside.

Maxie nods, pausing to look over at her mother without any surprise registering in her face. Has Saffron been with them all this time?

“Mom, come with us?” It’s practically a begging plea. I’ve heard Maxine use this voice before on Saffron, but it never seemed to work before. Saffron hesitates even now, and then nods. Maxine pulls me away from the boys. They’re reluctant to let me go; I get the feeling. After all we’ve been through, I want to spend every moment together.

“Last time,” I promise, turning around as I walk away and lift one hand to my heart. “Last time we’ll be apart until ... he dies or he’s arrested.” I smile at them as Tess observes me leaving the room to be with the Banks, a begrudging understanding in her face.

Before I turn the corner, I see her take a step toward me, pause, take a step back. She doesn’t want me to cloister myself in another room with the kidnapper and her family, but she isn’t going to stop me. Parrish moves up beside his mother, putting a hand on her shoulder and offering his support the way he’s always done.

I love him for that. Gives me enough peace of mind to keep going.

My grandparents are in one of the downstairs bedrooms, located in a separate hallway not too far from the pool. Maxine knocks softly, and Carmen opens the door up, looking like she’s just gotten up and refreshed herself to start the day. I wonder what time it is? I guess I never thought to look.

“Oh, Kota ...” The words are a breath. Carmen hugs me so tightly that I can’t breathe, looking up and over my shoulder at her daughter. “Saffron.”

“Hello, Mom,” Saffron says softly, almost sheepishly. I’ve rarely heard her

sound like that, but it isn't the first time I've caught a flicker of shame in her voice.

"Come in, come in." Carmen steps back and holds an arm out, yelling over her shoulder for my grandfather. "Walter! Your granddaughter and your daughter are back!"

He comes running, his shirt not entirely buttoned, hair still damp from a shower.

"Oh, thank God." He finishes buttoning his shirt as he crosses the room—it's more like a large hotel suite—and lifts me into another proper hug. It's been a while since I've felt like this, alone in a room with the Banks family. It feels oddly fragile somehow, like I'm being gifted with something that may not last.

That scares me.

"Pop." Saffron exhales and looks away, tucking her hands into her pockets. "How are you?"

"Where have you been?" he asks, looking to Carmen, but my grandmother simply shakes her head.

"She's been helping Dakota, that's what," Maxine says, lifting her chin proudly, an emotion she's rarely if ever felt for Saffron. This may be the very first time. "She's hunting Justin."

"*Hunting* Justin?" Carmen asks, nearly choking on the words. We have yet to have a proper conversation about what happened. All they know they got from either the online videos, the boys, Maxine, or Tess. Nothing from me directly. We're long overdue for a talk. "What do you mean by that? Saffron, this is a job for the authorities."

"Mom." Saffron turns back to look at her and sighs heavily, like we're the ones who are being unreasonable here. This is yet another common thread in our interactions: Saffron always thinks she's right, that the rest of us are nuts, that she makes good decisions. Historically, she hasn't. Her record isn't good. "The FBI knows about Justin; the world knows about Justin. If either of those things were going to help, he'd be dealt with by now. Did you just notice that my daughter has been *missing* for two weeks?"

It's ironic that Saffron is talking about me being kidnapped, isn't it?

Walter puts his arm around my shoulders and holds me there while he contemplates his child.

"Why do you think you're more qualified to take on a mass murderer than

the FBI? Explain that to me, honey. I'm willing to listen; it just seems like a far-fetched fantasy."

Saffron looks over at Maxine and smiles tightly, reaching out to stroke her hand down her daughter's cheek.

"I'm going to go now," she says, but Maxine shakes her head violently and pulls away.

"You always do this; don't do this to me now." My sister swallows hard and stares Saffron down, challenging her like she always has. I just don't expect my mom to listen this time. "Stay, Mom. Please."

Saffron sighs again, but she looks back at her parents, begrudging them a response.

"If a mother cannot protect her child, then who is going to do it? Who?" Saffron raises her arms out, like she's asking me for a hug. I don't hesitate; I happily give her the hug, let her wrap me up the way she always has. Her visits were few and far between at times, but I know she loves us both. "I'm going to keep Dakota safe—no matter the cost. Somebody has to do it."

Carmen and Walter say nothing; there's nothing *to* say to that.

"We should probably talk now," I admit, drawing away from Saffron and turning to face them. I wonder what they think of my hair? I know everyone's too relieved to see me alive to care about it, but ... I care. I reach up a subconscious hand to touch the short strands.

"Hey," Maxie whispers, taking my elbow in her hand. I look over at her. "We can't add the length back, but we can restore the color, can't we?" See what I mean? Same suggestion that X made. I hold back the tears and nod too vigorously to be anything but undignified and sloppy. And happy. Because I'm with my family again, and it feels really good. It feels weird, too. I'm not the same person I once was, and we can never go back to the way things were, but that's okay. Being with them is enough. "Let's just ... put in an online order, and have it same-day delivered?" Maxine looks around, like she doesn't know where her phone has gone. "Oh. Right. No service."

That makes me laugh. It's not really funny at all if you think about it, that we can't just go buy hair dye. And also that our phones are blocked.

"I'll run out and grab it," Saffron says with nothing but confidence in her voice. "Be right back."

"Please don't," I beg, but this time, she doesn't listen to me. She just smiles and gives my head a rub.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” Saffron heads for the door, even when her parents try to stop her.

“She’ll be okay,” Maxine promises, looking down at me. “She’s been coming and going this entire time.” My sister smiles at me, but I can see that I’m not the only one who’s worried.

If Justin had a proper ‘enemy’ in all of this, I don’t think it would be Tess: it’d be Saffron.

He’d give anything to see her dead.

Maxine ends up raiding the kitchen for snacks, setting up one of the suite’s dining chairs in the center of the sitting area.

“This place is like a palace,” Carmen remarks, seated in one of the oversized armchairs as she looks around. By palace, I think she’s referring to the size of the house and little else. She’s one of those ‘if you don’t have anything nice to say, sometimes it’s best to keep your mouth shut’ people. I’m sure she finds the house as gross and modern as I do. I blame her and Walter for raising me in a charming farmhouse.

“Or a tomb,” my grandfather adds under his breath. He’s not wrong. With all the curtains closed, it’s a bit dark down here, so we’ve got all the lamps on. It’d be nice if we felt safe enough to let the sunshine in.

Some summer break this is, huh?

“My end of the summer outings used to be kayaking with Sally or taking night walks to look for fireflies with Maxine. This blows.” I lean back in the chair, reverting to a more infantilized version of myself for a brief instant. It’s nice to feel like a teenager, even if it’s only for a few minutes.

I’ve grown a lot since I first came here.

“I had all these twilight hikes planned,” Maxine remarks, brushing my hair absently in preparation for the dye job she’s about to give me. I’ve always relied on Maxine to do my hair for me when I couldn’t get a timely appointment in town or if we didn’t have the money for it. My grandmother had taken to doing low-cost surgeries for the community; she doesn’t make a lot of money anymore. “Plus, there were *tons* of cute guys whose numbers I saved just in case Maxx and I didn’t work out ...” She trails off there and clears her throat.

“About that boy,” Walter begins, and I give him a pleading look, “I don’t like him.”

“Oh stop that,” Carmen reprimands, glaring at him from across the room. “If what Maxine has told us is true, then he’s a brave boy doing the best he can in a horrible situation.”

“Still don’t like him,” Walter adds, shaking his head and looking at me to make sure I’ve heard him. “I don’t like any of them.”

“I’m sorry? Question mark?” I grin at him when he gives me a look. “They’re amazing when you get to know them, I promise.”

“When did Justin first make contact with you?” Carmen asks, breaking the ice I’m trying so hard to skate across. Feels like I just got dunked in freezing water.

But I have to tell them the story, huh? The whole story, from my lips.

There’s a knock at the door, and Maxine checks to make sure it’s safe before answering.

“I’m back, and I’ve got the dye,” Saffron says with a smile, setting the bag on a side table. Maxine immediately begins to go through it, checking to see that Mom’s gotten everything. “Do you want me to help? I did my own hair recently.” She fluffs it with her fingers, shaking out the bloodred strands. “Looks pretty good, don’t it?” She pauses and frowns at me softly. With her standing behind me, I’m staring at her reflection in the dark screen of the wall-mounted TV. “I’m sorry about what happened with Maxx.”

My mouth twitches. That’s a pretty small apology for Maxx’s brush with death. If I’d known they were working together, that they were keeping secrets, maybe I could’ve prevented us from ever getting to that point? But this is typical for Saffron. I’ve received the same, lackluster apology for missed birthdays and months-long absences, for shitty boyfriends and trips to rehab.

I say nothing, so she continues. I’m not angry at her. How could I possibly be?

“He told you that we’ve been working together since I was in New York, right?” she asks, and I spin around, nearly toppling my chair over. Saffron snatches the back and keeps it from falling, offering me a smile to go along with the rescue. “Your sister got attacked by one of Justin’s people early on; Maxx was there to help her out.”

Maxine blushes—see how similar we are?—and tucks some hair behind

her ear. Is that what X meant when he said that Maxie asked him for help? How did I not figure any of this out sooner?!

“Nothing happened,” she murmurs, as if it’s not a big deal. It is. It’s huge. “This was way back at the beginning of things, shortly after you moved here. I think the dude was trying to kidnap *me*, to be honest.”

Was it Mr. Fosser, the nasty pervert? Oh my God. I bet it was. It had to be.

“Seriously?” I ask, wondering why Maxx didn’t tell me any of this himself. That self-righteous dickhead.

“There are some things we need to talk about ...” Maxine trails off. “First, I should apologize for pretending to sleep with him; that was disgusting. It made me feel ...”

“Like you were losing yourself?” I whisper, because that’s what Justin excels in, breaking people down, brick-by-brick. In the beginning, I thought I was strong. I *was* strong. But he took me down with a chip to my self-esteem, a break in my morality, a stolen piece of my dignity, until I was so weak and full of cracks that I began to falter.

“It was horrible, and I’m sorry.” Maxine wrings her hands as my grandparents look on, sympathetic to her distress. They know us both well enough to know that we’d never try to sabotage or hurt one another that way on purpose. “There are ... well, there’s more.”

“More.” I exhale and look back at the TV, pointing at my hair. “Then break the bleach out and let’s get started; we both have confessions to make.”

I peep around the corner of my bedroom door to see all three boys lazing around inside, waiting for me.

“Does it make me a dick that I’d rather she was hanging out with us instead of her family?” Chasm asks, and it actually sounds like a genuine question. He looks over at Parrish. “Pretty sure that makes me a dick.”

Parrish drops the book he’s reading to his chest. My eye twitches when I see that it’s *Stepbrother Inked* again. Fuck that book! I’m going to burn it, I swear. Err. Not a good metaphor seeing as this must be a replacement copy (um, gross, who purchased the replacement copy? the insurance people? LOL) as the original copy really did get destroyed in what could’ve been a deadly fire.

“I don’t worry about being a dick as long as the thoughts stay inside my own head. If I did, I’d struggle with the implications.” Parrish adjusts himself and returns his attention to the book. He’s lounging perpendicular across my bed, back to the wall, one knee propped up.

“Okay. So that most *definitely* means that *you’re* a dick, but I was asking more about myself. It was semi-hypothetical and a little bit rhetorical.” Chasm mumbles all of this, lying on his stomach next to our study table that sits low to the floor. He’s got his hips propped by a pillow, head folded on his arms.

Maxx is seated at the desk with his arm slung across the back of the wooden chair, green eyes focused on his hand as he tries and fails to make a proper fist.

Oh Maxx ...

I stand up and walk into the room, chin lifted proudly, hands clasped behind me.

“How do I look?” I do a little spin and then fluff my short, wavy hair with my fingers. The left side, well, it’s lime-green and the right is a perfect black. Just the way I like it.

Parrish sits up suddenly, dropping the book to his lap as Chasm rolls over to stare at me, holding the pillow to his crotch. Maxx stays sitting, crossing his hands over a questionable location between his strong thighs.

“Oh my God, gross. Are you all pretending to have hard-ons?” I whisper this last part. I’m teasing. Can’t help myself. I feel good after my conversation with my family. Maybe I cried a tiny bit, and maybe I reverted to OG Dakota just a little, but that’s what the Banks are here for. They’re my emotional support. Also, Saffron is a pretty decent hair stylist. *Better than stupid Raúl. DRIP—Don’t Rest in Peace.*

I walk into the room and take a seat on the edge of the bed. I imagine I’ll be whisked back for another interview with Agent Takahashi soon enough. I can only assume Danyella will have told her parents everything. Lumen will have snapped by now, worried for her own parents. There’s also, you know, the corpses left at the Hearsts’ mansion to stress over. *I’m so sorry that we couldn’t save you, Veronica. You deserved better than that.* I wonder if the guys have told Tess about her death yet. Or about Saffron shooting Jack Larae (aka murder-porn guy).

“Pretending to have a hard-on?” Maxx asks, raising a brow. “Sure.”

“Definitely not pretending,” Parrish grumbles as Chasm adds something in Korean.

I ignore them all.

“Had a little conversation with my sister,” I begin, trying to quickly change the subject. If we start talking about hard-ons or last night or the way I’m fidgeting on the bed, we’ll end up naked with Tess walking in on us during the act. I am not okay with that. I focus on Maxx’s handsome face. “She told me *all* about how you guys pretended to two-time me after your breakup so Justin would think he had leverage, so he’d watch you both in his efforts to find Saffron.” I take a deep breath, overwhelmed with love for Maxim Wright. All three of them really, but X is the highlight for me today. “Oh, and also how you protected Maxine when she was attacked.”

I stare my guilty boyfriend down as he studies me, both arms crossed on the back of the chair now. He’s still practicing the act of making a fist, but there’s no aggression in it. He’s just trying the limits of his hand.

“Overachiever,” Parrish drawls, purposely picking up the book in his long fingers and using it to fan himself. He acts like this is an act of great contrition, an apology for all of his unearthly and decadent tastes. *I will fan myself this day, so fear not, good servants. If it is my punishment to perform such a laborious task, I gladly accept.* The diffused sunlight hits his white sweater and makes it glow. With the hair, the eyes, that *mouth*, he might be a grandiose lord but he’s also an angel. “I will never stop repeating how I knew you were full of shit. You’re a crappy actor, Maxim.” Pear-Pear gives a shark’s smile that dispels the sun’s heroic efforts to purify his sass. “And I was right—as I always fucking am.”

X doesn’t seem like such a bad actor now, pretending as if he never heard his friend speak. Could be more accurate to say that he doesn’t care. It seems somehow that his gaze, forced to stray from me against his will for so long, has now found a permanent resting place. The look in his eyes betrays the raw truth of our relationship: Maxim Wright is mine, and he expects me to be his.

I accept.

“I appreciate that you were both giving Saffron information,” I continue, pretending like my brain doesn’t continuously stray back to romantic matters. “It doesn’t entirely explain how my mom can melt into shadows and hide in trees with long-range sniper rifles, but at least I know where she was getting

some of her intel.” I scratch guiltily at my temple. “Seeing as Chas and I couldn’t hold a secret between us for more than a day, I understand why the double Maxes kept it all from me.”

“The double Maxes?” X asks with an adorable All-American boy snort. He follows that up with a *whiplash-bam-homerun-boy-next-door* smirk. “I take it you guys are solid?” he continues when I find myself tongue-tied and can’t find words around that killer smile. I nod slightly. *I was never eloquent around possible love interests. If I were going to change and grow and shit, why couldn’t I have lost that trait?* “Good. Because Maxine’s a friend of mine now. I’ve been using her to air my complaints about having to share you with other guys—especially during the time we weren’t together.”

“I knew you were going to hurt yourself.” Chasm’s tone is oddly seductive, and I realize that he’s talking to Maxx, but he’s looking at me. He has a way of pinching his brow and lowering his lids when he’s deep in thought. Does he know he sucks on his lip rings, too? The motion of his tongue comes across as an invitation. “But kill yourself? Dude, you’re such a martyr.” Chas takes his time in pushing his body up to a sitting position, slouchy bad boy grace splashed across pristine bamboo floors. He points a single finger at X, sleeves pushed up, Parrish’s art on display. Simple motion that it is, the muscles in his arms stretch and flex with quiet strength. “Should’ve known there was even *more* going on with you. There’s always something. You’ve been talking to Saffron behind our backs for *months?*”

“If it weren’t for Saffron, I think Justin would’ve killed me and Maxine both. But he wants Saffron. She’s his ultimate target. The two of us being the only people able to talk to her, it made us valuable. It worked out.” Maxx sighs, sliding off the chair to sit on the floor. The sight of him, leaning back against the edge of the desk with his chocolate brown hair falling across his forehead, it’s glorious. “But it was hard. It was so goddamn hard.”

I get up off the bed and move over to sit beside him, putting my head on his shoulder.

Parrish ends up climbing down, so that we’re all sitting around the study table together like old times.

“I missed this,” I respond, sunshine slanting across my shiny new bedroom. Everywhere I look, more impressive details emerge. Even the small, useless trinkets in my desk drawer are organized and soot-free. Also, there’s a neon Pac-Man light from ‘Pottery Barn Teen’ on the wall that Tess

added of her own free will. I'm half-tempted to mock it for being from Pottery Barn. I also love it.

"Did I tell you that I enrolled in the University of Washington for the fall semester?" Maxx looks down at me as I adjust myself so that I can meet his gaze. He smiles a little wider, and my heart breaks, because if none of this garbage had happened with Justin, I could be happy right now. I'd be *beyond* fucking thrilled for Maxx to stay in town.

"Where are you going to live?" I ask casually. I'm selfish. I love it best when they're all here with me.

"I haven't decided yet," he says with a slight cringe, reaching his hand up to muss with his hair. "With all this other stuff going on, I haven't made plans."

"You can live with me," Chas says, but his face shows that he isn't entirely sure what his future holds either. *Oh Seamus. You can't be gone, not without repairing your relationship with your son.* "Or maybe Tess will let us all live here together like one big happy poly family?"

"Pipe dream," Parrish says, but then he lets out a disbelieving laugh. "Then again, who knows? Being in mortal danger sure has chilled out her usual parenting responses."

We all go quiet again.

"What are we supposed to be doing right now?" I ask, wishing that we could focus on the simple fact that school starts the day after tomorrow. Monday. Fucking *Monday*. But how can I go? If I show up at Whitehall, it's like giving into Justin's parenting time.

My best bet is to wait it out here.

"I think we can do whatever we want with the time we have here," Maxx offers, reaching out to stroke my hair before placing a gentle kiss on my temple. That simple act defines him, proves his intent more than any words he could ever say. He might be a wild lover, but he's an affectionate partner, too. I want to crawl on his lap and ride him again. *Explicit thoughts. Carnal thoughts. Malfunction.* My face flames as X peers questioningly down at me. "Are you having naughty thoughts again, Dakota Banks?"

"Um, obviously?" I ask, trying to make light of the situation. "You guys were ... last night was ..."

"Tell us who fucks the best." Parrish throws an arm over his knee and leans forward, just *staring* at me like he expects me to answer such a stupid

question.

“You all have your strengths and weaknesses,” I reply easily, hoping that’s the end of the matter.

“Weaknesses?” Chas asks, sitting up so that he can stare at me, too. “What weaknesses? If there’s something I can improve on, then I want to know about it.”

“If we stay together, how do we decide who gets the first baby?” Maxx asks absently, staring up at the ceiling. That startles me and I spin to face him, backing up and somehow ending up in Parrish’s lap instead. How did that happen? He’s a tattoo artist/ninja apparently.

“Baby?” I ask, choking on the word. “I would need to be at *least* thirty.”

“Yeah, okay. Thirty works. How do we decide?” X repeats, looking at me like that’s a serious question.

“Why don’t we decide how we’re going to attend class instead?” Chasm interjects, but he doesn’t sound entirely unamused by the discussion. “Although, I do want to put this out there: I also would like a child. Just one.”

“I’ll take one, too,” Parrish declares, and I push away from him, standing up so that I can glare down at the three of them.

“I’m not a made-to-order baby factory, thank you. If we ... if you guys are okay staying like this, we can talk about it later.” I pause at the sound of a soft knock on the door, looking up as Tess enters and does her best to smile at us.

“Talk about what later?” she asks, and that smile of hers, it’s as brittle as dry toast. “Not more secrets that you’re hiding from me, right?”

“We were talking about future babies—starting when Dakota turns thirty,” Parrish replies easily, looking toward the windows and not at our mother. The curtains are open, but just a crack. I want desperately to see the sunshine, but I also don’t want to be spied on. I get that the windows are tinted now, that they’re bullet-resistant, but then ... this is the Seattle Slayer we’re talking about here.

“Interesting.” Tess doesn’t sound like she thinks the subject is interesting at all, more like it freaks her out. Parrish seems to sense that, turning so that he can smile wickedly at her.

“Won’t that be fun? You’d be the grandma from both sides.”

Tess grits her teeth, closes her eyes, and breathes until the angry flush leaves her face. She cracks her imposing gaze to *glare* at Parrish. He pretends

to be intimidated and looks away—while smirking.

“Alright, enough of that,” she says, leaning her shoulder against the doorjamb and crossing her arms. “We need to talk about school.”

“I’m not going,” I tell her, and she nods, like that’s the answer she was expecting.

“No, I didn’t think so. I’ve talked to the school, and they’ll allow you all to do Zoom meetings and turn everything in online. Maxim, are you prepared for school as well?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replies without a hint of sarcasm or rebellion. “I enrolled in online courses only for the semester, so I’m okay for a while. My classes don’t start for another few weeks. Right now, I’m only here to help.”

“So he says until he wants me to tutor him and then make some *japchae*,” Chas teases in a low whisper, like everything is normal. Nothing is. He knows that. Chasm pauses then and looks away, a bit of sweat forming on his forehead that he swipes off with a nervous hand. “I don’t ... I’m not sure where my dad is right now, so I was hoping—”

“Honey,” Tess says, coming in to kneel on one of the pillows beside the table. Chasm looks back at her like he’s in need of a parent and here’s one right here. God, I love Tess for that. It’s like she was born to be a mom. She’s got five biological kids of her own, plus Parrish, plus Chasm and Maxx. And in such a high stress situation? She’s handling it well. “We are past the point of you worrying about things like that. You’re here with us until you don’t want to be, okay?”

“Okay.” Chasm doesn’t say much more than that, but I can see in his face how grateful he is for the offer. I can also see how profoundly sad he is. *This is our story, so it has to work out somehow.* I grab onto that hope and hold tight. Sometime soon, I might have to learn that hope does best when it floats. Letting go can be therapeutic.

“Maxx, I know you’re a legal adult, but you’re welcome here just the same.” A small pause. “Provided you can follow my rules.” *Especially when it comes to sex* is left hanging unspoken at the end of that sentence. Classic Tess Vanguard.

“I appreciate that.” X’s voice is hard, his stare fixed on the floor. Likely, he’s thinking of his own dad. I wonder where Hamilton and Tiffany are right now? If he isn’t staying with them, he must think they’re relatively safe. Or ... he’s more concerned about what’s happening with me. I have no idea. I do

trust his judgement though.

“I’d like you all to come down and eat with us.” Tess looks oddly pained for a moment, so I figure this has something to do with Saffron. Shacking up with your daughter’s kidnapper is never an easy or peaceable situation. “Everyone’s already downstairs—the entire Banks family included.”

“We’re coming,” I assure her.

“You bet we are,” Parrish mutters under his breath, and Tess’ attention snaps to him like a rubber band. “What?”

“I should’ve spanked you as a child,” she grumbles, pushing her bangs back so that she looks just a little less perfect. Tess heads down the hall without waiting to see if we’ll follow.

“*You* should spank me now.” Parrish snickers as he slips past me, and I kick him in the back of the ankle. Luckily for him, he stays out of my reach until we get downstairs.

I can’t throttle my boyfriend in front of my grandparents.

I pause in the threshold between the foyer and the living room, fingers brushed up against either side of the doorjamb. Ben is helping the twins focus on their food by sitting with their handheld gaming system in his lap. All three of them are seated around the coffee table with forks in their hands when we walk in.

The Banks—Saffron included—are sitting at the kitchen table with Paul, occupying that strange space where I had my awkward birthday breakfast. That place and this place, they don’t feel the same somehow. But they are. Which means ... *I* am not the same somehow.

That makes me both happy and sad. Change is good. Change also means saying goodbye.

“Dakota!” Ben is the first person to notice me, standing up so quickly that the game system flops out of his lap. Amelia manages to catch it and then hugs it to her chest, waving at me but declining to stand up. Henry just hides behind his twin. That’s okay. The hug I get from Ben is enough to make my whole morning. He releases me and returns to the coffee table, but I can’t seem to make myself move any further into the room.

My *entire* family is here, and I’ve been in captivity for two weeks.

I realize that I’ve frozen in place only when Chas puts a warm hand on my hip, bare fingers brushing up and underneath the hem of my shirt. I shiver and clench the doorjamb with my left hand.

“*Bikyeora*,” he breathes against my hair. “Move, Little Sister.” Chas runs his finger up my spine and I stumble awkwardly into the room, throwing a poisonous glare over my shoulder in response. He hooks a boyish *heh* smirk my way and saunters past to take the chair next to his liege. Parrish has already unfolded his royal self into the seat directly beside Tess, using one hand to smooth out the ‘wrinkles’ in his sweater. Maxx stays standing behind me, far too close to be considered normal. I pretend not to notice, but he casts a big, hot shadow over me.

“I’m glad you weren’t brutally slaughtered by the Seattle Slayer,” Kimber says dryly, maintaining her position on the couch, her gaze affixed to a phone that doesn’t have service of any kind. I smile. “I didn’t think that you were since, well, you’re *you*.”

“I have to agree: our sister is bulletproof,” Maxine agrees, moving over to stand behind the sofa. She leans down and crosses her arms on the cushion next to Kimber’s head. “You should get up and give her a hug,” she stage-whispers, and Kimber’s face wrinkles up in disgust.

“I’m not hugging my brother’s girlfriend. Who does that?” Kimber ignores me, working hard to pretend like she’s doing something important on her phone.

“You’re no fun at all, do you know that?” Maxine says with a sigh, moving over to the table so that she can pull out a chair for me. “Baby sister, your throne.”

“Thank you, madam,” I greet, giving her a half-bow and a grin. Kimber makes a disgruntled snort from the sofa.

“They’re both fucking weird,” Kimber breathes, shaking out her blond hair with fingers.

“Language, please,” Tess says, but she doesn’t even open her eyes. Her arms are crossed and she’s seated in the chair beside Paul. I take the spot at the end of table, and then the awkwardness sets in.

Maxx doesn’t even ask—he just fixes me a plate and sets it in front of me. Tess looks at us and for a second there, I’m almost glad we have Justin as an adversary. If Tess had found out that Maxx and I were dating under different circumstances? He’d be a dead man.

Wait. Is that a bad metaphor? Oh, that’s a *terrible* metaphor.

“Careful over there, young man,” Saffron says, using her best mom voice to turn the words into a command directed at X. “I was pregnant at your age.”

“Is that necessary?” Tess grinds out, opening her eyes to stare at Saffron. I’m embarrassed enough as it is, what with both sides of my family gathered in one place. Chasm and I exchange a look, and he grants me a supportive smile, one that transforms his lips from beautiful to *magnificent*. That helps. A little.

“Do as I say, not as I do.” Saffron takes a sip of her coffee and makes a face. “Then again, Tess already took you for birth control pills, so you’re set.”

“*Mom.*” Maxine tries and fails to capture Saffron’s attention.

“Poor Kota.” Carmen chuckles, reaching over to pat my hand. I stare at the table and say nothing, doing my very best not to consider who might’ve just heard that snippet of private information. *Who, as in everyone. Because of course. Because why not. My grandparents. Paul. My little sister ...*

“She got the pill?” Kimber snaps, sitting up on the sofa and glaring. “Seriously? How fair is that?”

“You don’t even have a fucking boyfriend,” Parrish retorts, and then he looks over at Tess to find her staring at him. “What? She doesn’t. Why would she need the pill?”

Sitting there, I realize something strange.

For two weeks, while I was trapped in my tower, life went on. These people have been getting to know each other in a way they never would’ve if not for Justin’s constant interventions in my life. If I were gone, if somehow I don’t make it to see the end of this, they’ll be okay.

That’s a relief. That’s a huge fucking relief.

The thought is as comforting as it is sobering.

“Dakota’s personal business doesn’t need to be aired in front of everyone.” Tess is standing up for me against Saffron. That’s enough to make me smile, to diminish the embarrassment enough for me to look up and not blush from boobs-to-scalp. “Saffron, I will parent her from now on.” Tess sits up straighter and exhales, forcibly releasing some of the stress that’s coiled up in her shoulders.

“I see you guys have had plenty of time to talk while I was gone.” I dip a length of celery into the hummus on my plate. Maxx has added more vegetables and fruits and less chips and cookies. Looking at his own plate, I see that he’s got the same spread. *He likes health food. Can I trust him?*

“Mostly we talked about you.” This is Chasm again. He’s not eating, but

he is staring at the ring on my finger and making me want to hide it in my sleeve. Tess notices and then she's looking at the ring, too. The edge of her lip lifts but she says nothing. She doesn't have to. I've read it all before in her books.

Just like she wanted, my mother's books were conversations with her stolen child. We spoke before we ever met. Convince me that books aren't pure magic. I'll wait.

Tess glances over to see me staring at her. She's far more perceptive toward emotional distress than her adopted counterpart. Sorry, Saffron, but it's true.

"We might not have wanted to end up here like this, but here we are." Tess picks up her coffee and then stares down at it, the faintest brush of a smile on her lips. "Here we are fucking are." She downs the rest of the mug like it's the alcohol she hasn't been drinking lately and hands it absently over to Paul so that he can make her another.

He does without her ever having to ask. What I thought was weakness in him at the beginning, I realize now is support. Paul Vanguard might struggle in other areas—like standing up to Laverne—but he does his best to make up for that by helping Tess in other ways.

"Because of *him*," Saffron agrees belatedly, but Tess shakes her head with a laugh.

"Not just him, Saffron." Tess leans back in her chair, looking over at me and the boys. She brought us down here because she has something to say, but she's not ready yet. Whatever it is, I don't think it's going to be good news. Good news is easy to deliver. Good news bursts out like streamers. Bad news sews lips shut.

"I suppose we'll agree to disagree on that one." Saffron doesn't back down. She isn't going to. This is an argument she'll take to the grave. "Dakota was a blessing, is a blessing, will *always* be a blessing. Taking her the way I did, it'll always have been worth it."

Tess slams her fist on the table, but she exhales and says nothing, waiting for Paul to place the fresh mug of coffee in her hands. She nurses that java like a true Millennial, proving that her *Eff Off Before Coffee* plaque on the wall is a serious threat.

"You kidnapped her baby." Walter is never quite gentle enough when he talks to Saffron. She spooks easily, and she doesn't like to hear the truth from

him. Looking at my family from this perspective, I see that the Banks aren't as perfect as I made them out to be. And the Vanguards aren't as awful.

My life isn't a fairy tale, and the characters aren't so simple. Nobody quite fits their role without bleeding over the edges. We're a messy coloring book. Some of us, like me, might even be scribbles.

I smile at that.

The unintended consequences of Justin's cruelty are a strange spiral. If he hadn't gunned down those people in front of Saffron, she wouldn't have come for me. If she hadn't kidnapped me, I'd have never even met the Banks let alone become a part of their family. Happy accidents.

"And now that you've undone that, she's at risk of being murdered by the man that wants us all dead," Saffron adds, like her decision to kidnap me makes perfect sense considering. "Especially me." She smirks at that, but I don't find it funny.

If Saffron had never come for me, then the Banks wouldn't be involved in this. Perhaps 'unfortunate accidents' is a better descriptor.

"Baby sister," Maxine warns, sensing the direction of my thoughts based only on the expression I'm wearing. Tess looks from her to me, like she's trying to absorb whatever unintentional cues I'm giving off. "What are you thinking about over there?"

"If Saffron had never taken me, then you guys wouldn't be in Justin's crosshairs." Tears of frustration well, but I brush them away with a dash of my arm across my face, turning to look at Parrish. "If it weren't for me, you —"

"I'm Tess' son," Parrish breathes out, acting as if he believes I've said otherwise. He tousles his hair purposely, trying to hold my attention. "I was always going to be a target. Don't stress over me, Gamer Girl—even if I *did* beg you not to fall in love with me. I'm sure that had nothing to do with my kidnapping."

This little shit ... But the tears dry before they ever fall. Parrish is good. Too good.

"You're my son, too," Paul says, lifting up his coffee. "You were doomed from the start." It's supposed to be a joke, I think, but I've never heard Doctor Paul Vanguard with the Range Rover and the custom license plate make a joke, so it takes me longer than it should to get it.

Tess smiles at that though.

“I told you that my dad was Justin’s secretary once upon a time.” Maxx’s laughter is the opposite of mirthful. It’s a sad acceptance. He’s far too worried about Laurent to offer anything more than a tense twist of lips. But those green eyes? They’re on fire when he looks at me. “He gave people access to Justin’s private information that should never have had access in the first place. I’m guilty by association.”

I turn my head to see that Chasm is already watching me. He doesn’t need to mention that Seamus and Justin were friends, that they’ve invested in one another’s businesses, that they were tied together from the start. Where does the bad blood come in though? From what I’ve seen, Justin has been grooming Chas to work at Milk Carton. Not hurt him. Not hurt his father.

“You’re home,” Chasm says to me, and I don’t think he means the ice palace. I mean, I’m sure he *does* mean the ice palace, but more than that, I think he means the people inside of it. Nearly every person I’ve ever loved is in this house. There are a few exceptions, but for the most part, this is my world. “And that’s what home is, people who protect you no matter what. I’m *glad* we’re here to help you, Naekkeo.”

Chas is right: this is home.

After everything I’ve been through, I’m finally fucking home.

“You’re a blessing, doll.” Saffron taps her knuckles on the table to get my attention, and then she points at me and there’s a fierce glimmer to her gaze that makes me feel so loved by her that I can’t breathe. “*You* were always meant to be Dakota. *You* were always meant to be my daughter.”

Tess closes her eyes, like she’s trying to block out the statement.

“I think what she’s trying to say,” Carmen continues, attempting to salvage the situation before my moms go after each other, “is that we love you, and no matter what happens after this, we wouldn’t have changed anything about your time with us.”

“What I *meant* was that she was always destined to be my daughter.” Saffron isn’t backing down, resting her leather-clad arms on the tabletop as she leans forward. I like the look, all that leather with the red hair. But if she keeps pressing that point, Tess is going to break. My bio mom’s eyes are open now and she’s *staring* at Saffron Banks like she wishes she could kick her out of the house.

“It’s true, you know?” Maxine tells me, sitting back and crossing her arms. “I couldn’t imagine having a different sister, even if that person were my own

flesh and blood. You remember what I told you about the blood of the covenant being thicker than the water of the womb, right?”

My eyes shift to Tess, and we look at each other. I have no idea what she’s thinking right now, but I’d love to know. Paul takes her hand, as if he can sense that she needs his support. That’s Maxine for you, blurting something like that out in front of the woman who used our shared DNA to bring me here.

I’m not angry about that anymore. I’m not angry at anyone in this room. The only person I’m angry with right now is Justin. Oh, and his pawns. If it weren’t for Amin Volli, I feel like we might be in a better place today. My father might be dead.

“Your real daughter,” Tess starts, looking back at Saffron. I think she chose that phrase on purpose. “The one I met at the shelter. If you don’t mind my asking—”

“My real daughter?” Saffron returns dryly, and then she laughs and it’s all sorts of bitter. “My real daughters are sitting right here. Is that boy not your real son?” She points at Parrish, and both he and Tess get real angry, real quick. I know that Parrish’s connection to Caroline is as hard on him as my connection to Justin—even if he’d die before he admitted it. “All I’m saying is, watch your words, huh? I’ll tell you about the other Dakota. I have nothing to hide.”

My mothers engage in a silent standoff at the table. They’re in the same room, they’re talking, but they’re not friends. I don’t think they’re ever going to be friends and that’s okay. People needn’t agree with one another to recognize the humanity in their opponent.

Tess engages with Saffron for a brief moment, but then she turns back to me, and her expression changes. Her voice gentles, and there’s a sense of understanding and empathy in her that I can appreciate.

“Your daughter passed away from SIDS?” Tess clarifies, and only once she’s shed all of her anger does she look at Saffron again. Maxine is sitting there and holding her breath, like she, too, would love to know what happened to her little sister. *Our* little sister.

Saffron shakes her head, leaning forward and hooking her hands together on the tabletop.

“No, it’s called SUDC when the child is over two—*sudden unexplained death in childhood.*” Saffron sighs heavily, shaking her head as Carmen

reaches out to rub her back. “I took her to the hospital, but ... Anyway, they couldn’t do shit to help her. Once she was gone, I stole her body and carried her with me.” She looks over at her mother, like she’s about to confess something, reveal yet another family secret. “She’s buried on the property at the back of the house, under the big oak tree.”

“Oh, God.” Carmen closes her eyes and turns away as Walter stares at his daughter in shock and then, finally, he closes his eyes in sympathy, too.

Maxine and I share a look across the table. That tree, we’ve played under that tree. I’ve sat with Sally and Nevaeh (oh, Nevaeh) and had picnics there. We’ve both seen Saffron lying beneath the shady limbs of that tree with her eyes closed, meditating.

“I wasn’t about to bury my child in a box; I wanted her to rest in peace within the earth.” Saffron forces a tight smile to her face as she looks over at me. “But you were never a replacement for her. The universe took her, but it gave me another child in her stead. Nature is death but it’s also life. You’re my life, Kota. You and Maxine.”

“Your life? You ruined *my* life,” Tess whispers, and Saffron gives her a sharp look.

“You seem to be doing just fine. Or, you were, until you took Dakota back.”

“I could’ve had you thrown in jail,” Tess grinds out between clenched teeth, and only another hand-squeeze from Paul is able to keep her in her seat. The boys and I exchange a look. Not sure that this is what Tess asked us downstairs for. I feel a bit like a volleyball being passed over a net.

Carmen reaches out a hand across the table, putting it over Tess’ in a motherly sort of way.

Tess looks up in surprise, and I wonder if she wouldn’t like to have a relationship with my grandparents. After all, her parents are gone, her grandmother is gone, and Laverne is a bitch so it’s not like she has a relationship with her mother-in-law. If Tess wanted it, my grandparents would take her in like their own daughter.

“I’m sorry we didn’t dig deeper sooner, but you also need to understand where we’re coming from. We had our grandchild kidnapped from us as well.”

Tess stares at Carmen for a long moment before glancing over at me.

“I should’ve left you there,” she says softly, like she’s ashamed of herself

for wanting her kid back.

“No,” Carmen interjects before I get a chance to respond. “You did what any mother would do. And you were more than kind with the plea deal that you extended to our daughter. It’s just ... if you’d approached us in a different way, this—all of us together—would’ve been the outcome from the start.” Carmen looks at me next, and my cheeks flush, like I’m about to be scolded for something. “I want you to give your mother some credit, Dakota. She called us even before Justin did, long before the fire. She invited us out here.”

“She ... what?” I ask, and then I exchange a look with Parrish to see if he’s as shocked as I am to hear that. He doesn’t look surprised at all. He raises an eyebrow.

“Tess likes to do nice things but not tell anyone about it. I’ve never understood it, but that’s how she is. You remember the day that you made the cornbread and she broke your phone?” I cringe, but he’s not done yet. “You know how we were all gathered around the table? She was giving us all a lecture about making sure you felt welcome, that you felt at home here. She was advocating for *you*.”

“Parrish,” Tess says softly, but that’s it. No rebuttal, no rebuke.

I don’t even know what to say.

Justin has unwittingly gifted us with compassion and understanding for one another. I bet he’s fucking *seething* at the idea that we’re over here bonding together. He didn’t want that to happen from the start. The very first thing he asked me to do was force Tess to talk about him while she was terrified about her missing son. How sick and twisted is that?

“I don’t know how much Saffron told you, but Veronica is dead.” I break the emotional tension with a more urgent matter. It’s easier to talk shop than talk feelings. “Amin Volli killed her.”

Tess looks disappointed and sad, but not surprised. I’m guessing she was already filled in.

“She must’ve slipped out of the house after we left for the opera; I thought she understood how much danger she was in.” Tess pauses, eyes searching the room like she’s seeking out invisible haunts—namely Mr. Volli. “Or else that man dragged her out.”

“He’s a tricky one, that weirdo teacher,” Saffron admits, shaking her head. “Makes me wish I’d studied martial arts, so I could kick his ass.”

“You did shoot him,” I remind her, and she grins.

“Damn straight I did.” Saffron gives Maxx a look. “Switch chairs with me, would ya?”

He graciously moves, so that Saffron can take his spot on my left. She puts an arm around me and ruffles up my short hair with her other hand. She did a nice job coloring it for me, won’t lie.

“I love you fierce, Kota,” she tells me, pressing a kiss to my temple. “No matter what happens, you and Maxine are my babies.”

Silence falls over the table for a moment.

“Is the FBI coming to talk to me about Veronica?” I ask, honestly surprised that I haven’t seen Takahashi yet. I’d almost expected her to show up last night.

“There were no bodies when the police got to the Hearst estate,” Tess tells me, and I give an involuntary shudder. “But yes, you will all be interviewed. Again. Unfortunately, nothing about these scenarios helps our cause. Not even that scrap of goddamn bloody wedding dress.”

Tess puts her forehead down on her arms, and I’m reminded all over again that she’s going to have to go to court for what happened at the opera. That she could be *charged* for what happened there. That Paul could be railroaded as the Slayer. That this happy family get-together might be the last one we ever have.

“You heard that Laverne was involved in drugging me?” I add, and Tess lifts her head up, turning her gaze over to Paul. For his part, he at least seems to be embarrassed about it.

“I believe my mother was aware that Parrish was kidnapped, that she was using him to help promote the app.” Paul swallows a lump and adjusts his glasses. “I don’t believe that she’s a killer; I think she’s trying to avoid a scandal so as not to squander her investment.”

“I’ve always disliked your mother,” Tess murmurs under her breath, and Paul flushes. “But maybe we can use what she knows against Justin? She keeps trying all these tricks to get you out of this, but it’s not working. At what point does she come to her senses and realize that her son is going to be *imprisoned* if she doesn’t cooperate?”

“Let me work on her,” Parrish says, but Tess is already shaking her head. “Mom, I don’t even have to see her in person. I’ll call her.” He points over at Kimber who still happens to be sitting on the couch and pretending like she’s

not eavesdropping. “We will call her. We’re her favorites, and if she doesn’t have us, she has no heirs.” He grits his teeth as he stares at the table and then shakes his head. “For what she did to Dakota, I would *never* speak to her again, but if there’s even a small chance of turning Laverne on Justin, let’s do it. He wouldn’t survive.”

It makes me feel better to have a plan, but I don’t know how much weight I’ll give it.

“Before ... before anyone gets up,” Tess begins, lifting her chin and sitting up straight in her chair. “I just need to say this.” She looks over at Carmen and Walter, at Maxine. Not at all at Saffron. “I’m sorry for what I did. I’m sorry that I came in and used my money against you, that I took you to court, that I tried to separate you from Dakota. None of that was okay, and I made a mistake.” She snuffles slightly and closes her eyes, like there’s something she’s thought of that she wants to say but is afraid to. “After Justin is dealt with, if Dakota would like to ... she’s welcome to move back to New York. I won’t fight it.”

Tess opens her eyes and shoves up to her feet, taking off out of the kitchen doorway with Paul jogging to keep up. Personally, I’m stunned, sitting there in dead silence with my entire family staring at me in anticipation.

I turn to the boys first.

There’s Maxx, head bowed, mouth tight, eyes hooded. He’s wearing a sleeveless blue hoodie, unzipped, a white t-shirt with the *Wright Family Racing* logo layered underneath it. He doesn’t even look up, but he knows I’m staring at him. I can tell because his shoulders get tense, because he’s too fixated on the table. “*I’ll stay out of this—no matter what.*” That’s what his stance says, that he’s somebody who wants me to make my own choice even if that choice is the absolute wrong one for him.

He’s also pissed all the way off about it.

“Do you think you could be happy here?” Chasm asks me, and it’s not the question I expected from him or anyone else. It surprises me, genuinely surprises me. *Do I think I could be happy here? How could he even ask me that? Doesn’t he know? Don’t they all know?!* He reaches out and takes my hand, running his thumb over the engagement ring. And then he makes like he might pull it off and I slap him. Chas and I end up staring at each other from mere inches apart. I wish it was easier to ignore the shape of his mouth. “Because I know you were happy there.”

The offer to live with the Banks, while tempting, is one that I know I'm not going to accept. I couldn't possibly leave the boys, especially not after everything we've been through. I've got siblings here now that I really care about. Besides, Maxine is close by, and ... this is home now. I want to get to know Tess, too. I want to stay in Medina.

While the decision is simple to make, it isn't easy. Not at all. My heart pounds as quickly as it does around the boys, and my skin flushes with embarrassed heat. Shame. I feel so bad for my grandparents. They raised me. They spent so many years of their lives shaping Dakota Banks, and now Dakota Banks is someone else entirely. Saffron is here, risking her life for me by tracking Amin and Justin, and yet on the inside, it's Tess that feels more like a mom to me.

The thought is shocking.

And it's not because of DNA or biology or court orders, it's because of Tess' *actions*.

She didn't just say she was going to change, she did.

So did I.

Hell yeah I did. As if I was going to let Tess' highfalutin ass become a better person than me. Heh.

"I already am happy here," I admit. Not with the almost dying, having to kill a guy in self-defense, or the kidnapping of my boyfriend, but with everything else. Before Justin descended with all this chaos, even Whitehall wasn't so bad. I liked hanging out with Danyella and Lumen. I loved going hiking with Maxx. Tutoring with Chasm. Fighting with Parrish.

"You're not allowed to leave," he says absently, arms folded, face turned toward the wall. He won't look at me because he's full of shit. If I wanted to go back to New York, he'd be angry, but he'd kiss me goodbye. Parrish can pretend to be the boss in this relationship all he wants. "I'll fly in my grandmother's jet to come and see you every weekend. The carbon emissions would be *staggering*." He turns those bright eyes of his on me, and it's over.

I'm a sucker. I'd have stayed for that look alone.

There is one person, however, whose look could get me to leave.

Maxine waits patiently across the table, pretending to be disinterested in my response (so she doesn't influence me), but practically bouncing up off her chair with the need to speak.

"You don't have to give us an answer now," Carmen says softly, but I

can't look at her. I'm just staring at my sister now. She lives in Eugene, so ... *Ugh, I think I might actually like the Pacific Northwest, too. Lots of ferns. And rain. And people who refuse to use umbrellas.* "And you certainly don't have to move back in with us. As long as we can visit you, as long as we can reach you on your phone, that's all that we need."

"Well, that, and maybe two or three less boyfriends," Walter grumbles, and then Maxine is rushing around the table to hug both me and Saffron from behind. She's waited until the perfect moment to get out of her chair, snapping the emotional stress in the room like it was never there. The shame in me fades almost as quickly as it came. *God, I love her.*

"Stay here so we can go hiking every weekend. If you're going to date Maxx, you're going to have to get used to it."

"I'd rather Kota and I hiked alone," X tells me, entirely unashamed. See? Shame *can* be useful in certain situations. If only he had some now.

"Sounds like an activity I want no part in," Chasm murmurs under his breath.

Parrish stands up lazily from his chair, hands on the table, oversized white sweater lifting up in the back so I can see a tantalizing sneak peek of his skin above his jeans.

"I'll go tell Tess that you're staying," he declares, and I give him a bemused look in response. What. An. Asshole.

"I never said that was my decision." It was. It is. But he doesn't need to know that. Arrogant asshole with stupid muscles and stupid tattoos and stupid brown-gold eyes that burn. Then I notice that Chasm and Maxx are staring at me like my head's just exploded, and I sigh. "Of course I'm staying, but he should've at least waited for me to say that." I'm grumbling now, but Parrish is already taking off to inform our mother.

I honestly think she'll be shocked.

"Without us, would you stay?" Maxx asks, and it's a legitimate question, one that I don't know if I can answer. I'm not entirely certain that I would, but I'm also not staying just because of them, if that makes sense. Our eyes meet, and he smiles at me. *He knows.*

I don't respond, and he doesn't press me.



CHAPTER 31

I'm tucked into one of the pantry cabinets, hidden behind several boxes of some weird 'sprouted whole grain' cereal that Tess keeps on hand in large quantities but which nobody eats (not even Maxx). It's gross. Sugar and banana slices can't fix the health food mess inside those boxes.

My body is cramped, and it's surprisingly hot in here, but I don't move because the police are going through the house looking for me. Justin sent them. He has a right to, considering the custody agreement. As far as anyone knows, I'm a runaway now. Sure, I'll show up for school via Zoom today, and he'll know exactly where I am, but if someone comes for me, I'm hiding and I'm not coming out.

The cabinet door opens, and I go as still as I can. I stop breathing, too.

"They're gone." It's Chasm, reaching out to scoot some of the cereal boxes aside before he holds out his hand. I take it and he helps pull me from the pantry.

"How was it?" I ask, annoyed that I'm missing my first few classes of the day.

"Eh. I mean, they walked the entire house, opened closets, peeked under beds, but that's about it. It's not like they ransacked the place."

Parrish shuffles into the room wearing those slippers of his that I saw at Laverne's, the ones that match Tess'. She walks in a minute later, and then it becomes painfully obvious that they have matching pajamas.

“How you ever became king of the school with slippers that match your mom’s is beyond me,” I mutter with a chuckle, and Pear-Pear pauses to glare at me.

“Are you my stepsister again? Are we back to squabbling?” He tosses his laptop down on the table as Tess looks between us with a raised brow. “Because I could say some things about your pajama choices.” He eyes my Yoshi pj’s with distaste apparent in his handsome features.

“I’d like the two of you to stay focused. Our day’s already been thoroughly derailed by this little intrusion.” Tess checks her grandmother’s watch. “You’re all late for class,” she reminds us with a pointed look. I can hear Kimber in the dining room, participating in her own online schooling. The little kids are upstairs in Tess’ office with Paul supervising. “Log on and get going please. With all my failures as a parent of late, I’m not keen to add another by allowing you to become delinquents.”

Chasm chuckles at that, but he dutifully picks up his earbuds and pops one in, sitting down at the table and opening his own laptop.

“Can I cook for you guys?” Maxx asks, coming in behind Tess. “Coffee? Tea?” He touches a hand to his chest. “I’m here for moral support.”

“I see that’s what we’re calling it now,” Tess grumbles, eyeing him as he approaches the fridge and opens it to look for breakfast possibilities. During the last two nights, the boys slept in my bed, but Tess couldn’t complain because, well, it’s harder to kidnap someone when there are four of you. She did, however, check on us so many times that sex became a far-flung possibility. “Let’s go. Schooltime. Chop-chop.”

“I don’t know how you put up with that,” Saffron murmurs, walking into the room and swinging her thumb in Tess’ direction. My latter mother ignores my former mother, but I can see from the way her forehead scrunches up that she’s annoyed. “You’ve got a serial killer after you. What does school matter?”

“School matters because they all have futures to look forward to,” Tess says, finally giving Saffron a glare. “We’re on better terms now, but that doesn’t mean I’ll allow you to come in and critique my parenting.”

Saffron shrugs and moves into the kitchen to see what Maxx is up to. Now, I’m trying not to take sides in the Tess versus Saffron squabbles, but Saffron doesn’t have a lot of room to judge anyone’s parenting skills. She wasn’t around enough to take credit for me and Maxine; our grandparents are owed

the praise for our upbringing. I have to say though, having her here now is epic.

There were times throughout all of this where I felt alone, or where I felt like it was me and the boys versus the world. It's nice not to feel that way anymore.

"Can I help you cook?" Saffron asks, and Maxx just stares at her, like he isn't sure what to do.

"Go ahead, Maxim. It's not disloyalty for you to cook with the person who saved your life." Tess offers him a smile, aware that he's on her side when it comes to the Saffron/kidnapping me thing.

"Yeah, no, I didn't ..." Maxx just trails off and then gestures at the pile of food items. Chas is already locked into his class, wearing his earbuds and staring at the screen. Parrish is yawning repeatedly and pretending like he forgot his school password so he can avoid logging in. "What should we make with all this? I was going to do crepes again, but if you've got a better idea, I'm open to it."

"Oatmeal pancakes with cinnamon apples?" Saffron suggests, picking an apple out of the bowl on the kitchen island. "Like back in the old days?"

"I'd love that." I whisper the words without meaning to, watching her toss and catch the apple before she takes a huge bite out of it.

"If I was home on their first day of school, I'd make this. I'd do it with apples from my parents' trees." Saffron directs Maxx on what ingredients to switch out and where to start while I sit there and stare at my computer screen. As soon as I log into this, I'm letting Justin know that I'm here. The police might come back.

Also, screw him. He can send the cops back as many times as he likes, but I will always be 'gone' when they show up. If I go back to his house, I am dead. Period.

"What are you thinking about?" Parrish asks me as Chasm removes an earbud to drop in on the conversation. I look up and smile at them both.

"That I really was a snobby East Coast brat, complaining that there was flavored creamer instead of 'farm-fresh milk' or 'scrambled eggs from our *personal* chicken coop'." I snort now that I'm thinking about it, my face flushing red. My comments about the architecture of this house (which I still hate), the Vanguard family structure, the food, all of it. Embarrassing. "Sorry about that."

“Sorry we were dicks,” Chas says with a shrug of one shoulder. He pats at his pocket like he’s going for a cigarette and then curses, shoving up the long sleeves of his shirt to reveal his tattoos. “We all made mistakes.” He sticks his earbud back in and gets to work. Valedictorians have to try harder than most.

“You know what I regret most? Not wall-slammng you the first second we were alo—” Parrish is cut off when Tess grabs him by the shirt sleeve and gives it a hard yank.

“School now, or I make my own TikTok video about our matching slippers.” She waits there while we all pop in our earbuds—or in my case, slip on a lovely lime-green headset—and log in.

A WhatsApp message pops up right away. All it says is *Hello Princess*. I block the number. A new message from a new number appears next. *Don’t you dare*— I don’t even finish reading it. Block. I close the app. I don’t check my email. I focus on my classes.

The best part about remote schoolwork? I get to poke Chas and Parrish under the table with my foot and make out with Maxx on my break.

Silver linings and all that.

One week into our lockdown, my grandparents get the news: our fucking house in New York has burned down. My initial response was to freak out, but that didn’t last long. We’re all here, we’re all still alive, and it’s just a house. But oh my *God*, was it a house.

Twenty-two-hundred square feet of history filled with antiques and memories. There were king boards on the floor that I pointed out to every guest that set foot in that place. “*Did you know that any trees large enough to make floorboards this wide were reserved for royalty? Either the builder of this house had friends in high places or else they poached this wood from the crown.*” If Nevaeh and Sally were over to hear me say that, they’d mouth the words along with me and roll their eyes.

Walter would then tell me that story was a myth—sort of. And if our guest wasn’t terrified enough, he’d launch into a lengthy tale about how, in colonial times, some trees (especially the Eastern white pine) might be selected and marked by three slashes to reserve them for the monarchy. These particular

trees would then be used for the British navy, to make masts and booms for ships. *“It’s highly unlikely that our floorboards are illicit. But would you like to see our basement? It was a hot spot during prohibition.”*

Sigh.

Justin has taken a lot from me, but burning down my childhood home to smoke me out of my hidey-hole? It’s a low blow by a desperate coward.

My grandparents took the loss in stride like they always do—*good thing we have insurance, eh Walter?*—but Maxine and I bawled like babies and hugged each other like we’d lost an old friend.

That was a week ago.

We’re now two weeks into this mess with no end in sight.

I had to stop going to school because Justin kept sending the cops whenever I logged in. Then he started severing the connection completely. Now, nobody can go to school.

Nobody can go to school and our house is gone. The place where I was raised. The place where the person I call Dakota Banks was formed. The farmhouse that I miss like a member of my own family.

I will never see it again unless it’s in pictures.

But how can I cry about a house after everything I’ve been through? These last two weeks alone, I’ve been kicked out of school and spent way too much time hiding in the attic or the sauna or the pantry cabinet, avoiding Agent Takahashi and the police as best as I can.

It won’t last.

I’m currently listed as a runaway, but everyone knows I’m here. When Takahashi interviews the boys (which she’s done no less than *five* times these past few weeks), she grills them about my whereabouts. It’s not that I’d mind talking to her, but I know that Justin might use her to get to me, that Takahashi is too chicken shit to do anything about it. She might very well turn me over to him herself.

Today is another regularly scheduled interview for the boys, and it coincides with Tess having to go into court for something related to the attempted shooting. I won’t say it hasn’t been nice living here with my entire blended family, but we can’t stay like this forever.

We’re the victims yet we’re the ones who are trapped. Does that seem fair? Does it seem right that the people being targeted, harassed, and threatened are the ones who can’t leave the house? Who can’t go to school? Who can’t even

go outside for fear of being attacked?

All of these issues, they kept me up all night last night. I paced my room. I stared at the boys' sleeping faces like a creeper. I scribbled my thoughts in a notebook. Now I have something I want to say, but I'm not quite sure how to say it.

I'm sitting on Parrish's bed with all three boys, flipping through the newest set of drawings that've sprung from my stepbrother's hands. With no internet, no school, and no outings, we've all had a lot of free time on our hands. If that means sneaking sex whenever Tess is occupied with her typewriter, so be it. If that means lying together in my room and reading books in comfortable silence, check. If that means sitting with my feet in the pool and talking to Maxine, I've done it.

I've cooked with Saffron, played numerous board games with my grandparents, taught Henry and Amelia how to kick ass on Tetris, discussed the *Warriors* series by Erin Hunter with Ben, and even let Kimber teach me her tricks for using liquid eyeliner.

Paul has been weirdly awesome, too, like he's trying to be a father to me.

"I'm sorry I came in and messed up your life," I told him when we were sitting in the living room one day and watching a medical documentary about botched plastic surgery (a topic we both enjoy, oddly enough). He paused the show, looked over at me with a baffled expression on his face, and responded in a way that I certainly hadn't expected.

"If I hadn't been such a coward in high school, if I'd told Tess how I felt about her, then you might've been mine. I'm the one who should be sorry."

That's what he said to me. I found it surprisingly cute, and I actually gave him a *hug*.

That's where we're at: total crisis mode.

With a sigh, I close the drawing pad and Parrish flicks me in the ear with an inked finger.

"Ow." I rub my ear and glare at him. "What was that for?"

"You didn't say one thing about any of my work until you sighed and then closed the book. I might seem like a complete and utter badass, but I'm still a sensitive *artiste* underneath it all." He splays his long fingers over his chest, an adorable frown on his pouty mouth. He's joking, but he's a little bit serious, too.

"Regardless, if you flick my fiancée in the ear again, we're going to have

problems.” Chasm is lying on his side with his back to mine, flipping through a manga that’s written entirely in Japanese. He claims that he can read it. I believe him because he’s smart as fuck.

Parrish kicks the comic book off the bed and onto the floor, and Chas sits up suddenly, narrowing his eyes on his bestie.

“Fight me,” Parrish declares, and the two of them end up in some stupid male tussle over nothing. I think they’re both tired of not having anyone else to pick on.

Maxx and I exchange a look of adoring exasperation before he gives up on pretending to be nice and drags me into his lap, strong arms wrapping around me from behind.

“I know you, and I know you like his art, so that’s not the problem. What’s up, Kota? Talk to me.”

I close my eyes, letting his body heat suffuse mine, and I allow myself the space to entertain the idea that’s been percolating. The guys are going to hate it. Tess won’t allow it. The Banks family will strongly disapprove. Ugh.

While Saffron continues to pop in and out of the house, she won’t tell us exactly what it is that she’s doing. My assumption is that she’s still trying to kill Justin. Great. Awesome. If it could actually happen, I’d take it—even if it meant her going to jail. It sounds selfish, but at this point, we are *all* trapped here. Poor Amelia and Henry don’t understand what’s going on, and they ask every single day if they can go out and play.

I hate that.

If Saffron were going to get to Justin, she’d have done it already. He’s far too careful with his movements, which means that we need a different plan. We’re out of options here.

I open my eyes.

“I want to meet with Justin,” I say, and X goes stiff behind me (not in a good way), his arms tightening around my waist.

“No.” He says it before Parrish and Chasm can even find their feet. Parrish flops back down on the bed to stare at me while Chasm walks around the end of it, pausing directly in front of me and Maxx.

“Why would you even suggest something like that, Naekkeo?” he asks, smoothing his hands down the front of his wrinkled shirt. “You promised you’d do everything in your power to stay the fuck away from him.”

“Normally, I find Maxx’s caveman-like responses infuriating, but this

time, he's right." Parrish snatches his art book up and tosses it onto the nightstand. "No."

"Hear me out." I try to untangle myself from X's arms, but he doesn't make it easy. He resists until I look at him over my shoulder, our noses brushing. *Why do you have to be so handsome? It's distracting AF.* "Seriously. Just listen."

He sighs and releases me, holding up both of his hands with his palms out in surrender. Our resident rabbit, GG, stomps his foot and then noisily slurps at the water bottle in his cage. He's so spoiled. He's had bok choy, bell peppers, and radicchio today.

I stand up and move a few steps back so that I can see all three boys, but they can't easily touch me. If they touch me, things get messy. Literally. Since we don't have to use condoms anymore. *Eww. Why the hell did I just think that?*

I need to learn to pour more of my weirdness into my writing. With AI chatbots working their way towards writing whole novels, I think strangeness and quirkiness are the only saving graces of the human artist. Did I mention that I've even been letting Tess read my work? I don't have access to anything that I wrote while with Justin, but I've started to pen new stuff.

When I told Tess about some of Mr. Volli's edits, she folded her hands on the table, rested her chin atop them, and stared me down.

"Those sorts of edits render a story barren and lifeless. Based on what you're telling me, I have to say that I completely disagree."

So now I've been getting feedback from my mom/favorite author, and it's fucking awesome. In another life, I'd be in heaven here.

Ahem. So what does that have to do with Justin? Well, like with Tess, I find that writing things down helps clear them out of my head. I've come up with an idea that, while risky, seems like our best option.

"She's in her head again," Chasm remarks as X stretches his arms above his head, likely as an intentional distraction.

"She's in outer space," Maxx agrees, dropping his hands to his lap. "Are you going to explain this crazy idea to Tess, too? Because even if you somehow manage to convince us—not happening—she won't go for it."

"If she knows about it," Parrish adds, taking my side and pissing the other two off. "So tell us this genius idea, Gamer Girl." He snaps his fingers at me, and I grab the PlayStation remote off his gaming chair so that I can throw it

at him. He catches it, which is annoying, but which also makes me pine for my days of gaming back at home in my room, tucked up with my computer and high-speed internet and whatever the latest, greatest release might be.

“Here’s what I think.” I cross my arms, but I wish I had an old-school chalkboard so I could write this all down. I’d use my iPad, but technology sort of creeps me out now. I’m not sure that I’ll ever love it quite the same way that I used to. That day at the beach, when we all sat and ate ripe watermelon together, was a game changer for me. I want more of that and less ‘being spied on and recorded all the time’. Even without Justin, isn’t that what technology sort of does anyway? “We go to Whitehall—in person.”

“Already hating this plan,” X warns me, shrugging out of his hoodie to reveal a ribbed tank underneath. I love men in ribbed tanks. I can’t stop staring. “I’m not a student there, remember? No way I’m letting you go without me.”

“One of your old uniforms is stuffed into the back of my closet,” Parrish remarks, pointing in that general direction. “The fire restoration people even had it dry cleaned and hung back in there. I saw it when I was digging around for a new drawing pad. You could wear it and slink around the school to keep an eye on us. You’re good at that stalking shit. Also, I’m just playing devil’s advocate. I hate this plan, too.”

“Why would we go back to school?” Chasm clarifies, but not like he’s against the idea entirely, more like he’s curious to see where I’m going with this so he can piggyback off my idea.

He can sit there and ponder all he wants, but I know he’s desperate to go back. It’s not possible to be number one in your class when you don’t *go* to class. Chasm has always taken his grades so seriously, has always wanted that one thing that would capture his father’s attention.

If said father is dead? If he’s being held captive? Chas won’t decrease the amount of effort he puts into being valedictorian, he’ll double it. Triple it. He’ll work himself to the bone to achieve the dream his father had—or has—for him. He needs to be in school, and I can’t steal away everything he’s ever worked for by continuing to hide. It’s not reasonable to expect him to fight a serial killer and study at the same time.

“Justin will show up there,” I continue, but that doesn’t seem to convince a single one of them that this idea is getting any better. “We’ll be in public which gives me a chance to talk to him without, you know, instantly dying or

whatever.”

“Uh-huh.” This from Maxx.

“But before we go back to school.” I raise a finger for my aha moment. “I meet with Takahashi.”

Silence. They’re still not getting it.

“Won’t that expedite your reunion with Justin?” Parrish asks dryly, but Chasm is still quietly contemplative. Unlike the other two, he might see where I’m going with this.

“I’ll ask her to outfit me with a wire. She said that using minors for undercover work was unethical or dangerous or something, but what if it was the opposite? If I wear a wire, and I tell Justin about it, he can’t kill me or it’s over right then and there.” I wait for their collective approval, but it doesn’t come. “I’m not planning on being alone with him, but I can talk to him there at the school. If the FBI is watching me, if they’re using me in that manner, then he can’t make a move. His hands are tied.”

“You’re assuming he still cares about being caught,” Chasm adds thoughtfully. “If he changes his mind about that, if he decides he’s done with his games, then maybe he’ll kill you anyway?”

“I can’t live the rest of my life in captivity. I also won’t be able to get away with avoiding the FBI for much longer. I think the only reason we’ve gotten this far is because Agent Takahashi *does* believe us. She just isn’t a rule breaker; she’s cautious.” I exhale and wait for the pushback. It’s coming, no doubt about that.

“There’s always the chance he’ll pull a gun and shoot you outside the school. You, or one of us.” Chasm doesn’t sound like he’s trying to tear my plan apart, more like he’s ensuring that I’ve gone over all the possible outcomes. “Why not start by talking to Takahashi and see what she says? For all we know, they could be days away from arresting him. If you’re going to take a risk, start with that.”

“How do we know she won’t turn you over to Justin?” X asks. It’s a valid question. We *don’t* know that.

“All we know for sure is that Tess might be put in jail. Or Paul. Or even Saffron. I know that Jack’s body went missing along with Veronica’s, but that doesn’t mean Saffron didn’t kill him or that Justin won’t set her up to ensure she’s charged with the crime. We know that my grandparents’ house burned to the ground, that we can’t go to school or even walk outside for fear

of dying. Those are the things we know.” I force myself to take several slow, calming breaths. “Takahashi has been conducting your interviews here, so that works in my favor. If she forces me to leave the house, I’ll resist and maybe we can at least get some viral videos going of me struggling and screaming on my way out the door.”

“Sounds like an absolutely horrible idea,” Parrish says, resting an elbow on his knee. He stares at the sunburst inked into the back of his hand before lifting his head up to meet my gaze, his expression softening somewhat. He knows that I feel responsible for the collective suffering of this family. I can’t help it. In a way, it *is* partially my fault. “If she tries to take you, she’ll have to arrest me alongside you.” He heaves a dramatic sigh. “Alright, let’s do this.”

“Seriously?” Maxx asks, sounding frustrated by the other boys’ reluctant acquiescence. “If I’m the only dissenting voice, this is happening whether I like it or not.” He doesn’t sound like he believes that, like maybe he’ll put up a fight anyway. “You’re all sure about this?”

Chasm paces the room a few times before dropping his arms to his sides. For the briefest of breaths, his expression is one of tender agony.

“Maybe if we talk to Justin, we can figure out where he’s keeping Laurent and Seamus.” The expression fades as quickly as it came, and he’s back to his usual cocky, confident self. “Unfortunately, X, I’m going to agree with my girl on this one. What if this goes on for months? What if it goes on for *years*?” Chas moves suddenly toward the door, opening it a crack and then stepping back in time for Tess to appear. She’s dressed for court in a deep purple blouse and wide-legged gray slacks.

“I have to leave, but if I don’t come back, just understand that I love you,” she says simply, as if this is a macabre fact that we should all consider. I resent her for her sudden practicality.

“Mom, don’t say things like that,” Parrish whispers, standing up from the bed to give her a hug. He wraps her up in his arms like he’d prefer to keep her there forever, and she rubs a comforting circle on his back. When they separate, Tess looks past him and over to me.

“I love you, too,” I tell her. It’s a phrase that can never be said too many times. I’m not sure that I’d ever get tired of hearing a person I care about tell me that they love me. “But you’ll be okay. Everything that Justin does, he does for you. He wants you to see it all, feel it all, understand why he’s doing

it.”

Tess heaves a deep, long exhale. She knows I’m right, but she wishes she could be the martyr, that there was some way for her to go down and take him with her.

“I’m still going to try to kill him,” she admits unapologetically. Her and Saffron both, eh? I wonder who, if anyone, will be able to complete the act. Lord knows that we’ve all tried. I desperately want to ask about Delphine, if Tess knows anything about the notes between her and Saffron, but I’m afraid to say it out loud. I’m only about eighty-percent sure we’re not being spied on at the moment. Not good enough.

I smile.

“Good luck.”

Tess holds her arms out for a hug, and I can’t resist the invitation. She gives me as good a squeeze as she gave Parrish and then gestures for the other boys to give her ones as well. They’re more than happy to do it, too.

Silence falls as Tess leaves, her heels echoing down the hallway.

“I see now why you were all so protective over her,” I admit, staring at my bare toes instead of their faces. “She’s prickly on the outside, but she’s got a heart of gold.”

“Nice of you to admit that I was right and you were wrong.” Parrish smirks at me and then makes a lewd gesture that has my blood boiling for two completely different reasons. *Yeah, love-hate is our vibe.*

I pick up a book from the shelf and chuck it at him, but it’s all in jest and the item falls harmlessly to the floor.

“What time is Takahashi supposed to be here?” I ask, my stomach churning with nervous butterflies. I’ve thought about this idea all night, but that doesn’t mean it’s an easy plan to execute.

“About an hour,” Parrish admits, checking the dragon clock on his wall. “Whatever shall we do to fill the time?” He lifts both brows, steps back, and uses his body to shut the bedroom door.

Three sets of eyes fall on me.

Four sets of clothes hit the floor.

I’ve convinced the boys to listen to Agust D’s music with me. None of them

are big fans of K-pop, but they can get down with *Haegeum* and *Daechwita* playing on repeat. When they all heard that Agust D is actually a ‘pen name’ of sorts for Suga from the boy group BTS, they were surprised. Totally different vibe.

That’s what we’re doing when Agent Takahashi walks into the dining room and sees me sitting there.

She doesn’t look surprised either. She simply sets her bag down on the table, looking over her shoulder at her new partner, Sam Something. That’s what I’ve been calling him in my head. His name *could* be Something Sam, as in ‘Sam’ is his last name instead of his first name. I’ve got no clue.

“Keep everybody else out for the time being,” she instructs and he nods, leaving her alone with us. Itsumi Takahashi turns back around and pulls out the chair nearest her before taking a seat and folding her hands together. She stares down the length of the table in my direction. “You’re back.”

“I was never gone,” I admit, turning my phone off. Even without a signal, even without Wi-Fi, it scares me to leave it on. I only do it for short bursts and only if we’re discussing completely inane subjects like whether Min Yoon-gi makes better music under his stage name of Agust D or Suga or if he’s just another cog in the wheel of BTS. *Shh, don’t tell the ARMY fangirls and fanboys that I find the subject inane.*

It’s life-or-death to some.

Life-or-death to me is literally, well, breath or suffocation. Sunshine or shallow graves. Heartbeat or cold corpse. That sort of thing.

“I see.” Takahashi waits for me to continue, wearing a leather jacket that’s not unlike the one Saffron prefers nowadays.

“I was never gone; I just didn’t want to die.” I add that last bit on and then wait for her to respond. See? I did learn some things from Justin. This is a chess game, and I’m not making more than one move at a time.

The boys are sitting on my right, my left, and across from me—Parrish, Maxx, and Chasm, in that order. They let me do the talking, but I can sense that they’re all coiled up, ready to jump in. We’re the only ones that know about this plan; I didn’t even tell Maxine for fear that she might try to stop me.

I refuse to be put off from this. I’m ruining the lives of my entire family by running away. There has to be some compromise between giving into Justin and finding myself in a silk-lined coffin, and living my life in a pantry

cabinet behind a bunch of sprouted grain cereal boxes.

“You assume that I’ll send you back to Justin Prior because of the custody agreement, is that right?” She spins her wedding ring—it’s on the correct finger and hand to be one, anyway—around as she makes her move and then waits for my response. I sense that she’s an unending well of patience, far deeper and cooler and darker than the waters in my own well.

“Aren’t you?” I ask. She doesn’t reply. Not a good enough move then. “Are you investigating him as the Slayer?” I don’t know if she can respond to that question directly, but could she find a workaround, something that might give us all peace of mind. *I can’t answer that, but you have nothing to fear. I can’t answer that, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.* Something like that.

“Even if I were at liberty to tell you something like that, it could be months before he’s charged. Longer than that. It could be years. None of the charges might stick. Hell, maybe he’d pay someone off and walk—guilty or not.” Takahashi finally looks up at me, and I see all the lines in her face etched over years of worry and stress. Her job doesn’t look like an easy one. “Once upon a time, I was different than I am now. I worked my ass off to get things done, and I cut corners. You know what happened?” She sits back in the chair, still playing with the ring on her finger. “My husband died because of it.”

None of us knows how to respond to that, so we wait. And wait. She doesn’t bother to elaborate.

“Was he an agent, too?” I ask, wondering if that’s the right word. It sounds so cheesy, right? Everything having to do with the FBI sounds cheesy to me. Oh. Unless it’s that old movie, *The Silence of the Lambs*. That’s a good one. I’d say Justin might like it—seeing as he’s a serial killer himself—but he prefers epic fantasy and rom-coms. *Gag.*

“He was.” She sighs again and forces her hands to be still in her lap. “The point I’m trying to make here is this: if Justin were guilty, and I were investigating him, you’d be looking at a long, difficult road in which I could make zero guarantees as to the outcome or to your safety.”

“Are you taking her back to Justin?” X is bold enough to ask outright. He isn’t nice about it either. He doesn’t care if she works for the FBI or not. He’s not afraid of her. Not sure if that’s because he isn’t afraid of anything or if it’s because he knows there are much worse people out there to be afraid of.

“No. Getting involved with custody arrangements isn’t my job. I’m here to

investigate other issues. For example, why don't we discuss the alleged events that occurred at the Hearst estate?" Her voice is edging on annoyance now, and I don't blame her. We haven't made things easy.

"Whatever the boys have told you, that's what happened. Me rehashing the same shit isn't going to help you." Takahashi raises her brow at my curt and probably inappropriate response, but it's the truth. "Their fathers are missing, people are dead, and I'm begging you to help keep me alive. Isn't *that* a part of your job description?"

"It depends," is how she replies, and I want to freaking scream. Instead, I force myself to remain calm, to breathe, to squeeze the boys' hands under the table.

"Give me a wire to wear. Monitor me. Make me an undercover whatever-the-fuck. You said before that it was dangerous to use minors. What if it could save my life? What if I might be able to get something out of Justin that you could use?"

"Not feasible. Say he is the Seattle Slayer, for sake of argument. We use modern equipment; he hacks us. We play a trick like we did with the tape player, he removes it, and then you're no better off than before." Takahashi reaches for her bag, like maybe she's done with the experimental part of this conversation, like we're going to revert back to the same old, same old. *Tell me what the boys have already told me a hundred times. Tell me all about how Justin is guilty while I sit here and do nothing about it. Now tell me all of those things all over again.*

"If he knows you're watching me, if he thinks you're onto him and hurting me is the final trigger for his arrest, that'll give me a fighting chance. I can go to school. I can talk to him. I can gather more evidence." I'm pleading now. I don't care. Remember what I said about my pride? I chucked it out the window a long time ago. "He loaded a revolver with a single round, spun the cylinder, and then shot me until there was only one chamber left. I'm only here because I played Russian roulette, and I won. You might not force me back into his house, but it'll happen eventually. I can't pretend to be a runaway forever."

Agent Takahashi stares at me for nearly three minutes without saying a word. I know because I can see the clock on the wall ticking down the seconds. That's a good sign, isn't it? She's at least thinking about what I've said.

“If he kills me, then you’ll know it’s him. You can arrest him and be done with all of this.” I shouldn’t say that—the statement gets all three boys riled up and edgy—but it’s the truth. “So why not give me a wire? What do you have to lose?”

“My job. My life.” Agent Takahashi opens her bag and then pulls out a notebook. “Let’s start with what you just told me, about Justin and the gun. Do you remember any distinguishing marks on the weapon?”

“Really? We’re back to all this?” I ask with a caustic laugh.

“I’ll make something to eat,” Maxx mutters, standing up from his chair.

“What a waste of time.” Parrish is staring Takahashi down, like he can wield his Prince Sloth charms against her and find a solution via a royal proclamation.

It’s Chasm who remains quiet for so long that I wonder if he isn’t totally checked out.

“What if I told you that I had access to the inner workings of the Milk Carton app?” Chasm asks, looking up from the table’s surface to stare Takahashi down. “I could show you how Justin found all the killers that he’s got working for him—including Amin Volli. That’s got to count for something.”

The way Maxx and Parrish look at their friend, I’m guessing this is the first they’ve heard of this.

“If you had this information, why not tell me sooner? We’ve been talking for weeks.” Itsumi sounds irritated, but a little excited, too. I’m surprised. Not sure she had that sort of energy left in her.

“Because if he finds out that I gave this to you, he might kill my dad.” Chasm’s voice is a strange, breathless thing. “But I’m worried that he might already be ... I just think you should let me show you. I can reveal exactly who’s been committing the murders for Justin, and also how he found these people through his app. That’s good evidence, right?”

“It’s helpful,” Takahashi admits, “but it’s not a smoking gun.” She sighs and sets her pen down. I imagine she hasn’t had to use a pen and a notepad for her job in a long while. But hey, can’t hack a yellow legal pad, am I right? “Does your mother know that you’re asking this of me, Dakota?”

“No.” Itsumi and I stare at one another. “But if you don’t agree to give me a wire, I’ll go to school anyway. Justin will show up—before, during, or after—and I’ll lie to him. I’ll tell him I’m acting as an informant for you, and if it

goes wrong, I'm dead. You can't stop me from going to school. You can't stop him from taking me when it's his legal right. The only thing you can do to protect me is to agree to this."

Sam Something (or Something Sam) returns, walking in the room with his hands tucked into his pockets. He pauses behind Takahashi, like he's waiting for orders. She sits back in her chair with a long sigh, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Set her up with a covert listening device—and make sure everyone knows that we're doing it." Takahashi looks up at Sam, and he raises both brows. "Get her the tape recorder, too. We'll be collecting it every night at eight o'clock on the dot." She turns to me again, but her expression is grim, like she's already regretting the decision. "You're that convinced that he's a killer?"

"Every single thing we've told you is true," I repeat, holding her gaze without flinching. "If you give me time, you'll see for yourself."

She sighs and stands up, exiting the dining room without a reply.

"For what it's worth—unofficially—I believe you," Sam tells us, pulling a radio off of his belt. He smiles at us before following after Takahashi while the boys and I sit there in stunned silence. I'd find him creepy if not for that vigilante glint in his eye. The patronizing smile he gave Justin was *priceless*. No way my father would allow a pawn to look at him that way. I trust Agent Sam. Or Agent Something. I just trust him period.

"Tess is going to flip out when she finds us missing again," Parrish whispers, but I shake my head. Because we're not going to sneak out of here like I originally thought.

Remember what I said before? You can't trap someone in a secret if they refuse to keep it, now can you?

As promised, Parrish digs Maxx's old Whitehall uniform out of the closet and offers it to him. The latter eyes it with a curled lip but takes it with a begrudging acceptance in his face. He knows that if he wants to go to Whitehall with us, he has to blend in.

"First, I'm the creepy old guy attending the high school party. Next, I'm the creepy old guy dating a highschooler. Now, I'm the creepy old guy

wearing a school uniform and going back to said high school.” X casts an apologetic look in my direction before heading to Parrish’s bathroom to change. “Sorry, Kota. Are you sure you still want to date me? I’d understand if you changed your mind.”

He says that, but he doesn’t remotely sound like he’d understand. The way he wets his bottom lip with his tongue confirms that theory.

“You pulled the trigger on yourself because you thought it would save me along with your best friends. We’re still dating. Now go.” I jerk my chin in the direction of the bathroom, but he doesn’t head inside or close the door just yet.

“Did you miss me that much?” he asks, and what I believe is meant to be a bit of a joke becomes gravely serious in an instant.

“Don’t you two dare get all lovey-dovey in my bedroom.” Parrish snaps his fingers to break us from the trance and X sighs, giving his friend a look before heading into the bathroom. “Hey.”

“I wasn’t getting lovey, just ... contemplative or something.” I check the dragon clock for the time. Tess should be home shortly, and then it’s time for *that* conversation, the one I facilitated by asking an FBI agent to make me an informant. Oh dear. “You never know when—”

Parrish cuts me off with a kiss, one that’s a duality of romance and sex, one where his fingers trail down the side of my neck, one where he parts from me with half-lidded eyes as I gaze up at him, and he gazes down at me and—

It was just us. The ones who weren’t supposed to be together. The stepsiblings. The rivals. The roommates. Our love-hate had transformed, and even if the kiss we’d just shared had a duality, our relationship no longer did. The love had outstripped the hate, and this is what we had become.

Starstruck lovers under a glow-in-the-dark sky.

That’s when it hit me that ‘hate’ had never been a part of our equation.

What we’d had was tension: vibrant, impossible, real.

The only real thing we had.

My fingers claw at Parrish’s hair and he scoops me into his arms, knocking several items off of his nightstand in an effort to set me on it. Luckily, it’s a nice, solid wood piece and not some cheap pressboard stuff because he slams me into it, my legs wrapping around him as we kiss each other into oblivion.

With Maxx in the bathroom and Chasm downstairs, briefly trapped by my grandfather in conversation, we’re alone for the first time in what feels like

forever. It's time. This needs to happen. *If circumstances had been different, it'd be just me and you. Just us. We could be happy together like this.*

"Panties off," Parrish breathes, shoving his academy-issued slacks down below his ass. He's already dressed for school in his black jacket, lime-green tie, and shiny loafers. Same for me—minus the slacks. When selecting my bottoms today, I remembered Chasm's 'warning' about pants and went for a skirt instead. Lucky me.

I untangle myself from Parrish only long enough to shed the offending underwear and then it's game on. His tattooed hands slide up the outside of my thighs, cupping my ass and digging his fingers into my cheeks. He pulls me roughly against him, sliding his body against the outside of mine, teasing me and kissing me and making me want him even more.

"For two weeks, I contemplated what I'd do without you," he whispers, but I'm already shaking my head at him.

"For nineteen days, I contemplated what I'd do without *you*." That's my retort. Somehow it comes out more as a come-on, and Parrish gives this soft, tender growl, like he's giving into something he never believed could be his. A lifetime romance. A friend forever. A partner.

It's rare for such a thing to happen at our age, but it *does* happen. And it can happen at any time to anyone. It's never too late to give or receive love. Never.

Parrish thrusts into me, filling me up and slamming the nightstand against the wall.

Maxx chooses that moment to step out of the bathroom, dressed in his uniform but with the shirt unbuttoned, hands raised like he was intending on buttoning it but never quite got to it. Also, Chasm walks in the bedroom door, stumbling when he sees how Parrish and I are engaged and turning suddenly to block whoever might be out in the hallway.

"Sorry, Maxine. Not right now." He shuts the door quickly, locks it, and turns back to me and Parrish. I see all of this peripherally, like it's in a haze. Mostly, it's me and Parrish.

That's what I continue to focus on: his handsome face, the taste of his mouth, the feel of his hands. His body inside of mine. He fills me up in ways that aren't physical, like a balm to the soul.

"Doing it in your school uniforms before class." Maxx tsks his tongue and tries to make his words into a sultry tease. That's not how the sound comes

out. He sounds like he ... I don't know ... wants to join us?

"I can't leave you guys alone for a second," Chasm murmurs, coming over to sit on the bed in his own uniform. He parks himself at the end of it, putting his elbows on his knees, folding his hands together. His amber eyes are on mine as Parrish slides in and out of me, already working my body up into a fine sweat. My stomach muscles feel knotted, the space between my thighs aching and throbbing, clutching at Parrish's body and encouraging him to move faster and harder. My hands clutch at his ass, yanking him against me, moaning and writhing and—

There's a sound at the door, like someone's using a key. Chasm shoves up to his feet, Maxx rushes forward, but it's too late.

It swings open, Tess is standing there, my *grandparents* are standing there, Saffron is standing there, and ... it's over.

I close my eyes, bury my face against Parrish's neck, and wish that Justin had sent me to the afterlife already.

"It's a perfectly natural thing," Carmen tries, but Tess levels a stare on her that ends with the pair of them in silence, an unspoken 'I'm the guardian of Dakota' battle. My grandmother isn't one to lose a fight, but she gives in, knowing that it's time for Tess to take over parenting me.

We're all seated at the kitchen table in our uniforms, speechless, embarrassed. Well, Parrish and I are embarrassed *again* in front of our own mother. So fucking awkward. My grandparents are making it worse by trying to be understanding and gently asking questions.

"This is pure hell," I whisper, but I can't look at Parrish. Can't look at Chasm or Maxx either. Definitely can't look at my mother. Not the bio mom or the adoptive mom.

"No shame in what happened," Saffron offers with a chuckle, trying to figure out the espresso machine. For lack of something better to do, Chasm gets up and goes over there to help her make a cappuccino or something. I've already heard Saffron complain that there's no regular ol' coffeepot, like all she wants is '*a goddamn cup o' joe*'. "Just let 'em be. Young adults are balls of hormones."

"Saffron Banks," Carmen whispers as Walter stands in the living room,

looking out the front windows and definitely not at Parrish (I think my grandpa wants him dead). Maxine looks absolutely mortified, positioned near the refrigerator, staring at our mother like she's got serious secondhand embarrassment.

Tess says nothing, but when Saffron glances back at her, their eyes meet and the latter sighs dramatically.

"Alright, alright. We've had fourteen years with Dakota; you've only had two. You go for it." Saffron returns her attention to the espresso machine as Chasm cringes, and Maxx snorts, Parrish stays broodingly silent, and Tess *steams*.

"I came upstairs to find your door locked. Imagine how that might make me feel? You were kidnapped from that very room." Tess steps closer to the kitchen table, her gaze dark as she studies me and Parrish. Maxx isn't spared the glare nor is Chasm. I guess they're also somewhat responsible for the locked door even if they weren't directly involved in the, um, other stuff.

"We ..." Parrish trails off and then shakes his head. "Sorry."

"Sorry," I repeat.

Maxx says nothing, but I hear Chasm murmur *mianhaeyo*.

There's a strange tension in the air. That's what causes me to look up and meet Tess' eyes. Knowing that she saw me and Parrish mid-coitus, I want to die. Looking at her feels impossible, but I somehow find the strength to hold her stare.

"The sex stuff, I can't even ... I don't want to ... you're both my *kids*." She exhales and closes her eyes, reaching up to push some loose strands of hair from her forehead. "But at this point, I don't know that I have the energy left to fight you on it."

"Something happened today, didn't it?" I ask, and Parrish stands up suddenly, scraping his chair back across the floor.

"Mom, what's going on?" he asks, slipping past me and Maxx to move over next to her.

Tess' lips are pursed as she opens her eyes and surveys the room and everyone in it.

"I've been charged on multiple counts, and it's not looking good. The best I can hope for is a plea deal that gets me a couple of years."

"What?!" Parrish grabs onto her arm, eyes wide and frantic. "What do you mean? You were defending your daughter. You were protecting us all. You

were—”

“I tried to shoot an unarmed, presumed innocent-until-guilty man in a crowd of people. That means I don’t have a lot of time to handle this.” She turns to me next, and there’s a war going on inside her eyes that I understand far too well. She’s afraid for me, for herself, for this entire family, and she knows she’s going to have to make a hard choice. “I heard from Agent Takahashi about your plan.”

I swallow hard as she takes in my uniform, the boys’ uniforms. She pauses on Maxx and lifts a brow, and he flushes all over. It’s one of the only times I’ve ever seen him blush.

“We thought if I got a visitor’s pass and went to school with them—”

Tess holds up a hand to cut him off.

“Where you going to sneak out on me?” she asks softly, but then I’m standing up and Chasm is placing a freshly made flat white into Tess’ hands in silent apology. She takes it with a smile and reaches out to ruffle his hair.

“We weren’t,” he promises, looking down at his uniform and then shaking his head. “We were hoping that you’d come back, that we’d talk about this, and that we’d go to school today. It’s time for us to go back to Whitehall.”

My sister moves over to the table to sit across from me, and we share a silent look that says *we need to have some girl talk at some point*. I turn back to Tess.

“We’re all about transparency from here on out. If you say you don’t want us to do this, we won’t.” I swallow a hard lump. This is me putting a huge amount of faith in my mother.

She stands there for a while, gaze lifting to Saffron. They stare at each other, and I can’t help but wonder if Tess really is hoping for a miracle from the woman that was once her greatest rival (and might still be, in a way). Saffron lifts her cappuccino in salute as Tess turns back to us.

“I’ve discussed the issue with Agent Takahashi, and I agree on some aspects. We can’t stay holed up forever, but I also can’t allow you to be alone with him. Tell me how you think you can pull this off without him dragging you home under the guise of the custody agreement.”

I nod, taking a deep breath to ground myself.

It’s not up to Tess to handle Justin, not up to Saffron, not up to me either. I reach my hand down and subconsciously touch my fingers to my tattoo.

There is only one way for us to handle this situation: together.

“Here’s what I’m thinking ...”

The decision has been made: we’re going back to Whitehall tomorrow.

“Who do you think is scarier?” Chas asks, eating chips from a bag as he sits in his usual spot on the windowsill. What’s not usual is that the window is closed and he’s not smoking. I’ll celebrate that latter victory, but it still disturbs me to see him that close to the glass. What if Amin Volli is sneaking around out there? “The Seattle Slayer or the students at Whitehall?”

“Easy answer,” Parrish replies, lying on his back on his bed and staring up at the ceiling. I’m not sure how we all migrated in here again when my room is also an option. I’m starting to think it’s because we’re all addicted to the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling. “Whitehall students.”

“I can’t believe they cut your clothes off,” Maxie says, sitting on the floor with GG in her arms. All the lights are off, but there’s enough of a glow from outside for me to see the rabbit’s white fur and my sister’s vague outline. “It was that Veronica girl, right? The few weeks she was staying here, I struggled a bit with her personality. RIP, I guess.”

“She was challenging,” I admit, lying opposite Parrish on the bed, looking at the stars and reveling in the new perspective. “But she didn’t deserve what happened to her.”

“You’re giving her far too much credit. If she’d ever believed that killing you would’ve granted her some boon in return, she’d have done it.” X is sitting on the floor beside me. I can’t resist reaching a hand out and digging my fingers into his thick hair. “I’m not saying she deserved her death, I’m just saying don’t turn her into a saint now that she’s gone.”

There’s a long stretch of silence where nobody talks. I’m a little nervous about tomorrow—understandably so—but I think I’m the least nervous person in the family. Everyone’s worried about what’s going to happen to me, and I don’t blame them.

I’m risking my life tomorrow, but at least I’ve got some assurances: Takahashi will be watching. The worst Justin could do is shoot me right there in front of the school, and at least he’d be arrested and the world would finally know who he is. But I don’t think he’ll do that. He’s not somebody who gives up easily. I imagine that he’ll fight and plan and scheme until his

dying breath.

In that regard, we're similar.

It's one of a few good traits I'll willingly accept from him.

"Shall we change into pj's?" I ask Maxine, reluctantly untangling my fingers from X's hair.

"I feel like you need an escort," X adds, but Maxine hands him the bunny instead.

"Don't perv on my sister in front of me please." She transfers the rabbit and then helps me up off the floor, leading me out of the room as Parrish swings his feet off the bed with the intention of following us. Maxine points at him. "We'll grab our pajamas and change in your bathroom. Y'all can relax for a minute."

"Leave the door cracked," Chasm calls out as Maxie drags me into the hallway, "both doors!"

"Dating three people?" she asks as soon as we're in my room with the door mostly closed. "I couldn't handle it." She shakes her head as she opens the top drawer of my dresser, digging around for pajamas for both me and her. Poor Maxie didn't bring much clothing with her. And now, anything that was left at the house in New York—

I shove the thought from my mind. It makes my heart hurt to think of all the family heirlooms that were lost, the furniture that my grandmother made destroyed, that last scrap of *home* drifting away like ash. My breath catches and I reach up to swipe my arm over my eyes.

My sister notices—she always notices—and pauses, turning around to open her arms to me. I fall into them, closing my eyes as she wraps me up and rocks me. With all the mother figures I have running around—Tess and Saffron and Carmen—Maxine is the one who brings me the most comfort.

We stand in silence for several moments, and then the guilt creeps up as it always does.

"Did you really love him?" I whisper, because she's never given me a real answer to this question. For a while, we stand there in delicate quietude, so long that one of the guys—not sure which—creeps into the hall to check on us before heading back to Parrish's room.

"I did," she admits, but when I go to pull away, Maxine won't allow it. "I really, really liked XY, but you know what? He didn't like me in the same way. With or without your relationship, it would've ended up the same."

I draw back from her, looking up at her face.

“How do I know you’re telling me the truth?” I quip, but I’m not angry with her for lying to me. Or giving me a pinky promise that wasn’t real. Like X, my sister is willing to do questionable things if she believes her course is righteous.

“Mm.” Maxine thinks on that for a second, tapping her finger against her lips in thought. “Well, you know me. I don’t like guys who don’t like my family. We never even made it around to kissing because a week into dating, he made a comment about Saffron that I didn’t like. We argued about it, and then we decided to take things slow after that.” She shrugs. “I deserve to be with someone who likes me and wants me even if there are other options out there. I deserve to be with someone who would choose me first. If he wanted to, he would.”

“Fair point.” I exhale, releasing the last of my guilt. Well, okay, so I *tell* myself that I’m releasing the last of my guilt with that exhale, but that isn’t necessarily true. I’m sure I’ll feel guilty for a while, but as long as we survive to see the end of this, I can handle that. “Grandpa hates X now though.”

Maxine chuckles, reaching out to rub my hair.

“Yeah, well, you’re going to have to work that one out on your own. I tried to explain X’s motivations—and that I was complicit in them—but you know how he is.”

The door swings inward and there’s X, standing there with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Your grandfather isn’t a very forgiving man, is he?” he asks, and I shrug.

“Not really. It may take years for him to forgive you. Think you can handle that?”

Maxx smiles at me, stepping into the room and pulling me into his arms. My sister makes a sound of irritation and retreats into the hall, giving us a quiet moment to be alone. Ish. Everything in this house is ‘alone-ish’ at this point. One can never be too careful with the Seattle Slayer mucking about.

“You want me around for years?” X asks with a sweet darkness in his voice, one that promises romance but promises other things, too.

“Until I breathe my last,” I reply easily.

At the time, I had no idea how soon that moment would come.

If I had, I’ve have agreed to the *years* part of it.

The time we had left was nowhere near enough.



CHAPTER 32

The sunshine is bright the following morning, a creamy butter color that sweeps over the towering walls of Whitehall, highlighting the white gravel loop drive and the black sports car parked alongside it. I walk out the side door of the building with my hand to my brow, shading my eyes.

I'm wearing a wire. The FBI is on campus. The boys are here. Everything is going to be okay.

It's easy to tell myself those things. It's harder to believe them with Justin standing right there in front of me. Our eyes meet from across the length of the courtyard and every instinct I have tells me that I need to run *right the fuck now*. I breathe the emotion in and hold it there, taking a few steps forward before I exhale.

He looks like a hair-trigger to me, like the slightest brush of the wind will set off the trap.

My right hand drops to my skirts, fisting in the pleats as I close the distance between us. I lower my left hand from my eyes as I approach the Seattle Slayer. He could be any other man right now, leaned up against the side of his car and polished like a gem in his bespoke suit.

He doesn't seem surprised to find me here, closing his eyes and looking up in the direction of the sun as if basking his face. Underneath such a pretty picture, there's so much barely contained violence. The boys must smell it, too, because they stay close to me, one on either side and one behind.

“Hello, Princess,” Justin purrs, turning back to me and opening those brilliant blue eyes of his. He looks like a supermodel right now, like an actor in a blockbuster movie. It’s truly a difficult thing to remember that he pulled the trigger on me—six times over. Six times that he convinced me that I was going to die.

“Hello, Justin.” That bothers him, how flippant I’m being, that I’ve called him by his name. “I have school today.”

“You decided to come back, did you?” he asks, smiling at me and cocking his head to one side. “That was very brave of you; if I were you, I’d have never come back.” He laughs then and slicks his hair back with his hand. “My father woulda killed me for skipping class.” He leans in toward me and I realize how lucky I am to have never met the grandfather on this side of the family. Our noses are practically touching, and it’s Maxx who steps forward and snatches Justin by the bicep, shoving him back into the car.

Uhh.

“Keep your fucking hands off of her,” X says, his face and voice entirely deadpan. I realize that he’ll kill Justin now, in front of the FBI and everything, if he thinks he can get away with it. The way Justin looks at him—casually neutral at first but with a gently blooming smile—I can sense that he’s plotting in his head.

“My father—your grandfather—he made me shoot my own dog when I missed curfew by a single minute. He’d beat me if I didn’t clean my room to his standards. If I took too long in the shower. If I mouthed off the way you do. You don’t know how goddamn *good* you’ve got it.” Justin runs his hand over the lower half of his face as we stare one another down.

Our entire dynamic has changed.

“I’m not afraid of you anymore,” I tell him, and he laughs. He fucking loves that. Justin howls like I’ve told an incredible joke, like *I* am crazy and he’s the only sane person standing here.

“That’s good then, seeing as I’ve gone out of my way to correct your hillbilly upbringing. But you know what they say? It takes nature *and* nurture—seems like my genes can only help so much.” He looks me over with a shake of his head as I unbutton my blazer, blatantly revealing the tape recorder stuck in my inner pocket. The mic and cam Agent Takahashi fixed me up with are too small to see unless you’re really looking. Doesn’t matter. Justin can hack the whole world: he’ll know what I’m recording.

“The FBI are watching me today. You know that, right? They’re watching you, too.” I rebutton my jacket, crossing my arms as Justin’s eyes swing over to Parrish. He looks at him with the same hunger I’ve seen when he mentions Saffron. I realize that of all the possible targets in Justin’s life, the son of his ex-wife, the son of the man she cheated on him with, the boy I love, his death would bring maximum suffering.

Chasm notices me noticing Justin, and we exchange a long, understanding look. If Justin is going after someone today, it’ll be Parrish over me.

“We’ll go out to lunch after class today.” Justin checks his watch, like he’s bored. “That’s it. Just a lunch date.” He smiles and looks up at me, lifting a brow. “You can bring your boyfriends, too. I’m sure they’d love to hear how Seamus and Laurent are doing—and that they’re both very much looking forward to the wedding.”

I can feel Chasm stiffen up on my right, but it’s Maxx that stands between me and Justin, *Parrish* and Justin.

“Leave now. We’re not meeting you for fucking *anything*.”

“If you want me to drop my charges against Tess for violating the custody agreement, you will. Not ... that it’s looking great for her since she tried to shoot me in a crowded room.” Justin shrugs. “Make your own choices then.”

“We’ll go to lunch,” I agree, moving to X’s side. “But you have to let the custody thing go. Do you understand me, Justin? I’m not going to allow you to treat me or anyone I love like shit ever again. You will not hit me. You won’t call me names. You won’t insult me anymore. Otherwise, I’m not going to lunch, and this is the end of all communication between you and me.” I stare him in the eyes, daring him to challenge me here and now when he knows the authorities are watching. *How close are you to breaking? And if you do break, shoot me first. That’s all I ask: just shoot me first.*

“Here’s the name of the restaurant; you can meet me there.” He reaches into his pocket and withdraws a piece of paper. So ... this plan is not an accidental one. He knew in advance he was going to do this. “See you after school, sweetheart!” Justin throws up a hand in a wave, climbs in the car, and takes off.

What the hell is he up to? This behavior is not normal for my father. It’s like he’s reverted to the schmoozy bastard he was on day one. Back then, he’d allow me to get away with a snarky comment, a clever remark, outright defiance even. Him being calm ... not necessarily a good thing.

“What just happened there?” Parrish asks, but I haven’t decided yet. Well, I haven’t decided anything except that it spells eventual disaster. A *nice* Justin? That’s dark satire.

“What do you mean *what just happened?*” Chas scoffs and shakes his head, reaching up to brush some hair from his forehead. He smiles wryly as he stares at the ground, wheels in his brain turning. “We’re being played even as we’re playing Justin. What’s new?” He turns away and heads for the building, holding open the doors and gesturing for the rest of us to follow him in.

I hesitate and pretend it’s because I’m watching Justin’s Lexus make its way through the gate. My reluctance to enter Whitehall has *nothing* to do with the wary stares of the other students. No way. We didn’t see a ton of people between the parking garage and this door, but word spreads quick here.

There *will* be an audience.

I unfold the paper schedule I got from the office—no phone, remember?—and stare at the name *Amin Volli* next to my first period *Software Tools: App Development 2* class. It’s crossed out and another name is written in its place.

Right. Amin. He could be on campus, watching the FBI watch us. The idea freaks me out so much that I stuff the crumpled schedule into my pocket and put the thought as far from my mind as possible. I throw my shoulders back and lift my chin, feigning confidence that I’m only half sure that I deserve to have. Maxx is watching me, and when he sees that I’m fortifying myself, he gives me a cocky smile and a slow wink.

“You’ve got me as a bodyguard. Nobody will fuck with you.”

“After seeing you come at me the way you did? Yeah, I don’t blame them.” I toss what little hair I have left and head for the door, pausing just inside the grand hall and allowing my eyes to adjust to the change in light. It’s bright outside, but it’s substantially muted inside these stone walls.

Parrish is in front of me, but he hasn’t moved very far. I hear Chas offer a sharp whistle of surprise from behind me.

“Shit.” His voice has this darkness to it that solidifies me. He’ll beat the crap out of whoever he has to in order to keep the peace here. But Chas? He’s got enough followers that I don’t think violence will be necessary. “They look like an angry mob, don’t they?”

“Dakota.” I look up to see Danyella waiting for me in the center of the

hallway. Behind her, it seems the entirety of Whitehall has turned out to witness our return to the castle. There are students from every year, some of whom I know, most of whom I don't. They are all staring at us.

Staring at us.

It's creepy.

"My grandmother hasn't disinherited me yet," Parrish drawls, as if in response to their silent indictment. He cocks his head at them, stuffs his right hand into his blazer pocket, and then shrugs. He starts off down the hallway in a confident, easy gait, pausing at the wall of students near the front of the group. "I'm a fucking Vanguard. *Move.*"

Parrish waits. He'll stand there as long as it takes. Antonio Rossi is at the front of the horde, face purpled with rage. The last time he saw us all together, we were at the hunt where his father died. If he has any clue as to what's going on in the investigation, I can understand why he'd look at us like that.

"I never asked for the criteria that defines success at this school." Parrish lifts up a hand and starts to raise fingers as he counts off Whitehall's favorite attributes. "Money, looks, power, grades." He flicks Antonio in the face, and it takes Gavin and a few other guys to hold him back. "Check, check, check, check. I win."

"I'm going to fucking kill you!" Antonio is screaming, likely unaware that the FBI is recording his outburst. Philippa stands nearby, fussing with her skirt and doing her best to appear agitated. I can see in her eyes that she likes the drama. She doesn't miss Veronica; she happily stole her spot on the popularity ladder. "You were there when my dad was murdered." Antonio tears from his friends' grips, but he doesn't come at Parrish again. "You know more than you're saying. I'm sure of that. As soon as I get the proof, I'm going to rip you a new asshole—literally."

"Keep making threats today, Rossi," Parrish continues as Chasm scoots past me to back up his friend. X stays behind with Danyella and me, content to blend into the shadows so that he doesn't end up getting tossed out by Ms. Miyamoto. Doubtful that she'll be giving him anymore visitor passes. "Really. Threaten my life as many times as you want today. Show the world your true self when it matters."

Antonio is still ranting and raving when the crowd separates and Parrish is allowed to walk through unmolested. Nobody else comes at him. He pauses a

few feet later to look at us over his shoulder.

“Well?” he queries as Chasm comes up even with Antonio and the two of them stare at one another, the toes of their shoes nearly touching. They’re *this* close to a physical fight.

“Looking forward to your *wedding*, McKenna,” Antonio growls at him, and then the agitated boy storms off with his cloud of dickhead friends. Philippa watches me for a minute, but then she follows after him. She can’t know that I had anything to do with Veronica’s disappearance. Yet. I don’t think anyone knows about that *yet*.

“If you tell anyone I’m here, I’ll kick your ass,” X says to the silent crowd, strolling past me and Chas to join Parrish. Ah. Apparently he’s not *that* worried about being caught.

“Our wedding?” Chasm asks quietly, turning around to look at me. His eyes are full of questions, but we can’t talk about any of that here. Tenderness is a weakness to be exploited at Whitehall Prep. Also, the FBI is listening. Also, Justin. Not a great place for a heart-to-heart.

“We’ve all gotten the invitations,” Danyella whispers from beside me. When I turn a disturbed look on her, she coughs into her hand awkwardly. “I’m sorry. Is this a bad time? If you two need space to—”

“Can I see the invitation?” I ask, unease poking holes in my brief spree of confidence. I’m a sieve of self-assurance.

She nods and reaches into her book bag, pulling out a lovely, scented card with a dead butterfly pinned to the handmade paper. Danyella has taken care to put it in a small, plastic pencil box to preserve its wings. It’s so ... *ehhhh* that I don’t touch it. Chas intervenes before I can gather the courage to do so.

“This is, like, right around the corner,” he says under his breath, studying the fine calligraphy—written by hand—that lists a date, time, and location (the estate Justin showed us before) for the event. Everything about this is calculated. But for what? Does Justin truly believe we’d show up to a wedding?

I can see him planning one with the express purpose of killing the bride and groom.

We’ll ... talk about this later. I stuff the invitation back into the pencil box and tuck it into my own bag. Danyella is smart enough to know there’s something nefarious going on, but also that we can’t discuss it here. She smiles at me instead.

“I’m glad you’re back.” She takes my arm and leads me down the hallway with Chas taking up the rear. He’s concerned about the invitation, too, but there’s nothing we can do now. If we don’t show up, there is no wedding and nothing to worry about.

“How’s Lumen?” I ask, focusing on Danyella and ignoring the prying eyes of Medina’s elite youth. She’s staring at the floor and holding her book bag in two hands in front of her. I haven’t heard anything from either girl since we parted ways after the Hearst house. Mostly because my phone has been in airplane mode for two weeks.

Danyella tilts her head slightly to look back at me, using two fingers to adjust her white glasses with the pink *pi* signs all over them. Yes, like the symbol for the number three-point-one-four. Like geek glasses. I love them.

“Mm. She hasn’t heard anything about her parents, but she also hasn’t heard anything *from* her parents.” Danyella drops her voice as we clear the crowd, cupping a hand to her mouth as she leans in toward me. “We told Agent Takahashi everything—and I mean *everything*. The body that we buried ... the sex offender ... he wasn’t where we left him.” She drops her hand and looks forward again as I raise both brows at that.

Did Justin have Amin Volli or someone else move the body? Why? Certainly not to protect Lumen and Danyella. To make us all seem crazy? To throw doubt on our story? That’s the only reasonable conclusion I can come to.

“Is she—” I start, but then Lumen appears in one of the classroom doors, looking surprised to see me. She’s so surprised that it takes her several blinks to shape her expression into one of proper disdain.

“Don’t even start with us today,” Chas warns her, inserting himself partially between Lumen and me. I’m not worried about her. I also know how weak she is. I stand there and wait for her to deliver on that.

“Start with you? I don’t want *anything* to do with you.” Lumen shoves past Chasm, and I watch his remarkable self-control as he lets her hit him and doesn’t retaliate. She doesn’t look at me or Danyella as she sprints past, blond hair flowing behind her. Her eyes are windows to her withered soul. I only catch a glimpse of them, but it’s enough to see that.

Her parents are dead, aren’t they? I’m sure that they are. She seems to know it, too.

I feel nothing but sympathy at this point for Lumen.

“Don’t let her get to you; she won’t talk to me on campus either and we’re living together.” Danyella rolls her eyes and points to the nearest classroom door. “This is me. What’s your first period destination?” I look back at the schedule, at my first class of the day. It’s one I don’t share with either of the boys.

“I’ll be right across the hall,” Chas reassures me as X takes up a relaxed position in a nook next to a water fountain. He smiles darkly at me from down the hallway, and I relax a little. Parrish is waiting outside his classroom, watching to make sure I get safely to my own class first.

“Looks like we’ll be in this one together,” I tell Danyella with a pained smile.

I fully expect to be murdered during the school day.

Somehow, we all survive to see a late lunch with a serial killer.

If I’d thought life at Whitehall was hellish before, this establishment of higher learning has turned into absolute madness. Did I say I enjoyed high stakes games before? Like, say, running from class to class like I’m outrunning a zombie horde? I lied.

“Barely a gamer girl,” I puff, bent over beside Chasm’s locker. He has a small bubble around him of people who are loyal and will probably always remain loyal. Kwang-seon McKenna told me that he wanted to forge connections by being nice. Seems like it worked.

“Barely? You mean in every cell.” He reaches out to ruffle my hair. “You’ve got a ‘GG’ inside every chromosome, right next to the ‘XX’.” He smiles at me, but it doesn’t last. Because it’s the end of the day. Because we’re going to lunch with Justin. “You do realize that he might have shooters on the roof? That he might have the waitstaff poison any food we order? That he might just snap and throw the sharp edge of a knife to your throat?”

I stand up straight, feigning dignity. Hard to do with bits of hair stuck to my forehead. Danyella told me that the new haircut made me look fresh and young, which I guess is a good thing. I’m convinced that my soul is over a million years old and currently fossilized.

“If I am still a gamer girl, then I guess I’m a Jurassic era fossil, too,” I grumble, and now both of Chas’ brows are way, way up and he’s smiling

adorably at me, like I'm the most precious creature he's ever seen. *He's the most precious creature I've ever seen so ...* "Likewise," I add, just to amp up the weirdness.

"Stop being so damn cute; it's distracting."

"Who's being cute?" X asks, appearing behind me and placing a huge hand on my shoulder before I even realize he's there. My entire body shivers violently as unwanted hormones pump through my blood. Being surrounded by three attractive, wonderful humans at all times can sure put a strain on one's libido.

I snort at my own inner monologue and realize that maybe, just maybe, I'm slowly losing my mind to stress.

"The person who's being cute," Parrish continues, adopting this co-flirting technique that the boys seem to be working slowly to perfect, "that can't possibly be you, can it?" He comes around on my left and looks me up and down, evaluating me the way he did when we first met. Only this time, he does absolutely nothing to hide his approval.

"No, of course not," X continues, pulling me close and curling around me. It seems like an adorable gesture at first—and it is—but then I realize that he's also hiding from a passing administrator. I turn around in his arms, awestruck as always by his good looks. They seem amplified somehow by the school uniform. Does that make me a perv that I find him attractive in a uniform he outgrew two years ago? Or is it okay because I'm also in school? *Gah, I don't have the time or leisure to analyze this growing fetish!* "You look constipated. That's not so cute."

"I do not look constipated!" I choke out, aghast, rearing back to stare at him with stark betrayal in my gaze. "How dare you, Maxim Wright."

He reaches out like a ninja, covering my mouth with his hand.

"Shh. I'm undercover, remember? While I'm here, you can just call me Mad Max." He grins, but the movie reference is lost on me because I haven't seen any of the *Mad Max* movies. He can tell, I'm sure. "Kota, *how?* We're watching those together once we're settled and in love and not being hunted by serial killers."

"Yeah, so, about that," Chasm begins, drawing attention back to himself and the practical nature of the situation. He's absently tugging at the plug in his right earlobe. "Are we really going to this lunch date? If so, we need to inform Agent Takahashi. If so, then we need to inform *Tess*, and I'm not

going to be the one to field that headache.”

“I’ll do it,” Parrish declares, like it’s no big deal to stand up to the mighty Tess Vanguard. He slips a phone from his pocket that I wasn’t aware he had. I squint suspiciously at him. “What? If the Seattle Slayer hacks my phone while the FBI is watching, yay for us. More evidence.” He lifts an inked finger to indicate the camera in the corner just above us. “He’s got plenty of eyes here anyway. What difference does this make? I’m calling Mom.”

“Before you do that ...” Chasm reaches out for the phone, does a quick search for restaurants, and picks one seemingly at random. He takes the address and then texts it to Justin’s real number (ya know, as opposed to the one he uses when Mr. Volli is sending threatening videos my way). “There. No way in fucking hell we’re going to the restaurant he’s picked out in advance.”

A reply comes back almost instantly—but it’s not what I expected.

Sounds lovely, sweetheart. See you there.

That’s it. No argument. No threats. No subtle digs at my hair color. He didn’t act like he even *noticed* that I’d dyed my hair. Bad sign right there. You bet your ass he noticed. Probably made his murder fingers twitchy. *Must slaughter rebellious daughter.*

“He’s on his best behavior, isn’t he?” X asks dryly as Parrish takes the phone back. He’s in the process of calling Tess when Agent Takahashi appears in the hallway, hands in her pockets, walking confidently toward us. Sam Something is by her side.

They walk right up to us and pause.

“Going to lunch with the killer?” she asks, looking me in the eyes. “Why?”

“Because we need a resolution, however that may come.” I shrug my shoulders. I had a lot of respect for Agent Takahashi before, but I’m not sure that I have much left now. What use is an FBI agent that can’t save me from a serial killer? Sorry if I sound a tad bitter, but that’s how I feel.

In games, there’s usually a clear bad guy and a clear good guy.

In real life? Everything is obscured. Everything is covered with a thin veil of fog. Morality is not so cut-and-dried.

Itsumi Takahashi isn’t a hero on a white horse riding in to save me; she’s just a person.

“You’ll be watching?” Chasm clarifies, and she nods. Sam, on the other hand, gives me a thumbs up and a wink, and I decide he isn’t as boring as I

first thought he was. He's gutsier than his partner. I like him. Still miss Agent Murphy though. I bet if I'd told her all about Justin, she would've nailed his balls to the wall (literally).

Probably why he had her killed, huh?

"We'll be watching, but it does hurt your case to willingly go out to eat with a man you claim is torturing you." Typical Takahashi. If she wasn't so dry and practical, I might think she was one of Justin's pawns.

"If they're being threatened, it doesn't," Sam offers, looking at his partner. The two of them exchange a long, silent stare that I can't even begin to comprehend. Takahashi sighs.

"I know that, but I'm telling you how this looks to a jury." She turns back to me with her lips pressed flat, a specter haunting her dark eyes. She mentioned her husband, and how something went wrong in the past, and I get that she's really, truly trying to help here, but it's hard to remember that at times. "Please call your mother."

Itsumi turns and walks away. Sam hesitates briefly, offering a smile of encouragement before he goes.

"She's cautious, but it's for a good reason. Her only goal is to keep you kids safe." An expression of regret passes over Sam's face, and I wonder if he isn't thinking about Agent Murphy. "Can you show me the restaurant that you're headed to?" Parrish lifts the phone screen up for Sam's perusal and he nods. "See you all there. I'll be the one enjoying a mustard sandwich with a side of pastrami." He snorts at his own lame joke, waves at us, and then reforms into Takahashi's shadow.

You think he has a crush on her? Maybe? They'd make a cute couple.

"Guess it's now or never," Parrish grumbles, hitting call on Tess' number. She answers within *seconds* which proves she's been waiting for this phone call all along. "Everything's okay." A pause. "He was here this morning; we're going to lunch with him."

Seems both of my parents are in the mood to offer surprises today. Tess and Parrish only speak for a few minutes, but even if I can't hear both sides of the conversation, it doesn't seem to be going in a poor direction. Eventually, Parrish hands the phone out to me, and I take it.

"Hello?" I ask tentatively, hoping Tess doesn't try to discourage me from doing this. It occurs to me just before she speaks that we should've set up a safety word in person. What if Justin makes an AI model based on Tess'

voice, and I think that I'm talking to her, but I'm not—

Ugh. Paranoia is exhausting AF.

“I love you; I just wanted you to know that,” she tells me, her voice resigned. Letting us handle things isn't Tess' style. She wants to step up and control the entire scenario, I know that. This is a lot for her. Unfortunately, one of the conditions of her bail is that she doesn't get within a hundred yards of the school. “Agent Takahashi will be right there if you need anything. Don't be afraid to break rules or run or hurt him. Whatever you need to do, don't let him intimidate or bully you.”

“I understand,” I agree, taking a deep breath. “And I love you, too.” We hang up and I pass the phone back to Parrish, our fingers brushing, heat racing up my arm to set my heart on fire. “You guys ready?”

“Ready when you are,” Maxx says, turning and holding out a hand to indicate the hall. It's mostly empty now. Even the thought of bullying or intimidating us—for being related to the Seattle Slayer, I guess?—isn't enough to entice students to stay late at the end of the day. They're still highschoolers, after all.

“Ready is a subjective term.” Chasm shakes his head, tucks his hands into his pockets, and starts down the hallway first.

Off we go.

Today is a turning point.

Either things will get much better after this or ... they'll end.

Violently and with impossible permanence.

The restaurant Chas chose at random is a sandwich place by the water with its own dock. Tables are spread out at equal intervals down the length of it, sailboats and small yachts parked nearby. The water sloshes against their sides, offering a melodic backdrop to the sunny September afternoon. Fall is on the cusp of taking over, but it's still pleasant out, and it's still the Pacific Northwest so most of the trees are evergreens.

I miss New York state fiercely in that moment, the way the hills change color like a benign forest fire spreading across the landscape. I miss going to Stockbridge in Massachusetts; I miss the pumpkin show at the Naumkeag historical house; I miss traveling to Salem to watch outdoor screenings of

Hocus Pocus.

I miss the house that Justin burned to the fucking ground.

He's already there when we arrive, waiting at the host stand with his arms crossed. He smiles at us when we walk in, and I get the chills. If brown recluse spiders could smile, they'd smile like this. If pit vipers could smile, they'd smile like this. If ticks could smile, well, this would be the smile of a bloodsucking tick with Lyme disease.

"Ah, Princess, there you are." He comes over to us like he might touch my hair or kiss my cheek, but I pull back into the safety of the boys, all three of them surrounding me protectively. Justin frowns slightly and then shrugs, turning a bright smile on the hostess. "*Daseot myeong ieyo,*" he says in Korean. "Five people, please." Uhhhhh. Didn't expect that. "I speak four languages fluently," Justin explains as we all stare at him with wide eyes. "I was in South Korea when Seamus met Ji-hyun, you know." My father looks at Chasm when he says that, referencing the mother that he never met. "Anyway, I suppose that makes me a polyglot?" He looks up at the ceiling, asking it like it's a question. And then he laughs. "I guess that also means I speak more languages than any of you." Justin's voice drops a dangerous octave, and he smiles again. Another tick smile. A flea smile. A monster smile. "And my ignorant daughter who only speaks one. How shameful is that?"

I grit my teeth, but I ignore the slight. Chasm *stares* at Justin in a way that makes me consider that perhaps Maxx isn't the only one contemplating murder today. How dare Justin bring up not only Chas' mom but also his dad? Not only is the poor guy missing, but he's missing because of Justin. There's no room for doubt about that.

The hostess finds us a spot on her iPad and grabs a stack of menus, offering Justin a flirtatious smile as she leads us past the outdoor host stand and down the length of the dock. We're seated at the last table, closest to the water. Justin sits more or less across from us while the four of us stay pressed together on the opposite side.

"Where's my dad?" Chasm asks, and I struggle not to think about the smug expression on Raúl's face when he told me that the cabin burned down.

"And mine," Maxx adds, exhaling heavily and crossing his arms. "I'm sure you've killed them both, but we had to ask."

Justin snorts at that, looking up at the waitress when she approaches to take

our drink order. She seems infatuated with his blue-eyed, dark-haired countenance, biting her lip as she waits for Justin to choose from a list of specialty cocktails. When he selects one, she asks for his ID which makes me roll my eyes so hard that my head spins.

“Sorry, it’s just ... you look so young,” she says as he offers a charming laugh.

“Believe it or not, this is my beautiful daughter,” he tells her, gesturing my way. I pretend not to get the chills when I hear that statement, looking away as the boys order for themselves (and for me).

“Watch her ask for his number,” Chasm murmurs as the waitress finally leaves and Justin settles back in his chair, tilting his head so that the sun falls across his face. He looks relatively normal right now, peaceful, but those dream-tastic fantasy visions I used to have of him realizing the error of his ways and reverting to a semi-normal human/father figure have been thoroughly dashed.

One does not recover from playing a forced game of Russian roulette.

“Where are Laurent and Seamus?” Maxx repeats as I force myself to keep my eyes on Justin. Somehow, I wish he’d brought Delphine. I don’t know why. It’s clear I can’t trust her, but I also can’t stop thinking about those notes either.

“They’ll be at the wedding,” Justin repeats, opening his eyes and dropping his chin back down. Shadows from the umbrella fall across his face as he smiles. The air smells like saltwater and violence. Swear to God.

“Right. The wedding.” I have my bag with me, so I lean down and extract the pencil box for dramatic effect. I place it on the table, but I don’t open it. “Do you want to explain this?”

Justin seems to find that funny, using a single finger to draw the box closer to him.

“This must be Danyella’s,” he says when he notices that the box is decorated with mathematical equations, like the quadratic formula. “What a clever girl she is. That’s the sort of person you should be making friends with. That is, if you want to have a future that doesn’t include *would you like fries with that.*” He opens the box and takes the invitation into his hand, holding it up by his face. “The butterflies were alive when I sent the courier out with the cards. I suppose if they’re dead, they’re at peace.” I can hear an unsaid *it’s better when they squirm* at the end of that. He tosses the card to

the table and a piece of the butterfly's wing breaks off.

"You've been planning our wedding without us?" Chasm presses, his eyes on the roll of silverware beside him. This wouldn't be the first time someone considered stabbing Justin with a fork. He's hard to kill though. I don't think cutlery is the answer.

"Look." Justin leans forward and slaps his hands on his thighs. He even reaches up to theatrically remove the designer sunglasses resting in his lush hair. I hate the way it shines, as if he's a special person worth noticing. I know that's how other people perceive him; he's got that aura. "I'm not going to fight you on the custody thing, okay? You don't want to live with your old man? I'm not going to make you." He puts a hand to his chest, as if this is a genuine offer. I hate him for playing this part for the cameras, for the FBI. Hate it, hate it, hate it.

"Oh? Somehow I don't buy that," Parrish interjects, and the rest of us cringe collectively. I shoot him a sideways look that he ignores, one that says, *shut the fuck up, he totally wants to kill you!* "What's the catch here?"

Justin sighs, like this has become tiresome for him.

"Tess tried to kill me. Paul is under suspicion of being a *serial killer*. And I'm the bad guy here?" Justin splays his fingers on his chest, like he can't fathom why that might be. "Parental alienation is a crime, you know. I see that she's done her utmost to turn you against me."

"Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?" I ask, but I have my own suspicions. Look up the patterns of most domestic abusers: when the control starts to slip, they revert to the love-bombing stage. For a little while, anyway. "What do you want?"

"Well," he begins, pausing dramatically when the waitress returns with our drinks. The boys ordered me an iced green tea with honey which is more delicious than it ought to be. Could still be poisoned sure, but I doubt it. Chas picked this place last minute, the FBI is here, and if Justin hurts us now, he won't get a chance to go after either Saffron or Tess. That revenge means far too much to him. "Thank you—Shari Ann, was it? Thank you, Shari Ann. We need a few more minutes to discuss the menu." He smiles tightly at her, and she leaves, still biting her lip.

I want to scream.

"Did the AI chatbot come up with the tortured butterflies?" Chasm challenges, and now he's looking right at Justin. "Or were you lying when

you said you were letting AI plan the wedding. Sure seems like the planning thus far has been deeply personal. Why are you so intent on seeing us married?”

“So many questions.” Justin picks up his cocktail and admires the color of it, the decorative edible flowers perched beside the straw, the sugar rim. He takes a dramatic sip and sighs, setting the drink aside. “It feels like I’m being interrogated here. Is it wrong for a father to plan his daughter’s wedding?”

“When she’s in high school, it is.” I hold his gaze when he turns to me, but I can’t glean anything from the expression on his face. “When she never asked to be married, it is.”

“Never asked? Mia, I’m not the one that proposed. I’m not the one that said *yes* in front of our friends and family.” Justin sets his drink down and quirks a smile. “All I’ve ever done is try my best to parent you.”

“Jesus.” Maxx turns to the side with a derisive scoff as I sit there, holding my father’s stare. *Please don’t punch him today, XY.* He grips his leg with his left hand, like he’s reliving what happened the night of the hunt. Justin absolutely *loves* that, quirking a smile that cuts me right to the core.

“It’s clear to me now that you have no interest in following in Daddy’s footsteps.” Don’t you love how he says the most innocuous things, but they come out like a direct threat to my personal safety and wellbeing? Yeah, me too. “But I would like to see your marriage to Kwang-seon.” He holds up a hand, as if to stifle any incoming protests. “I know, I know. Marriage licenses in Washington state aren’t granted to anyone under seventeen without special circumstances.” Justin reaches into his jacket and pulls out a small stack of papers, tossing them onto the table. “I spoke to a friend of mine and explained your ... circumstances. He’s willing to sign off on the petition to marry.”

“What circumstances?” I ask as Chas and I exchange a look. We turn back to Justin together, and I find myself absently running my thumb over the diamond engagement ring.

“Do you really want me to say it here?” Justin asks, like he pities me. Like I am something to *be* pitied. It puts me into a rage that I don’t dare show. Any reaction on my part simply feeds the monster. “In front of your other boyfriends?” Another long pause. “You were pregnant with Kwang-seon’s child before you miscarried. Nothing to be ashamed of.”

My mouth drops open because, uh, that’s not even a remotely true

statement. I start to tell him so as quickly as I can, to refute that lie before Parrish's or Maxx's stares get any more intense. Before Agent Takahashi or Sam Something believes that's a true statement. He interrupts me because, well, that's just who Justin Prior is. A jerk. A liar. A killer.

"Look, all I'm asking is for the wedding to carry on as planned." He leans toward me, lowering his voice to a whisper, as if he isn't perfectly aware that he's being watched and listened to. He knows it. This is live performance art. "Once you and Kwang-seon are married, he'll automatically qualify to receive the benefits of the trust that Seamus set up. You'll have plenty of money and—better yet—a minority stake in Milk Carton. That's what I'm interested in. Transfer that portion of the company to me—I'll even pay for it—and then, unfortunately, we'll have to say goodbye to one another."

"Say goodbye?" I ask, voice dripping with skepticism. Great. Now Justin's faking a lost pregnancy so he can marry me off at sixteen. Didn't think he could get any creepier, did ya?

"I'll be living in Beijing for a couple of years to set up the Chinese branch of Milk Carton. Doesn't that sound nice? International success for my little app." He checks his watch, like he doesn't already know today's date. "Speaking of, the public launch of Milk Carton is the same date as your wedding, coincidentally. You don't want to waste that beautiful dress, do you?"

"You're saying that if we attend the wedding," Chasm infers softly, "that our fathers will be there?"

Justin shrugs.

"I can't compel them to attend, but I'm sure that Seamus wouldn't miss it for the world. Laurent likely wouldn't pass up a chance to visit his son, his daughter, his husband." Justin pauses at the waitress' approach.

I have yet to even glance at the menu, but Parrish orders for me yet again. As predicted, the waitress does offer Justin her phone number and he gives her a softly admonishing look before pointing at his ring finger.

"Sorry, but I'm married and I'm a very faithful and loving man." He turns back to me as she walks away, the expression on his face shifting slightly. "Unlike your mother and ol' P-P-Paulie." He seems to find himself absurdly amusing.

"You're saying that if we go through with the wedding, if we give you Chasm's share of the company—"

He interrupts me yet again. My eye twitches in annoyance.

“*Sell* me his share, yes,” Justin corrects, but I ignore him.

“You’re saying that if we do that, we’ll get to see Seamus and Laurent, and that you’ll move to Beijing without forcing me to come with you?” I state that as clearly as I can, trying to decide where the trick is here. There’s *got* to be a trick. I don’t buy any of this for a second. But at the same time, getting Maxx and Chasm their fathers back, that’s the most important thing here.

Bonus points for this: if Chasm and I get married, it’s possible for us to petition for emancipation.

No more worrying about custody or parenting time. I can even change my name back.

“That’s what I’m saying.” Justin forces a grin that’s all teeth, like a shark. Maxx shifts like he might throw himself at the guy, knock them both into the waters of Lake Washington and hold Justin there until they both drown. Would not surprise me. “You’ve made life here very uncomfortable for me. An innocent man, beleaguered by the FBI, betrayed by his philandering ex-wife and her butcher of a husband.” Justin snorts. “I mean, not only is he the Seattle Slayer, but did you *see* the nose job he gave to Ellen Fisher?” He clucks his tongue there and then gives me an oddly approving look. “Such a shame, that their boat went down. I hear Veronica’s body was never recovered?” A pause. “From the shipwreck, I mean. Still lost at sea.”

I don’t say anything because I’m not sure what that look means.

“How stupid would we be to believe this is a real offer?” Parrish drawls, using his straw to stir his drink. Ice cubes clink together, adding to the small sounds of boats bobbing on the water, of birds overheard, the distant chatter from another table. “I think your plan is trashed, so you’re running away to another country to regroup.” Parrish lifts a defiant gaze to my father. “What’s to stop you from sending killers after us later?”

“Killers? I’m not the one that’s facing charges for murder or attempted murder. That would be *your* father and stepmother, young man.” Justin taps his knuckles on the tabletop. Referring to Tess as Parrish’s stepmother is an intentional jab. “I’m also not the one that stabbed a knife into my mother’s leg. You’re damn lucky Caroline didn’t press charges.”

Parrish opens his mouth, but no words come out.

We all look pretty guilty when you start tallying our crimes.

“We all know that I’m innocent,” Justin continues smoothly, “but with the

FBI surveilling me, that fact will be proven beyond any reasonable doubt. What can I possibly do to harm you or your little friends? All I've ever wanted to do is help." He finishes his drink and sets it aside, locking me down with that perturbing stare of his. "Marry Chasm, give me full control of the company, and I won't bother you again unless you want me to. Doesn't that seem like a fair trade?" His voice is edged with a desperation that I don't believe, but that I wish I could.

"It's not worth it," Maxx murmurs, but I don't know what choice we have.

Justin is the custodial parent. We all know he's too careful to make a mistake while the FBI is watching. So what do we do? Hide out forever? Wait for him to drag Tess back to court for full custody? Wait for her to be sent to jail? Wait for Seamus' and Laurent's bodies to show up?

There's only one thing that I know for sure: we cannot enter the venue and get married in front of a crowd. If Justin is planning something, that's when it'll happen. At the altar. In front of an audience. Blood on my wedding dress.

"Otherwise, I'll be taking you home with me tonight. The FBI cannot interfere; the police cannot help you. Legally, it's my night." Justin touches his chest again, like he's trying to appeal to my emotions. "But if you agree to the wedding, then I'll let you go back to the murderers' house—murderers' in the possessive plural—and we can meet for lunch two or three times a week until then. What do you say?"

"We pick the restaurants last minute and tell you where to go," I add, and Justin smirks. He selects a ripe strawberry from the side of his plate, eating it slowly, savoring it. It comes across as menacing, like a wolf lapping blood from its slavering maw.

"Anything less than that would be obscene, don't you think? I just want you to feel safe."

"I will call you Justin—not Daddy—and you will call me Dakota. We will attend the wedding, but only on the day of." I smile and open my blazer again so he can see the tape recorder. "I'll be wearing this. I'm sure the FBI will *still* be watching." I don't know if they will in all honesty, but it doesn't hurt to mention it now.

"Fine by me. All I want is a peaceful life and a relationship with my daughters and my beautiful new wife." Justin looks to Parrish, like he's imploring him with his eyes. "Give your mother—your *real* mother, not the cheating whore—a call or stop by sometime. I know she misses you."

“I couldn’t care less if she dropped dead,” Parrish says blithely, reclining back in his chair.

Conversation dies down as our food arrives and Justin picks up his fork.

“Oh, and about that project you were working on for me.” He lifts those wolfish eyes to my face, and I freeze like I’m being hunted. I am. That’s not up for debate. *See, here comes the catch.* “I know I told you that it needed to be done before school started, but I’m willing to extend the deadline. How about you finish that checklist by the wedding and we call it even?” He cocks a brow at me, but we both know exactly what he’s talking about.

“*It’s payback, Princess.*”

He wants me to kill the other kids on the list.

Philippa. Gavin. Antonio.

What happens if we get to the day of the wedding and I haven’t done it? Because I’m not going to. I’m not doing anything he asks of me ever again. Except ... except maybe this wedding. As of right now, I’ll agree to it. If we do show up—to see Seamus and Laurent—then we need to have a plan in place.

I’m not willing to see what plans the Slayer has in store for the ceremony.

“Let’s schedule another lunch date for Friday. How does that sound?” Justin takes a bite of his sandwich, smiling with his lips pressed tight while he chews.

What’s that old adage? If it sounds too good to be true ... we’ve been over this before, right?

Only, of all the options available, this seems like our best bet.

“Sounds like a plan, *Justin.*”

He goes absurdly still when I use his name, but then he takes another bite of his sandwich, and I pick up mine, and we both decide how we want this game to play out.

Parrish calls Tess to update her after lunch, but she’s still in the foyer pacing when we arrive at the ice palace.

“Thank God.” She steeple her hands up by her lips like she’s praying, scanning us with a shrewd eye for blood or bruises. When Tess deems it safe to proceed, she drops her arms and waits to be filled in. I know we have to

tell her what happened—what Justin is offering—but I’m loath to do it. Because I’m afraid she’ll say no. I’m afraid of that even as I know she probably has good reason to say no.

“Let’s ... talk in the living room,” I start, looking to Parrish for support. He holds out his hand to lead the way and we end up spread out across the cream-colored sofas with all their hard lines and edges. They’re far too square at the corners for my liking, but if they make Tess happy then so be it.

Nobody else is around, so I assume Paul is with the kids (and Kimber) while the Banks are probably together somewhere. Maybe in the pool? I would *love* a moment to sit with my feet in the water. Don’t the boys and I deserve that much at least? We faced-off against a mass murderer today and survived. That’s a win in my book.

We take turns recounting the day’s events, each person adding a sentence in here or there.

It takes Tess a few minutes, but she finally lifts her head to look at us.

“I don’t have a lot of time to think about the plea bargain that’s on the table. More than likely, taking it would be my best bet. That means I’m not going to be around much longer.” She pauses, inhaling and closing her eyes as she keeps that anxious breath trapped in her chest. When she exhales and opens her eyes, she’s got her composure wrapped firmly around her. “While I’m certainly not a fan of seeing two children be married”—here she pauses to squint her eyes at me and Chasm—“it’s not a huge concession to make considering the circumstances.” Tess crosses her legs at the knee, resting her hands together in her ‘interview pose’. I’ve seen numerous interviews of this woman, and she always sits just like this. “You’re *sure* you’re not pregnant?” she asks, and I shake my head.

“Never have been, won’t be until I’m at least thirty.”

Tess hears that and her mouth twitches and I *know* she wants to say something about that, ask another question, fixate on this detail, but she doesn’t. She pulls it together and looks the four of us over.

“I’ll talk to Agent Takahashi, see what she thinks about this and where we should go from here. It’s our best option.” Tess pauses like she’s misspoken. “It’s our best option to play along for the time being.”

Best option—not a good option. Because it’s not. Because it comes with risks.

But it’s the only choice we can make for now.

I sneak a glance at Chasm to find that he's already staring at me.

Fiancé. Husband. Terms I did not expect to get familiar with for another ten-plus years. Justin has done his utmost to accelerate the process of growing up. That makes me deeply sad somehow. Growing up is an event that should be savored and cherished.

It should be a slow burn, not a quick flame.

"If you're not comfortable with this—" I begin, still looking straight at Chasm. He interrupts me by holding up a hand.

"Naekkeo, the only part of marrying you I don't like is the timing." He smiles at me, but there's an edge to it. He wants to see if his father will show up to the wedding. But he doesn't think he's going to. Hope is a cruel blade and Justin has it pressed tight against Chasm's throat. "If it comes down to it, and we go through with the wedding, I'm okay with that. No, I'm *happy* about that." He stands up and comes over to me, taking up my field of vision as he stands in front of me and puts his hands on either side of my face.

Tess is watching which makes things awkward, but Chas leans down anyway and puts his lips up against the side of my neck.

"I feel the same way." My words are warbly and weird, but true. Lies taste like bitter poison on my tongue, and the truth is sweet wine. It's intoxicating. I'm obsessed with it now. I'm *free* in its presence.

"Good." Chas kisses my pulse, lip rings brushing my skin and drawing gooseflesh. "Because we signed those papers, so ... I think we're going to be legally married whether we like it or not." He pauses, lifts a brow, smirks. "But we like. *Joahae.*"

"How do you boys feel about this?" Tess asks in a voice that's surprisingly empathetic. Chas draws back and blinks suddenly, attention shifting to his friends, a perplexed frown on his ripe mouth. There's a determination in his crystalline gaze that pairs strangely with the shadows of guilt. He wants me, but he doesn't want to hurt his friends. The former feeling burns brighter than the latter.

I grip his shirt, but he doesn't move.

"I hate it," X admits readily, his voice a weary resignation. He *knew* that playing me the way he did would cost him. His life. His love. His friendships. But he did it anyway and now he imagines that he's paying the price. I don't see it that way. I should make sure that he understands that. "Kota knows that I'd give anything to marry her one day, but if this is how it has to be, then I'll

get through it.”

Parrish is silent for a while, staring down at the ink on his hands before he looks back up at Tess.

“If Justin hadn’t kidnapped me ...” It’s almost a plea, but it’s one with no proper resolution. No matter how much we wish, we can’t go back. Life is not a video game. I wish it were, but it isn’t. It’s not a book with a rewrite. It’s not a chess game with hidden strategies. Sometimes, it’s sad. Sometimes, it’s bitter. Sometimes, we make mistakes without meaning to.

Other things? They’re completely out of our control.

The ending to this story was never mine to write, was it?

The room is still and quiet, a pause, a breath, a lingering.

I remember Mr. Volli quoting T.S. Eliot during one of my classes. It’s a common enough quote—overused, maybe even a little cliché—but it hits. It strikes. It holds.

“This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper.”

And there you go.

With few pieces left on the board, we make our last move.



CHAPTER 33

Is it a dress or an explosive device?

I eye the white box on my bed with distaste. If the FBI hadn't gone over these items with a magnifying glass, a wool blend hat, and a bloodhound (metaphorically) then I wouldn't even be touching them. Tess still doesn't want me to touch them, but if we're going to play along with Justin's plan, we have to make some concessions.

Justin's been sending oodles of items to the house: shoes, jewelry, bags, a dress for the rehearsal dinner. It's like we've rewound the clock several months, like he thinks he can undo everything that's happened between then and now.

His barrage of gifts is taking a highlighter to another problem in my life: my grandparents.

I haven't told them that Chasm and I are getting married. Can't bring myself to do it. I'm chickenshit when it comes to Carmen and Walter and their opinions of me. Because they have them, I'll tell you that. When I arrived in Medina, I thought Tess was judgy (she is) because her opinions often differ from mine. Back home, I naturally shared a lot of my grandparents' views. Now? They're not going to like this at all. Our opinions will differ. They will seem judgy, too. *Eeeehhhh*.

"You need to rip the bandage off," Maxine tells me, peering over my shoulder at the towering stack of items on my bed. She's enrolled in online

classes at the U of O, so she's locked up in the ice palace prison with the rest of us.

After making my deal with Justin, we've been venturing out more, but always with caution, in groups, and with Tess' bodyguards following behind. Whitehall is a surprising reprieve from lockdown. Everybody still hates us, but as the days pass, they pay less and less attention. No drama, no fun for ultra wealthy youth.

"Would *you* want to tell them that you were getting married?" I ask, looking at my sister with a *seriously?* expression on my face. "Even now. In college. Would you?"

Maxine snorts and then gives me a comforting pat on the shoulder.

"Yeah. No. I wouldn't even entertain getting married before twenty-five to avoid their wrath. Even if I were in love. Even if I were sure." She taps at her lips with a questioning finger and then reaches out and rips the top from the box before I can overthink it.

There's a jacket in this one along with a note. It's in Justin's handwriting, not Amin Volli's. That's where I'm at in my life: I can tell one serial killer's writing apart from another's. Brilliant.

"Maybe there's a dress in one of these boxes that was stolen from the morgue," I muse as my sister picks up the pair of gold pumps in both hands and stares at the crystal buckles on the toes. "Maybe it's soaked in formaldehyde, and when I put it on, and I sweat, the poison will go into my pores and I'll die an early death?"

"Would that be preferable to transparency with the people who love you most?" Maxine teases, and I glare at her.

"Oh my freaking fuck!" Kimber squeals, sliding into my room wearing fuzzy, hot pink Versace slippers (a total waste of five hundred bucks). She steals one of the shoes from my sister and turns it around in her own hands. "Manolo Blahnik Hangisi heels. Do you even know how to *wear* a shoe like this?" She asks me, offering slitted eyes and a half-smirk that looks remarkably like one of Parrish's. "If you don't wear the heel, the heel wears *you*."

"Look at you." Maxine teases, reaching out to pinch Kimber's cheek and giving it a little squeeze the way she used to do to me when I was acting like an ass. I'm well-trained and remain peaceable. "Trying to be clever when you're just being rude."

“Don’t touch me,” Kimber snaps at her, slapping at her hand. She peers at the shoe size, as if considering whether to steal them from me or not. “Size eight?” She snorts. “You have huge feet, OMG.”

I snatch the shoe back and then hold it above her head where she can’t reach.

“I’m several inches taller than you, and I have a perfectly normal shoe size.” I pause there as she crosses her arms and stares me down with a challenge in her gaze. I’ve always thought Kimber Celeste had a dangerous edge to her. As of now, she’s fourteen. In like, ten years? I’m going to make sure to stay on my little sister’s good side. “Even if I did have large feet, why would you tease someone for an immutable physical characteristic?”

“Immuta-*what?*” Kimber retorts, and Maxine howls.

“I love seeing you as a big sister,” she chortles, turning away and grabbing another one of Justin’s boxes. She lifts the top without flinching, fearless. I strive to be as fearless as Maxine Banks one day. “It gives me confidence, like I’ve taught you well.”

“More like a sister-in-law,” Kimber says haughtily, peering at the stack of boxes with keen interest. “God, I wish my dad were a serial killer, so he’d buy me all this stuff. You’ve got fifty-K on your bed, easy.”

“Your dad is a plastic surgeon who gets you whatever you want,” I respond dryly, watching as Maxine takes the white wool-cashmere jacket and slips it on. “The cost of your slippers could pay someone’s rent.”

“I lost two-hundred-K in clothes *easily* during the fire. What do I have now? A basic wardrobe of staple items. Some are from the freaking *department store*. Forty-dollar jeans? Pass.” Kimber’s tone-deaf statement makes my teeth hurt, but Maxine ignores her. Maybe that was my mistake from the beginning? I responded to everything like it was a personal attack.

“*My dearest Princess, I saw this jacket and thought you might be cold if there’s a chill during the rehearsal dinner. All my love, Daddy.*” Maxine gags as she reads the note and then crumples it up in her hand, tossing it onto the floor before she digs into the next box. I could care less what’s in these things.

“We’ve tried to be chivalrous and give you some space to be sisters, but seriously, Kimber?” Parrish appears in my doorway, holding onto the jamb on both sides, shirtless as fuck. Stupid muscles on display. *Why, why, why is he so hot?* “Listening to your inane babble is breaking my brain.”

“Sorry your girlfriend has the feet of a giant.” Kimber jerks out of the way as Parrish lunges for her, slipping past him and using Chasm as a shield. “Also, sorry-not-sorry that your girlfriend is marrying another guy.” Kimber is laughing, but only until she sees who’s standing in the hallway beside her. “Oops. Sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Banks.” She grumbles this last bit before she flees, and I look up to see Chasm in the doorway, eyes wide.

He’s been begging me to tell them for five days, has promised to be by my side for said telling.

I haven’t had the stomach to do it yet.

Maxx peers in at me from over Chas’ shoulder.

“You need me, Kota?” he asks, big and warm and protective. I want him. But I can’t use him as a shield right now. I have to do this. The truth is spread wings and open sky. Lies are metal bars, a cage without a door.

I shake my head and Maxx steps aside to make room for my grandparents. And Saffron. Much less scary Saffron. Her parents are undeniably more terrifying.

“Who’s getting married now?” Carmen asks. I feel a hand on my shoulder and glance back to see Parrish leaning over to whisper in my ear.

“You’re on your own with this one,” he tells me and then he retreats, taking X with him. I notice that their bedroom door stays wide open. Surely, they’ll eavesdrop. Can’t blame them. Already, I spot Parrish’s pretty fingers curled around the jamb from inside, like he’s prepping for a peek.

There’s a grunt as X grabs him by the back of his sweatpants. I see Parrish stumble, whirl a toothy snarl on Maxx, and then the door slams shut. Scuffling sounds ensue from inside, and it’s nearly enough to make me smile.

Nearly. Because this moment is momentous and strange.

Chasm comes over to stand beside me, exhaling and closing his eyes to gather his courage. His arms are crossed tight over his chest, his bright red sweatshirt a pop of color against the white walls of my room. I should’ve asked for a different color when the painters were here. Too bad I’ve had murder on my mind. Interior design is more fun.

Chas opens his eyes and I’m dumbstruck by the commitment in them.

He’s in this. For real. He’s my husband—on paperwork, in the bedroom, by my side for major life decisions. My partner.

Husband, husband, husband. What the crap is my life? High school was not supposed to go this way. Justin forced me into adulthood before I was

ready.

I resent him more for that than I do for murdering strangers.

“Look at all this shit,” Saffron says when she walks in and sees Maxine in the coat. She points at the pile and shakes her head. “No wonder the world is going to hell. Who needs this much crap?”

“If you knew how much it cost, you’d be even more surprised.” Maxine lifts up one gold heel for emphasis. My grandfather is peering over the pile in confusion. He reaches out to pick up a note that must’ve fallen loose from one of the boxes.

“*Princess, I’ve found the perfect tiara for your wedding day. You are Medina royalty—never forget that.*” Walter reads the message and then looks up at me. I’m cornered. I’m trapped. It’s time. “From what I understood, the two of you were engaged because Justin blackmailed you into it. What’s all this?”

“May I speak to you all alone?” Chasm begins, and I reach out, snagging the sleeve of his sweater and yanking him closer to me. He stumbles into me and turns, so we can stare at each other.

He lifts his brows like, “*Naekkeo, you gotta let me do this.*”

I purse my lips like, “*no way, it’s better if it comes from me.*”

He says, “*I’m not letting my fiancée suffer alone*” with the widening of his eyes.

I sigh.

Stubborn ass. I start talking before he gets a chance to.

“Remember how we explained that Justin might move to China? That we might get a reprieve from all of this?” They’ve been told everything *but* the wedding bit. Arguably, that’s the most important part, but I was waiting for what felt like the right moment to tell them. “Well, part of the deal is that Chasm and I get married. Officially. In a ceremony.”

Maxine gives me a thumbs-up and a smile. Saffron cocks her head to the side in confusion. Grandma stays stoic. Grandpa is *mad*.

Please let there be a formaldehyde-soaked dress in one of those boxes. That’s my easy out.

Chasm takes my hand and holds it tight, staring my family down with conviction in his gaze.

“I want you all to know that even though we weren’t ready to get married, that we’re young, that this is a less than ideal situation, I promise I’ll ...” His

voice breaks there for a minute and he's forced to swallow back his anxiety. "I'll do my best to take care of Dakota, to help her succeed, to be respectful towards her. It would mean a lot to us both if you approved." He pauses again like he's reconsidering the words, reaching up to rub nervously at his chin. Did I mention he's wearing heavy eyeliner today? His black sweatpants and matching red sneakers give him an edgy, urban look that I fully appreciate. "If not that, then at least if you didn't disapprove."

"Kota." This is Carmen. She takes the lead as she always does. My grandfather is a lot more emotional, so he leaves initial responses and decisions to her while he lets his feelings settle. "When is this wedding supposed to take place?"

"A wedding, huh?" Saffron murmurs, sitting down on the edge of my bed and picking up another box. It just so happens that the tiara is inside of this one. I remember watching *Miss Congeniality* with her when I was young. Sandra Bullock is an FBI agent who discovers a ludicrous plot involving a beauty queen and an exploding tiara. What if this one is rigged? What if Takahashi and her crew missed something crucial in this pile of gifts?

The sunshine is cutting through the windows in thick, warm bars, falling across the pale floors, hitting the shiny toes of my grandmother's shoes. I've done a lot of growing up in her absence, and here I am, preparing to face off against another of life's milestones and she can't be there for that either.

I exhale and lift my gaze, daring to break the tender silence.

"You can't come to the wedding because Justin might pull a violent stunt, and I won't risk it. That's why I haven't been able to say anything. I'm ... getting married and you can't come." There's a sniffle there, and some tears. Chas lifts the long ends of his sweatshirt sleeves and uses them to brush the liquid from my cheeks.

"Oh, Naekkeo," he says, and it hits me how much change hurts. Good change. Bad change. It stings. I'm legally married, and even if the ceremony doesn't happen, my happily ever after is to live here. Not in New York. Not with my grandparents. Here. "Don't cry. I swear I'll be a good husband." He looks at me with that same frantic energy he gets when he's afraid that something that's good for him won't be good for everyone else. Chas is selfless. He takes on as much pain as he can to spare others. He's so, so good, and I don't deserve him. "You're my family, Dakota."

I throw my arms around his waist and squeeze him as tightly as I can.

“We can’t attend the wedding.” Carmen repeats that, her voice deeply contemplative but also hauntingly sad. She and Walter, they dedicated nearly two decades of their lives to me and Maxine. They always put us first. They pushed aside dreams that they’d had for themselves and committed to us. I hate disappointing them. “If we can’t attend the wedding, what makes you think we’d advocate for you to participate in it?”

“My little girl,” Walter whispers, lifting his hands helplessly. “How did we get here?”

“Netflix,” Maxine says, and it’s just enough of a joke that Carmen laughs. Not Saffron though. She stares at me with that penetrating gaze of hers, and I know that she’s wondering how she can help. If she can get Amin or Justin. If there’s a way for her to stop this sequence of events in its tracks. “Because you two are better people than I am. I never would’ve called the hotline.”

Carmen gives Maxine a soft, understanding sort of smile, like she doesn’t believe my sister’s words. Maxine is too good of a person. She would’ve called the number. I guarantee it.

“Kota, what’s really going on?” Carmen asks as Walter paces the room briefly, pausing beside my bookcase. He puts a hand on one of the shelves to steady himself. He never wanted me to grow up so fast. He always did his best to ensure that I had a happy childhood. Innocent, silly, and frivolous.

“For now, we’re going along with the wedding prep.” I gesture at the pile uselessly. “I don’t know what we’re going to do on the actual day.”

“Not that it matters,” Chasm adds in a low voice. “Because the paperwork has been turned in already.” He scratches at the side of his face with a single finger. “We’re already married.”

“Son, care to take a walk with me?” Walter asks, but before I can decline, Chasm steps forward and nods. It’s all very old-fashioned, and I roll my eyes. “I’m not going to hurt him, Kota,” my grandfather adds with a small laugh. “But all young men can benefit from the wisdom and experience of their elders.”

I give him a look, but Chasm lifts both hands up and out.

“I’ve got this,” he tells me, and then he exits the room with my grandpa. I guess they’re going to walk around inside? In circles around the pool? They *might* walk around the yard, but if they do, they’ll take a bodyguard with them.

“He’s not going to rip him to verbal shreds, is he?” I joke and Carmen

gives me another smile.

“I know I’ve said it before—and believe me when I say I speak for your grandfather as well—we’re so proud of you, Dakota.” She crosses her arms as she studies me from across the room. I fidget in place, but I’m desperate to know what she’s going to say. “You suffered for so long on your own, you don’t have to do that anymore. I’m not going to add any stress to your life. What do you need from us right now?”

“We need Justin dead,” Saffron answers for her, standing up from the bed. “More importantly, we need that weirdo teacher dead. Your sperm donor is *nothing* without that man.” She tucks a hand in her pocket and comes over to stand in front of me. With the other hand, she touches my cheek with her palm. “Congratulations, honey.” She gives me a kiss on the opposite cheek. “I haven’t always had the best taste in men, but you’re different.” Saffron chuckles again. “Different than Tess and me both, I think.”

She pats my arm and leaves the room, discussion closed. Saffron doesn’t particularly care if I get married young. Carmen ... she’s still standing there, but her eyes say that she’s deep in thought.

“Can we attend the rehearsal dinner?” she asks finally, and I see that she’s staring down at one of Justin’s numerous notes. “Assuming there’s going to be one.”

“This is Dakota’s call to make.” Maxine slips out of the jacket and tosses it on the bed. “If you want us there, we’re there. If not, I understand that, too.”

“I can’t guarantee that anything involving Justin will be safe.” I wish I could. But the Seattle Slayer is unpredictable by nature. He *might* head to China, regroup, wait for the heat to die down, kill us later. That’d be the smart choice: let Tess go to jail, let Paul take the fall for his crimes.

But there’s always option two: *go out in a blaze of fucking glory*.

No matter how much I wish the Banks could be with me during the rehearsal dinner and the wedding, it’s not happening. I won’t put them at risk like that.

There’s a bit of awkward silence there where my face says *I’m so sorry, you can’t come* but my mouth refuses to obey any orders. My grandmother takes over, breaking the tension with a bit of humor at my expense.

“At least we don’t need to discuss what happens between husband and wife in the bedroom,” she says with utmost sincerity, and my mouth drops open. My face is flaming as both my sister and my grandmother laugh at me.

“Don’t give me that look. It’s important to be educated about life.”

“Come here,” Maxie grabs me by the arm and drags me over to the bed. “Let’s get through this stuff together. Maybe I can take a few items to pawn for my tuition?”

“Maxine Banks,” Carmen warns, but my sister is only half-teasing.

“You can have all of it,” I tell her, lifting an embroidered dress for inspection. “Whatever I don’t need for the rehearsal dinner, it’s yours.” There are easily ten outfits here, one of which Justin suggested I wear to the bachelorette party that he had planned. I’m not attending that, by the way. I’m only playing along enough to survive until we have a solid backup plan. I told him that via text. His response? *Whatever you want, Princess.*

Creepy, right?

We unpack the clothes in warm afternoon sunshine, the sound of Parrish’s pencil scratching on paper carrying across the hall. GG thumps in his cage. Maxx tosses a small bouncy ball against the wall and catches it, working on strengthening his hand. Their door is wide open now which makes me smile.

When Chasm comes back, my family politely excuses themselves, and I take a big risk by closing my own door. Some moments are just meant to be private.

I’m standing there with my body leaned back against the door, hands tucked behind me.

“Did he give you shit?” I ask, because I’m not quite sure what their talk was about. My grandfather isn’t a very confrontational person, but this situation is testing everyone’s limits.

Chasm stays where he is, his own hands stuffed into the pocket of his hoodie.

“No.” His voice sounds strained, so I push up off the door to move closer to him. He’s staring at my now uncluttered bed, and I wonder if his thoughts haven’t strayed to more, um, private acts. But then he looks up and I’m struck by the vibrancy in his gaze. Helping drunk girls, tutoring me, the sunflowers. I should’ve known all along. “He offered me some advice.” Chas hooks a pretty smile, reaching up to rub at his smooth chin. I caught all three boys shaving in Parrish’s bathroom this morning. It was the cutest sight I’ve ever seen in my life. “Good advice.”

“Good advice?” I ask, trying to peer into Chasm’s face. He reaches up suddenly and yanks his hood into place, like he’s trying to hide his facial

expression from me. When I step in front of him and push it back, our eyes meet again and I'm not just struck, I'm eviscerated. Bad metaphor? Yep, bad metaphor.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I choke out. Bad metaphor or not, I can't breathe. I cannot fucking *breathe* for the way this boy is looking at me.

Chasm wets his lips and then he reaches out and puts his fingers on the back of my neck. Our kiss, there's fate and future in it. I can taste all the possibilities from all the years ahead of us. He uses his mouth to convey his feelings, and a deep warmth stirs in my belly. I grab onto his sweatshirt and he holds me with his right arm, tucking me close against him. Not only is he warm, but he smells good, and he feels strong, and I like the sensation of belonging I get when we're together.

"I'm not going to tell you what we talked about." Chas' voice wavers slightly, like he thinks I might press for more. I won't. I'm sure Walter imparted advice about love and long-term relationships, maybe threw in some man-to-man stuff. I'll leave it alone. "But it mattered to me." He hits his chest with his fist for emphasis. "It mattered."

There's a space of beautiful sunlit silence where everything is okay. Safe. Normal.

"Good. I was worried he might box your ears."

A smile hovers on Chas' face but it fades away in the space of a few blinks. He doesn't respond, studying my lips instead of looking into my eyes. When he does glance up, I'm captured all over again. It's that easy for him to reel me in.

Footsteps sound in the hall; there's a knock on the door.

We both hesitate before answering.

"Fuck it. You're my *wife*." He takes my face between his hands this time, and he savors my lips like candy. His touches linger. His exhales are potent and passionate. His intentions are clear as glass.

The door opens, and I feel Tess' presence like a physical thing.

Hey, at least she *tried* to knock this time.

She waits for the kiss to finish and for me to turn around before she speaks. Parrish and Maxx are both waiting in the hall behind her.

"You told your grandparents?" she asks, and I nod. *My grandparents*. I like her referring to them as they are. As my family. The Banks will *always* be my family. "Good." Tess sighs, crossing her arms. It looks like she wants to say

something else, but simply can't bring herself to do it. "Please leave your doors cracked."

She gives the other boys a look before she leaves the four of us alone at the end of the hallway.

Chasm reaches out for my hand, sliding the pair of engagement rings from my finger. He studies the one from Justin and then tosses it into the trash can near my door. It hits the bottom of the metal can with a sharp clang. The other ring—the pink diamond that Parrish originally gave to Lumen—goes into my nightstand drawer. I'm so surprised that it takes me a second to realize he's put a new ring on my finger.

I don't recognize it, and I have no idea where it came from, but the way he caresses it with his thumb tells me that it's sacred.

"My dad gave this to me at the cabin the night we ran into him," Chas says, looking up at me. "He was going to propose to my mother with it. He never had the chance since she passed away. If ... if one of us ... well, you're the only girl that deserves to have it." He turns away from me and walks quickly down the hallway toward the staircase.

I let him go because I can sense that he needs a bit of space.

But my heart. Oh my heart. *Dugeun dugeun*. That's the Korean onomatopoeia for the *thump thump* or the *boom boom* of a frantic heart. In Japanese, it's *doki doki*. No matter which way you put it, I'm wild for that boy. *Crash crash. Clang clang. Pound pound. Whoosh whoosh*. My pulse races.

"Holy shit." Parrish steps close and takes my hand, studying the ring. The band is tarnished silver, the gem as purple as the summer ripened grapes we ate together earlier this morning. Amethyst? I think it's an amethyst. "This is happening." He rakes the fingers of one shaky hand through his hair.

"Happened," Maxx corrects softly, and I glance up to see them both looking back at me like they're afraid. I open my mouth to reply, but X reaches out and touches a gentle finger to my lips. His touch tingles. "Once Justin is gone—whether that means in a different country or a shallow grave, I don't know—we'll talk it over. For now, let's just be."

Parrish pulls me into his arms and holds me. Just holds me.

We drop the subject temporarily.

Later that night, I fish Justin's ring from the trash and give it to Maxine.

That should pay her way through college, don't ya think?

The next few days are relatively boring. Dare I say ... normal? We go to Whitehall, Maxx sneaks around in his old uniform, and the rest of us do our utmost to stay together and away from any spot in the school where we might get jumped. We have lunch with Justin again, and he's a consummate gentleman. He's nice to me. He's respectful. He's funny. He's charming.

Freaks me all the way out.

"Good morning," Danyella says, hooking her arm with mine. She's already at work on a new production for this year—*Hamilton*—even as the theater is still undergoing construction. I feel a sense of guilt each time I pass by the doors, but admitting publicly that I was the one who set the fire won't do me any good. When I declined to rejoin the crew, Danyella gave me an admonishing speech about how actions taken under duress in the name of saving a life don't karmically count against a person the same way as malicious intent.

I gave in; I'm on the production crew again.

"Did you hear the ECMP this morning?" I ask her. I've become a religious follower of Jack's Emerald City Murder podcast since ... you know. His cohost—some woman whose name I can't remember—has a much better, much less creepy voice. She is, however, just as much of an opportunist as Jack. She's been using her cohost's disappearance to speculate on all sorts of sordid what-if scenarios.

She's ... sort of right though, isn't she? Jack Larae was murdered (or is he even dead?) by my kidnapper/mom in an abandoned mansion on the night of the opera—gasp. My life is so Agatha Christie. It is. It just is.

"No," Danyella begins, clearly unsure as to where I'm going with this. When I look over my shoulder, I find Maxx trailing us, hands in his pockets, looking like any other Whitehall student. Okay, fine, not like any other Whitehall student—like a model. Chas is caught up in conversation with someone asking him about the student body president position (he's running), and Parrish is up ahead, looking like he's off to the coal mine. "Why?"

"A girl's body was found floating in Lake Washington." If I sound bitter, it's because I am. I'm worried that the body belongs to Veronica Fisher. I'm worried that the body being found in the lake means that Justin is up to

something. It's not a surprise that he's plotting, but ... I'm prone to fantasy. I'm a hopeful person. I want him to go to Beijing and never come back.

"I wonder if it's Veronica," Danyella says absently, not at all ashamed to voice the subject aloud. I cringe, but she speculates. "It'd make sense, considering that her parents' boat went down. It's tragic but expected."

Ah. Yes. Danyella isn't aware of the kidnapping plot and subsequent loss of Veronica from our house. After everything we did to keep her safe, she died anyway. Why is life so cruel? Aren't things supposed to work out in the end?

"On the show, they were hypothesizing that the Slayer sunk their boat." I don't have to say anything more than that. Danyella is looking at me like *yeah, duh, I assumed your dad killed them*. I sigh as Chas catches up with us.

"Fucking student council election." He snorts and then reaches into his pocket like he's going for a cigarette. Chas frowns and then sighs, ruffling his hair instead. "What a waste of time."

The ring on my finger fucking *burns*. I rub it with my thumb and wonder if Ji-hyun (Chas' mom) would've liked me.

"And yet you can't seem to resist," I tease, turning and walking backwards so I can fix his tie at the same time. He looks at me with an expression that's less *student council president* and more *I drive a late sixties hot rod; also we're married*. I don't acknowledge that toothsome stare. "Do you still think you can win it?"

He pretends to think for a moment and then snatches up both of my arms by the wrists.

"I *know* I can win it. There are enough people in this school who owe me favors." His face shifts, like a sunset in fast forward. It goes from bright and sunny to dark in the space of a few blinks. "Whoever runs against me, I'll have a secret I can expose. I know everybody's secrets at Whitehall."

"How about I beat the crap out of whoever runs against you?" X teases. I *think* X teases. It's also possible he's telling the truth. I glance back at him, but he pretends not to notice that I'm squinting rudely. He smiles at me instead. It's red, white, and blue. It's fireworks. It's a parade. "What? I'm kidding. I'm not beating up a bunch of high school students."

"Ouch. Tilted much?" Chas replies, digging around until he finds the pack of gum in his blazer pocket. He glares at it, as if it's responsible for his lack of cigarette. "You're here with us when you should be on a college campus."

Sounds like somebody's salty about it."

Maxx looks like he might reply, but then his worst enemy pops around the corner.

It's Ms. Miyamoto.

"Fuck." Maxx lunges for the nearest door, yanks it open, and slips inside.

In the nick of time, too.

"*Ohayo gozaimasu*," I greet, hoping I'm not totally butchering the pronunciation.

"*Ohayo gozaimasu*," she repeats with a slight incline of her head. She pauses to have a small conversation with Chasm—fully in Japanese, mind you—as Parrish sticks close to me and Danyella. He's scanning the crowd with the gaze of a distinguished royal peering down at unworthy peasantry.

"One day, when I've inherited Laverne's fortune, I'll remember exactly who it was that pissed me off when I was here," he declares, not bothering to keep his voice down. "And when they come crawling to me looking for investors, for press, for distribution, I'll spit in their faces and laugh on my way to the bank."

Danyella adjusts her glasses.

"I would advise against the spitting part of that equation. Did you know there have been cases in which a person spat on another and received a bioweapons charge?"

Parrish gives her an odd look and then reaches up to run his hand over his hair.

"Yeah, well, that was hyperbole at best, Miss Schaeffer." He rolls his eyes, and I smile. He's not allowed to be such an ass and yet also be hot at the same time. Life isn't fair. "What? Am I too pretty for you, Miss Banks?" He flicks his tongue against the corner of his lip and offers me a pornographic wink. No joke: a girl near us actually flutters her hands in front of her face like she's fanning herself.

I roll my eyes, but I'm charmed.

I'm beyond charmed.

I'm also happy even though I know shouldn't be.

After school, we plot and plan and scheme. During school, there are too many people and too many cameras. Despite the hostility of some of the students, I'm beginning to love it here again.

Normal was the right word to use. This ... is all blissfully, perfectly boring.

Ms. Miyamoto separates from Chas, heading out the door toward the parking garage. She's not gone for all of two seconds before Maxx pops back out of the classroom door, face pale, sweat on his forehead as he uses a single finger to pull at the collar of his shirt.

"Hey, um." That's what he says. Someone as confident as Maxim Wright. That stops me dead in my tracks. I turn around to see Chasm standing near the door alongside him. It's not just any classroom door. It says *Astronomy* on the front of it. Also, it's usually locked. Since the day I started at this school, I have only seen that classroom once.

With Mr. Volli.

"What do you mean by 'hey um'?" I ask as my heart starts up a frantic beating in my chest. Not the *dugeun dugeun* kind, but the *eeek* kind. The *ah, crap, what is it now* kind.

"Yeah, exactly that." Maxx grabs me by the wrist and pulls me into the stairwell, guiding me up the steps to the unused classroom.

We pause in the quiet space with its domed ceiling on the left side, morning sunshine streaming in through the windows. It takes me a second to place the creaking sound or figure out where it's coming from.

"Oh for fuck's sake." That's Parrish, pausing on my right side while Chasm comes up the stairs last. I notice that Danyella doesn't join us.

My gaze swivels over to where the boys are staring, and then I'm stuck there in a strange limbo while I try to process the scene in front of me.

Antonio Rossi is hanging from a rope that's attached to one of the heavy wooden beams in the ceiling. His body sways to-and-fro like maybe he hasn't been up there all that long. It's obvious without even approaching him that he's dead.

It's also impossible to miss the note attached to his wrist—just like the one that was on Veronica's.

Maxx notices it, too, approaching the body and untying the note before bringing it over to me.

The boys watch as I unfold it, reading the beautifully written quote in Mr. Volli's perfect handwriting.

"Love is the bone and sinew of my curse."

Err.

"What the fuck does that mean?" Parrish asks, but I have no idea. It's very obviously another Sylvia Plath quote, but that's about as much of it as I

understand. I look back up at Antonio and try very hard not to stare at his face. See, I've gotten a lot better at it lately, the looking but not looking.

The first time that I saw a dead body, it was JJ in that box. It haunts me because it was my first undoing, the moment when I realized that my easy normalcy was shattered, that it had been nothing all along but an illusion carefully crafted and maintained by the people closest to me.

Life is broken. It's bloody. It's messy. It's gross. It's weird. It's also beautiful. It's also wondrous. It's also magical. It can be all of those things because nothing is wholly one or the other, not good or evil.

Veronica's death saddened me. Antonio's is a disappointment. But neither affects me the way JJ's did because I'm now tarnished and in need of polish. And a vacation. Definitely in need of a vacay.

"Another Sylvia Plath quote," Chas finally says aloud, belatedly answering Parrish's question. "As for what it means? Love is at the center of Sylvia's suffering. She suffers because she loves. Why it would be left here for us, I don't know."

I bite my lip and tuck the note into my pocket.

There's the sound of frantic footsteps on the stairs behind us and then Ms. Miyamoto and Danyella both are in the doorway. The latter adjusts her glasses and looks away, as if out of respect for the dead. The former immediately draws her phone from her pocket and places a call to 911.

Something about the situation must have drawn the attention of the other students in the hall because soon there are dozens of them, pouring in and filling the sun-drenched space. Their chatter dies down until there's nothing but collective breathing and the creak, creak, creak of the rope.

We're given the gift of space because I think that, as much as they hate us now, they're all afraid of us, too. All those dirty, wicked Whitehall students.

Ms. Miyamoto tries to shoo us all from the room at first, but she's also in the middle of talking to the dispatcher and looking up at Antonio like she wants to cut him down but isn't sure how. Doesn't matter. He's clearly dead. Has been for several minutes, at least. But only minutes.

Someone—Amin Volli—was here recently.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I draw it out. I've taken to carrying it around at school because why the fuck not? Justin can see me through the security cameras, through other peoples' phones, so why not have mine on me?

There's a text from his alternate number.

Happy nuptials, Miss Prior.

I look at that, look up at the body, back down at the phone.

By the time I do, the text is gone.

What in the fresh hell is this?!

Justin would not call me Miss Prior. That is not Justin's handwriting. No way would Justin be sneaking around Whitehall right now when the FBI is watching him. This is all coming from Amin Volli.

Happy nuptials? I look up at Antonio, at the slight sway of his uniformed body. His loafers are at eye level. It's disturbing. *Is this ... is this like a wedding present or something?*

It's all I can think. Justin told me to finish the list. Here's one of the people on said list, dead. Here's Amin's note. There's that text. I know that Mr. Volli handles a lot of those elements for Justin. So ... what does this mean when you put it all together?

"Love is the bone and sinew of my curse," I whisper, and bile rises in my throat.

"Bitch," someone murmurs as other teachers enter the room, doing their best to force students back down the stairs to the hallway. "She did it."

"I'll bet she did. Savage," another voice whispers, and then everyone is looking at *me* like I'm the murderer.

Is that what Justin will think, too? Will he somehow imagine that I pulled this off with the boys' help?

If so, am I more screwed than I was before or could Mr. Volli somehow be used in our favor?

We end up as we always do in a room at the ice palace with Agent Takahashi after school.

"There's no footage of anything beyond Antonio Rossi heading up the stairs to that classroom willingly. It's likely going to be ruled a suicide." She sits back in her chair, staring at us with an expression of suspicion and distrust. "Interesting how the four of you stumbled on his body before anyone else. While you're at it, do you want to explain the teenage girl we found on the shores of Lake Washington?"

“I told you that it was Amin Volli,” I grind out, pointing at the note on the tabletop. Actually, there are two notes. I’ve given her the one that was on Veronica’s wrist as well. I never bothered before because I wasn’t sure it would make a difference. I should’ve left the damn things attached to the bodies. “Both teenagers were killed by him—at Justin’s request.”

“You should listen to my daughter,” Saffron confirms, appearing in the doorway. She’s wearing a red jacket to match her red hair today. Also leather. Also not sure where she’s getting all this leather from. It’s expensive, isn’t it? She walks into the room and puts her hands on the tabletop, staring into my eyes. “I tracked him to the school, but he managed to hang the kid before I caught up to him. He’s a slippery one, that weirdo teacher.”

Takahashi stares at my mother like she doesn’t know what to do with her. Arrest her? Have her evaluated by a mental health professional? Ignore her? Listen to what she has to say? *Wait till Takahashi finds out about Jack Larae* ... Sort of implied that Amin killed him, too. When I said I wanted to be honest, I meant with the people I care about. I will lie all day long to keep my mom out of jail.

Saffron shrugs her shoulders and saunters off in the direction of the kitchen while I sit there wondering what the hell happened today.

Amin Volli committed that murder—that’s a fact. But did he do it because Justin ordered him to? No. That doesn’t make sense. Why go after Antonio the week before the wedding when I’ve been cooperating all this time?

Takahashi taps her pen against her mouth and closes her eyes.

“This investigation is going to send me to the grave,” she mutters, but then maybe she realizes that Agent Murphy already was sent to the grave and her eyes open on such explicit sadness that I have to look away. *Or maybe she’s thinking about her husband?*

“Sam Something has a crush on you.” I’m not sure why I say it. Takahashi’s sadness dims at the edges and then her attention is fixed right on my forehead, as if there’s a bull’s-eye there. “Just saying.”

She ignores me. *Bet she likes him right back but is too hard-boiled to give into her feelings of passion.* It’s a cute story. Probably total crap, but cute.

“Let’s circle back to the dead girl on the beach. Is that Veronica Fisher?” Her voice is a steel blade, one that’s been coated in distrust and suspicion. I can feel it poised at my throat. As far as I know, Tess never said a word to her about the kidnapping. The boys either. She doesn’t know what we did,

only that Veronica is now dead. “I’ll have a positive ID by the end of the day, but I want to give you the chance to come clean.”

I point at the notes, trapped in the dining room by myself. The boys are all in the living room with Tess. It’s Friday, but who knows if we’ll have school on Monday or not. Classes could be cancelled for the entirety of next week.

Happy Nuptials, Miss Prior.

Yikes. The whole situation is so creepy that I’m tempted to ignore it. But we still don’t have a plan. This, all of this creepy shit, it might be the solution to our problem.

“I can’t say for sure, but if I had to guess then yeah, it’s Veronica. Amin killed her. He killed Antonio, too—not to mention Judge Rossi. I have a feeling that if you don’t stop him, he’ll get Philippa and Gavin next. Remember the list of students that I was supposed to kill for Justin? They were all on it. Now two of them are dead. If that isn’t proof, I don’t know what is.”

Takahashi leans forward, challenging me with her gaze. It always feels like she’s after me for something, like I’m a little kid in trouble with the teacher.

“It looks like *you* told me about this list, and now two of your fellow students are dead.”

“Didn’t you hear Justin at lunch? That ‘project’ he was referring to? This is it. If you watch Philippa and you watch Gavin, you’ll find Amin. If you find him, you’ve got Justin.” I hold her gaze. “Are you going to let me die at my wedding? If you don’t find a way to arrest Justin, or you don’t provide enough security, that’ll be it. He’s either going to make his final move at the wedding or else his final move is to flee.”

“I can’t put an entire team on you every time you have a hunch, Miss Banks. Nothing happened at either of your lunch dates. Who’s to say that your wedding won’t go the same way?” She tugs her yellow notepad closer and writes something down. “The only person who tried to kill someone at the opera was your *mother*.”

“Don’t you think it’s weird that two teenagers are getting married?” I ask, but she doesn’t even bother to look up.

“Everything about your marriage license was legal. You admitted to signing the papers. Chasm admitted to signing the papers. What can I do about that?” She sets her pen down and purses her lips at me. I am not Agent Takahashi’s favorite human being in the world. Fair enough. She isn’t my

favorite human being either. “But I told you before: I believe you. So give me something. Where can I find Amin Volli?”

“I don’t know,” I answer and she sighs again, picking up her pen and scratching down another note. “But I might be able to find out.”

Takahashi stops writing to look up at me.

I smile.

“How familiar are you with Sylvia Plath?”

“Yeah, so, I think Amin Volli killed Antonio as a wedding gift,” I tell the boys when we’re finally alone in my room. I left the notes with Takahashi, but it’s not like I can unsee them. It’s not like I can unread them. It’s not like I forgot about the text. “He messaged me after we found the body. Deleted that same text right after.” I spread my hands to indicate the dramatic nature of the scene. “*Happy nuptials, Miss Prior*. If you take that, and you take the notes, and you take today’s quote in particular ...” I so don’t want to admit this, but it’s a nagging thought. “I think he’s ... helping us?” I ask it as a question and Chasm gapes at me.

“Why would he text you like that?” he asks, sounding bewildered. Doesn’t look bewildered though. Looks hot. Hair is styled perfectly, eyeliner is on point, lip rings have been replaced with black spikes, plugs are yellow with a sunburst design that somehow matches Parrish’s hand tattoos. “You think he’s into you or something?”

“Not like that,” I scoff, pacing a small rut and running headfirst into Maxx’s chest with an *oof*. He steadies me with his hands on my shoulders and peers into my eyes.

“Like how then?” he asks as Parrish rummages through my bookshelf, invading my privacy but somehow making it feel totally natural for him to do so. He’s like that, you know.

“We won’t know unless we ask him directly.” I shudder. The last thing I want is a pet like Mr. Volli. Justin can keep him as a pawn. I want no part of that. Imagine being tailed by someone like Amin Volli for the rest of your life. A person could never sleep easy. The man is a specter. He’s a yurei. A hantu. He’s a poltergeist. He’s a fucking demon.

But I can’t let this opportunity pass us by.

“That’s quite the jump of logic,” Parrish remarks, flipping through—Jesus, that’s my *journal* from junior high (smoke damaged and wrinkled, but legible). He begins to read aloud. “*He’s the cutest boy I’ve ever seen in my whole life. I want to kiss him. I want him to kiss me. I want—*”

I pull away from Maxx and yank the book from Parrish’s hands, turning my darkest glare his way.

“You, sir, are lacking in propriety.” I snap the journal closed and tuck it up against my chest with a sigh. “Just ask next time, okay?” I say, brushing some of my short hair back. It escapes my ear and brushes against my cheek. I miss my long hair. Seriously. I pine for her. “If we text that number, we’re likely texting Amin and not Justin. Let’s talk to him.”

“You want to use him against Justin.” Chasm gets it first, but he’s already shaking his head. “*Ani*. He isn’t going to help us. If he did kill Antonio as a gift, it wasn’t because he cares about you. He’s helping Justin by doing that. He’s giving his employer’s daughter a wedding present. It makes sense if you think about it like that.”

“Someone killed Veronica, Chas.” I take the journal and slap it against my palm for emphasis. Very dramatic. “It wasn’t Justin. If he found out that Veronica was not the body in that hole, what do you think might’ve happened? He sure as hell would’ve mentioned it. That means Amin took care of Veronica for us and didn’t tell anyone.”

“What do you think he could do to help us?” Maxx asks, perched on my desk with his dress shirt unbuttoned beneath his blazer. His tie is still on, hanging over the bare skin of his chest. “Kill Justin?”

“Doesn’t it seem like Amin does more of the actual killing than Justin? He wears the stag mask. He makes the phone calls. He’s the one that follows us around to see what we’ll do. It’s always Mr. fucking Volli.” It occurs to me as I’m saying all these things that ... maybe I’m swallowing a spider to catch a fly?

You know that old nursery rhyme? An old lady accidentally swallows a fly, so she swallows a spider to catch it. Then she swallows a bird, a cat, a dog, and so on. In the end, she swallows a horse and ends up dead (of course). It’s a ridiculous children’s song, but it makes a good point.

If I believe that Mr. Volli can kill Justin, then do I really want to find myself indebted to Mr. Volli?

“It’s equally important that Amin gets caught.” Chasm says it. We all

know it. “So what he can possibly do to help us with Justin?”

“Better one than two of them. And the FBI is already searching for Amin. They *know* he’s guilty.” I lift up my phone. It’s turned off, but I have it. “If we pit them against one another, why not? Losing Amin would be a huge blow to Justin.”

“Are you going to offer him money?” Parrish queries absently, seated on his usual spot atop my bed. He consumes it when he sits there. It becomes *his* bed. He’s just that way. “If so, you’re welcome to whatever is in Laverne’s vault. I’ll empty it and give it to the bastard if he’ll kill Justin and leave.”

“This is murder-for-hire,” Chasm says, looking me dead in the face. “If this happened to work out, we’d be paying a man to kill your father. According to the law, he’s innocent until proven guilty. This is the murder of an innocent man, legally.”

“If this worked somehow, I’d take the fall.” Maxx is so casual about it, like it doesn’t matter.

So self-sacrificial.

We all turn to stare at him.

“Bro, for real?” Chasm groans, sounding exasperated. “Are you nuts? Didn’t you learn anything by trying to die? We need you here.”

“Why don’t we see if this is even an option?” I power my phone on. “If it’s not, this conversation is moot. If it is ... we’ll deal with it then.”

Chas doesn’t appear convinced, but I’m itching to try this. Because we need something. Because a boy was found *hanging* at our school today. I’m sure that when Tess gets back from her lawyer’s office, we’ll be talking about this. And I don’t just mean Antonio. I mean all of it.

“I have something to tell you guys before you make that call.” Chasm looks nervous as hell. He even shrugs out of his blazer (complete with tie hanging out of the pocket) and begins to unbutton his shirt.

“Are you stripping or confessing?” Parrish asks mildly, only the words aren’t mild. They’re sharp. He’s worried and he doesn’t like that Chas might be keeping a secret from us.

“I’m hot.” Chasm says it, not me. I smile at that, and he crooks a smile back at me.

“Can I put SEVENTEEN’s *HOT* on for background music?” I tease, referencing another one of my favorite K-pop groups. “Please, *Oppa*.”

Chas bites his lip, yanking on one of his lip rings.

“You’re distracting me on purpose.” He finishes unbuttoning his shirt but keeps it on. Now both Maxx *and* Chas are partially shirtless. They always claim there’s some ulterior motive for stripping—too hot, shirt is itchy, clothes need to be washed, can’t find a pj top—but I sense it’s purposeful. Their sole intent is to tease me.

Parrish notices that both the other boys have unbuttoned their tops, so he begins to do the same and I groan.

“Can we *please* just call this serial killer/poet?” I ask, but Chas shakes his head as he sits down on the edge of the bed. The mattress dips and disturbs his great majesty. Parrish levels his best princely glare on the back of his bestie’s head.

“Phones out for a minute. Bug detector.” Chasm looks at Maxx. “Please?”

With a sigh, X gets up and takes our phones, dumps them in Parrish’s room, and does a thorough sweep. He even goes so far as to *shut and lock the door*. As long as Tess doesn’t come home, we’ll be okay. If she does, it’s suicide by parent.

“Well?” Maxx poses in the center of the room, arms crossed, brow raised. “Let’s hear it.”

Chasm exhales and puts his hands on his thighs. I think he’s bulked up a bit since last year. He ordered the same size slacks for his uniform, but I think he needs a bit more room. He’s got more muscles in his calves and thighs than he did before.

“When I go to my cram classes, I’m trapped in a dead zone. There’s no service in there. The administrators don’t want anyone using their phone to cheat with like ChatGPT or whatever.” He kicks his shoes off and then goes about peeling his socks off. It’s a distraction technique. “Takahashi’s been sending someone for me to talk to. I tell them everything I do at Milk Carton, every person I see come through the doors of my house. They have meetings there, my dad and Justin.” He pauses, and the silence is excruciating. “They *had* meetings there. Anyway, I’ve been helping them out. Like the night of the opera, at Lumen’s place. The pizza delivery app I had on my phone was rigged to send a signal to Takahashi if I clicked on it, to let her know that Amin was there. I don’t know what happened, why she didn’t come, or if she did come, why it took her so long. But they didn’t find him. It’s very possible that Justin blocked the signal.”

Maxx smirks and moves over to pat his friend on the head. Chas smacks

his hand away, but it's a cute bromance moment.

"I knew you wouldn't sit idly by. We're all plotting, aren't we?" X pauses and then turns to see me glaring at him. "Well, not anymore. My bag of tricks is empty."

"Mine isn't." Parrish sits up, crossing his legs and putting his elbows on them. I can see his tattoos between the two white halves of his undone shirt. "I've been talking to my grandmother every night. She's stubborn, and she's selfish, and she's salivating over the projected success of Milk Carton. But if I can convince her to come and talk to me in person, so we can discuss Justin in private, I think we could get him. She could hire a private fucking military to kill the guy."

"Rich people." Both Maxx and I say it at the same time and smile.

"What? It's true." Parrish is adorably indignant. "Justin is wealthy, so the only way to outdo him is get someone wealthier to move against him. If I can convince Laverne to do it, we'll win. That's my plan." He sits back up and then starts to undo his tie with those long, beautiful fingers of his. "Murder-for-hire is a *great* plan. I just think we need someone good, and that's going to cost money. Stealing from Laverne's vault is a secondary option if she won't give in."

"If we can get Amin to show up somewhere, can you signal the FBI again?" I ask and Chas nods, looking ashamed at having kept this secret. I understand why. At any given time, we can't be sure if we're being spied on or not. It's never a guarantee, but we're running out of time.

I cannot shake the idea that the ceremony is going to be a bloodbath.

That's how long I have, where my sand timer runs out.

At the altar.

"We don't even have to get Amin to kill Justin," Chasm muses, staring at the pile of shoes and socks on my floor. "All we have to do is get them to meet up. That's incriminating as fuck, right?"

"Sam Something"—I pause here because all the guys are staring at me—"That's what I call Agent Sam. Anyway, Sam Something is suspicious of Justin's involvement with Amin. He questioned him about it in the foyer, right in front of me and Delphine. I think getting them to meet up would be ideal."

"Let's do it then," X says, moving over to the door so he can grab my phone from Parrish's room. "Let's call the bastard. What the fuck else are we

going to do?”

He’s got a point.

We’ve got nothin’.

Amin Volli answers my call on the first ring.

He’s sitting in a chair in the wine cellar which means he’s *at* Justin’s house. I wonder how much time he spends there? How has this fucker avoided capture for so long?!

“Hello, Miss Prior,” he says, wearing the stag mask and sitting with his legs crossed at the knee, white gloved hands folded atop them. His hair is slicked back, his suit pressed, his smile disturbed. Everything that’s happened thus far might’ve been under Justin’s orders, but what has he lifted a finger to do? It was Amin Volli that kept Parrish in the cellar and tortured him. It was Amin who killed Mr. Fosser (also DRIP to that guy, may he never rest in peace), who stood over my grandparents with a rifle, who kidnapped me.

This suddenly seems like less of a good idea than it was a few minutes ago.

“Why are you helping me?” I ask, and he cocks his head to the side like he has no idea why I’m asking such a silly question. The boys aren’t on camera with me. It seemed more likely that Amin would talk if I pretended to be alone. I mean, I’m not. They’re right there, *staring* at me. But he can’t see them.

“Are you not appreciative of my assistance? You have a checklist and no intention of completing it. As far as Veronica Fisher?” Amin sits back with a sigh, giving a small shake of his head. “I find it absolutely adorable that you were unable to kill her, that you went to such great lengths to keep someone you despised alive.” That smile of his, it absolutely triggers my PTSD from the night of the hunt. I can barely stand to look at it. “If the girl had been left alive, it would’ve made things difficult for you. How likely is cold-hearted Agent Takahashi to believe you kidnapped her with the best of intentions?”

“Did you kidnap her from the house or did she run away?” I ask, hoping to get as much information as possible. Chas is recording all of this on his phone, completely detached from cell service or Wi-Fi. I’m sure Amin knows or suspects as much and doesn’t care.

That’s the scary part.

“By all means,” he says, inclining his chin, as intuitive as always. Practically a mind reader. “Record me and take it to the FBI. By the time they get to this cellar, I’ll be gone.” He winks at me, and I see a flash of the adorable poet that was so kind to me during my first few weeks at Whitehall. I *liked* this guy. He was my favorite teacher for a while there. “I assume there’s another purpose for your call?”

“Does Justin know that you killed Antonio and Veronica?” I might be getting a little brazen with my questions but screw it. Go big or go the fuck home. “He doesn’t, does he?”

“Would that help either of you if he did? What does it matter? He wanted those brats dead and now they’re dead.” Amin lifts the sleeve of his jacket and checks his watch, like he’s on a tight time schedule or something.

“Why are you helping Justin?” If I ask something like this, record it, and give it to Takahashi, surely *that* counts as a smoking gun? It’s worth a try.

I resist the urge to look up at the boys. I don’t want to give away that they’re standing across the room from me, leaned up against the wall near the bathroom, sitting cross-legged on the floor, or standing poised for action. I’ll let you guess which boy is where.

“Why not? He’s an intelligent man with grand plans.” There’s a strange pause there that makes me wonder if Amin still believes those things. “But he lets his need for attention get in the way. If he didn’t care so much for the approval of others, he could be great.”

“Why leave me that particular Plath quote?” I continue, trying not to get too excited at all the information we’re collecting right now. This phone call is *proof* that Amin Volli is working with my father, that they’re both part of the collective that makes up the Seattle Slayer. “Are you in love with me or something?”

That gets him to laugh. It’s a low, icy chuckle that digs into my skin like needles.

“Miss Prior, you’re sixteen years old. For a man my age to hunger after a teenage girl, that’s pathetic. Do you really believe I’d allow myself to descend to the level of a dog in heat like our dear friend, Mr. Fossier? I’m disappointed that you’d even ask.”

“*Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.* Love is the basis of Sylvia’s suffering. How else was I supposed to take that?” I adjust myself on the bed, crossing my legs and trying to affect a casual stance. Again, terrible actress.

Like, awful. I was built for honesty, I guess. Not a particularly good trait in this situation.

“Your heart causes you so much pain, gets you into so much trouble. It is the basis of *your* suffering. It is the flesh and blood of your curse. I both admire and pity you. I imagine that’s why I find your writing so intriguing. In order to write well, one must suffer.”

Yeeaaaah. Not going to respond to all that weirdness. No wonder Saffron calls him ‘that weirdo teacher’.

“Would you kill Justin for me?” *Rip the bandage off. Get it out there. Never hurts to ask.*

Amin considers the question like it’s a legitimate one.

“You’d have me kill your father? Are you sure that’s what you want? Doesn’t your soft heart bleed for him even now? As much as you hate him, you pity him, too. Don’t lie to me. I can feel it in your writing.” He reaches up to run a finger along the edge of the stag mask. “Tell me how you really feel about him, and I’ll consider it.”

I don’t hesitate. The words seem to tumble from my lips of their own volition.

“I wish I could love him, but I can’t. I *should* love him, but I don’t. After I met Tess, and we didn’t get along, I wanted more than anything to find out who my father was. I ... I don’t understand why he can’t use his success as revenge, why he has to hurt people.” I’d cry, but I think my tears are all dried up for now.

Amin sits forward, eyes sparkling behind the mask.

“Lie. You don’t understand why he has to hurt *you*. If he didn’t betray you by harming the people you love, if he didn’t harm you directly, you’d look the other way. Because part of you believes that Medina has sins to pay for. In that, Justin Prior’s vengeance is righteous. If he only killed people you don’t care about, you wouldn’t want him dead.”

Amin stands up from the chair, and I panic. I tell myself to stay calm because this recording is damning as fuck, but somehow, I doubt it’ll work out that way.

“Wait. We can pay you. However much you want. Millions.” I hate the way my voice sounds when I say that, like I actually despise hearing those words come out of my mouth. So does Amin Volli apparently. He shakes his head like he’s disappointed.

“Miss Prior, why on earth would you believe I’d be motivated by money? I like the winning side. I find your strange responses to Justin amusing. He, too, lacks a heart so he doesn’t understand them. I thought that you might be able to win against him by continuing your strange charade, but it seems you’ve run out of options. Offering me money? Why, I’m offended.”

“He’s not really going to China, is he?” I have a feeling that Amin’s about to hang up. This is my last and final chance to get something out of this phone call. “He’s going to kill us at the wedding.”

Something about those statements gives Amin pause. He rubs his chin with a gloved hand.

“If he were smart, he’d leave the country. He’d allow this mess to clean itself up. I don’t know if his emotions have fully taken over. I certainly hope not.” Amin looks right at me through the screen, and his gaze is so intense, he may as well be standing right in front of me. “If he pulls a stunt at your wedding, it’ll mean the end of everything. He will never escape that scrutiny.”

“That’s his plan.” I’m sure of it, and I let that confidence show through in my voice. “He’ll risk getting caught to teach me a lesson. To teach Tess a lesson. To teach *Medina* a lesson. Think about it. Why push so hard for the wedding? He’s got the paperwork turned in. Chas and I are married now. He’ll inherit the shares. So what’s the point of a ceremony? To show off to the people of Medina.”

“I very much look forward to seeing you at the rehearsal dinner.” That’s how Amin responds. It’s *infuriating*.

“So you’ll consider it then?” I’m being brazen here, but so what? We need plans upon plans upon plans. It’s what Justin does. It’s why he’s been successful thus far. “You’ll kill him for me?”

“Possibly.” He smiles a private smile and looks away from the camera. “Tell Saffron that I said hi.”

The call ends without any obvious intervention on his part.

“What. the. *fuck* was that?” Parrish asks, pushing up off the wall. Chas stays where he is on the floor and Maxx relaxes his fighting stance. A little.

“Thank God you can’t punch people through the phone,” I mutter, and X hooks an almost-smile.

“Never tried. Willing to give it a shot though.”

“What the fuck was that? I’ll tell you what,” Chasm says softly, and then

he hits play on the recording. Instead of hearing the phone call on repeat, all that comes out is this grainy gurgling. Chas lifts his phone up like he might throw it at the wall but then drops his hand at the last second. “I should’ve known he’d cloak the call. Motherfucker.”

The room falls silent.

Amin Volli will be at the rehearsal dinner.

Do I try to convince Takahashi to show up there so she can catch him?

Or do I hope for the opposite?

Are you really pinning your hopes on Amin Volli, Kota?

What a silly, ridiculous idea.

Absurd, really.

But—and here’s another of my favorite idioms—real life is *always* stranger than fiction.



CHAPTER 34

There's an anticipatory salivation in the air. I taste it the moment the Jeep's rear door is opened, and I hesitate, one gold-heeled foot on the step, brisk air turning my bare legs to gooseflesh. I can't breathe for the impatient expectations that Justin Prior exudes.

He's waiting for me.

Our eyes meet in that strange half-space between the car and reality.

It's my rehearsal dinner tonight. For my wedding. *My wedding.*

"Hello, Princess." My father gives me his best smile, the one that charms investors out of money, that bribes judges, that sparks tiny flames of hope in the hearths of hearts that should be long cold. *Amin is right. If Justin had been good to me and mine, he could've damned the world, and I wouldn't have cared.*

"It's Dakota." I make a risky move by challenging him, but it's worth it. That perfect smile falters at the edges and I see the true heart of the monster underneath. I turn to my fiancé, waiting patiently for me to take his outstretched hand, and I make the final step out of the vehicle.

It's cold, even with the wool-cashmere jacket I stole back from Maxine. Chas—beautiful, *beautiful* Chas in his t-shirt and suit jacket, slacks, and sneakers—senses my discomfort right away. He shrugs right out of that jacket and adds it to my ensemble.

Justin's eye twitches.

I'm sure he carefully selected this outfit tonight. The addition of an oversized men's jacket doesn't suit his vision. I smooth the lapel with my hand, ensuring that my new ring is on proper display. *Suck that hairy dick bag of resistance!* I smirk at my serial killer father, and he notices.

Ooooooh, he's mad now.

"You've gotten quite uppity lately, haven't you?" he asks, unable to help himself. "Well, I suppose I tried my hardest. C'est la vie." That's what he says. Doesn't sound like that's what he believes.

Maxx is on my right, his back leaned up against the side of the Jeep. He's coiled, a predator without a hunt. He *wants* Justin's blood in his mouth but knows that a misplaced bite will doom us all.

"What's the matter, Maxim?" Justin teases, tucking his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "You look like you want to punch me again. Not sure that it'd hurt seeing as you're a cripple now."

X doesn't move, but he tightens up, muscles locked, lips in a sneer.

"Keep pushing me, and you'll have the privilege of finding out." Maxx glances over to where Parrish is now standing. He rode with Tess, but while he's allowed to stand this close to Justin, my mother is not.

Apparently, if you try to kill someone and then get out on bail, your intended victim has no trouble obtaining a restraining order. Or an order of protection? I don't know legal jargon. All I know is this: Tess cannot be within a hundred yards of Justin. Her car is parked down the hill from the venue, headlights on.

Justin turns to me with a smile, one that arcs through my heart like an errant electrical charge, burning up the last threads of connection between us. We're not father and daughter (never were). But we're also no longer victim and assailant.

"I've dropped the protection order for the sake of the wedding. Wouldn't want all of polite society to think you were abandoned by your mother the way this one was." Justin jerks a thumb in Parrish's direction and manages to time his inappropriate comment with Caroline's prompt arrival.

"Our guests are waiting," she says impatiently, looking Justin over like he's so much trash. But then he turns an expression on her that would crush most women. Caroline pretends to be cowed, averting her eyes, but there's a twitch in her lips that she can't hide. Justin smiles. Tiny acts of defiance please him. He *loves* to see rebellious people crushed by forced submission.

My stepmother is dressed to kill (pun intended) in a powder blue dress, hair in a chignon the way that Justin likes it. Her silver heels are laced up to her knees, visible only through the slit in her gown. She looks so innocent, like any other wealthy Medina aristocrat. I'm not buying it though. There's an edge in the air around her, a flicker, a blur, like she's a black widow waiting in a web. *Please kill Justin for me!* I beg silently, but I doubt it. That'd be too perfect: Justin's death and Caroline's life imprisonment.

As Justin said, *c'est la vie*.

Tess' car pulls up behind the Jeep and she climbs out, her belted trench gown and leather clutch giving her the look of an authoress with zero fucks left in the bank but plenty of money. *Get it, Tess.* I smile slightly as she makes her way over to stand beside Parrish.

"Are we about to witness a bloodbath?" Chas asks when he notices that Caroline and Tess are staring at one another like lionesses on the savannah. Justin seems to think the same thing, seems more than thrilled at the prospect of a catfight.

"Nah. Tess has more self-restraint than that," I whisper back to him, our arms locked at the elbow.

"You wanna take bets?" Chas is studying the way Tess' fingers tighten on her clutch, like she's *this* close to pulling out another weapon and giving the whole attempted murder thing another go. I bet if she'd hit Justin at the opera that she would've shot Caroline next.

"Hello Tess," Justin says, looking at her like he's thoroughly enjoying the control he has over her movements. Her participation tonight (and tomorrow, at the ceremony) are wholly and completely up to him. "Are you going to try to shoot me again? I went out of my way to have the order of protection removed so our child wouldn't appear to be an unwanted bastard."

Ouch. Another dart thrown right at Parrish. You wouldn't know; he doesn't so much as twitch an eyebrow.

"Hello Justin." Tess stays where she is, dropping her clutch to her side. "I wouldn't do such a thing, not when I'm already out on bail. Not when we're being watched." She shrugs, as if this meeting is casual when it's anything but. Takahashi and Sam are like right there, just down the drive from where we're parked.

"I've got a dress for you," Justin offers, as if he seriously believes Tess would accept a gift from him. "For the wedding. It's custom, spare no

expense. Will you wear it, hmm? Our only child together is getting married. A once in a lifetime event. Dare I say ... a fairy tale.”

“Two children marrying under duress is not my version of a fairy tale,” Tess replies easily. Neither of my parents seems afraid of one another, which is certainly a surprise to me.

If I were either of them, I’d be terrified.

“The dress was designed to complement the afternoon sun. It’s in your style, Mrs. Vanguard. But if you won’t accept, I’ll graciously donate it to a women’s shelter. I know how much you enjoyed your stay at one.” He winks at her, but she doesn’t show a lick of emotion.

Not until Caroline engages with Parrish anyway.

“Hello son,” Caroline says, likely with the express intent of pissing Tess off. “Sit with me at dinner and show your mother a little love.” There’s a strange, echoing in her voice that I can’t quite place. Regret? I doubt it. Fear? Mm. Anticipation? Seems Justin isn’t the only person excited about the weekend’s events.

“I’d sooner eat glass,” Parrish replies smoothly. He’s got on a pale pink sweater and (gulp) some khakis that don’t look as bad as I’d have expected. Guess the Vanguard prince can pull off any look. The tattoos and the necklace help, that’s for damn sure. The outfit’s a nice contrast to Maxx’s all-black ensemble and boots.

Justin remains oddly quiet during the exchange, almost like he’s caught up in his head. He never loses that half-smirk on his face though. Not that, and not the glimmer in his brilliant blue eyes. They’re the color of a summer sky and just as endless, as strange, as empty. Not a single cloud dare show its face today.

I shake my head at the weird metaphor and try to get a read on my father’s expression. He’s not looking at Tess right now which is *extra* fucking weird considering the way he usually looks at her. What did Tess say in her new book? *Worshipped her like the sun*. Yeah, like that. But ... he worships her like a sacrifice that’s worthy of being bloodied. He wants her, but he also wants to hurt her.

Today, he’s peering at Caroline with some strong similarities to that expression, like both women are wild things in need of taming. Also, like they’re both worthy of being bloodied. Huh. Usually, he only looks at Caroline like something worth being pitied. He *really* doesn’t like her, and he

doesn't respect her, but today, he seems ... interested. Keenly so.

"Parrish will indeed be sitting with his mother," Tess responds without skipping a beat. "And he shows me plenty of love. No need to worry about that either." Tess' smile turns mocking. "We have matching pajamas."

"Mom," Parrish hisses under his breath, teeth gritted, *daring* her to say something else in that same vein. Life-ruining shit for someone who pretends to be an apathetic and cold-hearted royal pain in the ass. "Do not engage with my egg donor. I'd prefer to pretend that she doesn't exist."

"Sort of like Mia does when she thinks about her own mother," Caroline replies, tossing the insult out as easily as Tess did hers. But oh. my. God. I thought I'd seen Tess in Godzilla mode before; I've never seen anything like this. *Violence on a cosmic scale. It's been there for weeks, I think, but I'm only now noticing it because her mask is slipping.*

Quickly, Chasm steps between the two women, cutting them off before either of them—or myself—can intervene. I want to. I almost do. I almost tell Tess that yes, I had thoughts like that before. Egg donor. Preferred she didn't exist. Things have changed since then, and I don't think about her like that anymore.

Just like Maxx, she made the ultimate sacrifice for me. She could've died at the opera while wielding that gun, might've (could still, I guess) face life in prison (a different sort of death). Lost her reputation. Ruined her book sales. Alienated colleagues, friends, and ... possibly her husband or children, too. I mean, neither Paul nor the kids think any less of her, but the possibility was there.

"Is this your idea of a rehearsal dinner?" Tess asks, looking around at the dark woods on all sides of us, the defiant moon staring down from its starlit blanket. "Trees and poor company? Of all the things you were lacking—heart, affection, empathy—I didn't think style was one of them. All that time living on the streets must've warped your sense of taste."

That does it.

Justin snaps, baring his teeth at Tess in a grimace that promises he might be on his best behavior, but he's far from neutered.

"Can someone who grew up in a trailer park and slept on a dirty pull-out sofa bed dare make such an accusation? You're trash, Tess. Always have been, always will be. Poverty infects the *blood*." He takes Caroline's arm, dropping the grimace on his face and smoothing his expression into

something neutral but no less menacing if you can read subtext. “As if I’d ever disappoint.”

Justin heads up the gravel drive with his wife.

If we hadn’t been frisked for weapons at the front gate ... le sigh.

“If only I’d fucking shot him,” Tess breathes, looking over at the four of us. Her expression softens somewhat, but that hard edge of violence never quite goes away. “Stay together, stay close, and don’t forget that Agent Takahashi is here if you need her.”

I nod.

Yes, Takahashi and Sam Something are here. Not because of us. Takahashi was right. We keep telling her something catastrophic is going to happen, and catastrophic things keep *not* happening. But the people involved in this wedding are at the heart of her investigation. Medina’s best and brightest. Paul’s colleagues and acquaintances. Justin’s entire social circle. Tess’ polite societal enemies.

My rehearsal dinner is investigation gold.

“What’s on the menu tonight?” Maxx asks dryly as Tess starts forward with Parrish as her escort. Chasm and I walk side-by-side while X prowls, eyes searching the darkness for any sign of a threat. Amin Volli is here tonight, surely. Whether or not he’ll make a move is yet to be seen. “Mushroom tartare and candied crickets?”

“Are either of those even real foods?” Chas replies with a snort, reaching up with his free hand to fiddle with his tie. There’s no need for that. It’s perfect and straight because I tied it for him. I’m damn good at it. I blame the weird Avril Lavigne phase I went through in junior high after I stumbled onto some old posters belonging to Saffron. For a year or so there, I could not get enough pleated skirts, ties, and shirts designed to look like corsets. I was early aughts pop-punk chic. “Imagine this: we could be having chicken and beer right now. Maybe some *tteokbokki*.”

“Chicken and *what*?” Tess says, turning a motherly glare over her shoulder.

“Chicken and ... water?” Chasm replies, like it’s a question. “Definitely not beer.” I stifle a snort. I’d love some Korean fried *chikin*, some spicy rice cakes covered in cheese. Ugh. But no, not tonight. Tonight, we suffer.

The doors to the venue—which appears to be some sort of ‘log cabin’ on the outside, pure luxe and decadence on the inside—are opened for us by two

doormen in tuxes. Our coats and bags are checked, and we're left to stand there at the front of the room while the crowd of bejeweled devils turns to stare at us.

"I'm going to go look for our dads," X whispers, and then he gives a wave to Hamilton from across the room. Tiff is there, too. I'd love to spend more time with her. I honestly think we could be good friends. *We'll have to be, seeing as we're sort of, almost sisters-in-law.* Um. I might be getting ahead of myself. I like just married Guy One. *Slow down, Kota.* "You two are the centers of attention tonight. Have fun with that."

He slips away as Tess curses and sends Parrish after him.

"I'll be back, Gamer Girl. Don't eat or drink anything while I'm gone. It's probably poisoned." Parrish disappears into the crowd (whether he likes it or not, he fits right in) and follows Maxx over to his family.

Chasm's gaze scans the crowd, lips pursed, but there's no sign of Seamus. He's a big guy, redheaded, with a lot of presence. I feel like we'd see him if he were here.

"Damn it." Chas turns his attention to the cathedral ceiling above us—and the pink drone bubbles floating up above the rafters. Remember the ones? From the Milk Carton launch party? Gross. Our every move is being documented, as usual. "Well, I don't see my dad. If X can't find him, he isn't here."

My groom is hurting, but I feel helpless to take away that pain. If showing up for the wedding tomorrow might save Seamus and Laurent, I'm willing to risk it. I put my hand on his arm, aware that we're still being watched. There's not a person in this room who isn't aware of us.

Makes sense. It is our rehearsal dinner. We're supposed to run through the ceremony for tomorrow, but that's not why most of these people are here. This is just pre-game bullshit. Did you know that I've got twelve bridesmaids? Do I know any of them? Nope.

Wait. Philippa. I (unfortunately) am acquainted with her.

I spy her across the room, gossiping with Gavin. The pair of them together? Mean Girl Mecha. They come together to create the perfect bitch. Phillipa notices me staring and flips me off. I move to return the gesture when a gentle hand curls around my wrist.

"Baby sister."

I stand corrected: I know *two* of my bridesmaids. Err, I guess my sister is

the maid of honor? I'm not good with wedding stuff. Never once in my life have I pined for a traditional wedding. I'm not familiar with the lingo. It's all Greek to me.

"Hey." I smile at Delphine as I turn around, thinking of the notes tucked into my windowsill. I might not trust her, but I can't help myself: I do like her. I do.

"It feels like I haven't seen you in forever." Her gaze drops to my dress and her expression tightens. I look down at the butterfly embroidered minidress I'm wearing. This is from Justin, too, but I figured I'd capitulate on the easier things so he wouldn't suspect anything big. Like, say, Amin Volli murdering him. The ring was a big enough stretch. "I take it this was Daddy's pick?" The question is said with such wry distaste that Chasm and I both take note, exchanging a quick glance with one another. "I mean, because of the dead butterfly on the invitation and now ... this."

There's somehow an implied *what a creep* attached to the end of that. I scratch at my temple.

Delphine reaches out and pokes one of the butterflies sewn into the dress. Their wings flap when I move, and I get the distinct impression that I'm supposed to see my entire outfit as a metaphor. According to Kimber, this is a nine-thousand-dollar Oscar de la Renta dress with some major alterations. Mine comes with a long, flowing lace skirt that's not present on the original. Lucky me.

"Yep, this is Justin's pick." I use his name shamelessly, and Delphine notices, quirking a tiny smile.

"Well, here's mine." She reaches into the pocket of her own dress—this cute little gold number with a belt at the waist—and hands me a silver bracelet. It's the one she gifted me before, the one that used to belong to her grandmother. Something about that situation always struck me as genuine. It does now as well. "You don't have to wear it tomorrow, but ... I'd like it if you did."

I look up and meet her eyes. Delphine takes that as an invitation to hook the bracelet around my wrist for me.

"What's he got planned for tomorrow, Delphi?" I ask. If she's on my side (or even if she's neutral) then surely this would be the moment to come clean, to let me know that I need to be careful, to tell me what Justin's plans are and how to thwart them.

She stares back at me for a long time, seemingly unconcerned when Tess moves closer to join us.

“I love you, baby sister. I hope you know that. I—” Delphine puts her hand to her chest and I realize that she has tears in her eyes. “My grandma and my mom, they were the only family I ever had.” Even through the tears, Delphine manages to smile. Tess looks pained by this conversation in a way that only reinforces my opinion that Delphine is a ‘good guy’. If my mom didn’t like the girl, she wouldn’t look at her with so much pity. “And then I found you.” Delphine reaches out and puts her hand over mine again, giving it a tight squeeze. “I’ve never felt less alone than when I’m with you.”

My poor heart. I reach out for her when she draws away, but it’s too late. She flees our interaction like it’s the scene of a crime, seeking out Caroline in the crowd the way she’s done all along. She follows our stepmother like a puppy. But why? *You’re up to something, Delphi. I don’t know what it is, but I’m going to do my damndest to sniff it out.*

“That poor girl,” Tess says with a long sigh. Our eyes meet and I ask her in silence if she knows more about Delphine than she’s letting on. If she understands what I’m getting at—I think she does—then she chooses not to acknowledge it, turning away from me with a very strong *period-end-of-sentence* stare. I follow her gaze, spotting Takahashi across the room.

She’s speaking with Justin, both of their heads down and pressed close, voices hushed. Sam Something is nowhere to be seen. I don’t like that. I *really* don’t like that. I’ve asked myself more than once if Takahashi might be one of Justin’s people, but it was the strength of her character and her integrity that convinced me otherwise.

Problem is, I tend to trust too easily. Even now. *Especially* now.

“You don’t think ...” I don’t have to finish my sentence. Both Tess and Chasm know what I’m asking.

“If she were working with him, we’d be dead by now.” It’s Chas that answers, but Tess seems to share in his assessment.

“If she were working with him, she’d be more useful than a government bureaucrat.” Tess shakes her head, reaching up to smooth some hair back from her face. “Incoming at two o’clock,” she grinds out, and then she turns her mouth up into a blinding (but very, very fake) smile. Seeing that expression now, I’m grateful that Tess has started giving me real smiles. Her fake ones? They eviscerate. I can practically see gold-and-diamond Medina

guts on the floor.

“You tried to kill a man in a crowded room and now you’re here?” the woman says while her husband smirks and sips champagne behind her. “It’s incredible that someone like you has such powerful connections in this community. I wish I could get away with murder.” Both the woman and her husband chuckle and Tess’ face twitches.

“If only I were as good at it as my ex-husband,” is how Tess replies. Her lips bloom into a smirk, but that’s okay because at least that gloating expression is real. “Both the murdering and the getting away with it.”

The shiny couple doesn’t seem to know what to say. They drift away, but new socialites drift in to take their place. I brace myself for a long night.

And so it begins.

We spend some time mingling with a bunch of snooty people that both Tess and Chas know but whose faces I wouldn’t remember even if I did. I tend to forget people I don’t like. Trust me in this: don’t waste your energy hating people. Dislike ‘em? Forget ‘em. Hatred is its own special form of worship.

The only people I’d want to see out of this crowd—like Danyella and Lumen—are happily absent. I don’t want them here. I’ve let Danyella know that in no uncertain terms. Not here. Definitely not at the wedding. I haven’t been able to speak to Lumen (more like, she doesn’t want to speak with me), but I’m assuming that Danyella passed on the message.

A new batch of assholes drifts toward us, unable to resist the push-and-pull of repartee and quips. There seems to be no end to Medina’s morbid curiosity.

“Investment banker. His trophy wife. Their snot-nosed daughter who worships Philippa.” Chasm is waving his hand dismissively at the approaching dignitaries. I keep my expression pleasantly neutral and remind myself that idle chatter is better than twisted plot points.

It’s still too early in the game, Kota. If Justin is going to strike, he’ll strike tomorrow. If Volli is going to strike, he’ll ... well, he certainly won’t allow himself to get caught. There’s too much of an FBI presence here right now.

So I endure. And endure. And endure.

When it comes time to run through the ceremony, I do what I’m told without complaint.

“It was always a dream of mine to walk you down the aisle.” Justin is

musing absently, his expression here as calm as I've ever seen it. When he turns to look at me, he almost appears to be *human*. "You're the type that forgives all sins, aren't you?"

I just stare at him. How messed up is that sentence? I shake my head slowly.

"There are unforgivable things," I answer carefully, unsure if I'm playing into his hands or offering a response of rebellion. He smiles at me. That's it. No more, no less.

The music—it's literally a Disney song, *literally a fucking Disney song?! GAH*—begins and down the aisle we go, walking in these strange staccato steps that make my teeth hurt. Chasm's gaze is on the crowd, eyes flicking across one row after another in search of his father.

Something miraculous happens then. His eyes widen and he clamps a hand over his mouth. I'm passing by Maxx's row now, so I'm able to see the way he turns to follow his friend's gaze. And then his expression transforms into something magical.

That ... should've been my big warning.

I knew. I knew something was coming. I just had no idea what. Or when. Timing, in this case, is *crucial*.

Even with the whole room staring at me, I can't help myself. I turn, too, and spot both Seamus and Laurent at the back of the church. The latter is hugging and kissing his husband like he hasn't seen him in a million years. The former, he stares at Chasm across the length of the church.

Did I mention that my religiously neutral ass is getting married in a church? *To snuff out the heathen in you*, is what Justin said. I think he's serious, but I also think his version of the word 'heathen' means his rebellious non-serial killer child.

Maxx gets up from his seat but not before throwing a strange look over at Justin. The fact that his father is still alive makes things seem even *more* suspicious. We meet eyes and off he goes, to join his sister and parents.

Justin presents me to Chasm (have I mentioned how weird I find this tradition?) and we turn to look at each other.

"*He's alive?*" he mouths at me, and I smile at him.

I don't even know how to respond.

We were right. No way was Justin stupid enough to kill the men closest to him. Could this actually work out? As Amin said, he'd be smarter to leave

and try again later. That's what makes the most sense. Justin would know that we'd be left with only tentative peace after he left for China, that each moment of our lives we'd fear retaliation. Tess would end up in jail. Paul, too. This makes sense. This makes sense!

He might leave.

I can't stop myself from being happy about that.

Enduring the boring vows (we didn't write these; Justin did) is a lot easier with this bit of good news. Tess' mocking laughter from the front row interrupts the ceremony as well. Bonus. Justin *seethes* at her dismissive mirth.

"Do you want to come with me to see my dad?" Chas asks breathlessly as we exit the church and reenter the attached ballroom space. Doesn't matter much to me which room we're in. Those brilliantly colored bubble drones float around to follow us. It sometimes feels like Justin is living a century ahead of the rest of us. In a bad way, I mean.

I shake my head and give Chas' hand a squeeze.

"Go. Talk to him. Just ... stay in the main room?" I clasp my hands together with a grin and Chas chuckles, reaching out to ruffle my hair. His fingers feel way too good on my scalp.

"*Geurae*, Little Sister. Stay with Parrish while I'm gone."

I slap his hand away and glare playfully at him.

"The 'Little Sister' bit stopped working a while ago. I have to put a stop to it."

"Yeah? So ... *Wifey* then?" He raises his brows at me but backs away before I can catch him. *Adorable ass*. I will not admit to loving that nickname. I've gotta maintain *some* level of dignity.

I take a seat in one of the chairs near the door as Justin greets guests on their way back to the party. Tess sits down on my left. Parrish sits in my lap.

"Hi," he says, throwing an arm over my shoulders. "I'm jealous."

"Parrish Vanguard," Tess warns, but he ignores her.

"I'm feeling free to express myself, now that I see their dads are okay." He leans in and kisses the side of my jaw. "So, what do you say to that? Make me feel special."

"Tess is listening," I whisper through clenched teeth and Parrish gives me a look.

"I meant *dance with me, please*." He leans in toward me and purrs his next

words in my ear. “Why do you always have to make everything about sex?” Parrish sits up and looks back to see Tess staring at us.

“We are at a *rehearsal dinner* for Dakota’s wedding to *Kwang-seon*,” Tess grinds out, gesturing for Parrish to move off my lap. “Could you please control yourself for the next forty-eight hours?”

“So I can uncontrol myself after that?” Parrish retorts as I push him off and into the empty seat between me and Tess.

“I’m not responding to you for the rest of the night.” Tess ignores her son in favor of watching Takahashi and Sam move over to stand in front of us. My favorite FBI agent puts her hands on her hips and flattens her lips at me in an odd grimace.

“Looks like your worries for Seamus McKenna and Laurent Wright were unfounded?” It’s phrased like a question. It’s not. It’s a condemnation. Once again, we foretell doom and offer domestic bliss in its place. “And I believe you mentioned a one Amin Volli?”

Right.

“He should be here ... somewhere.” I don’t know what else to say. I let Takahashi know that Amin would be here, but I have no idea of knowing exactly where he is. She’s part of the motherfucking FBI, isn’t she? I’m a teenager. Why should I be expected to track the dude? “Spy on Justin long enough and I’m sure he’ll show up.”

Sam and Takahashi exchange looks. The former is on my team; the latter is not.

Well, I suppose she wouldn’t be here if she wasn’t. Doesn’t mean she has to enjoy my company.

“I highly suspect the evening will be another complete waste of time,” she says through gritted teeth.

“Wait until you try the food,” Sam offers, his attention slipping past us to land on Justin. There’s some tightly coiled rage there. He doesn’t trust my father for *shit*. “I hear that this crowd serves the good stuff. There’s supposed to be *dinner* at a rehearsal dinner, isn’t there?”

Tess is watching Takahashi with a guarded expression. She doesn’t trust the authorities any more than the guys and I do at this point. Can you blame her? If it weren’t for Takahashi, we might’ve been able to sneak weapons into this party. Then Justin would be dead and—

“Until dinner then.” Takahashi’s lips are flat when she responds, but she,

too, is looking at Justin with an expression of distaste.

Tess stands up to step closer to the agents, her voice lowered.

“If I could borrow you both for a moment ...” She turns away, as if she expects them to follow her. In the past, her confidence (borderline arrogance) annoyed me. I understand it better now, having seen what Medina has to offer. In order to run with wolves, one must bare teeth.

The three of them step aside, forming a tight circle to chat.

Parrish seizes the opportunity, grabbing me by the hand and yanking me back into the church. The loud buzz from the reception area only follows us for so long as the doors remain open. As soon as they close, there’s a strange, silent echoing, like the absence of sound is being reflected back at us. I glance over at the altar and swallow down the lump of my discomfort.

The tall stained-glass windows on either side of the building lend it an air of grandeur, like a Catholic church at the height of its glory in medieval Europe. Instead, this non-denominational place of worship feels like a backdrop for murder. Like the wine cellar back at Laverne’s, I doubt anything will happen here, but the thought remains.

The ceilings were tall enough that the rafters rested in shadow, the lights dimmed to usher in the silence. What was once a room filled with vows and promises was now as empty as a tomb, awaiting its next visitor. If only that sacred space knew that its pristine quiet was about to be violated by murder.

It would be left up to Detective Dakota Banks and her trusty bloodhounds to sniff out the killer.

I snort and put a hand over my mouth. Parrish, meanwhile, leans back against a pew and turns his attention up to the large metal chandelier that lords over the room. Bet it took a crane to lift that heavy thing up there.

“He could drop this on the guests tomorrow,” Parrish muses, rubbing at his chin. “He could bar the doors and set the place on fire.”

“He could drive a car through the front window,” I add, and the vibe is surprisingly serious even if I try to convince myself that we’re teasing each other.

We aren’t. We’re afraid.

“Explosives?” Parrish turns toward me.

“A mass poisoning?” I turn toward him.

“A sword fight?” He puts his hand on the side of my face. Now he’s teasing. Justin’s taught us to expect the unexpected, but that one’s obviously

a bit of a jest. Should've pondered and expected more than outrageous outliers. Agatha Christie warned me in her writing, and I took it to heart once before. Why didn't I ... I should've taken it to heart then, too.

"You gave too much rein to your imagination. Imagination is a good servant, and a bad master. The simplest explanation is always the most likely."

Why. Why. Why.

Not even a question—a statement of despair.

But that'll come into play later. Don't worry about it now.

"A dozen jaguars?" I reply, and then our mouths are touching.

"A bulldozer outfitted like an army tank?" Parrish whispers back, and then he cups my head with both hands, fingers hot and questing as he massages my scalp. His honey-truffle eyes are darker than usual, cast with an erotic enamel rather than an imperial glaze. Either way, my love for him is divine and immutable.

"Godzilla?" My eyes are wide in mocking severity, but our mouths brush when we talk so it's hard to be playful when all I truly want is to be deviously carnal. *Oooh, that's a good one. I should write that down.*

"Mothra?" Him.

"A horde of zombies?" Me.

"A legion of liches?" Him.

Closer, closer, closer, almost kissing.

"Dracula?" Me again.

"Beelzebub?" Parrish murmurs quizzically. And then he consumes me.

Isn't hard. Parrish has power over me. Love is like that sometimes, an unstoppable force.

He kisses me and pulls my face hard against his, using his tongue to steal my breath. I'm frozen in the quiet of the church. Well, the almost-quiet. My heartbeat is loud enough to echo around us like a prayer, but I've stopped breathing. That's how I hold onto it, that promise of happily ever after.

No matter what I do tomorrow, how I fight, where I go, he will find me.

Justin will find me.

I know that.

Ah. What a holy fucking kiss. I'm not religious, but if there is something omnipotent out there, I can taste it on Parrish's lips. He's magnificent. A creature worthy of worship if anything is. My hands come to rest on either

side of his face, fingertips pressed tight to his skin. Can he feel my heat the way I feel his?

Hot blood coursing, coursing, winding through veins and arteries, flushing the skin.

Parrish draws back and looks me over with the eyes of an ancient king, someone timeless and wise. He doesn't appear to be a foppish prince today. No, this is a whole different side of him, one that I'm not sure I've seen.

It's a glimpse of the future man that Parrish Vanguard will become.

And I like it.

I choke on an incoming breath, restarting time and regretting it. Can't I stay here forever, in this space between? I don't want to see what's on the other side. I don't want to read the next chapter.

Parrish puts his hands on my waist, and I find myself leaning toward him even as am I'm aware of how inappropriate this is. We're at my rehearsal dinner. I'm wearing Chasm's ring. I ... But this boy in front of me? He's making it difficult to focus on anything else.

"Is it wrong for me to feel this way in a church?" he whispers, teasing my waist with tender fingertips. I shake my head, a tremble coming into my fingers and toes that I can't control. He notices and takes one of my hands in his own, smoothing his thumb over my aching knuckles. Parrish looks me over with an artist's eye. "The next part of your body I want to defile: your hands."

"Is that a strong suggestion to sin or an offer to give me another tattoo?" I respond in a surprisingly coy voice. *I didn't embarrass myself this time!* Parrish's smile turns crooked, and he leans in, only to pause at the most crucial moment. Lips, scant centimeters apart. Hands, drifting lower. Heat, swelling between us. Take that last metaphor as you will.

I don't know why I say what I say next. Maybe because it's true. It's true and I'm so ashamed.

"I'm afraid," I breathe, and Parrish catches me when I lose my balance and fall into him. He tucks me tight against his solid form, hand brushing down the length of my back, soothing me.

"I know. Me, too." He kisses the top of my head and I close my eyes. I could stay in the ice palace tomorrow and something would happen. I could fly to Japan and something would happen. I could gather my skirts and run into the woods by myself, disappear into the night, and something would

happen.

I could kill Justin tonight and something would *still* happen. I know that. Whatever his plan is, it's already been set in motion.

Not that I won't try to kill him again if I can. Just haven't had the chance.

Yet.

"I will love you forever, Dakota Banks. It doesn't end when this world ends. I am yours in an infinite and unstoppable way." Parrish stumbles over the words and then he puts his forehead to mine. We're both on the verge of tears. "Sometimes, I think I've been looking for you for a million lifetimes. We've met before this one. We'll meet again."

I choke on those words, squeezing him tight to me as he does the same, cradling me against his warmth. *Life. This is life. That's all I want. Not money or power or fame, just this. A hug. A kiss. A smile. A summer eating watermelon. A private moment in a basement. A night of videogames and red licorice.*

Is that ... is that too much to ask? Am I greedy? Or am I just human, too?

I open my eyes in time to see Parrish shift his attention toward the church doors. They open wide to reveal Delphine in her shimmery gold party dress. Seeing her like that, silhouetted against the backdrop of gilded partygoers, a swishy skirt teasing her thighs, expensive heels on her delicate feet, it seems impossible that she's Raúl's murderer. But she is. I know that.

Both of Justin's daughters are killers now. I'm no innocent either.

She steps into the room and closes the doors quickly behind her, glancing over her shoulder at the pair of us. Various emotions battle in her eyes before she turns and makes her way to the pew where we're standing. When she reaches out to grab my arm, Parrish smacks her hand away with an expert's touch, like he's in a drama or something.

Our private, tender moment? It slips away like sand.

"Touch her, and I'll have to hurt you," he replies, like he's bored. Not true. I can see his entire body is stiff and ready for an altercation. He trusts Delphine as little as Maxx does. Delphine sighs heavily, but the tense set of her shoulders never changes. She came here with a purpose. I notice the bottle of champagne clutched in her right hand.

"You either need to leave *now* or you need to hide." She stands there like she, too, is more than up for the challenge of a fight. If Parrish and I don't take her up on her advice, she's going to come at him.

Without waiting for a response, Delphine makes her way over to a small table near the door. It's decorated with neat stacks of programs for tomorrow's ceremony. She sets the champagne down and then reaches into one dress pocket and then the other, pulling out a pair of flutes. Those are placed on the table beside the bottle.

"Hide?" Parrish asks, looking over at me. I have no idea what's going on, but if Delphine is suggesting that we hide, then is Justin up to something? Where is Takahashi when I need her? I draw my phone from my dress pocket, but my sister materializes in front of me with an edge of derision in her eyes.

"Don't." That one word is enough to give me pause. I look up from my phone to meet her eyes. They sparkle with frustration, but underneath that, there's a blaze of intent. "He might be leaving the country—or pretending to leave the country—but he isn't sloppy. You know that. Your phone is *Daddy's* phone."

Delphine lifts a brow in challenge, but what can I say to that? She's right. Both Parrish and I watch as she finds a spot behind the first two rows of pews, lying flat on the ground to peer beneath them. She makes a huff of annoyance at the dirt on her dress, brushing it off and settling in to wait.

"Hide or leave?" Parrish asks, but we both know we're going to hide. How can we pass up a mystery like this?

"Hide."

Parrish and I join my sister in her precarious position, splayed out on the floor like naughty children.

"What is Justin up to?" I whisper, trying to find a comfortable spot. The floor is hard and cold, and I feel ridiculous lying with my cheek squished against the ground. It's the only way to see beneath the pews and keep an eye on that champagne bottle, so it'll have to do.

Stretched out beside me, Parrish Vanguard is an incongruity. Yes, he's lying flat-out, but he's doing it with preternatural grace. *That son of a bitch.*

"Hell if I know." Delphine offers a belated response, voice hushed. "He told me to put the bottle and the glasses in here and then leave. Then again, he did ask me to—"

Whatever Delphine was going to say is cut short as the doors open once again.

Justin saunters in with Caroline on his arm, her pale blue dress a striking

contrast to his navy suit.

He locks the doors behind them—not a great sign. *Please don't have sex while we're hiding in here.* I'm not sure I'd survive such torture.

Caroline takes note of the dead bolt and frowns but doesn't make any effort to leave. We're left to wait on the floor together, breath hushed, all three of us peering out from beneath the pews. As perceptive as Justin is, I fully expect him to see us there.

"A toast seems appropriate, don't you think?" he begins, grabbing the sealed champagne bottle from the side table. He pops the cork and lets it bounce across the floor. Of *course* it hits me right in the face. *If one of them comes to pick it up, I'm in deep shit.*

I should've known though. Neither Justin nor Caroline would ever stoop so low as to pick up their own trash.

"A toast to what, exactly? The marriage of your brat daughter to your friend's brat son?" Caroline pauses near the doors, like she's considering undoing the lock. Justin pours two glasses and then downs his, pouring a second for himself before he offers Caroline hers.

"No, you airheaded twit. A toast to us. More specifically to *me*, and the fact that I'm leaving." He turns around and smiles at her, lifting his glass up to toast with hers. She hesitates and then takes a sip, blatantly rejecting the offer. "What? All I've heard from you for the past several weeks is how little you want to leave Medina. Well, guess what? I'd rather not drag your ungrateful carcass halfway around the world. You stay here, play the vapid socialite, and I'll find myself a mistress to satisfy my needs." Justin's mouth curls into a persnickety smirk. "You can get yourself a fuckboy—just don't get pregnant. We both know you're a terrible mother."

Parrish flinches. Not much. Just a little.

See? I told you the Caroline thing bothered him some.

"As if you raised either of your daughters." Caroline offers the retort without looking up, studying her manicure with a frown, as if something about it displeases her. If she *were* looking up, she might've seen the flicker of bloodred lightning in Justin's face. *Violence.* "What room do you have to talk?" She reaches up and swipes a hand over her forehead. She doesn't appear to be nervous, but she's sweating profusely.

He flashes her a monster's smile, removing a handkerchief from his pocket and presenting it like a concerned gentleman. Caroline takes it with narrowed

eyes and blots at her forehead. She's blinking rapidly, like perhaps she isn't feeling well.

"Not only did you screw the biggest pansy in all of Medina—ol' P-p-paulie—you did it without ensuring you'd see a single cent of the Vanguard money. And leaving your son to be raised by Tess? My, my Caroline. You were always jealous of her in school and yet, she seems to have acquired everything you ever wanted—including my undying devotion."

"Well, she can keep it," Caroline snaps out, stumbling slightly. If I'm not mistaken, she's slurring her words a bit, too. "At least my sssson was smart enough not to trust you." Oh yeah, she's slurring her words for sure. She places one of her hands on her belly, an unpleasant pallor creeping into the skin of her cheeks and forehead. My stepmother stares at the champagne in her hands like it's poisoned.

It ... might very well be.

"Smart?" Justin echoes with a disparaging laugh. He pours himself another glass of champagne. "If he were as intelligent as you think he is, he'd have insisted on marrying my daughter and gifting her the Vanguard fortune. Instead, he let Kwang-seon McKenna steal the limelight. Must be a Vanguard trait to lack balls."

I let my gaze drift to Parrish, but he doesn't react. He remains still and silent but for the slight scrape of his fingertips against the floor ...

"Maybe he knows better than to let your diseassed whore of a daughter touch him?" Caroline fires off the insult, but it falls flat under her drunken drawl. I can't even be mad about it because I'm concerned for the woman's safety. I'd love to know what's wrong with her. Seriously.

Did my dad just poison his wife at his daughter's rehearsal dinner?

"I only need one son-in-law, Caroline. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Justin lifts a delicately cultured brow. I flinch. Can't help it. It's no surprise that he wants to kill Parrish. It's even less of a surprise that all of Justin's declarations of honesty were lies. Did I truly allow myself to believe otherwise?

I did. Just a little.

Naivety will be my downfall.

"How you ..." A long pause follows here as Caroline scrubs at her neck with the handkerchief. "... ever let a bunch of *children* fuck with you, I'll never understand." She gestures at him with her drink, sloshing golden

bubbles over the side of her glass. They foam around her fingers as she continues to blink her way through a dizzy spell. “I thought I married a mastermind, but I only married an idiot.”

That last sentence is barely understandable. I translate it automatically in my head. Sounds more like ‘*I dot I barried a massermine, but I oni barried an idiot.*’

“Is insulting me really the best move for you right now?” Justin allows a bemused smile to settle on his lips, plucking the glass from Caroline’s fingers and finishing the champagne in her place.

In a surprise move, my stepmother lifts her dress to reveal a hidden sheath, pulling a *knife* on Justin. She charges him—charge is too strong a word, really—careening sloppily out of control and slamming into the side table. Programs flutter through the air like butterflies as the bottle of champagne rolls across the floor, squandering the last of its contents.

Justin snorts as Caroline picks herself up and comes at him again.

“What did you do to me?” she cries out. I think. This is what I hear: *vuttid eww do da be?*

“Careful, sweetheart. You might hurt yourself.” Justin chuckles as his wife swings at him, the knife whistling through the air despite her inebriated state. She doesn’t come close to hitting him. How could she? She can barely stand. He steps around her violent swings like this is a game. “You’re not quite the spitfire I thought you were. Did you even kill your ex-husbands, or did they all truly die of natural causes? I’m starting to think it’s the latter.”

“You poisoned me,” she garbles, finally slumping to the floor in a puddle of designer silk. The knife clatters to the floor and Justin kicks it nimbly away with a shiny leather loafer.

“No. There’s nothing wrong with the champagne.” He squats down with a smirk. “OxyContin. You love the stuff, don’t you? All I did was triple the dose in *your* syringe.” Justin nurses the last of his drink as Caroline sits there with pinpoint pupils and a swaying body. “You went from swallowing pills to snorting the crushed powder to injecting yourself. And forcing Delphine to help? Tsk-tsk. How could I have missed such a raw opportunity?”

OxyContin overdose? *He’s really doing it, isn’t he? Murdering his wife the night before his daughter’s wedding.*

Surely, it’s not too late to save her life? I move to stand up, but Delphine holds me down, keeping my head beneath the top of the pew as I try to sit up.

Our eyes meet and she shakes her head aggressively to discourage me, tilting her chin in the direction of the floor.

I glance beneath the pew in time to see Justin rise and kick the runner aside. He uses a small handle to open a basement door and Mr. Volli appears, his eyes meeting mine from across the room as he ascends. I swear that he smiles at me, but he says nothing, climbing up the steps to stand beside Justin.

“Take her.” Justin waves his hand dismissively, easily throwing Caroline off when she grabs for his leg.

“If you take me to a hospital, I’ll tell you everything.” She’s pleading with him, hands steepled together. “If you kill me now, it’s over for you.”

I continue to translate for my own sanity. Her words are so slurred as to be nearly unrecognizable.

Justin smiles brightly.

“You mean the dossier you mailed out? It’s a shame you’re a drug addict. If not for that, you might’ve had me.” He exchanges his empty glass for a manila envelope from Mr. Volli, tossing it on the floor in front of Caroline. She snatches it up in shaking hands and opens it, eyes wide as she scans the topmost document. “What was the plan? Kill me before this arrived at the media? Kill me before the second copy arrived at the FBI? Then you claim self-defense, bam.” He smacks his hands together and throws his head back with a laugh. When he drops his chin, the expression on his face is putrescent triumph, like he’s nailed a rat to a wall and is watching it squirm. “That would’ve netted you another dead man’s fortune, eh?”

“Justin, listen—”

“No. You listen.” He grabs Caroline by the hair, and something in me just snaps.

I’m not sure I can watch this.

I know that Caroline is a murderer, too, but how I can sit back and—

Delphine reaches out, grabbing my arm, fingernails digging into my skin. I stare at her in disbelief, but when she turns to me, I see two immediate truths in her eyes.

If I interfere, it’ll be worse for me.

If I don’t interfere, then we have a smoking gun.

If Justin kills Caroline now, then I can run from this room and tell Tess. She can call or chase after Takahashi and Sam. We’ll have the Slayer and his

accomplice with a dead body. This could be it. This could be the moment I've been waiting for since I woke up to find Parrish Vanguard missing from his bedroom.

Also, I can't do that. I'm not that person. It doesn't sit right with me.

She's Parrish's mom. What I want for her is a lifetime behind bars. At the very least, I can't let him watch her die. That's an image that can never be scrubbed.

I yank out of Delphine's grip and rise to my feet, ignoring Parrish when he grabs onto the lace of my dress. I very quickly move out from behind the pew and into the aisle, drawing all the attention to myself. Justin spots me right away as Mr. Volli turns a bored expression over his shoulder, as if he didn't already know I was there.

"What in the *world* are you doing here?" Justin asks me, so strangely upbeat that I immediately regret my decision to stand. I feel like he ... like he *expected* me to be here. Caroline looks over at me, skin clammy and pale. She crawls across the carpet in her beautiful dress, but I can't risk her seeing Delphine and Parrish behind the pew. There's a lot of tussling back there as it is. Delphine has her hand locked over Parrish's mouth.

I step forward only to notice that the tulle of my skirts is ripped. Justin focuses on that with a frown, shaking his head and pursing his lips.

"Poor as you grew up, one would think you'd appreciate a nice dress."

"Take her to a hospital." I stand firm in the center of the aisle, hands in fists at my sides. Now that I'm out here and Mr. Volli is studying me the way he is, I can't help but think I've made a terrible mistake. "Justin, please. If your wife dies the night before your daughter's wedding, the whole world will know that I was right, that you're the Slayer, that you're a *killer*."

Which ... is what I want. Why couldn't I just sit back and watch Caroline die? What is wrong with me?

The world is in full grayscale at this point; I no longer know what's right or wrong anymore.

"Whoever said she's going to die?" Justin asks mildly, smiling again. I don't like that, the shape of his smile. "She's going to a rehab facility." He snorts. "It's practically a spa. Caroline will spend the time she needs there so that she can get better. I only upped her dose to teach her a lesson." He looks back at his bride. "If I wanted you dead, you would be."

"Get me to a hospital," Caroline pleads, turning back to him. Her eyes say

she doesn't believe his story. She thinks she's going to die. I can't decide if Justin having my stepmother forcibly committed or killed would be more his style. *No, he won't kill her yet. Not tonight. Not here.*

Last time I'mma say this: I *hate* being right.

"Take her." Justin gestures with his chin as I realize how stupid this all is. Here's the moment we needed—Amin and Justin in the same room—and it isn't going to do me a damn bit of good. When I draw my phone from my pocket again, Justin doesn't stop me.

"Yes, sir." Amin collects the envelope from the floor and then grabs Caroline, tossing her over his shoulder like she weighs nothing. Rather than take her back through the church doors, he descends the steps into the basement. As he goes, he turns and winks at me from behind the stag mask before Justin closes the door behind him.

I realize how heavily I'm breathing only when I start to feel faint.

"If she dies, I'm reporting you."

Justin laughs at that, removing his own phone from his pocket as he looks over at me.

My eyes search the room for a makeshift weapon.

There aren't any.

Could really use Saffron right about now. *Mom, are you here somewhere? If so, I need you!*

"I'm sure you will. My superior DNA couldn't protect you from being a goddamn snitch, could it? Go. Do it. I encourage you to call Takahashi right this very instant." He lifts his phone and then offers it out to me. "Do you want her number, Princess? I'll give it right over."

"I have it, thank you." I stay where I am, expecting a fight. A backhand. A threat.

Justin shrugs, tucks his phone away, and leaves the room.

Just. Like. That.

"Baby Sister, are you *insane*?" Delphine whispers, grabbing onto my arm as Parrish growls from behind her, swiping dust and debris from his fancy outfit. He has pink fingernail scratches on his cheeks. I find myself surprisingly grateful for my sister's intervention. I drew Justin's attention at my own risk, but I didn't want Parrish to do the same.

"Gamer Girl, the fuck was that? You could've *died*."

I'm left standing there wondering if I just made the right choice. The

wrong choice. An irrelevant choice? *What is Mr. Volli going to think now? Does my intrusion make him more or less likely to assassinate Justin for us? Did we ever have a chance in the first place? Why am I pinning all my hopes on a monster? Why did I give a fuck if Caroline died in front of me? Why, why, why?*

My fingers make meaningless grasps at straws.

I turn to my sister and my boyfriend, but I don't know what to say. They're both looking at me with strained expressions of anger and relief. Delphine's expression is a dead ringer to Parrish's, further convincing me that she does, in fact, genuinely care about me.

I touch the bracelet she gave me.

And then I move over to the rug and flip it up, revealing the door underneath. I tug on the handle. Not sure what I plan on doing, but I can't be complicit in another death. I just can't. I wasn't made to be a serial killer's daughter.

Delphine quietly pushes the door closed and then stands on top of it, making it impossible to open.

"If you try to intervene, I'll have to stop you," she whispers. Delphine's eyes say that she's protecting me. What it *looks* like is that she's protecting Justin. This girl knows how to play both sides well.

"Delphi, *please*," I beg, aware that she's likely fighting to keep me alive. I might be signing my own death warrant here by trying to be the hero, but I can't seem to resist the urge. Dakota Banks really is still in me somewhere, isn't she? Mia Prior hasn't taken over yet. "Let me just get Takahashi and Sam." As I back away from Delphine, I hold up my phone.

"Dakota, let it go," Delphine pleads, standing her ground. "Daddy says he'll take her to a treatment center. What are you going to accomplish by chasing after Amin Volli?"

"Why take her out through a *basement*?" I hiss back as Parrish joins me. He could probably wrestle Delphine off the door, but he doesn't. He's thinking about what's best for me. Not what's best for his biological mother. I turn to him, but his lips are pursed, and he seems sure of whatever decision he's come to inside his head.

"He could be taking her out to avoid the scandal. Everyone here knows a person or two—or has themselves—gone to rehab, but nobody talks about it." Parrish exhales as I look back at Delphine.

“Did you mess with her medicine?” I ask. I wasn’t even aware that someone would crush OxyContin up and use it to inject themselves. Shows how much I know. The Banks raised me well, but I was incredibly sheltered. “Delphine, this is important.”

“You are more important,” she says, her face like stone. She points at the floor. “*Stay away from Amin Volli*. You chasing after him into the basement? It isn’t happening. He’s as dangerous as Daddy. *More* dangerous than Daddy. Don’t you dare.”

“Let it go, Gamer Girl.” Parrish exhales and puts one hand in his pocket before looking up at me. “By the time you convince Takahashi to come in here, Amin will be long gone and we’ll all look crazy again. We need to keep *some* of her confidence in us.”

My mouth purses, my heart flutters. I feel like I might cry, and I can’t explain why that is.

“She’s your mother,” I whisper, sniffing. My expression softens Parrish’s hard edges, and he steps forward, using his knuckle to catch one of my tears before he brings it to his lips. He kisses the droplet off as he meets my gaze.

“Tess is my mother. Caroline is ... someone that was supposed to love me but never did. Never will. Sometimes, life doesn’t work the way it’s supposed to. Sometimes it does. Saffron is your adoptive mother and she loves you. Tess is your biological mother and she loves you, too. I don’t expect a happy ending for me and Caroline.”

“You could visit her in jail—” I begin, but Parrish cuts me off by pressing a hard kiss to my lips.

“Justin is going to die. You know that, right? He can’t go to jail, and you can’t visit him, and we *have* to end him before he ends us.” Parrish is staring at me imploringly, begging me to understand.

“I wasn’t talking about ...” I trail off. “I still want to kill him ...”

“No,” Parrish says softly. “You don’t.”

Tears come then. Because Justin walked me down the aisle tonight and it means nothing. Because Maxx and Chasm were so happy to see their fathers, even if their relationships with them aren’t perfect. Because Parrish has Paul. Because ... because ...

“I’m just so tired of watching people die.” I slump like I might fall to the floor, but Parrish catches me. I’m tired of being clever. I’m tired of fighting for my life. I’m tired of blood. I’m tired of stress. I’m tired of fear.

I'm just tired.

Parrish gathers me to him, dignified and still as I cling to his pink sweater. I'm getting it wet with tears and—sorry, about to go TMI on you—probably snot, too. He strokes my hair and keeps me there while Delphine hovers awkwardly in the background, like maybe she'd hold me like this, too, if I asked.

There's a frantic pounding on the door, and Delphine moves over to open it. She steps aside as the doors fling inward, revealing the other two men in my life. They're both frazzled and *furios*.

"After you just warned me not to leave the room? Wifey, for real?" Chasm looks down at the basement door (he never misses a thing) as Delphine kicks the corner of the rug back into place. Chas glances back up at me. X ... never stops looking at me.

"You're in so much trouble, Kota," he breathes, hot fingers gripping my bicep to draw me away from Parrish. We stare at each other, sharing one of those supernatural couple moments. I know everything that he's thinking in an instant and vice versa. His pretty lips purse. "This is why you're my woman: independent and strong-willed. Just don't let those traits be the end of you."

"The fuck is going on in here?" Chas grits out as I try to figure out what to do with what I just saw.

"Maxx, Chas, I—"

Tess flows into the room like the heiress of hell, red-faced and raging. Oops. Takahashi and Sam are right behind her. Neither looks amused in the slightest.

"Dakota." Tess' voice flames. Ouch. I thought it'd be easier to deal with her once she was using my real name. Not true. I scrub my tears away with my arm. "Why on earth would you think it was okay to sneak in here alone?" Tess impales Parrish with an equally punishing glare as she walks over. "You, too, son. If you two want to be treated like adults, act like adults. If you want me to treat you like children, that can be *arranged*." She hisses that last word like a pit viper.

"Caroline—" I start again, but Delphine grabs my arm hard, nails digging into my skin. I try to shake her arm off and end up with a set of matching scratches to Parrish's instead. Doesn't faze her. If anything, she holds me tighter, as if this scenario is a struggle for our mortality. Might be.

“Not now.” Delphine looks at Tess, once again reconfirming more of my suspicions. *They’re working together behind-the-scenes. I knew it! Why else would they keep sharing private glances? It’s sus as fuck.*

“Is there another crisis at hand?” Takahashi asks wryly, moving deeper into the room with her hands tucked into her pockets. “Something you need to tell me, Dakota?”

Sam moves right up to the basement door, scooting the rug aside with his own foot. My breath catches as he kicks the rug out of the way and Delphine pales considerably. The agent’s normally jovial face morphs into a frown. He looks up at my sister, but she can’t stop him going down to the basement as easily as she did me.

“May I?” Sam asks, and Delphine steps aside. He takes his phone out, activates the flashlight, and down into the darkness he goes. I wait with bated breath.

“Well?” Takahashi asks, looking around. “Your mother made it seem as if you were at death’s door. Once again, I see nothing amiss, just an empty church and a spilled bottle of champagne.” She sighs. “Underage drinking is not a crime worthy of my attention.”

Delphine *stares* at me, and I look back at her, both of us breathing hard.

I make a split-second decision.

“Justin drugged Caroline with OxyContin; Amin Volli carried her out through the basement.” My face is a mask of resolute determination. Delphine releases me with a scoff and scowls as she looks me over.

I should’ve listened to her.

Maybe then Takahashi wouldn’t have followed my words on a wild-goose chase? Maybe her supervisor wouldn’t have lost all patience with me and mine? Maybe more agents would’ve been at the church? Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. One day, I’ll sit down to write and I’ll learn that regrets are a part of life, that most of us are just doing the best we can, and that sometimes people make mistakes. Sometimes people make really, really big mistakes.

“Amin Volli, eh?” Takahashi does not look like she believes me. She removes a weapon from her belt, holding the pistol in two hands, and she follows Sam Something into the basement. I wonder why she isn’t calling for backup.

Later, I’ll learn that she had no backup.

She was at that party because of her faith in Agent Murphy; there was no

backup.

“He has a jet waiting to take him to Beijing after the wedding. I’m supposed to be on it.” Delphine turns away and exits the room, leaving me to stand there with her nail marks in my arm.

“OxyContin?” Tess asks, because even if there’s no proof, she believes us. “Explain.”

Parrish and I do our best to mumble through the story—glossing over the kissing bit at the beginning—but Tess hones in on it anyway.

“You came in here to make out and nearly got yourselves killed?” is what she says, and then she laughs hysterically and rakes her fingers through her hair like it’s her fault we keep ignoring the rules she gives us. “I can’t take my eyes off of you guys for a second, can I?”

Nobody talks. Chas stares at the ring on my finger. Parrish stares at the floor. Maxx and I stare at each other’s faces.

We all wait with bated breath as several minutes pass.

The agents reemerge, sans weapons. Takahashi’s tucked hers back into the holster at her waist.

“There’s nobody there,” she says, unsurprised. *Fuck, fuck, fuck!* “But we’ll make an effort to speak to Caroline this evening.” With a frown, Takahashi heads back toward the party, nostrils flared in frustration.

Sam stays behind to look us over.

“If I were you, I’d steer clear of the ceremony tomorrow,” is what he tells us, but he needn’t bother. We already know. Only an idiot would attend that wedding.

Or a desperate, besieged person at the end of their rope.

“What are we supposed to do?” Tess asks him, sounding desperate. “I’ll be in *jail* soon. He has full custody of my daughter. How do we get out of this?” She narrows her eyes at the FBI agent. “You should’ve let me bring a weapon tonight.”

Uhh. My mom just basically told an FBI agent that she wants to kill somebody. Not good. Sam, at least, seems sympathetic.

“Itsumi—I mean, Agent Takahashi—isn’t convinced that he’s a killer. I am. I’m also a bit of an outlaw.” He offers a sideways smirk, reaching up to ruffle his sandy hair. “We’ll figure something out for tomorrow. I’ll touch base with you in the morning.”

He, too, leaves the room, and then we’re all just standing there with the

open basement door gaping like a dragon's maw. Cold air drifts from it to tease my ankles, and I shiver. Maxx takes me under his arm and Tess' mouth flattens into such a straight line that it almost entirely disappears from her face.

"Let's go. I think we've stayed long enough." She turns away and heads down the aisle, her dress flowing dramatically behind her.

"I'm guessing this was your doing?" Maxx replies dryly, looking over at Parrish with a shake of his head. "Encouraging Dakota to sneak in here? Man, do better."

Parrish bares his teeth at his friend as Chas tries to intervene between them, the way he always does.

Personally, I can't stop thinking about the dossier that Justin mentioned, the one Volli took with him in the manila envelope. If Caroline sent enough of those out, maybe one of them will reach its intended destination?

"Are you okay, Naekkeo?" Chas asks me after his friends have chilled out, and I shake my head to break from the stupor.

"I'm okay," I promise, looking back down at the crumpled rug beneath my feet.

I lift my head and hurry back toward the party—most importantly: the exit—catching up to Tess before we even reach the car. A strange thought sticks in my head and refuses to dislodge itself from my addled brain.

Not everybody gets a happy ending, Kota. In life, sometimes nobody does.

My phone pings, and I lift it from my pocket to stare at it. Only good thing about this creepy metaphor butterfly dress is the pocket, I swear.

It's a text. From Justin's burner phone. But it's a text from Amin Volli.

I'll make you a deal: if he doesn't get on the jet, I'll even the odds.

"I can't believe this is our last night," Parrish whispers, arms folded behind his head, eyes closed. We're lying side by side in the dark, the four of us. There's a blanket spread out across Parrish's bedroom floor, and we're doing a bit of indoor stargazing.

One day, we'll see the stars outside again.

"Our last night?" Chasm echoes, and I turn to see that his eyes, they're most definitely open. He's studying the constellations above for answers.

And these new stars that Tess bought? They're boss, bright enough to cast the faintest glow in the room. Chas is painted with starlight. "Why our last night?" He sits up. "We are *not* going to die tomorrow, Parrish Vanguard."

"Oh?" Parrish's eyes open as he turns his head to stare at his friend. "Pray tell us, dearest valedictorian, what's your plan to get us out of this mess? Tomorrow, we run out of time. We don't go to the wedding, Justin stops playing nice. We go to the wedding, hellfire rains down from the sky."

I turn away from them to find X studying me. I get the feeling he's been watching me and not the stars all this time.

"Seeing my dad today was one of the best things that's ever happened to me. I don't trust that. I begged all three of them not to go to the wedding, but Laurent's convinced that he has no choice. He's going to be there which means he's not safe."

"My dad advised me to attend the wedding." Chasm's voice is stiff and strange. He sits up and throws an elbow across his knee, face visibly scrunched, even in the star-dark. "I don't know why I feel like I should trust him." He scrubs his forehead overly hard with his hand. "He told me that I was shaming my wife by wearing metal in my face during the ceremony." Chas reaches up to remove one of the rings from his lip, staring at it forever before he puts it back in.

There's a knock at the door—which isn't even closed.

That means it's someone who isn't Tess for sure.

"You may enter," Parrish says, and I honestly can't decide if he's joking around or not. No clue.

"Hey Kota." It's Saffron's silhouette in the doorway, shoulder leaned against the jamb. "You won't see me tomorrow, but I'll be around, okay?"

"Okay, Mom," I say, but before she can leave, I decide to get up and give her a hug. Small moments of affection are important. There will *always* come a point when it's our last, and we don't get the privilege of knowing when that moment is. I try to make them count when I can. "I love you fierce."

"Love you fierce, kid." She gives me a kiss on the cheek, and then she's gone and only the scent of her perfume—distinct only in that her fragrance is comprised of an ever-revolving variety of scents—remains. *Tess has worn the same perfume since I was a child. The same kind.*

Saffron passes by Tess on her way, giving the Other Mother a pat on the shoulder as she goes.

Tess watches her go and then moves up to the door to stand beside me.

“What are we going to do tomorrow?” I ask without turning around. I can’t see the boys’ expressions anyway. My night vision is shot. “Did Takahashi message you about Caroline?” Tess nods—grimly. Uh-oh. “Did you tell her about the text from Mr. Volli?”

“I told her, but there’s no proof left on your phone. Amin must be as good a hacker as Justin.” Tess pauses and exhales. “Unless it wasn’t even Amin who sent it.”

Yikes. Why didn’t I consider that?

The text disappeared as soon as I got it. I didn’t dare reply for fear that Justin would read it. Tess is right: Justin might’ve sent it himself. Or instructed Mr. Volli to send it. I can’t trust anything—not even my own heart.

“Caroline was checked into a rehab facility nearby. Takahashi even went over there personally to speak with her. It seems she didn’t find anything amiss. I’m so sorry, Dakota.”

How ... how can this be?!

No matter what move I make, Justin is ten steps ahead. *He did expect me to be in that room, didn’t he? He wanted me to watch that scene. But what about Delphine? Every time I convince myself that she’s a good guy, she throws a very big, very hard wrench at my skull.*

“Are you working with Delphine?” I give up. I finally ask the question that’s been bugging me for weeks. If Justin hears me ask it, so be it. I can’t take it anymore. I *have* to know the answer. Tess hesitates briefly, long enough that I have all the clues I need. “I knew it.”

“Exchanging information, passing notes, that’s all. I don’t trust her, but she claims that she wants Justin dead or in jail. She claims that she wants to take care of *you*.” Tess sighs and then moves into the room, closing the door behind her, like she, too, is in desperate need of stars. She sits on the end of the bed, and I sit beside her. The boys remain on the floor.

My tattoo itches and I reach down, placing my fingers over the top of it. *Three hearts. Me, Saffron, Tess. We’ll forever be a part of one another. Justin gave us something we might not have otherwise had. In a strange way, I’m thankful to him for that.*

“Everybody keeps warning us to stay away from the wedding; we keep warning ourselves to stay away from the wedding.” I turn my head to meet my mother’s matching eyes in the dark. “Justin’s a very vindictive man.” I

don't have to say anything else aloud. The people in this room have joined my inner circle. I know and love them as much as I love the Banks. They can practically read my mind.

If we don't go, he'll retaliate. Force me to join him in China. Kill the wedding guests. Come for us afterward. If we do go, any or all of those same things could happen.

I reach up with both hands and ruffle my short hair with my fingers.

Still, nobody talks.

Because this is what a checkmate looks like. It doesn't matter which space you move your king to. The move is irrelevant, and you are going to lose. It's sometimes hard to see, even harder to accept, until you've manually tried each square in your mind, watched a bishop or a knight or a rook destroy everything you ever loved.

Or a pawn.

Amin Volli—depending on whether he fights for the black or the white side—could change the course of everything.

I won't count on it.

"It's smarter for Justin to leave," I continue, "than it is for him to strike during the ceremony. It makes sense for him to wait for Tess and Paul to go to jail, let the heat die down, the surveillance fall away. It makes just as much sense for him to blow up the venue."

"Or send a dozen jaguars," Parrish murmurs. Nobody gets the joke but us. I chuckle. Doesn't last. Reality is an icy numbness in my fingers and toes.
Fear.

"No matter which way I look at it, we have no moves left." I dig my nails into the tattoo until it hurts.

We have to flip the board.

Everyone here knows that, but nobody quite knows how to do it.

"I've already made the decision for us," Tess declares, and I try not to bristle at the authority in her tone. It's her call to make. I'll do what she thinks is best. "We'll go to the wedding." Tess' next words are rough, unpolished, like even the queen of the true crime novel doesn't know which way her villain is going to move. "Takahashi plans to be there anyway. It's best if we stay close to her." With a strong exhale, she slaps her hands on her thighs and stands up. "I'm worried that Justin *won't* try to pull something tomorrow. If he's on his best behavior, we might lose the interest of the only

authorities still willing to listen to us.”

Tess stays where she is, reaching out a finger and poking it through the bars of GG’s cage. *One day, I promise you’ll have a hutch and a yard to hop around in. I swear it. Stay strong my bunny brethren!* The rabbit flattens his ears and ignores her, munching on some mustard greens.

“Laverne’s attending the wedding.” Parrish sits up beside Chasm, and then Maxx joins them, and the three of them make a very pretty picture on the blanket together. *They’d look even better naked*, I think before tapping at the side of my head with my knuckles. *Down mammal brain. Not tonight.* “I’ll see if I can’t bring her over to our side.” He lifts his chin with an air of superiority. “She’s always found it difficult to resist my charms in person.”

“She’s not the only one.”

It was me. I said it. I blush, but it’s too dark in here for anyone to notice.

“Yes, well, you are not the groom tomorrow and you will not steal the spotlight. Do you understand me?” Tess gives her son a look in the dark. It’s such a classic Tess response to a blatant Parrish-ism that it makes the world seem normal for two seconds. I like that. I wish we could rewind time to the moment we shared before the Bend trip, when neither of us had doors.

I wish I could hear Chas murmur *fuck it* before he kissed me by the pond near his house.

I wish Maxx and I could cuddle up and watch *Dirty Dancing* for the first time all over again.

I wish Tess and I could meet anew, look across my grandparents’ dining room table, and smile at each other.

“Hi, I’m Tess, and it’s so wonderful to meet you.”

“Hi, Tess, I’m Dakota. Call me Kota if you want.”

“How much time are you going to get with that plea deal?” I ask absently. I never wanted to know the answer until now. Still don’t want to know it, but I can’t keep my head buried in the sand.

“Five years.” Tess kisses me on the forehead and then she goes out of her way to do the same to each of my boys. I thought she was cold in the beginning, but she’s just shy and stern. Tess Vanguard has the heart of a chocolate chip cookie straight out of the oven.

I smile despite the circumstances.

“Love you guys. Goodnight.” Tess slips into the hall, leaving the door cracked and the hallway light on. Some things never change.

Some things do. Even if you don't want them to.

Nobody has to ask if we're having a sleepover. All we do now is have sleepovers, platonic or otherwise. Parrish pulls his black comforter off the bed, drags a few pillows down, and we lay in a chaste foursome, looking back up at the stars again.

"Is it weird if we all just cuddle together tonight?" Chas hazards, gritting his teeth like he thinks Parrish and Maxx might tease him. Not that there's anything to tease him about. If any night was built for cuddling, it would be this one. Wait. Never mind. I'm of the persuasion that *all* nights are built for cuddling.

"It's only weird if Maxx touches me." Parrish feigns apathy and then grunts as Maxx rolls into him and throws a playful arm around his waist.

"Aww, come on. We all know you have a crush on me." X snaps his teeth near Parrish's ear and the pair of them end up in a tussle for dominance. I grin and giggle (not even embarrassed about the giggling thing).

"We're so fucked, aren't we?" I ask with a bemused sigh, and Chas gives an empty laugh in response, turning to nuzzle my neck.

"Yep. Completely and utterly fucked."

Maxx and Parrish stop fighting, the room goes silent, and then it's just the four of us in hazy star fog and rapidly spiraling thoughts.

Our hands curl together. Mine and Chas'. Mine and Parrish's. Maxx moves so that the crown of his head is pressed to mine, his legs stretched out in the opposite direction of my own. He reaches back with a single finger and presses it against my lips. I kiss it.

Till death do us part, boys.

Literally.



CHAPTER 35

Today could be my funeral and I'm not sure I'd be any less excited than I am now. I *want* to be excited at the prospect of marrying Chas, but instead, we're just sitting here and staring at each other. Cross-legged on the floor in my room, still in our pj's, we share one last private moment before the ceremony.

I've got the song *FIREWORK* by &TEAM playing currently. It provides the perfect backdrop to this moment as we hold our hands up and curl our fingers together. Chas marvels at the ring on mine.

"I wish I had a mom today," he says, and then he pauses, like something's just occurred to him. "Although, I guess I have Tess?"

I nod because I can't speak. Because he stares at me then. It doesn't have to mean anything, but somehow, it means too many things. *God, those eyes of his.*

"I'll be good to you, Dakota. I promise."

I squeeze Chasm's hands again and lean in. He meets me, forehead to forehead.

"I'll give you my all," I promise because I've made a decision about my future based on an event I don't even have control over. This wedding has been a *huge* factor in helping me make a much-needed decision. *Sunflowers and scream/silence cabins and the desperate need to be loved.* I have never met anyone who needed to be loved as much as Kwang-seon McKenna.

"I like you in a way that's visceral to the brain. You're up here as much as

you're here." He touches his forehead and then his chest. "Or here." Slides his palm down his front. I blush, but that's not the point. Sex is beside the point completely. That's why I know his eyes are hiding a plan. He's not the only one. Parrish. Maxx. Definitely Tess.

We're all working on our own contingency plans.

"I like you in a way that's integral to the soul." That's the only thing I can think to respond with. *Was that good? Was it hokey? Ehhh, I sound like a vintage Hallmark card or something.* The smile I get in response says otherwise. Chas leans in, nice and slow, and my lids get heavy.

"*Kiseu hae,*" he breathes, which pretty obviously means *kiss me or I'm going to die right here on your bedroom floor the day of our wedding.* Our lips pay obeisant greeting to one another, fingers curling ever tighter. There's an energy loop between us, a current that I don't want to let go of. Kissing Chasm is life, distilled in its purest form.

This kiss, like so many of the kisses I've shared with the boys over the past year, is a marker of time.

It's a landmark.

It's a memory.

"Knock knock," Tess says, but she only says it. She pushes the cracked door in to peer at us. I can't see her since I'm facing Chas. We break apart but just barely. He's looking at me and not at her, not even with the heat of her stare falling over us. "Delphine is here with your dress."

"I don't want to let you go," Chas tells me, but he withdraws his hands anyway and puts them back in his lap. "I have a bad feeling about today."

"I've had a bad feeling every day since Parrish was kidnapped," I admit. Today, as colossal, as historic, as monumental as it is, feels only *slightly* more menacing than some of the days we've already had. If we don't show up today, whatever tricks Justin has up his sleeve will be revealed later. This is better. This is best. We have Takahashi and Sam. We maybe-possibly have Amin Volli as backup.

I turn around to look at Tess. She's standing with her arms crossed, glasses askew, hair mussed. I almost want to be Tess Vanguard when I grow up. Won't lie.

"Did you check it for formaldehyde?" I joke. Sort of. Having my skin erupt in bloody lesions before I collapse on the ground in the center church aisle seems like a very Justin-esque move. "Do we have an alternative?"

“You could always wear the dress I wore when I married Paul.” Tess isn’t joking. She’s dead fucking serious.

“Do we poke the bear?” I ask, staring down at my lap. Chas stands up first, holding his hand out to me. The thought of pissing Justin off by wearing that dress is tempting, but I decide against it. If he’s really going to leave for China, then good riddance. I don’t want to do something that might trigger him if he’s not otherwise going to retaliate. “No, it’s fine. I’ll wear the damn dress.”

Chasm and I are both standing now, staring at one another across a small space.

“This isn’t goodbye; I’ll see you downstairs.” He looks so grave, so serious. I can’t help but try to reassure him. He touches the side of my face, his hand hot on my aching skin. I put my own hand over the top and hold him there long enough that Tess feels the need to clear her throat.

We separate and Chasm leaves for Parrish’s room. I just so happen to glance back as he opens the door. Both Parrish and Maxx are in various states of undress. I see Parrish’s tattooed chest. I see Maxx’s angel-inked back. And his bare ass. Why is he buck freaking naked?!

I turn away as Tess looks back, but the door is already on its way shut so she doesn’t see anything.

“That stupid app is trending,” she tells me. I know it is. I mean, I haven’t looked, but I’m not surprised. This is Justin Prior, after all. “Milk Carton.” She snorts at that as I turn back to her, my eyes catching on the diamond tennis bracelet on her slender wrist.

Right.

I’ll wear mine today, too.

Tess tried to bring it up casually this morning, like she really wanted me to wear it, but wasn’t going to push for it. This time around, I wear it with pride.

I move over to the nightstand and slide the drawer open, pulling the bracelet’s velvet box out and holding it in my hand. When Tess gave this to me, I couldn’t simply appreciate the thought behind the gesture. She was buying me something she liked enough to want to share, and I didn’t try to see it from that perspective.

Neither of us says a word—this *is* still Tess Vanguard—as I put the bracelet around my wrist and struggle to close it. I’m so focused on that, I don’t notice Parrish coming out of his room until his long fingers are taking

over for me. He closes the clasp with a deftness that stirs my breath. I look up to meet his eyes and find them wracked with pain.

It's a different sort of pain than the shit Justin's been inflicting us with.

This ... this is the pain of a broken heart. *Oh, be still my own aching heart.*

"I want a picture with you in your dress," he whispers as Tess makes a small sound of impatience from behind me. Parrish keeps hold of my wrist, stroking a thumb over the wild animal that is my pulse. I realize then that he still isn't wearing a shirt.

My gaze gets permanently stuck on his bare skin, on the art that Chasm inked into his flesh. I think about the basement in Bend, about Parrish telling me that I should be with Chasm instead of him. Who could've predicted this is where we'd end up?

"Son, today is your *best friend's wedding*—however it came about—and you *will* be respectful." Tess clucks her tongue and then grabs her much-taller-than-her child by his ear. He scowls prettily in response but doesn't fight back. Respect is what holds him back, not obedience. "Today of all days, I *do* expect you to wear a shirt."

"It'd be hotter if I threw on my tux jacket and let the tie hang around my bare neck."

He's dragged away by Tess, walking backward in the hall while running his middle finger down from his exposed throat to his—

I flip away from him before he drags me into his goddamn orbit.

I should be the sun. They should be the planets. Why does it always feel like there are three suns yanking me into their solar systems instead?

"I am my own solar system," I mutter, and Parrish howls.

"You bet you are, weirdo!" He escapes into his room before Tess gets ahold of him again.

"For Christ's sake," she murmurs, pausing when she sees that both my grandmother and my sister are standing in the hallway. I only wish Saffron were with them. She didn't explicitly tell me she was hunting Justin today, but ... I think she's going to be hunting Justin today.

Instead, it's Delphine accompanying them. She's already dressed for the ceremony—blond hair braided over one shoulder and threaded with flowers, her ruffle-tiered gown in navy blue.

"Baby sister," she says, smiling at me with her whole face. I don't know why it took me so long to get it. I should've been able to see how much

Delphine cared about me from moment one. “*I’ve never felt less alone than when I’m with you.*” My heart hurts when I see her step past Maxine and Carmen, the garment bag slung over one arm. Poor Delphi. I doubted her, too, because Justin wanted me to doubt her, and I played right into it. “*It was Nevaeh or Maxine; I made the choice like I thought you’d want it made.*” Damage control, like when I picked Saffron to die.

I hurt, but I smile back. Genuinely. With my whole heart.

Kimber slinks down the hallway behind the other women, Amelia’s small hand clasped in her own.

“Amelia didn’t want to be left out,” she grumbles, and now I’m grinning from ear to ear. Maxine picks up on Kimber’s FOMO and reaches out to give her blond hair a playful tug.

“Hey, this is a big day for Kota. On your best behavior.” Maxine slips past, giving Delphine a grin of her own. “You ready to dress our little sister up like an eighties themed Barbie doll?” She pokes Delphi in the arm companionably, and I warm up from the inside-out. Delphine says she doesn’t have any family but for me? Not true. She’s got a built-in support system right here. “That dress, my God, but it’s hideous.”

Delphine chuckles despite herself as Tess holds her arm out to indicate my room with a dramatic sweep.

“Here we go, Carmen,” she says with that jaded ‘I hate adulting’ sigh that’s a trademark of anyone that’s over the age of thirty-five. “Marrying off our little girl.”

Our. Our little girl. Not that I’m a little girl, but it’s cute anyway. On the inside, I’m positive that I’m at least a thousand years old now. *Thanks a lot, Justin.*

“She’s strong; she’ll survive.” Carmen pats me on the head as she passes. “I imagine you’ll make a wonderful wife, and that Chasm will make an equally wonderful husband.”

“Hey.” A deep voice interrupts the moment. I turn to see Maxx standing there—fully-dressed this time, looking *fly as fuck* in his navy blue tux—and fidgeting with his hands in a way that he never does. His expression holds an appropriate amount of chagrin for interrupting the moment, but he doesn’t apologize or hold back. “Do you mind if we talked for just a minute? It won’t be long.”

I nod because I can’t speak.

He takes me by the hand, and I can't help but hear the song that's on repeat in my room (the Korean version of *FIREWORK* this time, rather than the Japanese version that was on earlier).

"The moment our eyes met, bang, bang, fireworks blooming in the sky." That's how Chas translated the lyrics for me anyway. Maxim. Me. Fireworks from the very beginning.

X escorts me to Tess' office, knowing it'll be empty. He doesn't close the door, leaving it cracked behind us out of respect.

There we stand in morning sunshine and uncertainty.

There we stand in love and heartbreak.

"I still don't know what this wedding means, but I don't care. No matter your decision after this, I'll always love you. That won't change. I just wanted you to know that. If you need time alone with Chas after this, I'll give you however long you want." He wets his lips. "If you need time alone forever with Chas ... I ... I'll do my best."

I mimic the motion of his tongue with my own.

We stare at each other.

"Thank you." I don't think there's anything else to say. For Maxx, this is a lot. I know his urge is to stomp his caveman foot and declare that I belong to him. I snort and shake my head at the image. "Without you, I wouldn't be standing here today. I would be dead. My sister might be dead. Saffron might be dead."

"You give me far too much credit." He smirks at me as he leans down, tasting my lower lip with a naughty sweep of his tongue. His eyes, half-lidded and made for evening trysts, lock me down in a vibrant emerald stare. "I did you wrong, Kota, even if it was for the right reasons. I never deserved another chance, but you gave me one anyway."

My fingers lock behind his neck, noses touching, breath mingling.

"Stay safe today, okay? I barely survived the last time you got shot."

"I'll do my best," he swears earnestly, and then he's kissing me goodbye. I know why he's doing it, but I don't stop him. It'll be easier to kiss *hello* later if we leave off like this.

Maxx keeps his promise, returning me back to the women of the family in short order.

My sister—of the Banks variety—cracks her knuckles as soon as the bedroom door shuts behind me. The hideous dress lies unzipped on my bed,

frothing out of the garment bag like crystal-studded whip cream. It's so unbelievably hideous—but it does have pockets. Remember what I said about pockets? Girls go nuts for 'em.

“Ready for this, Kota? You might drown in lace and tulle.” Maxie grabs onto Delphine's arm as the latter smiles and raises a mischievous brow.

“If I were you, I'd wear the dress, but ...” Delphine grabs a pair of shoes off my desk and dangles them off the ends of her fingers. “Even Daddy won't notice if you wear a pair of Converse with it.”

Mismatched Chucks in lime green and black? With Sharpie decorations? For my wedding?

Yep.

“This dress is worth at least six figures,” Kimber whispers in awe as Amelia borrows a couple of my Unicorn toys (err, collectible art figurines!) to play with. “If anything, at least you won't look poor.”

“Don't be gauche, darling.” Carmen gently chastises her new granddaughter and Tess smiles softly, like even her tough shell has been cracked.

I exhale, stealing this moment as a freeze-frame for my soul. I will kindle this memory for as long as I have a consciousness with which to cherish it.

Growing up is a tough journey for everyone. Sometimes it's fun. Other times, it can be scary. It can be confusing. Shameful. It can be lonely. I think that's a big part of it, the loneliness of change, of meeting people and then losing them, of finding new friends, of discovering who you are. Of saying goodbye to your old self in order to welcome new experiences.

It's also a journey without an end. We grow and change at sixteen. At thirty. At sixty.

Each year, we're lucky to be alive.

That's the most important lesson Justin has ever taught me.

I hold it close to my chest as Delphine waves her magic wand and gives me the full Cinderella treatment.

By the time she's done, I am unrecognizable.

By the time Justin is done, that pristine white dress is red with blood.

Take deep breaths, Kota. You've got this.

I put a hand on my belly, trying to calm that queasy feeling in my gut. *Even if Justin leaves for China, this game between us isn't over. He'll come back with new pawns, new rooks, new bishops, new knights. We'll have a full board, and this will start all over again. As for me, I'll lose Tess. Paul, too, probably. The FBI. My half of the board will remain empty.*

Optimism.

It's the drug that's always fueled me. Even on a day like today, I can't resist its pull.

We can handle it though, can't we? If we're alive, there's always another chance. Always.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale.

I move down the hallway alone, following belatedly after Tess. She's got a fancy old tripod camera that she also inherited from her grandmother, a woman I never met but somehow feel like I still know. We're going to take a family portrait with it before we leave in the limo.

The massive floof of a dress barely fits down the hall. No joke. It's that wide, that bouncy, flouncy, and annoying. I slap at the voluminous folds as I head for the stairs, pausing with a single hand on the banister.

Everyone is going to be waiting for me down there, all eyes on me.

Once again, I'm famous for all the wrong reasons. Heh. From kidnap victim to grieving girlfriend to ... the daughter of a murderer. My Twitch channel is *buzzing* and it's not because I dominate *Apex Legends* or *Final Fantasy XIV* or *World of Warcraft*. It's because I'm Dakota Lorelai Banks, and my life is weird as hell. Famous for being unusual.

Could have worse things to complain about though, so you know what?

Fuck it.

I'll use my fame for good, however I acquired it.

I descend the steps, infinitely glad that I'm wearing the sneakers and not the ankle-breakers ... I mean *high heels* ... that Justin sent. I can hear laughter already, the low murmur of voices, and then I'm rounding the staircase's curve and revealing myself to the foyer full of people below.

The room goes silent.

I freeze.

It looks suspiciously like several people are trying not to laugh.

"Parrish Vanguard, don't you *dare*," I hiss at him, but it's already too late. He's doubled over with silent laughter, hand clapped over his mouth.

“Kota Bear,” Walter chokes out, tears in his eyes. He turns away, drawing a handkerchief from his pocket because he’s just *that* old-fashioned and likes to carry around things like that. “She looks like a deranged child bride.”

“Stop that, you sentimental old fool.” Carmen elbows her husband, but she, too, is trying her best not to laugh.

“Okay, I get it! I look ridiculous!” I gesture at the giant cupcake that dares to call itself a dress. “Can you guys at least pretend that I look cute?”

“Oh, you look cute alright,” Maxx agrees, hands stuffed into the pockets of his tailored slacks. “A cute little marshmallow ad—for preschool-aged children.”

“She looks like a Swarovski crystal shop besieged by a blizzard.” Parrish finally stands up straight, dabbing tears from his eyes with his knuckles.

“Some boyfriends you guys are.” Maxine moves over to the staircase and holds out a hand, helping me down the last few steps as Tess fiddles with the camera, trying to hide the strained smile on her face. As lighthearted as this moment is, we all know that today is a risk. Maybe it’s the biggest risk we’ve ever taken. Maybe it’s a gamble that we’ll win. Only the ticking of the clock will tell. “You look adorable, Kota.”

Chasm hasn’t moved from his spot in the center of the foyer, sweat glistening on his forehead, hands trembling as he does his best to straighten out his crooked tie. My sister leads me straight to him, depositing me in front of my husband. Legally, he already is. This ceremony was designed to show off our union to the diamond-encrusted sharks that compose Medina’s high society.

“*Cheonsa*,” Chas whispers, his voice trembling as much as his hands. I reach out and gently pry his fingers off the citrine shimmer of his silk tie. The navy suit and white dress shirt pair well with it, giving off that *mountain lake beneath a sunset* vibe that Justin was going for. “You’re beautiful, Wife.”

“I see you’ve finally stopped calling me Little Sister,” I whisper right back, fixing his tie the way I’ve been doing all along. He takes my hands in his, the warmth of his body seeping into mine, fortifying me for what’s to come. Whatever that may be, we’ll handle it together.

“Might slip up every now and again.” He tries to play it cool, but there’s nothing cool about Kwang-seon McKenna right now. He looks young and perplexed and in love. I smile as I look up at him. We hit this life milestone way too early, but that’s okay. We’re here, and we’re going to make it. I

know that. He knows that. We're both far too competitive to let our young marriage go to waste.

His gaze shifts to one side, and I look over to see Seamus, of all people, waiting by the door. Beside him, Takahashi stands with her arms crossed, looking frustrated by her own presence in this mess. Sam grins at me and gives me a cheesy double thumbs up.

"Hey." I draw Chas' attention back to my face, putting my hands on his cheeks. "We've got this."

"Listen to your new wife or I'll use my grandmother's money to ruin your life." Parrish stands beside us, trying to play off his heartbreak as apathy. His voice breaks and the insult reveals itself for what it is: pure and harmless fluff.

"Thank you for the well wishes on my *wedding day*," Chas gripes back at him. X comes over to put his hand on Chas' right shoulder.

"You've always been like a little brother to me, and you will always, always have family in me and mine. No matter what." Maxx leans in, giving Chasm a very severe look in warning. "*No matter what.*"

Pretty sure he's telling Chasm that there's nothing in our romantic endeavors—mine or any of the boys'—that could break our friendship apart. The four of us, we're solid. I think that even if there'd been zero chemistry between me and the guys, we'd have formed this sense of closeness anyway.

We're friends.

That's the most important takeaway here.

"I have to run ahead to meet Daddy," Delphine says softly, as if she doesn't want to interrupt us but has no choice. I turn to see her standing there, a faint sheen of tears in her eyes. If Justin has something nefarious planned for today, he hasn't told my sister. She reaches out for my wrist, gently touching her grandmother's bracelet, running her thumb over the one that Tess gave me. "I love you, and you're going to do great. I won't let him force you onto that jet."

That makes me smile.

I step away from the boys to give her a hug, closing my eyes and reveling in the warmth of her embrace. Delphine knows how to hug like a member of the Banks family, like she really fucking means it.

"I'll see you in a few." I draw back and she gives my cheek one last pat before heading to the door. I watch her go before looking back to see poor

Paul shepherding the twins into the room. They both look *miserable* in their formalwear, but they only have to wear it for the photo and that's it. They're not going to the wedding. Paul isn't going to the wedding. The Banks are not going to the wedding.

This is my compromise.

I can't stop the boys from going—Chas is the groom and the other two flat-out refuse to let either me or him go without them. I can't stop Tess from going (not a person on this earth can make Tess Vanguard do something she doesn't want to do). But as for the rest of my family? They'll be as safe here as they would anywhere else.

"Alright, I think I've got this figured out." Tess stands back from the tripod, biting her lip and pushing loose strands of hair from her face. She doesn't look like the mother-of-the-bride, she looks like a movie star on the red carpet. Her form-fitting gown gives me mad dress envy.

Here I stand ... wearing a cream puff skirt with a fitted bodice and a mountain of cleavage. *All the easier to see my boob blushes. Super.*

"You could've, you know, just used your phone to take a picture?" Kimber says with an annoyed huff. "How old is that thing anyway? It's like an antique or something."

"It is an antique, and it's worth a lot of money—since you seem to care so much about those sorts of things." Tess snaps her fingers to gather the attention of the people in the room. "Tallest in the back, shortest in the front, Dakota and Chasm in the center."

"How contrived is this?" Parrish wonders as he takes Ben by the shoulders and positions him in the front row. Parrish plucks the book from our little brother's hand and tosses it onto a decorative side table. Ben pouts adorably, shoving his glasses up his nose. "A group photo? Please, Mom, I'm gagging on clichés over here."

"It's hardly unreasonable to want a photo of my family on my daughter's wedding day." Tess huffs and sighs, glancing over at Seamus in his austere black tux. "You're not going to join us?" she asks, and he hesitates. He's so severe in the face, so tense and cold. But the way Chas looks at him? I know he loves his dad anyway.

"I suppose it can't hurt," he finally admits, coming over to stand behind his son. He even puts his hand on Chasm's shoulder, and I swear, I see my husband stand a little straighter in response.

“I look forward to being your daughter-in-law,” I tell Seamus with all due sincerity. My statement seems to surprise him, but he does his best to form the first smile I have *ever* seen on the man’s mouth.

“Well ...” He trails off as Chas looks back at him. “I look forward to getting to know you, Miss Prior.” Err. Well, okay. We got somewhere, but we didn’t go all the way. I can never forget that Seamus is Justin’s pet, can I?

“Mrs. McKenna.” Chas corrects his dad, and I give him a look. “What? You don’t like that?”

“Dakota Banks,” I repeat for the trillionth time. “My name is Dakota Banks.”

Sam offers to take the photo for us while Takahashi glowers in the corner, checking her phone every so often and tapping her foot impatiently.

“This isn’t particularly professional, Agent Sam,” she grumbles at him, making me think that his name really is Something Sam and not Sam Something.

“Come on, Itsumi, it’s just a photo.” He takes the shutter-release button in his hand. “Relax a little.”

“What’s your full name?” I ask him, because I just can’t take the burning curiosity anymore.

“Samuel Sampson,” he replies, and the room goes dead silent. He’s ... kidding, isn’t he? Agent Sam sighs heavily. “I know. My parents have apologized numerous times for that. Sometimes, I wonder if they hated me from birth.”

I laugh and he bumps the button, capturing our family in midmotion.

“Don’t worry; it can take a few,” Tess calls out, giving both Henry and Amelia an ear pinch to get them to behave. She stands up straight, puts her arm around Paul as my grandparents do the same to one another.

And Chas does the same to me.

“X, hold my hand or I’ll die,” Parrish whispers, and Maxx snorts. They hold hands behind my and Chas’ backs as I try to hold in another laugh. “So much less satisfying than it should be.”

“You’re my brother, too, and I love you—whether you like it or not,” X tells him blandly, and then he flashes that American flag smile of his. I swear, I hear like bald eagles crying out in a Montana sky or something.

The camera flashes again. And again. One more time.

When it’s done, the family scatters to the wind. Seamus leaves in his own

car, Takahashi and Sam head for theirs, and the boys get ready to pile into the Jeep.

“Stay right behind us *at all times*.” Tess points to each of them in turn. “We’ll be in the limo with ... *that man*.” She curls her lip and then shakes her head with a tired sigh. “The security team will be right behind you. No deviation from the plan. I cannot keep you guys safe if you don’t listen to me.”

“We’re not the ones riding in a car with a monster,” Parrish gripes, mussing up his hair with his fingers.

“It’s *my* limo,” Tess says, trying to reassure her son. She’s serious. She bought her own limo just for today. Not even joking. Rich people are so friggin’ extra. “It’s also bulletproof—”

“Bullet resistant. No such thing as bulletproof.” I can’t resist being a smartass. “What? It’s true.” She gives me a softly admonishing look and then pats my cheek in a motherly sort of way.

“Fine. It’s bullet *resistant*.” Tess exhales and reaches up to fix one of her earrings. Beautiful navy stones set in gold adorn her ears, adding to that old Hollywood glamour that surrounds her in a glittery, diaphanous fog. “At least if we’re riding with Justin, we can keep an eye on him.”

“Huge mistake, in my humble opinion,” Parrish repeats softly, but it’s not like Tess has a choice.

His riding with us, that was a condition he presented her with in exchange for dropping the order of protection against her. Without that, Tess wouldn’t be allowed to attend the wedding at all.

Too bad we’re all going to be checked for weapons beforehand—both by his people and ours.

One can never be too careful.

I lift my hands to rub at my face and X grabs my wrists, preventing me from smearing my makeup. I flush all over, but it’s probably not visible under the twenty tons of foundation I’m wearing. He gives me a little smirk before dropping my wrists, and that flush deepens further. It’s impossible to hide, what with my boobs on full display the way they are. I see all three guys stealing occasional glances.

“Don’t try to be a hero today, you hear me?” Maxx says, the words authoritarian and absolute. I roll my eyes at him, but it’s Tess who answers for me.

“Nobody is trying to be a hero today. I hope the four of you understand how fucking serious I am.” And wow. We all go silent as we stare at her. Tess rarely curses, so when she does, you know she’s fired up about something.

“I just want to get through the day alive.” That’s what Chasm says. His eyes blaze like a sunrise over the mountains, gold and fierce and hot. “We can deal with Justin another day.”

Tess nods, like she shares that simple hope with him. I’m not entirely sure that she does. If she gets another chance to make a move, I’m *positive* that she’ll take it.

“Say your goodbyes and let’s go.” Tess checks her grandmother’s watch. “We’re running late.”

I give each of the three boys kisses on their cheeks. It seems appropriate. I’m not about to have a three-way make out session while wearing my wedding dress and avoiding the stares of my grandparents and sisters. Kimber is hunched in a corner, arms crossed and glaring through a thick frosting of FOMO. She looks like a designer-clad gremlin.

“I’ll see you guys at the venue, okay?” I gather another kiss in my hands and toss it at the boys. Maxx reaches out like he’s going to pretend-catch it, but he’s thwarted when Parrish pretend-slaps it away and then pretend-steals it for himself. “You’re all too much, you know that?”

“Remind me why I’m letting you guys be my groomsmen again? This is getting kind of weird.” Chas gives them both wry looks and then shakes his head, reaching up to play with his tie again. I give his hand a gentle smack.

“Getting weird? It’s been weird from the get-go. But look at her.” Parrish gestures at me with an insouciant hand. “*She* is weird. Could you expect anything else?”

“I’m leaving!” I back away from them, waving with both hands as I head for the door. “I love you all!”

“Stay safe, sweetheart,” X whispers, gaze affixed to the floor. He smiles to himself as Chas and Parrish get into some small squabble or another, and I turn away to find Maxine and my grandparents waiting for me.

“Don’t you dare leave this house,” I warn them, because I can totally see Maxine sneaking out to attend the wedding. That’s just the sort of person she is. *Fearless*.

“We wouldn’t dream of it.” Carmen gives me a kiss on the cheek and then

stands back to admire me as my grandfather pats at his face with the handkerchief. “It’s you that I’m worried about.”

“Mom will be there with you,” Maxine tells me, tucking me into another warm hug. “Even if you can’t see her, she’ll be watching.”

I nod with my cheek still pressed to her chest, and we reluctantly pull apart.

“Have your mom take plenty of video,” Walter tells me, and I nod again. *Mom. Tess. Mom. Saffron.* Two people, one role. I’m a lucky person in some ways, aren’t I?

“I’ll see you guys in a few hours; we’re not sticking around for the reception.”

I wave farewell and off I go to meet my fate.

The title 'CHAPTER 36' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, blocky letters, while '36' is in a vibrant pink, cursive script. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a large drop, set against a light pink gradient. Bare, black tree branches are visible in the upper corners, and a dotted line trail leads from the bottom right towards the center.

CHAPTER 36

“This wedding is our crowning glory,” Justin tells me, stepping forward to take my chin in his hand. He’s nice enough about it, still playing the part of the doting father instead of the consummate villain. His eyes shine with the promise of conquest, of showing the whole of Medina who he is and what he can accomplish. “You’ll be married like royalty in front of them all. They’ll finally have to face the reality of the situation: that I was, am, and always will be superior to every person in this fucking town.”

I take a step back and Justin releases me without breaking my jaw. Small wonders, eh?

The Jeep Gladiator idles on the street as Tess waits impatiently just behind me, near the limo with Takahashi and Sam. *Sam. More like Sam-Sam.* I resist the urge to give a hysterical chuckle. No matter how calm I seem, how blasé, I’m afraid.

I’m terrified.

Justin’s eyes shimmer like a falcon as he studies me, my sister by his side. Caroline is nowhere to be seen.

Nor is Amin Volli.

“Did Daddy tell you that his app is number one in every app store in the country?” Delphine adds with a beaming smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. Justin tosses a smirk her way, pats me on the head, and then looks me over with a twitch of his lips.

His gaze lands on my hair and even though we've met for lunch a half-dozen times over the past few weeks, he hasn't allowed himself to stare at me the way he's staring at me now.

My hair color bothers him, even if he won't admit it.

"Congratulations," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. Justin scares me. Milk Carton scares me even more: it's an app that can change the world for the worse. An advanced facial recognition app for the average layperson to track their friends and family? To track strangers? To hack cameras and systems they should never be allowed to have access to? No thank you.

Alas, that's a problem for another day.

"Congratulations," Justin repeats contemplatively. He leans in toward me, lips near my ear. I hate the way he lays his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "I don't know how you pulled it all off, but I'm impressed, nonetheless. And just when I thought you were useless." He stands up tall, giving my shoulder another squeeze—a normal squeeze this time and less like a snapping turtle biting down hard enough to crack a bone—and he looks at me with begrudging pride. "It was a good move, just ill-timed."

That statement makes zero sense to me, but I don't think I'm supposed to get it. *Does Justin know about Veronica, that she washed up on the lake's shore? If he does, he isn't letting on. Does he believe that I had something to do with Antonio's death? Where the fuck is Mr. Volli?*

"Are you ready, Princess?" he asks when I don't respond, cupping the side of my face as both Tess and I tense up. There's a tenderness to his face, a softness that I've never seen before. I don't understand it at all. It scares me, but it also makes me feel hopeful. Maybe he really will leave for China after this, and I'll never have to see him again? One can hope.

"Daddy?" Delphine says, like maybe she can sense the strange mood in the yard as well. We're standing outside the old Vasquez place now. *Standing outside of the princess' tower more like.* This place is practically a prison in my mind, practically an execution block. I almost *died* in there.

"You're going to be beautiful today," is what Justin tells me, and he looks at me with such care and affection that I'm confused all over again. Delphine looks between him and me with a confused pinch between her brows, trying to puzzle out his strange behavior. Is he acting for the FBI? Is he feeling regretful now that he's leaving the country? Is he going to fucking kill me?

Even years later, I'm convinced of one thing: Delphine had no idea what

was going to happen that day. No idea at all.

“Um, thanks?” There’s me, being eloquent again. How else am I supposed to respond to his creepy compliments?

“Delphi, sweetie.” Justin turns to his eldest daughter and looks her over. “I left Kwang-seon and Dakota’s gift at the office. Go and fetch it for me. You can meet us at the venue.”

“But Daddy—” she starts, and he cocks his head at her like he’s appalled she’d dare talk back to him.

“How am I to present the gift at the reception if you don’t go and get it? I’m not in the mood to listen to *stupid* today. Go. Now. And hurry up,” Justin snaps, reaching out to give her cheek a condescending pinch. He leaves her skin with a red blemish when he draws his hand away.

“Yes, sir,” she replies meekly, head bowed. “I’m sorry that I disappointed you.”

My sister gives me one last look of warning before she turns and heads for her own car.

I swallow back my emotions and offer Justin a demure smile that’s only skin-deep.

“Off we go.” Justin offers his arm, but I don’t take it. He needs to be patted down for weapons first. “Ah, yes. The unpleasant formalities. Let’s dispense with them, shall we?” He saunters off toward the limo, accepting a thorough pat down from both Sam and another man in a nondescript suit. *One of Justin’s men, I think.*

Tess lifts her lip at him, but she doesn’t say a word. He isn’t worth the breath in her lungs.

Both of my parents receive the same treatment, but Justin goes out of his way to inspect the vehicle with his own man by his side. He even dons white gloves and runs them over the tires, under the hood, checks inside the trunk.

“You did try to shoot me, didn’t you?” is what he says to Tess by way of explanation.

Only once they’re both satisfied that the car is safe, that neither person is armed, are we able to climb in together. Tess steps toward the limo, but Justin is already there, opening the door and sliding in first. He doesn’t wait for us to get in which seems weird. He’s always pretended to be chivalrous in the past. When he’s not killing someone or beating them, he’s gregarious and fun-loving. What gives?

Fear, that old friend of mine, settles around me, but I still get into the limo. Sometimes—far too often—I think back to that moment and I wonder what might’ve happened if I didn’t get in, if I’d made another stand there. Would more people have survived? Part of me is glad that question can never be answered but let me explain.

I climbed into that limo because I believed we’d make it to the church before anything bad happened. It’s not that I didn’t think he was planning something, only that I thought he was planning something for the ceremony. How dramatic would that be?

Me, in my dress and heels (err, sneakers) and veil. Chasm, in his tux and tie and loafers. Maxx and Parrish as groomsmen. Maxie and Delphine as bridesmaids. All of Medina’s best and brightest gathered in the pews.

That’s where I expected Justin to make his move.

I was right. I was also wrong.

“Come on.” Tess holds the door open for me with a forced smile. She didn’t want to do any of this, but she didn’t have much of a choice either. *What if she tries to kill him again on the drive?* I’ve thought about that all night, how easily she gave into the idea of sharing a limo with Justin. I hope she knows what she’s doing.

“Thanks.” I move over to the car and Tess helps me in, rearranging my skirts like she might have done had we arrived at this situation via a happier route. She slides into the seat beside me, and we both put our seat belts on. Even Justin clicks his into place.

“We’ll be with you the whole way,” Takahashi says before she closes the door behind us. I’m not sure if that statement is meant as a warning to Justin, as a confidence booster for us, or if she’s still trying to please Agent Murphy’s ghost. Doesn’t matter.

Our driver works directly for Agent Takahashi. She won’t be one of Justin’s pets. She can’t be one of Justin’s pets. Fingers crossed that my optimism is well-placed this time around.

The vehicle rolls out of the driveway as I look toward the rear windshield. The boys have turned around at the end of the street, near that dreadful park and all the memories it holds. They fall into line behind us as the agents take point on our little motorcade. Tess’ hired security team plays the role of caboose in a blacked-out SUV.

“How long until the church?” I ask, looking to Tess instead of Justin.

“Not long,” he replies before Tess can do it for him. She looks past me to where he’s sitting, her eyes narrowed, one hand playing with the fine diamond tennis bracelet on her right wrist, a perfect match to my own. It’s a symbol of hope now, risen from the ashes. She shifts her gaze to me before resting an elbow on the windowsill.

“I’m proud of you, you know that?” she tells me, like she expects to die today. For all I know, that’s exactly what she’s thinking. “You’ve been through a lot; *I* put you through a lot by bringing you to Washington. Cutting you off from the Banks. Forcing fourteen years of longing on you that weren’t your fault.” She reaches out and touches the side of my face. “You’ve handled it well.”

“You like the person we’ve made together?” Justin asks, and it’s a genuine enough question that it gives me pause. I still don’t look at him, focusing on Tess’ expression and the way she stares at him. For the briefest of seconds, I can see how they loved each other once upon a time. But Justin isn’t capable of empathy. That’s where most of his mistakes are made: underestimating how much one person can care about another.

“If I could erase our history together, I wouldn’t do it.” Tess exhales and then turns her gaze to the window, staring out at the massive estates and the walls that keep their wealth and splendor hidden from the rest of the world. She looks back at me again. “I like Dakota exactly as she is.”

“You’d give up fourteen years with her all over again?” Justin continues, and I can hear the leather of his seat creaking as he leans in toward us. “You haven’t changed a bit over the years, have you? You stole my child, had me committed, and then you tried to *kill* me. At the opera, no less.” He sighs and shakes his head, sitting back in his seat like he’s disappointed. How ironic. “Tess, my darling, whenever are you going to grow up?”

My back remains to him, goose bumps prickling my arms and legs. Tess doesn’t react to that statement but for an exhale, turning her face away from his. Can she feel the way he’s looking at her? In the beginning, I thought at least *some* of this was about me, his long-lost daughter. But I’ve realized recently that I am incidental.

Justin is here for Tess.

We continue on in silence. I watch the scenery roll by outside the window, mansions falling away to suburbs whose yards expand with each mile traveled until we’re officially in the country. We head back toward the venue

where the rehearsal dinner was held, a blanket of forest enveloping the thousand-acre property on which it sits. Traffic thins. The road shifts from pavement to gravel.

The limo hits the first deep curve in the road, rolling past the decorative fence that marks the edge of the lodge's property. After that, there are fields of wildflowers backed by protected woodland. It really is a remarkable place, somewhere I'd be honored to visit under different circumstances.

My fingers curl tightly in the voluminous folds of my gown as I practice my breathing. The closer we get to the church, the more nervous I become—with good reason.

Against my better judgment, I finally look at him.

Justin Prior. The CEO of Milk Carton. My father. The Seattle Slayer.

He smiles at me, and I smile back.

Neither of us is genuine in the act, but we're both intent on playing the part of a doting father and his loving daughter today.

In a proper role-playing game, right before the big boss, there's always a story-progressing cinematic. The gameplay should culminate in an epic conclusion, a crescendo that hits like a wave, leaving you breathless.

This is that moment for me.

It's quiet, the sunshine is soft, and the lake sparkles like a gem on my left. I will never be able to erase those final seconds from my memory or my heart. The last time both my parents will not only be together in the same room, but also the last time they'll both be alive. It's the sort of memory whose scent is fragrant, but whose thorns are wicked sharp.

I will bleed every time I'm tempted to stop and smell the roses from the past.

I lean back in my seat, practicing a breathing exercise that I read about online. It works, and I feel my heart rate slowing, my body relaxing. Outside, the brilliant sunshine bathes the white and yellow and lavender flowers in the too-green fields. It's a nice contrast to the lake, the one that stretches nearly to the horizon. I can just barely make out the pines on the opposite shore, houses buried amongst their thick trunks.

My attention comes to rest, ultimately, on Tess. She's gazing out the window, her espresso hair draped over a pale shoulder, her dress the color of the water beneath the surface, blue darkened with shadow and depth. She turns to look at me, her lips painted a barely-there nude, her eye makeup

tasteful and understated. She smiles at me, really smiles at me then. It isn't a forced smile or a grimace or a tight-lipped manifestation of disappointment. This is real. Even in such a strained and broken moment, she's truly smiling at me.

That smile is a brilliant, tangible symbol that she's telling me the truth: she is proud of me. I'm glad that I let Parrish tattoo those hearts into my thigh. I'll think of Tess and Saffron every time I look at it. A smile captures my own lips.

The sound of tires on gravel snaps us both out of our shared reverie.

"What on earth—?" Tess sits up ramrod straight, turning to look at something out the window. "Itsumi, goddamn you." She frowns as the black sedan driven by Agent Takahashi makes a sudden U-turn, churning dust, and takes off in the opposite direction. "How *dare* she leave without telling me."

"It appears," Justin says mildly from behind me, "that the world does not run on your orders, Mrs. Vanguard."

Tess' head is silhouetted perfectly against the wild backdrop outside as she turns to look at Justin. That's how I happen to see a small, white commercial truck coming our way. These are relatively quiet country roads, and as far as I know, we have both the lodge and the adjoining church booked for the entire day and night. The truck is speeding so quickly that I wonder briefly if it's some last-minute touch for the wedding.

That doesn't last long.

The vehicle is coming directly at us.

I start to call out a warning, lips parting, lungs filling with the breath to scream.

The truck plows into Maxx's orange Jeep, sending it skidding through the grassy edge that borders the lake. It topples over, rolls twice, and smashes through the thin wooden fence before plunging—upside down—into the water below.

What ... what the fuck is happening?!

How long does it take for a car to sink? Three minutes? Two? Even less than that?

Not long enough, is the answer.

Maxx, Chasm, and Parrish—they're all inside!

"M—" I'm going to say *Mom*, I think. I'm going to open the door and hop out, even if it hurts. I'm going to tear the dress over my head and then I'll

jump into the lake wearing white lace negligee and sneakers. I'm in the process of doing that when I notice the second car.

Tess doesn't see it. She's still processing the split-second destruction of the boys' car. I bet she'd have jumped out right alongside me, give or take a few seconds.

We don't have that long.

It's coming so fast. But Justin's in the car, too. Surely, he wouldn't kill us all?

But ... would he though? Would he? Oh yeah.

A black sedan railroads us, changing the physics in the limo so quickly that I don't quite understand which direction we're traveling. Metal screams, glass explodes across my skin, Tess makes a noise that sounds like dying, bone snaps. We spin, a gruesome carousel ride that seems to go on forever.

My brain lights up with pain and then empties into a space of sweet, white nothingness. Everything slows down then, and I experience time in a way that I never have before. *Is this what dying feels like?* It's that thought which dominates my brain.

The princess dress is ugly with blood. My mother's expensive high heel is no longer on her foot and is instead finding its own way across the glass-strewn floor. I am so hyper-focused on the minute details of this moment that I see other, stranger things. My father's tie is the most glorious pale blue, to match his eyes no doubt. My veil becomes a ghost, haunting those last few seconds as it hovers over the blood-strewn cabin.

I black out.

My ears are ringing when I next regain consciousness, my body limp and useless in my seat belt. It's like a sling now, holding me against the leather seat when I'd otherwise be on the ground. Tess is there, I know that, but she isn't moving. When I blink through the grit and try to look at her, it's hard to make her face out underneath all the blood.

"Well, that was unpleasant." Justin sighs dramatically, undoing his seat belt and fixing his hair before he reaches up to dab at some blood on his lip. I don't even think it's his. He crouches down so he can walk across the cabin to Tess' door. He tests the handle, but not like he thinks it'll open. The sedan is implanted firmly in the limo's side, just inches to the right of the door. Justin uses his elbow to knock the glass out instead, clearing the window before he turns back to undo my seat belt. "See what you've made me do,

Mia? How many chances did I give you to fix your behavior? This is on *you*.”

My body—which weirdly doesn’t hurt at all—slumps uselessly onto the seat. The only part of me that seems to be working are my eyes. Even my brain is broken. All I do is lie there as Justin takes Tess’ seat belt off next, letting her fall hard against the door. It’s the way her head lolls against her chest that scares some sense into me, the lifelessness of her limbs.

I try to sit up, but I don’t seem to have control over my body. My legs feel like they’re in a distant galaxy, too far away to communicate with. My toes ... do I still have toes? I suck in a wet breath, blood filling my lungs along with the air I’m trying to breathe. It hurts to cough, but I can’t seem to stop.

As I struggle to get enough oxygen, my father works himself out of the broken window and lands with grace on the gravel road beside it. Takashi’s sedan slides back into view, skidding and kicking up dust before it comes to a stop. She climbs out of the driver’s side door as Sam follows from the passenger side, genuine concern coloring both of their faces.

They saw that we had an accident and came back for us. How nice. That’s how fucked my brain is, that I’m thinking like that. Justin is just standing there as Takahashi pulls her gun and levels it on him, smart woman that she is.

“What happ—” she starts, but she doesn’t finish her sentence. Blood splatters the back of her head and she glances back in time to see Agent Sam stumble against the side of the car and fall to the ground. His head is ... his head ... *Somebody shot him!* A whimper escapes me as Takahashi turns back to Justin. *Boom.* The gun drops from her hands and she, too, crumples to the ground.

Dead.

Both FBI agents are dead.

If I could’ve screamed then, I would have. I would’ve started screaming and I wouldn’t have stopped. Instead, all I can do is make these sad, small, pathetic sounds. *Is somebody shooting from the trees? Is it Mr. Volli? Where is Saffron?*

Justin removes the pale blue pocket square from his suit jacket, using it to dab the blood from his face. With a slight smile, he saunters confidently around to the driver’s side of the limousine. His footsteps tell me all I need to know about the situation. *Justin* is the one who is going to finish this, not us.

That's how it was always going to end.

We got here when we did by making a stand when we shouldn't have.

I've got a clear view of him through one of the other broken windows. Wish I didn't. Then I wouldn't have to watch him shoot the moaning limo driver in the face. *Where are the bodyguards?* I wonder. Weren't they right behind the boys?

Justin glances in that direction but only briefly. He returns to the task at hand, moving to the driver's side window of his accomplice's car. After a quick look inside, he pulls the trigger again. The sound of it tugs at those primal fears deep inside of me, the fear of dying that Justin cursed me with over and over and over again.

Now it's happening.

I'm bleeding *everywhere*.

The Seattle Slayer—make no mistake, that's who Justin is today—returns to Tess' door, his arm flying in through the open window to snatch me by the hair. I'm given a shake before he drags me across my mother's body and outside. *Chasm can't swim!* I think as I see the lake flash by, and then I'm in Justin's arms, and he's carrying me across the gravel road, as limp and broken as a discarded doll.

"When I warned you not to mess with me, you should've listened." He tosses me into an idling vehicle, into the dark cargo area of some sort of truck. When my body hits the floor, I'm reminded in a very violent way that I *can* still feel pain.

My brain short-circuits, and I lose consciousness briefly.

When I blink my heavy lids open a few seconds later, I find Tess lying beside me.

Her eyes are open now, too, and I'm so relieved to see that she's still alive that I let out a small cry.

Tess reaches out a quivering hand and gathers both of mine into her grip. But I can't feel her touching me, can only see it.

"I love you, Dakota," she tells me, so softly that I can hardly hear her over the rumble of the truck's engine. I want to say it back to her, just in case, but it doesn't seem possible to talk right now. "Stay calm. Breathe. Never stop breathing." She acts like I have choice in the matter, like my body isn't taking erratic, spasming breaths against my will, wet ones that hurt when they go down.

I might truly be dying.

I've thought long and hard about whether Justin would kill me someday, and now here we are.

The truck rumbles down the road, but we can't see anything. It'd be pitch-black in here if not for some air vents high up on either side of the truck. There's just enough light for me to see Tess' face.

"I'm ..." The word is slurred and soggy, but I'm proud of myself for getting it out anyway. "I'm dying." It sounds like I have a cold or a sniffle, but I think my face is just ruined. My head is pounding, and I'm so tired that I contemplate going to sleep.

That's not such a good idea, I know that. I do. *If the boys are dead, then I should let myself go with them.* But I don't know that for sure. I can't pull a Romeo and Juliet, can I? I *have* to find some way to get to them.

"Look at me." Tess manages to keep her voice even, but she's clearly in much worse shape than I am. How is she doing it? But then I start to notice small things as the light shifts and bounces across her face. She's got tears cleaning tracks through the blood on her skin, trailing from the corner of her right eye straight to the floor, and from her left eye, down the length of her nose.

Oh.

She's not in worse shape, is she? If she's that bad, and she's looking at me like that ... I try to look down, but I can't move my head, just my eyes. All I see is my body bathed in a blighted red wedding dress. My gaze moves back to Tess and stays there, focused on her hand holding mine.

The truck comes to a stop, and we hear Justin climb out. I'm struggling to swallow past the blood as Tess pushes herself up onto her elbow, looking toward the roll-up door of the truck like she wants to rush it. Can she? I don't think she could get up if she wanted to.

Justin throws the door open, sunlight flooding the muted darkness. I've never seen anything quite so hideous as his face when he smiles at us, backlit from behind and covered in shadows.

"My queen, my princess, we'll be taking a flight shortly. Wait here for me, would ya?" He laughs then, like that's absolutely hysterical. "Guess I don't have to worry about that, do I?" His face shuts down then, smile disappearing like smoke. "Neither of you is going to fuck with me ever again. *Ever.*"

He scowls at us as he moves away from the vehicle, footsteps heading

perpendicular and away. I'm still not able to move, but with how I'm curled onto my side, I can see down the length of the truck to the outside world. A cement strip, surrounded by grass. For as far as I can see, waving green strands and dotted wildflowers.

"It's an airstrip." The terror in Tess' voice kicks me in the chest with adrenaline, and a miraculous thing happens where I have limited control of my hands and arms. I'm able to sit up a little bit, too, coughing and spattering blood on the floor beside me.

I just stare at that long stretch of cement and pray that Tess is wrong about that.

"What if he has a jet?" Tess is speaking aloud, but I don't think she's talking to me. She's talking to herself, trying to come up with a plan to save her daughter. She looks down at me, and I see it in her eyes: if she can give her life to save mine, she'll do it.

I have no control over that.

"Don't ..." I fight to catch my breath, trying to shake the dizziness from my head but finding it heavy and difficult to move. I'm just hunched over like that, short hair bloodied and hanging on either side of my face. *I will never forgive you for cutting my hair, Justin.* "Don't make a move unless you can finish it in one." I lift up a single finger, proud of myself for getting that much of my body to move. "Only one."

There's some distant, muffled shouting and then we hear Justin cursing as footsteps pound across the gravel.

"Daddy," Delphine is begging, running behind him with blood on the side of her own face. "She jumped the pilot; she almost fucking killed me!"

"Well, Delphine, whose fault is that?" Justin says, using the single step at the back of the truck to step up. He grabs the leather handhold and tugs the rolling door closed. Two sets of footsteps move to the doors of the cab, matching sounds of them both slamming shut.

I'm knocked over by the force of the vehicle accelerating, my body sliding toward the roll-up door as Justin gains speed and crests a hill. I can't even stop the slide, but Tess does, reaching out to take my wrist so she can keep me close to her.

We look at each other again, and I know that this is it.

This is my last chance to connect with somebody who loves me. I will never see the boys or my grandparents, my siblings or my friends, ever again.

I'm dying and Tess is dying, and the situation is absolutely *hopeless*.

Why was Delphine bleeding? What happened to the pilot? Sounds like he might've been dead? Saffron. It has to be Saffron. Who else could it be?

"Saffron," I whisper as the vehicle evens out and Tess scoots down to be closer to me. "Could she have killed the ..." Big, deep breath. "Pilot."

"Maybe," Tess says, but she doesn't sound as hopeful as I feel.

That's when I realized that I was a hopeless romantic, somebody who could not let go of the possibility of good even in the worst moments. It was no longer brave of me to keep fighting then because there was quite literally nothing that I could do.

Sometimes that happens. Sometimes there is nothing left to be done. Sometimes ... you relax and accept the inevitable.

"Dakota." Tess is shaking my shoulder, and I realize that I've fallen asleep. She's so scared, so fucking scared. I've never seen such fear in a person before, not once. "You've got to stay awake for me, okay?"

"I can't." I'm crying now, but they're just empty tears. There's not a lot of emotion left in me. Not a lot of life left either. "I'm tired, Mom."

She pulls me into her arms, holding me close to her and petting my back with slow, sure strokes of her fingers.

"When you were a baby, I dressed you in so many fun outfits. I had ... before I ran away, I had everything. Dozens of outfits for you, maybe hundreds of them. In every possible color. I thought it was the greatest thing ever, having you and dressing you up."

I think about that, about Tess in her senior year of high school, pregnant with me, engaged to Justin.

Happy.

Now, here we are.

I was right: I've been checkmated.

For real this time. For real.

The truck rattles along before hitting smooth pavement, and then our speed is increasing so rapidly that I feel nauseous all over again. We must be on a highway of some sort?

"If we stop, scream," Tess tells me, still rubbing my back.

I'm so close to falling asleep, and I know if I do, I'm not waking back up. It's just ... I've never felt this tired before, and I can't feel my legs. What if I never feel my legs again? Or anything for that matter. *Stay awake!*

We drive for an eternity, tucked in this shadowy corner with the smell of blood and the sound of traffic outside the walls, wind whipping through the vents near the ceiling, aches and pains and (worst of all) numbness spreading through what's left of me.

It's such a relief when we finally stop that I cry, a sound escaping me that I can't stop. It's the only one I'm able to make. When I try to scream like Tess asked, I've got nothing but another hacking cough. Blood on my lips. Gasping for air with lungs that are already wet.

Tess at least tries. She waits to make sure we've come to a full stop, and then she yells as loudly as she can. No specific words, just sounds. She screams until her voice catches, and she clutches a hand to her throat, panting heavily through her own injuries.

The roll door goes up.

My view is spectacular, a sprawling house overlooking the water, a miraculous vista painted orange by the sun and dotted with the fine black silhouettes of evergreen trees. Justin grabs me first, hands around my ankles, jerking me away from Tess so quickly that she has no time to stop him. Not that she could.

He throws me over his shoulder, and my vision blurs. Even the bouncing gait of his step is almost too much for me. I'm still holding it together, but only until he chucks me onto a smooth, dark hardwood floor. The pain is absolutely excruciating, but it does serve a purpose: it wakes me up.

I clench my hands automatically against the pain in my pelvis, rolling to the right so that some of the pressure on the bone is released. It's the left side that hurts. *Please no more. No more pain. I can't handle the pain. Why is it only numb below that spot and not above it?!*

My labored breathing is so pronounced that I barely hear Justin when he storms across the room with Tess, tossing her onto the ground beside me.

"Daddy!" Delphine gasps when she comes in the door behind him, dressed not in her gown for the wedding but in a pair of leggings, sneakers, and an athleisure top with a sport jacket thrown over it. "Mia ..."

She stumbles over to me, dropping to her knees at my side, hand hovering over me. Her eyes are wide, in complete and utter shock at what she's witnessing.

I believe that expression—and the rage that follows it.

"She'll be fine, Delphi. The sooner we get moving the better. Did you call her?" He moves over to stand impatiently beside my sister, a gun in his hand.

It's not a revolver this time, but a sleek black pistol that suits his blood-spattered tuxedo.

"I ... I called." Delphine swipes her expression clean, a cool neutrality spreading across her beautiful features. She rises smoothly to her feet and turns away from me. "What do you want me to do?"

"Wait outside for her. Make sure she comes in when she gets here." He gestures toward the open front door with his gun and Delphine does exactly what she's told, exiting the building to wait outside.

Amin Volli is there, walking in slowly from one of the other rooms. He pauses to stare down at the pair of us. Tess is panting, holding onto my hands again, expression thunderous when her eyes meet Justin's.

"What have you done?" Mr. Volli asks with a cluck of his tongue, squatting down beside me. He passes his hand through the air above me, like he might touch me but decides against it. Tess slaps his hand away, but he just grabs onto her wrist and squeezes until she screams. "Such a shame, and a waste of good talent." He rises back to his feet, the stag mask perched on his face. He's still wearing the meticulous suit, tie, and loafers from before, hair slicked back, smile wicked. "It was a pleasure reading your work, Miss Prior."

He moves away from us and pauses next to Justin.

"Check the house again. You never know with that bitch." Justin holds his gun low, but his eyes scout the edges of the room, lingering on doorways, tracing up the stairs to the upper floor. He has to be looking for Saffron; I was right. Who else could he possibly be this paranoid about? When he's swept the room a few times, he looks down at us. "I was going to take us on a trip, somewhere with more freedom, but it looks like that's not going to happen." Justin squats down between the two of us, reaching out to run his fingers down the side of Tess' face. "I have *always* loved you, Tess. It didn't have to end this way. You two *made* me do this; everything that's happened or will happen ..." He takes the gun and pokes her in the side of the head with it. "It's your fault."

He rises suddenly to his feet, using one dirty loafer to roll me onto my back as I cry out in pain. He rests that foot on my stomach, leaning down and putting far too much weight on me. I'm struggling to breathe, bleeding everywhere, paralyzed but in pain, too.

"You. What a fuckin' disappointment. I should've suspected it: Tess is a

cheating whore, her daughter's a cheating whore." Justin lifts the gun, flicks the safety off, and puts his finger on the trigger. "Must say, I'm surprised you managed to complete the objective I gave you. The world won't miss those brats—just like it won't miss you."

My objective? I don't even have the headspace to understand what he's saying.

He tenses to pull the trigger.

Tess is the one that stops him, shoving up to her feet and grabbing onto Justin's arm. They stumble briefly, but then he throws her off, sending her flying into the wall where she hits and slides down with a smear of red behind her.

Justin doesn't stop there, grabbing her by the hair and dragging her back toward me. He throws her to the ground and kicks her repeatedly as she gasps in pain and doubles over, but Tess is too weak to do much more than guard herself against the worst of his blows.

When he's done, panting and scowling, he shoves the gun in his waistband and then straddles her, putting his hands on her neck. I can't take it. I can't watch this. I can't watch my own mother die like this, her ex-husband's hands wrapped around her throat. He releases the pressure eventually and Tess sucks in a gasping breath, her nails digging gouges into his hands as she tries to pry him off.

He drops his face and flicks his tongue across her lower lip.

"Don't worry: we'll have time to fuck later." He smirks at her, rising to his feet and looking down with an expression of perverse glee. "But I wouldn't want to get caught with my pants down—literally." Justin takes his gun out again, lifts it so that it's aimed at me, and smiles. "We'll be together in hell soon enough, Mia. Don't you worry."

His finger presses down on the trigger, and the gun goes off, but nothing hits me. I mean ... I don't *think* that he's hit me. My gaze slips down the length of my body to my thigh, to the hole in my wedding dress. Either he hit me, and I can't feel it, or else the bullet went through the dress but missed me somehow.

Either scenario is terrifying.

"I'd kill you now, but then *she* might not show up; I can't risk that." He lifts the pistol up, resting the barrel on his shoulder, and sighs, pacing a tight circle around us. Justin is meticulously scanning the room again, searching

for Saffron. Her paranoia has served her well in this fight, but it's also triggered his.

The adversary he didn't expect.

A wanderer, a free spirit, unconventional and strange. A kidnapper. A mom.

The first shot rips through Justin's shoulder, a pattern of brilliant crimson on the wall behind him. His eyes are wide, but he doesn't drop his own weapon. He stumbles a little before finding his feet, brilliant blue gaze drawn up to the railing near the top of the stairs.

Saffron and Amin come crashing over the side, hitting the floor in a tangle of bodies. Amin's much bigger than Saffron with a clear physical advantage, but he's also bleeding profusely. *Did she shoot him, too?* If anyone were capable of nailing the two most powerful heads of the Seattle Slayer hydra, it'd be my mother.

She and Amin appear to be evenly matched, but I'm too far gone to recognize anything even resembling hope.

For the first time in my life, I am truly and utterly *hopeless*.

It's a feeling I won't soon forget; I could live into the infinite and the sensation would never leave me.

I am no longer the writer guiding my own story. I'm helpless to watch as it unfolds around me with horrifying clarity. I somehow allowed myself to think that I had plot armor, that I was the heroine protected by this ethereal and omnipotent sense of safety where things can go bad, but they can never go *that* bad. I lost Nevaeh, yes. I killed Heath Cousins. People—like JJ and Veronica and Antonio—died, but never me and mine. Never my core group. Never the people closest to my heart.

Like the boys. Like Saffron. Like Tess.

Oh Tess.

She's finally regained enough breath to try fighting again, pushing up into a half-seated position so that she can scoot forward and grab the leg of a decorative table. She shakes it so that the lamp falls, shattering into pieces around her. A shaking hand closes over a broken shard of ceramic and tucks it into the top of her dress before gathering up another.

I try to crawl over to her, but I don't make much progress. Tess comes to me instead, handing out the second piece. She closes my fingers over it, and I turn back toward the melee, toward Saffron as she and Amin separate,

backing away from one another.

Justin's eyes are on fire when he looks at Saffron Banks. He strides forward and she turns, swiping her hands down the front of her leather jacket. Her red hair is loose and wavy around her face as she looks past Justin to me.

"You'll be okay, my sweet girl. I love you fierce."

My father shoots her in the stomach first and she falls backward, hitting the wall but keeping her feet. Saffron clutches her hands over the wound, looking down at it and then back up to Justin.

"Look at you, the kidnapper has arrived. Fucking finally." Justin isn't getting any closer to Saffron, but he doesn't ready himself to shoot her again either. This has always been his problem: he likes to talk way too damn much. He *needs* to see fear in others to feel validated, needs to bask in their suffering, and he needs them to know that he's the one responsible.

Otherwise, it's no fun.

"Kill her," Mr. Volli says coldly, like he never once quoted Sylvia Plath or wore bow ties. "You've allowed your obsession with the people around you to blind you to the end goal. Mr. Prior, when we were first acquainted, I warned you that I don't have the patience for illogical men."

Justin turns the gun on Amin and shoots him next. Just once. Right in the chest.

He jerks with the motion of the shot, but he doesn't go down. His white-gloved hands reach down to unbutton his jacket. There's a hole through his shirt, and a vest underneath.

"Leave, Amin." Justin gestures with his gun in the direction of the door, his gaze fixated on Saffron. "We're done here. I no longer have need of your services."

Amin Volli stands there for so long that Justin looks back to him, and Saffron bleeds. She's plotting, her eyes moving from one man to the other. She charges Justin and hits him in the side before he's able to readjust his attention away from the bloodthirsty poet.

Saffron and Justin end up in a struggle as Tess and I are forced to lie there as helpless spectators in our own fate. It's the worst feeling in the world.

Tess makes a sudden decision and acts accordingly, leaning down briefly to kiss me on the forehead.

"I love you so much, Dakota. You were absolutely worth every second that I spent searching for you, my lost daughter." She strokes my hair with her

hand, and then she's gone. I realize as she goes that she isn't sure that we'll ever see each other again.

Thank you, universe, for giving me the chance to meet my mom. If that's all that I came here for, to meet the people I've met in Medina, that's alright. I'm okay.

Parrish. Chasm. Maxx.

I use the last of my strength to get into a seated position, turning to watch as Tess uses the wall to get her to feet, holding onto the furniture as she goes for the door. She manages to take hold of the doorknob, twisting it and stumbling out of sight and into the blinding sunshine outside.

She did it! Go Tess!

Mr. Volli watches Tess struggle, watches her pass through the door, but he doesn't stop her. He walks confidently and quickly across the floor, pausing near my feet.

"I wish I could serve you, Miss Prior, but I only serve worthy masters. I did, however, promise that I'd even the odds." He squats down next to me, surreptitiously sliding a phone from his jacket and slipping it into the pocket of my dress. Our eyes meet. "See what you can do with it." Amin stands back up and offers a charming smile. "If you manage to escape this, we'll see each other again. *I desire the things that will destroy me in the end.*" He winks at me through the eyehole of the glittering black stag mask, and I wonder if I haven't been looking at things wrong all along, if Amin hasn't been playing one big game of murder with Justin as *his* pawn. "For now, I suppose, this is goodbye."

And then Mr. Volli leaves through the door we came in, closing it behind him.

When I turn to Saffron and Justin, it's clear that my father's got the upper hand. The yellow *U of O* shirt Saffron is wearing under her jacket is stained with blood, and she's beginning to lose ground in their tussle. My broken brain shivers, electrical currents of fear snapping me into a final state of alertness.

This is my last chance to make a move.

Phone. I slip my shaking hand into my pocket and draw it out, but there's so much blood on my thumb that I have to rub it off on the dress before I can swipe the screen and open it. There's no passcode or anything which must've been intentional on Mr. Volli's part.

I won't likely make it through this even with the phone, but I can at least show the world the truth. I don't bother dialing 911. I don't know where we are, and I'm sure this phone is protected in such a way that our location won't be visible anyway. By the time they trace the call, Justin will have discovered the phone and destroyed it—or else he'll have killed us all.

I have a better idea.

I log into my channel while Saffron is thrown into a wall, while she struggles to keep Justin from getting her on the ground. Once she goes down, I don't think she'll have long until he kills her. My only consolation is that I don't think I'll be far behind.

I set up a quick livestream and stare down at the camera, looking at my own bloodied face. I'm barely recognizable. One important thing comes to mind, more important than ending Justin's reign of terror.

Love.

"Boys ..." I choke on the word, gasping for breath. I don't know if they're still alive, but I can't leave this world without saying it for a final time. "Parrish, Chasm, Maxx, I love you guys. Grandma, Grandpa. Maxine. Kimber. Ben, Amelia, Henry. Sally, Danyella, Lumen, Paul. I love you all." I kiss the screen, aware that I'm running out of time. Time while Justin's distracted. Time to move. Time to breathe. "Who wants to help me catch a serial killer? This is the last time I'm going to ask."

I crawl to the overturned table and prop the phone up inside the remaining half of the broken lamp, positioning it for an ideal view of the room, and then I check on Saffron again.

Justin has her pinned down with his body, reaching out an arm to retrieve his lost gun.

I push myself forward, sliding my bloodied wedding dress across the floor, but I'm not fast enough. He snatches the weapon, sits up, and shoots Saffron. I hear her groan, see her throw a punch that hits him directly in the face. He backhands her with the weapon and watches with pleasure as she writhes under him, clutching her nose.

"How *dare* you take what's mine? How dare you turn my daughter into the pathetic bleeding heart that she became?" Justin hits her again as I continue to pull myself along, leaving a trail of red in my wake. He points the gun right at her heart and leans down to look her in the eyes. "In the end, it looks like I win."

“In the end,” Saffron coughs out, blood on her lips but a strange smile on her face. “I win because she’s still my daughter.”

Justin pulls the trigger as that scream I couldn’t summon earlier finally fills my throat, and I stab down into his calf with the piece of broken lamp. He doesn’t hesitate to swing his arm back, clocking me in the face and sending my battered body rolling across the floor.

He stands up, loafers in the pool of Saffron’s rapidly spreading pool of blood.

Justin walks past me with a sigh, leaving red footprints as he goes. He opens the front door as Delphine appears, out of breath and panting.

“Daddy, the kidnapper was out—” She stops and then looks around him, at Saffron lying still and surrounded by red. Her brown eyes move to Justin warily, but he’s already shoving her aside, looking around for Tess. He must spot her right away because he pauses as Delphine approaches him from behind. “I caught Tess trying to steal the truck.”

Are you a bad guy, Delphi? I thought you loved me? Help us!

“Bring her inside,” Justin commands, reloading the magazine of his gun as he walks back into the house and looks down at me. “Do you know where we are?” he asks me, because he could never resist getting in a last dig at his victims. *Saffron. Saffron is dead. Saffron can’t be dead.* “This is the house that I bought for you and Kwang-seon, to move into after the wedding. You might’ve had that, had you not fucked it all up.”

“I love you fierce.” That’s what I have the breath for, in my last moments. It’s all I’ve got, one final flicker of defiance. *That, and the limp he’s nursing, the blood soaking up his pant leg.* The words seem to surprise him in a way that nothing else has before. No insult I could ever utter would be worse than this.

He might not care whether I love him or not (I truly don’t, that was for Saffron and Tess and Delphine), but he set out to break me, and he failed. I can’t stop him from killing me, but I didn’t let him ruin me either. My breathing shallows as my blinks become longer and more drawn out.

“Stupid, to the end,” Justin remarks with another sigh. “It’s like you weren’t listening when I tried to teach you.” He watches as Delphine drags Tess into the room, struggling with her body like it’s a massive burden. That annoys Justin; I can see it. “Bring me a phone and close the door; I want to see it.”

“Yes, sir.” Delphine heads outside once again as Justin walks over to Tess. He rolls her onto her back with his foot, and when she doesn’t respond, he kicks her in the stomach. I cry out, but she doesn’t move, and he squats down to check her pulse.

Tess lunges at him, stabbing the piece of ceramic into his chest. The movement doesn’t startle Justin; he just turns his pistol on Tess and fires. He shoots her in the stomach, just like he did Saffron, and stands up, watching her writhe and bleed on the floor.

He tears the ceramic from his chest, ignoring the fresh bloom of blood on his ruined dress shirt, and tosses the shard aside.

“You can’t die yet, bitch. You’ll watch your daughter go first, and then you’ll take me over and over and over.” He smiles again, swiping blood spatter from his face.

“Here Daddy.” Delphine reappears with a phone and hands it over to Justin.

He pulls something up, watches it for a few minutes and smiles before bringing it over to me.

“Mia, you’ll love this.” Justin kneels beside me with the phone, showing off the image on its screen with pride. I spot the church. I spot the glittering guests. I watch as several active shooters descend on the unsuspecting audience. “Isn’t this beautiful? We can all leave this world together.” He withdraws the phone and taps the screen as I lay helpless and dying on the floor. I’m out of ideas. It’s over. “You’ll like this even better.”

He turns the phone on me again, and even in my strange state of ante-death, I recognize the foyer of the ice palace. I recognize my grandfather’s body bleeding on the floor. I try to scream, but no sound comes out. There’s nothing left.

“There was nowhere you could go to hide from me, Mia. You and your mother, you belong to me. All of this blood, it’s on *your* hands. Do better in the next life.”

Justin stands up and turns the gun on me. I don’t even have the time to process the possible deaths of my family—Maxine, my grandparents, the boys—or the fact that Saffron hasn’t moved this entire time. Tess is still awake, but her breathing is as shallow as my own.

I close my eyes.

There’s a grunt from Justin’s direction that I can’t ignore. It sounds ...

pained. I force my tired lids to open on Delphine, a knife buried in the side of Justin's neck. He reaches up a hand, but there's a lot of blood and it's coming fast. He can't stop its sudden, wild flow down the side of his neck as it drenches his jacket and dress shirt. His pale blue tie is already soaked with red.

"Who's stupid now, *Justin?*" Delphine whispers, her voice like dry bones and ash. She pulls the knife out and more blood comes with it. A torrent. Red geysers that swell in time with Justin's heartbeat. For a few seconds there, I don't think the attack is going to stop him. I'm wrong. I'm also right.

It happens so quickly. Because that's how life is. Our entire existence can change in the span of a single blink. We can be whole and perfect and happy, can take cheesy family photos in the foyer, laugh about an ugly wedding dress, watch wildflowers pass by outside the window of a limousine.

And then we can be here, watching helplessly as Justin turns his gun on Delphine and fires a single round into her chest. She staggers back with the knife clutched in her bloodied fist, falling to her knees seconds before Justin does.

My sister is bleeding from the chest; Justin is bleeding from the neck.

He drops his weapon first and she follows, losing the knife and clutching both hands to her wound. She claws frantically at it, like she's trying to gather the blood back into her body. It slips through her fingers like sand. Delphine lifts big, doe eyes up to our father, and my heart breaks into blurred fragments of grief. I realize that I would give up any part of myself to go back to that morning in my bathroom when she gave me a French braid with long, deft fingers. *My sister. My sister. My sister.*

We are all going to die here today, together.

This is how it ends, and I hate that it makes so much sense.

Tess groans and rolls onto her side, but Saffron remains still and silent.

"Bitch." Justin manages to wheeze a final word, a parting gift for his dying children.

"You hate ... the people of Medina?" *Wet, shuddering breath.* "You're ... no different from them." Delphi chokes and strange laughter escapes her crimson lips. "I ... hunted you ... and I ... finally caught you ... *Finally.*" She slumps to the ground to lie beside me and lands with a grunt. My hand finds hers and squeezes. "Baby sister."

She smiles. There's blood on her mouth. Blood on my mouth. I make

myself smile back.

“Big sister.”

That’s the last thing I ever say to her.

Justin is still on his knees, eyes wide with shock. Something in this world was able to surprise him. His *daughter* was able to surprise him. He looks down at Delphine and tries to speak again, but no sound comes out. Instead, he holds onto his neck as blood spurts from around his fingers in an obscene gush.

Delphine has struck the killing blow.

She closes her eyes in peace as Justin collapses forward, his head hitting the ground with a disturbing crack. Our faces are only a foot apart. Less than. His blue eyes are still working out possible ways to escape this mess. I can see the wheels turning, see that brilliant mind of his firing up for the final time. He’s still planning and plotting as he bleeds out on the floor.

We’re just alike in that way: neither of us wants to accept that it’s over.

Not a checkmate, but a stalemate.

My only consolation is that he takes his last breath before I do.



Maxim Wright

Let's Rewind: Five Minutes Before the Crash ...

She's right there, the girl we all love, the one who managed to snare three hearts—mine in particular—sitting in the back of a limousine with a fucking serial killer. I'm disgusted with myself for letting her ride in there with him.

The man who made me lie.

In lieu of gritting my teeth, I force myself to exhale, to relax my white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, to slump in my seat.

"I can't believe we let her do this," I mumble, and Chasm scoffs, turning to me from his spot in the front seat to narrow his amber eyes in harsh rebuke.

"*Let her? Seriously, Maxx?* I'm not about to let you talk about my wife that way." Chasm gives me a look, sitting ramrod straight in his seat, wearing a navy suit with bright yellow sneakers (he ditched his loafers as soon as Seamus left the house). He plays with the tie hanging around his neck, yanking at the silk and wrinkling it. I reach over and smack his hand as Parrish leans in between the two front seats.

"If you start gloating about the husband thing, we can't be friends anymore." Parrish is clearly joking, but there's a hint of his true feelings underneath. He's jealous. I'm fucking jealous, too. I'm still pissed that I didn't make my move on Dakota when I first saw her in the damn coffee shop. Like, she made it really easy on me and I still messed it up.

I saw her first, you know? I saw her first, but *she* is the one who made conversation with me. I know why I didn't approach her then—because I was technically still dating Maxine and I'm not a creep—but I'm mad about it now. Back then, Kota didn't like Parrish. She didn't like Chasm. Me, I thought she was the most beautiful human being I'd ever seen. Still do.

I worry my lower lip without meaning to. Bad habit. I'm not only stressing about Dakota in that car with her piece of shit father, I'm worried about everyone else, too. My entire family is going to be at that wedding. I tried to talk them out of it, but they disagree with me on how best to handle Justin.

They want to follow his every command in the hopes of making it through

this safely. I'm not following *shit-all* from that man ever again. My shoulder twitches, but I can't reach up with my right hand to rub it because *something* has to hold the wheel and my left hand is too jacked-up to be trusted. I can barely make a fist. And the nerve pain ... the fucking nerve pain ... Man, I can't begin to describe the fire and the ache of it.

The corner of my lip curls in frustration.

It's your own fault, you idiot. Saffron was right there, waiting to help. If you hadn't been so gung-ho about dying, you might've—

"Do you think Justin is actually going to leave on that jet?" I ask the guys for the umpteenth time. It's not like we had many great choices when it came to today, but I can't seem to find it in myself to be optimistic.

Not like Dakota is.

She's just ... so damn hopeful all the time. The quality attracts me even as I'm terrified that she might lose it one day. If she did, that'd be okay. I'd help her through it. But that bright, optimistic hope for the future? Not many people have that. All I want is to keep her safe, to protect the fragile shell of her joy and trust and the second chances she gives out like candy.

My poor, sweet girl. My girl. Because that's what she is. Mine. In my heart, forever.

Even if I'm not hers. Even if she marries Chasm, and chooses Chasm, and loves Chasm. My love will never change. I've always suspected that my heart was fragile, that I could give it out once and that was it. I was right. I was so right. Does it make sense why I wanted to at least wait until I was engaged to have sex? I'm twisted up in Dakota Banks, tangled in the threads of her heart.

Justin, that son of a bitch.

I curse her father in my head for pushing us to this point, to this wedding, to the sharp edge of fate.

I wonder if we could pay a professional to assassinate him? The Vanguards easily have the money for that. Just as we tried to bribe Amin Volli with items from Laverne's vault, surely we could find someone else to do the job? We'd need someone competent, someone worth their weight in gold—literally.

Shit. I think like a rich kid even if I'm not technically a rich kid. Hired assassins? What the fuck?

"He's probably going to blow up the church," Parrish says as dryly as possible. He has a habit of that, of pretending like he's the most redundant

human being to ever exist. He's not. He's down-to-earth and he cares. A lot. He's worried about this ceremony. So am I.

"Even if he *does* get on the jet, it doesn't change things the way Dakota thinks it does." Chasm crosses his arms and stares out the window in the direction of his side mirror. Just behind us, the black SUV follows with Tess' hired security. There's *supposed* to be an FBI agent or two in there, but who knows? Even if there are, they might be working for Justin. That entire *team* might be working for Justin.

Our only way out of this might be with money. Who can pay their way out via assassins and hired killers and legal fuckery? Who has the biggest bank account?

It might come down to Laverne versus Justin in the end—that is, if Parrish's grandmother decides to take any of this seriously. I'm not convinced she cares whether Paul ends up in prison or not. She doesn't have a maternal bone in her body. People are objects to be used; her own flesh-and-blood is no exception. She's *far* more concerned with the success of Milk Carton, and the doubling-tripling-whatever of her investment.

"Personally, I think hell has a better chance of freezing over." I sigh. "But you're right: it won't matter. You're still getting married today, and even if he doesn't sabotage the wedding, there's no way in *hell* that Justin's moving to Beijing and leaving us to live happily ever after."

My mind drifts to the image of Dakota in her wedding dress. I know she doesn't like the dress, and I can understand why. It's not her style at all. Too sweet, too soft, too full. I bet if she'd chosen her own dress, it wouldn't be white. It'd probably be short in the hem, long in the sleeves. It might have Pokémon characters on it.

But she said she wanted us to pretend she was cute? She was fucking adorable. More than that, she turns my blood to fire, makes me want her in ways that scare me. Makes me feel male and young and needy and *hot*.

A smile takes over my face and I run my shaking hand over my mouth. Time, future surgeries, PT might fix it a little. Or not at all. It hurts. It hurts all the damn time, from my bones to my nerves, from fingertips to shoulder. I wonder if I'll still be able to be a motocross hero like Hamilton wants? Probably not. And I'm okay with that. The smile stays where it is despite the direction of my thoughts.

Dakota was sexy as hell in that ugly dress. Maybe tonight, Chas will

share? If there's going to be a wedding, shouldn't it be about all three of us? We could push up her dress and—

I shake my head and exhale so forcibly that the guys notice. I pretend not to, right hand clutched on the wheel, gaze fixated on the limo ahead of us. *She might be serious about this marriage, as in, she doesn't want me or Parrish as partners any longer.*

I hope not.

Fuck, I hope not.

“He’s perving out in his head again.” Parrish laughs which annoys me. We’ve always had this weird rivalry thing going on. He’s just lucky that Chas is there between us to act like a buffer. Otherwise, I’m not sure what direction our love-hate would take. “What are you daydreaming about, *byeontae*? Your next embarrassing thing to say to Dakota?” He leans back in between the seats and pokes me in the cheek. “Wait, let me guess: they keep you up at night in the dark.”

“Get the fuck out of my face.” I push back at him, but he just laughs again.

He’s right. I just won’t let him know he’s right. It’s a disastrous combination, by the way. Parrish and being right. He’s so *smug* about it.

Sometimes though, when I think about that moment at the track when I told Dakota that I wanted to perform a well-executed wall slam without protection ... oh fuck, it’s so cringey. What is wrong with me? I knew when I fell in love, I’d fall all the way and crash hard. It’s true.

“It’s *my* wedding day,” Chasm warns us both, shaking his head and playing absently with his tie again. I sigh and let him do it. I’ll fix the damn thing at the church. “Neither of you are included in tonight’s activities.”

“Where exactly is the glorious honeymoon taking place?” Parrish continues as I pretend not to be irritated. Chasm knows that I am, and he grins about it. Yeah, we’re pretty much all assholes to each other. “The bedroom across the hall from her stepbrother? On the sofa in our mother’s living room? The guest room that shares a wall with the Banks? Those are pretty much your only options.”

“Keep seething, dude,” Chas tells him, licking one of his lip rings, his eyes narrowed out the windshield in front of us. “Wherever we do it, we’ll be fucking and you’ll be alone with Maxx.”

Parrish slumps back in his own seat with a sigh.

“Put your seat belt on,” I grumble at him, and he glares at me in the

rearview mirror before finally acquiescing. Flips me off, too. “This argument is pointless. For all we know, we’re not even going to make it through the ceremony.”

I reach out to hit the radio, tuning into ECMP. They broadcast live most days.

“Dude, I can’t handle this friggin’ podcast today,” Chas groans. He’s about to turn it off when I snatch his wrist in tight fingers. Can’t hold him for long. I need my right hand to drive since my left is ... Yeah. Anyway.

“—*tragic, heartless, and unimaginable. What sort of world do we live in?*” The host—she goes by the unoriginal alias Sharon Tate (after a Charles Manson victim)—sniffles dramatically and then continues on with a perverse sort of glee coloring her faux somber voice. She’s never been full-on cringe like Jack, but I wouldn’t be surprised to find out she worked for Justin, too. “*If you’re just tuning in, we have breaking news here at Emerald City Murder Podcast. I recently received word that my illustrious cohost and founder of the true crime social media empire, ECMP Unlimited, Jack Larae, was found dead in his Capitol Hill home early this morning.*

Jack’s body was discovered alongside three other victims—including two as-of-yet unidentified teenagers from the prestigious Whitehall Preparatory Academy. As my regular listeners already know, I have personal contacts within the FBI. I’ve been informed that two of the deceased were clutching notes—”

A vehicle zips past us carrying Takahashi and Sam, and I forget all about the radio show that we’re listening to.

“Where the hell do they—”

That’s as far as I get.

I was going to ask where they think they’re going.

That doesn’t happen.

We’re driving and then we’re not. The Jeep is flipping. *We* are flipping.

The world turns and shifts, and then everything is suddenly wet and I’m hanging upside down from my seat belt. It takes me longer than it should to figure out what just happened. I’m so disoriented that I actually close my eyes for a minute. *If I can just rest, I can figure this out.*

No!

I force my eyes open and discover real quick that we’re actually sinking into the water while upside-down. My eyes and then my nose are submerged

in the cool liquid within seconds, but my mouth is still free. I take in a huge breath and then reach for the window, rolling it down while I still have the chance. My seat belt comes off, and I use both arms to keep myself from hitting my head on the roof.

It's an effort to get my body righted in the small space. By the time I do, we're well on our way to being completely submerged. I can see Chas from here, frantically trying to undo his own seat belt, already holding his breath.

He can't swim.

And no, a few lessons from Dakota in the lake outside his dad's rental house don't count.

The car dips beneath the water and then we're all entirely submerged. I check back with Parrish to see that he's just removed his own seat belt and is working to get himself turned around. I use the edge of Chas's seat to pull myself forward, assuming he's the one I need to help. There's blood in the water, too, and I'm pretty sure it's coming from him. He was seated on the side of impact whereas Parrish and I weren't.

The metal door is dented and so is the mechanism for Chasm's seat belt. I don't even waste my time trying to undo it. I give it a tug to see if it'll come loose, but it locked in the accident. Luckily for me, I always keep a pocketknife around.

I draw the keys from my pocket—I don't need them for the car, it's a push-to-start—and flick open the knife. It takes some work to get through the tough material of the belt, stealing away precious seconds of oxygen. My chest is already on fire, and there's a frantic look in Chasm's eyes that I'm sure is reflected in my own.

The belt comes apart and I grab Chas' hand, yanking him out of the damaged seat and in the direction of my open window. Parrish is right there with us, working his way out of the back. I kick off and swim past him toward the sunlight, breaking the tension above with a choking gasp then feeling relief set in as Chas does the same.

With my shoulder screaming in pain, I swim one-armed over to the shore, pushing Chasm up on it and then climbing onto the muddy grass on my hands and knees. I'm choking and coughing, head swimming, body aching. It takes me a few seconds to realize that the security team's black SUV is on *fire* on the road just above us.

I can feel the heat of the flames on my face as I look up.

Chasm is sitting up now, undoing his tie and slamming it into the wet ground at his side.

I look back over my shoulder for Parrish.

I see sunshine reflected on the surface of the lake, bubbles from the sinking Jeep. I don't see my friend. He's the one who knows how to swim. He was *right* behind me. So where is he? Where the fuck is he?!

"Where's Parrish?" Chas asks frantically, grabbing onto my arm for support. I hardly notice, gritting my teeth against the fear taking root within me. *Come on, come on, come on. Surface, goddamn it. You're a strong swimmer, Vanguard. You've got this.*

The surface of the lake remains still save for the lingering bubbles.

I look up at the embankment again, turning to the left to see that the limousine is wedged tight against the fence and resting at a strange angle. *Dakota. Oh my God. Dakota!* There's this weird nanosecond there where I can't figure out who's more important to me, who I should save first: my best friend or my girlfriend.

I have to get to her, the love of my life, my other half.

When I rise to my feet, Chas follows and tightens his grip on my arm. He digs his nails into my skin to snap me out of the adrenaline-fueled trance.

"You can swim; you deal with Parrish." Chasm hauls in a deep breath, visibly fortifying himself against the frantic terror that's gripping us both. "I'll find Dakota."

That scares the fuck out of me. But I can't be in two places at once. I need to trust Chas the way he trusts me. We can do this together, just like we've done from the very beginning. If we weren't so good at this team player shit, Justin would've killed us all by now.

"Yeah, yeah, okay." I give Chas a look that conveys everything I'm feeling without needing to put words to any of it. "Go find our girl."

I turn back to the lake and, without letting my wild thoughts get in the way, I dive in.



Kwang-seon 'Chasm' McKenna

I trust Maxx to find Parrish; I believe that he will. If I don't, I won't be able to give enough of myself to figuring out what happened to Dakota. Not just Dakota, but Tess, too. Tess was in that limo with her.

I don't have a lot of people in my life that I care about, that care about me. My dad is my only blood relative. But Tess? She's my family. Parrish and Maxx are my family. *Dakota* is my family—my wife. She's my fucking wife. I want to finish growing up together so we can build a family of our own, so we can live in a home full of love.

Just *imagining* that Dakota and Tess and Parrish could be gone is enough to break my heart. I'm not sure that I'd ... Yeah, I wouldn't survive that. I don't think I could live if all three of them were gone. My thoughts—a jumbled mix of Korean, English, and Japanese—continue to spiral as I turn and scramble up the embankment like a man possessed.

As I climb, fingers digging into the mud, I relive my relationship with Dakota all over again, starting with the bullshit Parrish fed me that first night she arrived in Washington. He was into her, but he was afraid of her, too. Her arrival changed his entire life in an instant. He was jealous, I think, because Dakota was Tess' biological daughter, and he was not her biological son.

But it was more than that.

He liked her. The first girl he ever liked and she just so happened to be the first girl that *I* ever liked. What luck.

I hit the top of the embankment and spot them straight away. *Sunflowers*. There's a field of them across the gravel road that I ignore. They're starting to wilt since, you know, it's that time of the year. A symbol that was once a sign of hope might haunt me for years after this.

No.

We'll get married some other day—and we *will* have those fucking sunflowers.

As soon as I find my feet, I yank my phone from my left pocket, thankful that random happenstance saved its life. If it'd been in my right pocket, it'd be toast. My head hurts and my leg is on fire, blood soaking my already wet shoe as I run. I'm cut up and bruised all over, but it's not life-threatening.

Dakota's situation might be.

I don't even make it to the limo before I see the first bodies.

Takahashi. Sam.

The two agents lie dead on the ground beside their car, resting in pools of ruby red. The late afternoon sun catches on it, giving it a shine that should be beautiful but that turns my stomach instead. *Ani*. I don't want to believe what I'm seeing.

I stumble forward and grab onto the edge of the limo's broken window, peering inside to find glass and blood. So much fucking blood. My bride's veil is on the floor in a puddle of it. Her phone is smashed to bits, face-up on the ground beside the crumpled white fabric. Panic sets in at the sight, but I don't allow that emotion to take over.

I can fight any overwhelming feeling with logic.

There's a mystery here that *needs* to be solved. Can't do that if I'm freaking out. *Jinjeonghae*. *Calm down*. *Calm the fuck down*.

One hand fists in my hair, yanking on it until my scalp burns, knocking that sense back into me. I don't know when I picked the habit up. Maybe the day I found my grandmother comatose on the floor of the only home I ever knew? Maybe when I stayed with neighbors waiting for her to come home and then found out she never would? Maybe a few days later when I got on a plane and flew from Seoul, South Korea to Seattle, Washington, USA?

As I push away from the window, I dial 911. I'd say thank God for modern technology and waterproof phones, but technology's been making all our lives a bit shit as of late. Fuck technology and fuck Justin and—

All I get is a busy signal. A *busy* signal. How? Why?!

I move around to the front of the limo as I dial the number again, looking down to see the driver, slumped over in her seat. *Jugeosseo*. She's dead. Deader than dead.

"*Jinjiha?*" I whisper. *Seriously?* "Fuck."

I punch the side of the limo and immediately regret it, shaking out my sore hand and ending the call so I can try again. Whatever's going on, it must be a lot bigger than what I see right here.

Busy signal. Another call. Busy signal.

I forget about 911 and try Tess' phone instead. It rings from inside the limo, and I ignore it. I call Saffron. I call Delphine. I call the Banks. I even try Justin.

Nobody answers.

While my mind whirs through possible solutions, I jog over to the burning SUV that once held the security team. Tucking my phone in my pocket, I circle the vehicle, trying to see if I can't spot a way to get closer. The flames are so fucking hot on my face that I'm wary about approaching.

But what if someone's alive in there? I can't not help. That's not who I am. I don't want to be the bastard and the asshole and the bad guy even if I act that way sometimes. It's been beaten into me by Seamus, that that is *exactly* who I'm supposed to be to survive in this world.

Nice on the outside only; a demented devil on the inside. Smile to their faces; scheme behind their backs. After all that's happened with Justin, I'm starting to think my dad is right. Starting to. Just starting.

My wish for something different, for a world where doing good things yields good things, it's almost frayed beyond the point of repair—but it's not there yet. If I can help someone here, today, while I'm figuring out where to go next, while my mind is spinning and discarding new ideas in frantic frenzy, then I'll do it. If only to prove that good people *can* do good things and still win.

"Hey! Can you hear me?" I shout, and then I'm cursing and yelling at myself in Korean as I yank my wet jacket off, covering my hands with it as I approach one of the rear passenger doors, tugging on the handle as smoke surrounds me and I start to cough.

It's locked.

I try the front, but it's the same problem, and I'm forced via the heat and the smoke to give up.

I don't like that, admitting that there's something I can't do. *Am I leaving people to die? Is this my fault? Can I do more, try harder, figure something else out?*

I stumble back, throwing my jacket to the ground. What am I thinking? All that heat, all that smoke. I doubt at this point that there's anyone alive in there. Even so, guilt swamps me, as hard to breathe through as the black, greasy smoke. My attention shifts to the other vehicles scattered on the road beside the lake.

The SUV that hit the security team, it's not even remotely salvageable. No point in trying to look inside that car. Not that I would. Yeah, I want to be a good person. I don't want to be an idiot.

Fuck that monster.

Taking my phone out again, I record a short video of the scene and post it online. If I can't get through to anyone on the phone, I'll bring the morbid curiosity of the internet down on us like a hammer. I make sure to add our location to the post, and I spread that all over social media with a desperate plea for help.

Now what? *Come on Kwang-seon, you've got this. Think, think, think.*

The white truck that hit us is still sitting there, too, so I glance inside. There's a guy bleeding all over the seat. I don't think he's dead, but I consider helping him get there. There's a strange twist inside my chest, a dark voice whispering 'do it'. In a different place, under different circumstances, I might have.

He tried to kill my friends. He doesn't deserve to live. Fortunately for him, I have other, more important priorities. The fucker is irrelevant to me when Dakota is missing, when Parrish is underwater. Vengeance is never more important than love.

Never.

I move back to the embankment and spot Maxx on the shore, slumped over and struggling to catch his breath. No Parrish though. X only allows himself a few seconds of rest and then he's diving beneath the water again. Somehow, it feels like this is taking way too long, like Parrish ... like he ...

Parrish is drowning.

Parrish could be dead for all I know and there's nothing I can do because I'm an idiot who can't swim.

I force myself to look down at my phone again. I like to plan things. I like to figure things out. This is no different. I can do this. I can find Dakota. If I can't help Parrish, I can make myself useful somewhere else. I'm great at that, making myself useful.

As I think, I dial 911 again and again, studying the limo, trying to remember where Dakota was sitting. Not against the door like I was, but close to it.

She's badly injured, Chas. She could be mortally wounded. Tess could be dead since she was the one by the door. Justin won't have suffered enough no matter what happened to him.

The operator *finally* fucking picks up, speaking rapidly into the phone before I get a chance to speak.

“If you’re calling from the church, we have officers on the way. Stay where you are, remain quiet, and keep the line open.”

That’s how she answers the call.

“The church?” I turn and look in the direction of the lodge. I can’t see anything from here, but I can take a wild guess. *Justin sent his killers to the wedding. My dad is in that church. Maxx’s family is in that church.* “No.”

Goddamn it!

The need to help them tugs on me, mixes with my desperate fears for Parrish, my terror over Dakota and Tess. My insides churn like taffy, tugged in way too many directions.

“Sir, do you have an emergency?” the operator asks, thoroughly confused by my response.

I do my best to quickly and succinctly explain where I am and what’s going on, that Dakota and Tess are missing, that the *Seattle Slayer* is missing, that two FBI agents are dead, that someone is drowning.

“We have officers on the way,” is what she tells me.

“*Chas!*” I can hear Maxx yelling for me. There’s no resisting the frantic energy in his voice, the fear.

“We need someone to search for my wife!” I might be yelling at the operator as I run, but I need her to understand the severity of the situation. “If we don’t find her soon, he’ll kill her, too.” *If he hasn’t already killed her.* I won’t think like that. I won’t.

I don’t know what the operator says. Doesn’t matter. I’ve given her what I can.

I find Maxx on all fours beside the lakeshore, Parrish’s body laid out in the mud beside him. My childhood friend is blue in the face. Not moving. Not breathing.

If someone had to drown, it should’ve been me. I should’ve let Maxx help Parrish.

Without hanging up, I shove the phone into my pocket and slide down the side of the steep hill, stumbling to my knees in the muck beside Parrish.

Maxx is struggling to breathe, gasping and shaking, dark hair hanging into his face.

“He needs ... CPR ... help ...” He shakes his head at me without looking up. “I can’t ... breathe.”

He doesn’t have to explain any more than that. I tilt Parrish’s head back,

pinch his nose, and offer five initial rescue breaths. Maxx takes over chest compressions as I count out thirty, give two breaths. Thirty compressions, two breaths. Thirty compressions, two breaths.

We look at each other, me and Maxx.

“Where’s Kota?” he asks me, but I still don’t have answers for him. I shake my head and give two more breaths when Maxx completes another thirty compressions. *Please don’t take Dakota and Parrish from me. No matter what happens, I can get through it if I have them by my side. I know that I can.*

I can handle anything if the four of us are together.

Maxx and I stare at each other now the way we stared at each other last night.

When Dakota was distracted with her family, we sat together with Parrish on her bed and waited.

“If this is her picking you, it’s okay.” Maxx’s voice caught in his throat, but he said it of his own free will. Meant it, too. I could tell.

“Don’t do that,” I replied, shaking my head and curling my fingers into the blankets on either side of me. Dakota’s blankets. I closed my eyes. One day, they’d be our blankets. That’s what I thought as I sat there, sandwiched between my best friends, and tried not to be excited that maybe ... “Don’t act like you’re okay when you’re not.”

Of the three of us, I never expected to end up with Dakota. Oh, I wanted it. I wanted it more than I have ever wanted anything in my entire life. But it didn’t seem right. It didn’t seem right because it was at the expense of my best friends’ happiness. I’m used to taking care of other people, putting them first. I like it—most days. I don’t mind taking the fall or bearing the brunt or dishing out dirty work.

Except ... this was different.

Parrish sniffled, and I looked over to see if he was crying or something. Doubted it. That’s not exactly his style. But then he was. He had tears on his face, but his teeth were gritted as he glared at the floor, like he’d already come to a conclusion that he knew was right, but that he didn’t want to accept.

He turned his head to look back at me, and his eyes blazed with truth and rage and love all at once.

“Take care of her, Chas. You hear me? I’m wishing you well the way you

wished us well the night you ... when we first ...” And then he put his head in his hands and was silent. Because without Justin, his love story would’ve been so different.

She wouldn’t be marrying me; nobody would be dying.

“Baka,” I teased, calling him dumb in Japanese. I picked up the language because it was available at school. There it was, and I took it, and I excelled at it. I love that, the way the human mind expands if we take care to encourage it. “This isn’t about you or me or X; it’s about Dakota. Only she can make a choice—if she wants to make one at all.”

Parrish dropped his hands to stare at me, but his expression never changed.

“If she wants you, Chas, I’ll be supportive. I won’t fight it. I won’t resent you. I’ll ... be happy for you.”

That’s what he said to me. Now he’s lying here and dying, and I can’t do anything but breathe for him.

“Don’t die on me, you asshole,” Maxx is murmuring, still panting for his lost breath. “If she picks one of us after you’re gone, it’ll ... it’ll feel like a win by default.”

I’d smile if the situation weren’t ... *this*.

My brow knits and beads with sweat as we continue our work. I’m determined to keep going until the ambulance arrives, but I can’t shake the sick sense that I *need* to find Dakota. I have to go after her before it’s too late.

In my mind, I go over exactly what I’d do if I weren’t performing CPR. *Steal a car and Drive where, Chas? Go where? How do I track her without a phone? How do I hack her with, well, a superior hacker watching me across the vast valley that is the internet?* If I weren’t doing CPR right now, I’d still be thinking. I promise myself I’m not wasting any time in my search for Dakota by helping Parrish. Not that ... I don’t want to choose between them. Ever.

This is why I’d never make her choose. I would never force that decision.

Parrish’s eyes flutter and both Maxx and I freeze, staring down at him in a stretched moment of stillness and silence. *Jebal. Jebal. Jebal.* I silently beg Parrish to wake up, and he does, like a miracle. He turns to the side and vomits onto the ground beside Maxx.

Parrish groans and coughs, gasping his inhaleds, choking out exhaleds, and trying to curse at the end of each breath.

“*Shit*”—gasp—“*fuck.*”

Maxx pats his back, momentarily distracted as he catches his own breath and tries to help Parrish do the same. Parrish, on the other hand, is looking right at me when I first hear the crunch of boots on gravel. I lift my gaze to the road and find a figure standing by the broken fence, gun in hand.

My mind empties.

And then it fills with pictures. Images of Dakota and the moments we’ve shared over these last few months. The love. The impossible-to-describe-can’t-be-contained-words-aren’t-enough-they-never-will-be-true-and-perfect love that I feel for her. It swells and expands in my chest as X shoves up to his feet, having finally seen what I saw. I guess it must’ve only been seconds between our realizations.

Doesn’t matter.

Seconds is enough.

I’m aware of red hitting Parrish in the face, and that’s it.

I’m not aware of anything else.

The image features a stylized illustration of a large green heart with black outlines, set against a background of black, leafless tree branches. The heart is positioned on the right side of the frame. The text "CHAPTER 39" is written in a bold, black, hand-drawn font across the middle of the image. The word "CHAPTER" is in all caps and a slightly irregular font, while "39" is in a more fluid, cursive style. The background is a light pinkish-white gradient.

CHAPTER 39

Parrish Vanguard

What? What?! I'm screaming inside my head, on my hands in the mud as I stare with wide eyes at Chasm's body. He slumps to the side like he's boneless, and I taste blood in my mouth. Or maybe it was the other way around. The order of events isn't important. It's meaningless.

The consequences are the same.

I remember Dakota describing the taste of blood to me in the dark of night, curled up against my side and holding back tears as we cuddled in bed.

"I could taste Maxx's heart in my mouth, Pear-Pear. I could taste the person I love dying on my tongue."

That's me now. Tasting Chasm. Because ... because ... because ...

My gaze swings rapidly up to the person at the top of the hill, at Maxx as he throws his body into the man, as they hit the ground and struggle for control of the gun. It happens much quicker than I could've possibly imagined.

X knows what he's doing. He does Krav Maga. He was ruthless at Whitehall Prep. He drove those brats to their knees, sniveling and kissing his feet, worshipping him. He was poor and destitute by their standards, and yet he ruled over them. So, yeah, he gets the gun easily enough and then he—

There's blood on the gravel as Maxx tucks the weapon into his slacks, turning and immediately making his way back toward us. That's when I realize that it's been several seconds and I haven't gone to Chasm yet. How could I have possibly made him wait that long? How stupid am I?

I can barely move, and I'm still remembering what it feels like to breathe. I shift over to Chas, reaching out my fingers to brush the hair back from his face. My fingertips tremble as I touch him, as I try to understand what it is that I'm looking at. *His lightning bolt bangs are red now. Why are they red?*

"Does he have a pulse?" X asks me, falling beside Chas' body and helping me to roll him onto his back. We're both shaking as I lift my fingers to his neck, as I lean in to see if I can't hear him taking a breath. I sit like that for far too long, so long that Maxx pushes me out of the way and checks for himself.

He looks up at me, and I look back at him.

“Don’t,” I say, squeezing my eyes shut as my lungs burn, my chest expanding and contracting of its own will. I’m choking on these massive inhales, and I’m spitting out water as the hot sun bakes my back. My suit is ruined, soaked all the way through and somehow unbuttoned all the way down the front. Not that it matters. Nothing matters. “Don’t, Maxx.”

“Parrish, we need to find Dakota,” Maxx tells me, and there’s a sob lodged in his throat that he won’t give into. Because he’s Maxx. Because he’s practical. Because we both saw Chas get shot in the head, but neither of us is willing to accept it. “We can take him to a hospital on the way.”

That’s how Maxx justifies it, like we have any power to do anything.

It’s in that moment that I realize how helpless I truly am, and vow to change that fact forever.

I will embody what it means to be a fucking Vanguard.

All along, the dark, seductive serpent that was Medina was inside of me. Now, it coils and writhes, and I know that I’m going to find power and have no shame in using it.

“Okay.” I help Maxx lift Chas’ bloody body, and I don’t think about how limp it is, how I’m pretty sure he’s dead, how there are tears running down my face. I don’t go there at all. We lay our friend out on the grass and take turns checking the cars, looking for one that still runs.

I find myself outside the box truck, staring at the driver as he groans from his place on the front seat.

And then I reach out, curl my fingers around the gun on his belt, and draw it out. I only take the time to switch off the safety before I’m pointing it at the side of his head.

“You don’t have to do this—” X starts, reaching out to stop me. It’s too late. I pull the trigger, and then I look back at Maxx, lowering the gun to my side.

“Help me move his body.” My voice is cool, cavalier, empty. I can only imagine what my face looks like. Blank. Ruthless. Dotted with Chas’ blood. I slip the gun into my pocket.

X says nothing, just grabs the man’s legs alongside me and drags him onto the grass. We head back to collect Chasm, and I climb into the passenger seat, helping Maxx maneuver our friend’s body onto my lap. Chas’ legs are curled on the bench seat, his head cuddled against my chest. I stare out the front windshield, breathing hard. I can see myself looking back at me,

tightlipped and narrow-eyed and full of ... hurt.

I'm hurting so badly that I can't breathe. And then the tears are falling again, and the unfortunate fact of my existence flashes into white-hot and painful reality.

I feel it all.

I feel everything so deeply that it hurts. I don't want to. I wish that I didn't. In truth, all it does is make me miserable most days. For months at a time, I'd find myself in a fog of gray, listless and unmotivated and mean. I don't know why. Maybe I was unhappy? Maybe I was depressed? Maybe I was even bored?

But then there she was. My stepsister. Mia. The bane of my existence. The balm to my apathy. Her hair was insane, and her mouth was beautiful, and I could barely fathom the creature peering back at me from the foyer. I wasn't wearing a shirt; she noticed right away.

I *am* allergic to shirts—I admit it.

"Who the fuck are you? And what are you doing in my house?" I watched with pleasure as her eyes widened, as her perfect mouth parted in surprise. Here was a person so different from any other I'd met in Medina, someone with scuffed sneakers and a forced smile tight enough to crack her face in half. Honest to a fault, a girl capable of meeting my cruelty with cold reality.

We hurt each other.

We broke each other open.

We fell in love.

"As if, little sister. In your dreams." But those words I spoke to her were a lie. In *my* dreams. She was in all of my dreams.

A sob escapes me as I clutch Chas tight, as Maxx climbs behind the wheel, as I grit my teeth and drip saltwater freely into my friend's hair. I'm practically clawing at him now, digging my fingertips into his skin.

I didn't want to bless Dakota and Chasm's marriage, but I did it anyway. I did it because he's the only person in the whole world that I would do that for. And now he's ... I look down at his bloodied face, and I'm not ashamed. I weep like a child, fat tears tumbling down my cheeks, jacket sleeve rubbing at my nose.

"What the fuck do we do?" Maxx whispers, because he doesn't know any better than I do. I sniff and force the pain back, lifting my chin and letting that haughtiness roll over me. It's always protected me from my own

feelings, and I'm not about to give it up now.

"We drive fucking *fast*."

He looks at me; I look back at him.

We're both aware that we might be the only ones left.

Chas' phone goes off in his pocket, and I draw it out with a shaking hand. I not only know his passcode; my fingerprints unlock the damn thing as surely as his own. That's who we are, me and Chas.

I look down at the screen to see about a million notifications waiting. Maxx hits the gas as I thumb through them, finding Chasm's social media trail, to his plea for help as I struggled at the bottom of the lake. One notification in particular grabs my attention.

It's so strange that it takes precedence over everything else.

Dakota's livestreaming? Now?

I click it.

I almost wish that I hadn't.

There she is, smiling. Somehow, amongst all of this, she's *smiling*.

"Boys ... Parrish, Chasm, Maxx, I love you guys. Grandma, Grandpa. Maxine. Kimber. Ben, Amelia, Henry. Sally, Danyella, Lumen, Paul. I love you all." She gives the screen a kiss that hits me like an arrow to the chest. "Who wants to help me catch a serial killer? This is the last time I'm going to ask."

"Jesus," Maxx whispers, his own eyes wide. I lift my gaze to his, and something silent and implicitly understood passes between us. He turns away and hits the gas so hard that we lurch back against the seats, gravel and dust churning as the box truck rattles toward Medina. Neither of us says anything more to one another. There's nothing to say to make this better.

I study the house that serves as Dakota's backdrop, trying to figure out where she might be. I know everybody in Medina, so it's possible I might be able to recognize it. Chas definitely would. He'd take one look at the wood molding, the art on the wall, the floors, and he'd know whose house this is. If that didn't work, he'd hack the feed and figure out where it was coming from.

I'm not that good.

I'll have to figure it out by memory alone—that is, if I've ever been in this house. The thing is, Medina isn't very big. With a population of three thousand, it's a small town trapped in the shadow of Seattle. Its exclusivity means I know most people, most houses. *Unless they're not in Medina at all.*

But where else would they go?

As I wrack my brain, a live horror show plays on the screen, a hell that I can do absolutely nothing about. I'm helpless again. I'm fucking helpless.

I watch Justin shoot Saffron. I watch Dakota stab him. I watch him hit her and send her flying.

On the inside, my serpent coils tighter and tighter and tighter, squeezing the life from my heart.

A text comes into Chas' phone—from Delphine of all people.

Hurry, she says, followed by an address that I know immediately.

They're at the house Justin bought for Tess back in the day, the place they lived as a family, where Dakota spent the beginning of her life as Mia. How did I not figure that out right away? My gaze drifts down to Kwang-seon's pallid expression.

Hospital or house?

I stare at Chas, but even though I already know he's gone, I can't give up on him.

"Stop." I say it forcefully, but Maxx doesn't hear me. "Stop!" I scream it this time and he slams on the brakes, throwing both me and Chas into the dash. I shove my door open and scramble out from underneath his comatose body.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Maxx asks me, but not like he believes I'd ever risk our friend's life out of sheer stupidity. I look back at him, hand clutching the handle of the door.

"Take Chas to the hospital; I'm going after Dakota." I slam the door and jog back down the road without bothering to look over my shoulder. I can hear the truck leaving as I run, hating my body for its limitations, knowing that I nearly drowned and this is the best I can do whether I like it or not.

I find another car that runs—a black sedan. On the ground beside it are the FBI agents who were supposed to protect us but didn't. I ignore them, stealing the car and making a U-turn to follow after Maxx. On the seat beside me, the livestream continues on Chasm's phone. I glance at it as I drive. It's dangerous, but I can't look away. I can't let Dakota die alone.

Gamer Girl is sprawled on the ground in her wedding dress now, soaked in blood, not moving. Tess—oh, God, Tess—is lying close by while Justin stands over them both with a gun. I jump when he pulls the trigger and hits my mother in the stomach. I'm just fucking sitting there stunned while she

writhes around, bleeding all over the floor.

“You can’t die yet, bitch. You’ll watch your daughter go first, and then you’ll take me over and over and over.” Justin smiles at Tess before turning away, and I lose it.

I hit the gas so hard that the car redlines, eating up the space between myself and Maxx until I’m passing him in a blur. The box truck can’t keep up. I look down at the screen again, dreading whatever it is that’s going to happen next.

Justin steps up to Dakota. He lifts his weapon. Points it at her.

Delphine stabs *him*. He shoots *her*. The four of them lie together and bleed to death while I’m stuck in the middle of the trees with nowhere to go and no way to help. Delphine stops moving. Justin stops moving. Dakota stops moving.

I can’t bear to look, but I can’t bear to look away either.

When I arrive at the house, I see that the authorities are already there. I don’t care about that. I don’t care that I shot a man or stole an FBI agent’s car. I try to push my way through the horde of people, but I’m held back by the hands of strangers, steered to the edges of the crowd even as I’m in the middle of a fit.

I suppose that when it comes down to it, I *am* a spoiled princeling.

“Let go of me!” I snarl, tearing from the hands of a police officer who’s only trying to do his job but who—unfortunately for him—has found himself stuck with me. “My girlfriend is in there.” My voice breaks as I scan the crowd, trying to figure out how to get past him. “My mom is in there.” I take a step forward and I scare myself when I speak my next sentence. *I sound like Laverne*. “If you don’t get the fuck out of my way, I’ll ruin your life—starting with your job.”

I end up in the back of a police car, but only after a physical altercation that results in me wearing handcuffs. I stare at the back of the seats in front of me as the officer speaks to his superior. I *despise* the looks of pity they cast me. The officer frowns sadly at whatever news he receives, like he feels *sorry* for me.

He isn’t allowed to feel sorry for me.

There's nothing to be sorry about.

Nothing.

"Alright," he says, opening the door to look down at me. His eyes are kind, but his face is austere. This is a man who takes his job seriously. This is someone who's seen a lot of shit. His expression softens, and I find myself biting back a scream. "I'll take you to the hospital so that you can see them. We don't have a lot of time."

He removes the handcuffs but leaves me in the back.

As we pull away from the scene, heading in the direction of the hospital, we pass by the Schaeffer's place. It, too, is *crawling* with vehicles from the sheriff's office, as if there weren't enough police in Medina to handle this massacre on their own. I see Lumen slumped on the lawn, a blanket over her shoulders, staring at the ground with an empty expression that I understand far too well.

The cruiser continues past, and I slump into my seat. I don't realize we're passing by the—as Dakota calls it—ice palace until I look up and realize that our house is once again painted in red and blue lights. There are as many cops here as there were at the Schaeffer's, at the scene of Dakota's livestream. Maybe more.

Dad. Kim. Ben. Amelia. Henry. The Banks.

My fingers press against the glass as we pass, but I don't ask the officer to stop. If anyone was hurt, they'll be at the hospital. If they're dead, there's no point. I need to see Dakota, Tess, Chas. I almost scream when the officer receives a call on his radio, when he turns the cruiser's lights on, when we drive faster.

As if he's trying to get me where I need to go before the chance to say goodbye has slipped through my fingers.



CHAPTER 40

Dakota Banks

Dreaming.

I'm dreaming of Saffron and the pool of blood around her body. I'm dreaming about her sitting under the oak tree in New York. I'm dreaming of her writing in my books, secret messages that I should only read when I really need them.

Well, I *really* need them now.

In this dream, when I crack open the covers, the only writing inside is Amin Volli's cursive.

That's what startles me awake, I think. The idea that Saffron's words might be erased forever. That I'll never speak to her again, the woman who changed my world by kidnapping me, the one who loved me like I was her own.

Was.

As I struggle for consciousness, I'm aware of so many things.

The blood flecking Justin's lips, the shudder of his dying body, the emptiness in his eyes.

As horrible as he is in real life, his eyes are never empty. They're always full of something, even if that something is no good. I see that emptiness in him now and I know for a fact that he's dead.

I know for a fact that I'm still dreaming.

I can't say for sure what happens when we die, but I recognize the fear in me, the desperate need to relive as many happy memories as I can. Just in case. Because there's nothing else I can do except dream. I've been fighting for so long, but now it's over. It is. Whether I want it to be or not, whether I liked the way it ended.

Regardless, it has ended.

The house I grew up in was warm. There was always a fire in the woodstove on cold nights, always hot food on the table to complement it. In the summer, every door and window would be flung wide, and we'd bask under the glow of stars, voices hushed whispers in the presence of fireflies. Maxine would eat watermelon with a spoon while Sally, Nevaeh, and I roasted hot dogs over a fire in the backyard.

I see Walter and Carmen, side by side, planting starts in the garden, each of

them wearing wide-brimmed straw hats and too much sunscreen. I draw in memories of the apple trees and the smell of ripe fruit, of feeling safe and happy and content. I didn't need anything else. I didn't need or want to be a princess.

Tess' face swims into view, but there's no animosity left. I haven't felt anger toward her for some time. Instead, I see the expression on her face during our initial meeting, the tender ache of grief, of time lost that she'd never get back, of seeing the baby she remembered transformed into a full-grown person. Words from her books flit through my mind, twisting up with words from my own writing.

If I'd survived this, I would've done something good with my supposed talent. I swear it. I would've ... I would've married Kwang-seon McKenna, and I would've been good to him, too. *Oh Chas*. I feel his mouth on mine in the hedge maze outside of Whitehall, can feel his hot hands on my skin. The boy who takes on too much and asks for little in return.

The dream kiss that we share shifts and morphs, so that it's Parrish kissing me instead. We're playing *Gauntlet Legends* together; we're fighting; we're making love for the first time. He's looking at me with surprisingly tender eyes in the world's last Blockbuster because he feels it, too, that need for connection, for understanding, that need to no longer be alone.

In the way of dreams, I kiss Chasm and Parrish and then somehow, they are Maxx, and he's the only boy I've ever known. In the coffee shop that day, he starts conversation with me first. He's single. He's never dated Maxine, and there is no Justin. We fall in love the same moment we meet, and there's never a time where I question his motives or cry over him. We ride bikes in sun-dappled woods until we come across a clearing.

I see faces there, so many faces. Danyella is sitting on a fallen log with Nevaeh by her side. There are tulips in red, white, and blue. Butterflies flit like magic across the shadowed space. Even Delphine is there, laughing and twirling.

I'm going out loved. I'm going out having met some incredible people. I'm going out having learned so many hard but wonderful lessons. Once I'm gone, I know the boys—if they're still alive—will find a way to heal. They have an unbreakable friendship, strong enough to carry them through the clatter and din of grief.

My grandparents, they'll mourn Saffron, but if Tess lives, they'll welcome

her as a daughter.

Tess ... if Saffron and I can't make it, then she has to live. If only one out of the three of us gets to move forward with life, it has to be her. I want it to be her.

I smile as I think about the tattoo on my thigh, of the three hearts to represent me and my mothers. Or represent my boys. Maybe it represents both? Either way, good things come in threes.

Justin didn't win. He fucking lost. Because despite everything, he was never able to take hope away completely. Not even now. He's gone, and I trust that things are better this way. I might be gone, but Justin's gone, too.

Everyone I love can live in peace.

I'm still smiling when I lose consciousness for the last time.

Once upon a time, there was a princess trapped inside a tower. Her dresses were hoodies, her crown a headset, and her tower a mansion on the shores of Lake Washington. Unconventional, surely, but she believed in the premise of the modern-day fairy tale.

That is, there's always a happily ever after waiting at the end of the rainbow.

Even if that happily ever after isn't for everyone in the story.

I'm okay with that.

I promise myself as I fade away that the boys will live, that Tess will live, that my siblings and Paul and the Banks, they'll live. That's how I find this deep, calm well inside of me, and I curl up there, letting go and saying goodbye.

It's game over, Gamer Girl.

It's game over, Justin.

Finally.



Maxim Wright

There's a girl flirting with me by the vending machines.

I try to ignore her at first, but she's persistent. She writes her number on a piece of paper and slips it into my back pocket. That's when I feel the wry smile twist my lips, and I know I'm going to get vicious. I turn on her, so slowly that it actually freaks her out. She takes a stumbling step back.

"We're in a *hospital*," I breathe, trying to keep my voice steady. It's difficult. It's impossible. My dad is dead. Hamilton is fucking *dead*, and I don't know what it feels like to breathe. Not just him either. I ... I'm surrounded by ghosts.

The girl blinks at me like she doesn't understand.

I think I came down here to grab a snack, but that doesn't feel so important anymore. Why would I even need to eat? It'd be easier if I were dead. I wish I had died in when the box truck hit the Jeep. Sometimes, I have that thought and I feel so guilty that I wish self-flagellation was a thing.

"All I did was give you my—" she starts, but I turn away from her and shove the vending machine onto its side. By the time I turn back around, she's gone. I'm breathing so hard that I get dizzy, sitting down on a nearby bench until several security guards come running.

They might've escorted me off the premises, but then, the Seattle Slayer thing is a big deal and they know who I am, how I'm involved in it. I'm given a warning, they right the vending machine, and then they leave.

I sit there for an hour before I head back to the room.

Parrish joins me a short time later, flopping into the chair on my left.

"You're a diva when you're hungry," he tells me, gesturing with the candy bar. "Please just take it and eat it, spare us all the drama."

What he's really telling me is this: *don't starve to death because I need you, because we need each other right now*. He's right, and I know it, so I snatch the candy bar from him. I tear the wrapper down with more aggression than necessary and snap the end of it off with my front teeth.

"It's true," I grumble, trying and failing to maintain a somewhat normal façade. I want to cry. "I'm an asshole when I haven't eaten."

"Only when you haven't eaten?" Parrish retorts, but there's no heat in his

voice. Instead, he stares at the floor, and I wonder if he's going to cry again. I wouldn't blame him.

"Did you go down to the convenience store?" I ask, sitting up and grabbing the plastic bag from the floor by Parrish's feet. I study the logo on the front of it. "You did. You walked all the way there. It's like three blocks away." I point at him with the candy bar and toss the bag onto another empty chair. "That girl was hitting on you, too, wasn't she?"

"The other people on this floor have started calling her the ghost of floor three because that's where she's staying. She only comes up to the fourth floor to use the vending machines." Parrish shrugs and then holds out his hand, waiting for me to grab another candy bar from the bag and drop it into his palm. "That's why I walked to the convenience store," he admits, unwrapping the bar. "To get away from her."

We sit in silence together with the hush and whir of medical equipment for company.

I don't talk about Hamilton, how he was killed during the shooting at the church. Parrish doesn't mention that Dakota's grandfather died while hiding their little brother, Ben, in a kitchen cabinet. Otherwise, they'd both be dead. We don't rehash the story of Maxine pulling Kimber into the sauna and covering her mouth as active shooters searched the ice palace. If not for Carmen's quick thinking—and the happenstance of Paul and the kids being in the hallway near the pool—they'd all have died rather than found sanctuary in Tess' newly installed panic room.

We've gone over and over those details.

There's a knock on the door, and we both look up.

Neither of us answers the knock, but it opens anyway to reveal Lumen Hearst. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and her skin is paler than usual. I've never seen her without makeup, with her blond hair tumbled into a rat's nest, but that's what she looks like now, like she's broken.

Can't blame her, can I? Both of her parents were found dead. Worse than that—in my opinion—the killer that descended on the Schaeffer's place ... shot Danyella right in front of her. Danyella is dead. Danyella, with no horse in this race. Danyella, who sent letters to the FBI. Danyella, whose only mistake was that she wanted to help her friends.

"What do you want?" Parrish whispers, but the animosity between him and Lumen has evaporated like smoke. I move the grocery bag and she slumps

into the empty seat between me and Parrish.

“I’m lonely.” It’s the most heartfelt admission I’ve ever heard from Lumen. She puts her face in her hands and begins to cry, and I can’t help it. I put my arm around her to comfort her, and she turns, burying her sobs in my shoulder.

Parrish gives me a look that I return.

“Don’t get soft on me,” he whispers, but he knows that I’m only truly soft for one person. I shot a man in the head with his own gun. Parrish did much the same to another of Justin’s killers. That asshole had more of them in his pocket than we ever realized, and he manipulated them brilliantly. The wedding day massacre went off without a hitch in multiple places at once.

Nice to know that use of deadly force is allowed in life-or-death situations. Neither Parrish nor I will be charged for our crimes. Some small token of blessing in a storm of shit. I rub my face with my right hand.

Lumen gets herself under control and sits up, swiping her arm under her nose. She stares at the pair of hospital beds across the room from us. Gotta admit that it’s a nice room. Wood floors, handsome mahogany paneling, a seating area with pull-out couch beds and a coffee table. Having money can be nice.

Nobody talks for another hour. We’ve been doing this a lot lately, sitting like this and staring. What else are we supposed to do?

“Where do you think Amin Volli went?” Lumen asks, peering around the room like she imagines he might materialize behind the heavy drapes. I mean, it’s possible. He might.

I laugh, and the sound is ugly as fuck. I need to learn to get that under control, my darkness. It’s all around me right now, choking me in a cloud of despair. I want to hurt someone, and I don’t want to be the kind of guy who hurts people when he’s angry.

“Maybe he went to Beijing?” Parrish says dryly, and then he curls in on himself, putting his head in his hands. Neither Lumen nor I comment.

Amin Volli. What the fuck? He left Jack Larae’s body in a pile along with Philippa and Gavin, with Caroline. And now he’s on the lam. He’s gone. Nobody knows where he is; Justin’s most prolific little helper disappeared into the ether. Attached to his victims’ wrists, more notes, more poetry for Kota.

I exhale and stand up, pacing over to the pair of beds. I pause between

them as I often do, waiting for either Dakota or Chasm to wake up. Saffron might be dead. Delphine might be dead. Walter and Danyella and Hamilton and Seamus and Laverne and Takahashi and Sam— They might all be dead, but Dakota and Chasm don't have to be. They can recover. They can *both* recover.

My mind cracks, and I close my eyes. It's too much some days. It is. I can barely stand to breathe. But when I look at my soul mates—because I think we can have more than one, and I think they can be platonic, too—I know that if I had to pick two people to live, I'd have picked them.

"Please," I whisper, crouching down between their beds. "Please don't leave me." My fingers dig into my hair just before the hospital door opens again and there's my sister, Tiff, throwing her body down beside mine, wrapping me up in her arms.

"It's okay, Maxim. I've got you. I've got you." She rubs my back as I go through it—for the millionth time in the last several weeks—and she takes care of me even though her dad is dead, too. Laurent waits near the door, too grief-stricken to be of much use. His husband is dead, I get it. If I were him, I wouldn't even be able to get out of bed.

He blames himself for Hamilton's death. Because if he hadn't been Justin's accountant way back when, our family would never have been involved. But that's life, isn't it? It's never fair. It never makes sense. It just is. It plods along at its own pace, does its own thing, the wishes and dreams and thoughts of human beings don't factor into random chance and circumstance.

"Come on. Let's go home and rest for a little while. If something changes here, the hospital will call Tess." Tiffany helps me to my feet, but I can't bear to leave. I haven't left in weeks. I sleep here, shower here, sit vigil. For two weeks, nobody has tried to move either Parrish or myself from their sides.

But two weeks is a long time.

"Go. I'll stay here, and we can trade off in the morning. Start doing every other day shifts." Parrish says all of that with the excitement of someone on their way to the guillotine. He knows that this is how it starts. Every other day. Then a few times a week. Once a month. Hardly ever.

If neither Chasm nor Dakota wakes up, Tess might have to make hard choices.

"Text me hourly updates," I murmur, and then I just give into the exhaustion, let it roll over me in a wave. All I want to do is crawl into bed

and sleep. And I can do that at Laverne's place, in Kota's borrowed bedroom. Nobody's ready to go back to the ice palace just yet, and since Laverne was shot during the church massacre ... Well, her place is Parrish's place now, I think. I don't know much about rich people wills and stocks and property transfers, but he was the only one named in her will.

So I guess he's even richer than he was before.

And yet, he's never been unhappier.

"Stay safe." I take the time to put my hand on his shoulder before I leave. Without Parrish, I don't know what I'd do. He looks up and offers little more than a nod, but I know he understands. Even if it feels like we want to die, even if Chasm or Dakota do die, we'll stick it out. For each other.

I leave Parrish with Lumen—and two security guards stationed outside the hospital door. With Volli on the loose, we can't be too careful.

I fall asleep before Laurent's car ever leaves the hospital parking lot.



Parrish Vanguard

Lumen stays the night in the hospital room with me. We've never gotten along, but the shit we've gone through has afforded us a level of comfortable camaraderie we might otherwise have never had.

"Can you believe that we started the year off as king and queen of Whitehell prep?" she says, using an old nickname for the school that faded out of popularity during our freshman year. Now, we just prefer to call it 'Hell' with a capital H. Simpler that way. "It was supposed to be such a good fucking year." She spreads her hands helplessly, sitting and watching as I open up both pull-out couch beds and dress them with sheets.

It occurred to me on the first night that I stayed here that I could count on one hand the number of times I've put sheets on a bed. It isn't befitting of a Vanguard to stoop to such simple tasks. I close my eyes and count to a hundred. Lumen keeps talking, but only to fill the silence. She knows that I'm not listening.

Laverne is dead. That makes me the Vanguard heir. Paul tried to help me with some of the paperwork regarding her estate, but I couldn't focus on any of it. I signed what I was told to sign, stamped what I was told to stamp, pressed my thumb to my phone's scanner to unlock my accounts.

I'm going to use all of that money to acquire power—and then I'm going to use that power to keep them safe. I open my eyes again, and I wonder if I weren't more ruthless, if I couldn't have saved them. Were there opportunities for me to kill Justin that I missed? Was I too naïve?

I was. We all were. And we're paying the price for that naivety now.

"Where are you going to go after this?" I ask, opening my eyes and turning around. It seems easier to deal with Lumen's shit than dig into mine. "You're poor. You're an orphan." I'm not being mean. This is how people in Medina talk, how they've always talked. I've hated it since I can remember, but I participate in it anyway.

Lumen doesn't look upset. She is. But not by my words. For the moment, her depression is subdued.

"My grandparents on my mother's side are wealthy; they cut her off when she married my father." Lumen wets her lips and stares at her knees, at the

simple sweatpants she borrowed off Danyella before Danyella was dead. “They’re going to take me in even though we barely know each other.”

I notice how she mentions their socioeconomic status before everything else.

That’s Medina for you.

We both climb into our respective beds, and I use the app on my phone to control the lights in the room. This hotel suite is as nice as they come, private and luxe and comfortable, the best that money can buy. I offered to pay for it with Laverne’s money, but Tess insisted.

Oh, Mom.

She’s resting at home—at Laverne’s estate—because while she’s no longer in need of hospitalization, she isn’t all better. Oh no. Tess nearly died. Would’ve died, had Delphine not texted the address of the house to the authorities before she texted it to me.

Delphine.

The only person who was able to get close enough to kill that bastard—at the cost of her own life.

I sigh and roll onto my side, hugging my pillow and letting the consistent beep of the machinery lull me toward sleep. It doesn’t come. It never comes anymore, not since I saw Chasm get shot in the head. Not since I watched Dakota Banks die on a Twitch livestream. And yet, they’re both still here. Somehow.

“It should’ve been me ... it was supposed to be me ...” Lumen whispers into the dark. She cries herself to sleep, and then I’m the only conscious person left in the room.

Morning rolls around far sooner than it should, blinding me through the large window that overlooks a park. I haven’t slept but for small bursts here and there. All I can think about as I watch golden streams of light hit the floor is how Dakota would be upset if she were awake, righteously angry that she and Chas are being cared for in a state-of-the-art facility, in a room as nice as a penthouse no less. She’d talk about universal healthcare or something and her cheeks would turn pink with conviction.

I sit up to find that the other couch bed has been put away. Lumen is gone and, in her place, both Carmen and Maxine are waiting for me to wake up. Guess I must’ve slept more than I thought.

I force myself into a sitting position, and Maxine smiles at me. She smiles

at me even though her mom is dead and her grandfather is dead, and it's all because they loved Dakota too much to let go. If they'd never come to Medina, if they'd stayed in New York, then maybe ... But that's not how Justin Prior works.

Worked.

You're past tense, dead as a doornail, motherfucker.

"Morning sleepyhead." Maxine does her best to sound cheerful, but I saw her that first day, stumbling into the hospital like a drunk, falling to her knees, screaming. She screamed for Walter and for Saffron but mostly, she screamed for Dakota. I stare at her, but I can't stay quiet forever. She saved my sister's life at risk to her own. Walter saved Ben's life at the price of his own. Carmen helped Paul hide the children in the panic room. What can I say except *thank you* to the remaining members of the Banks family for the rest of my life?

I'll give them money. Millions. They'll never want for a thing. And I will. But it won't ease their grief. It won't make them happy. They aren't like the people in Medina, not like Caroline or Justin or Lumen or even Paul or Tess. Money doesn't make their world go round.

"Good morning." My voice is about as chipper as a graveyard full of hungry crows. I squawk, but I squawk with *menace*. I clear the sleep from my throat and look away, ashamed. I can't help but feel responsible for the deaths of both Saffron and Walter. If I'd stabbed Justin with that knife instead of Caroline, maybe—

"We brought you breakfast," Maxine continues, standing up from the sofa. She brings me a tray and sets it on my lap, like I'm the person here who needs mothering. I'm not. It's her, the one with the broken eyes and the trembling smile.

"I appreciate it, but it's not necessary." I look down at the food and then lift my gaze to find Carmen smiling sadly in my direction. There's an expression on her face that I recognize, like a flicker of the pain inside my own heart. *That is what I'll look like if Dakota dies, like my soul has been split in two and my better half has been buried.*

"Let us be useful," Carmen says, her voice even, her gaze steady. She's a strong woman. I see Dakota in her face. Not in the lines of it, obviously, because they don't share DNA, but it's blatantly obvious in the way she carries herself. This is the woman who taught Dakota to love herself, taught

her to be strong. “Neither Maxie nor I know what to do with ourselves if we’re not staying busy.”

Useful, she says. As if her family didn’t save mine. Because they did. Without the Banks, I might not have a little brother. Or a dad. Or ... I mean, I dislike Kimber, but life wouldn’t be the same without her.

Carmen heaves a sigh as she stands up, making her way over to Dakota’s bedside. The thing that’s incredible about her is that she doesn’t just reach down to take her granddaughter’s hand. She takes Chas’ hand, too, squeezing them both as she studies Dakota’s sleeping face.

I force myself through breakfast—eating is fucking perfunctory at this point—and put the couch bed away, folding my sheets up for Maxx to use later. When he comes back, we’ll switch places. I’ll go to Laverne’s and ... do what? Spend time with our siblings, I suppose. *Our siblings*. Mine and Dakota’s.

Tess shows up as I’m struggling with the fitted sheet, trying to figure out how a layperson folds something that behaves like ornery origami. “*Oh my God, you’re so blue-blooded that you can’t even fold a sheet!*” Dakota would howl. My lips twitch into an almost smile as the door opens and Tess uses crutches to amble into the room.

“Any changes?” she asks, but she knows there haven’t been any. I’d have called if there were. The hospital would’ve called if there were.

“Nothing.” Carmen shakes her head, seated on the edge of Dakota’s bed. Maxine sits in a chair on the other side, arms folded on the bed, chin resting atop them.

Tess frowns and exhales, making her way slowly over to the chairs at the edge of the room. She sinks into one with a sigh, setting her crutches aside. I move to the door to close it for her when Paul appears with a carrier of iced coffees in hand.

My dad and I stare at one another. How is it fair that he’s here and Seamus isn’t? Or Hamilton? Walter? Out of the four of us, I’m the only one who has a father left. How do the fates decide who lives and who dies?

Answer: they don’t.

There are no easy explanations for what happened to us. The world is cruel and unforgiving and random.

Paul—Dad—hands me the coffees and I take them.

“Thought you guys might need a caffeine boost,” he says gently, and I nod.

“Thank you,” I tell him softly, far softer than I’ve spoken to him in years. I turn away and Dad grabs my arm, drawing my attention over my shoulder so that I can see the nervous expression on his face. He adjusts his glasses with a single finger, and I just know he’s thinking about Laverne. She could be mean, but she was still my grandmother. She was still Paul’s mother.

“I love you son.” That’s what he says to me. It’s too hokey for me to respond to in the moment, so I just nod and turn away, passing out drinks to Maxine, to Carmen, to Tess. I offer the last one back to Paul, but he waves it away, so I take it.

“The Wrights are with your siblings,” Tess explains even though I didn’t ask. I know she trusts Maxx implicitly. Who wouldn’t? He ran into a burning building for a bunny. I didn’t believe his bullshit from moment one. He might be a dick, but he’s the sort of dick who beats up other dicks for mistreating people. Maxim is more softhearted than he thinks. “How are you holding up, honey?”

I hate that a simple question from Tess can slice me in half like a blade.

“I’m fine.” My words quiver in a way I refuse to acknowledge, sipping my drink and watching the two most important people in the world sleep like the dead.

“No, you’re not,” Tess says softly, but I can’t look at her. If I do, I’ll fall apart, and I’m not ready to fall apart right now. I need to keep it together until they both wake up. “But if you’re not ready to talk about it, that’s okay, too.”

“Leave me alone.” I don’t mean it, and Tess knows that. She knows me better than anyone. It’s a blessing that I was raised by her and not Caroline. “*At least my son was smart enough not to trust you.*” I don’t think about Caroline and all the complicated emotions surrounding her.

Dakota and Chasm.

It’s all about Dakota and Chasm.

I somehow end up nodding off in my chair, vaguely aware of Tess gently extracting the coffee from my fingers. The next thing that hits me is a strange sound, like a groan or a cough or some strange mixture of both.

My eyes snap open and I sit up, realizing that I’m alone in the hospital room with Maxine.

Our gazes meet, and I shove myself off the chair, stumbling and nearly falling to my knees. I move between the two beds and look between the pair of sleeping faces, trying to figure out where the sound came from.

“It’s Kota,” Maxine says, her voice strained. “It’s Kota.” She leaps out of her own chair, forgetting all about the call button beside the bed, and takes off into the hallway in search of someone.

I’m standing right there, peering into her face with wide eyes when she first cracks her own. I’m certain that she doesn’t recognize me, that she’s still in a haze of painkillers and trauma, but when I squeeze her hand, she squeezes right back.



CHAPTER 43

Dakota Banks

I'm not dead.

That's the first thing that registers in my mind. I'm floored by the realization even as people flutter around me, checking my vitals, checking my eyes, asking me questions that I can't answer. The world is diaphanous, like I've only just crested the edge of waking. I'm not in full control of my body, adding to the illusion that I'm still asleep.

But ... I'm not dreaming? It feels like I am, like I'm lost in hazy clouds, stumbling around in my search for reality. I'm so convinced that I'm actually dead that I debate on whether or not this is the afterlife, if we're all dead and struggling to parcel through the fallout. I guess ... I guess I'd be okay with that, too?

Only, as I come to and realize how much goddamn pain I'm in, I know that I'm still alive.

That's as far as I get on day one, a blurry realization of *life*.

On day two, I wake from the nightmare of seeing Delphine's eyes close, of watching Justin die while I bleed the last of my life across polished wood floors. I'm sweating and crying when I wake, but someone's there to guide me through it, holding my hand and stroking my forehead. I have no idea who that person is.

Days three and four are similar, a drug induced haze that I drift in and out of, unsure where reality begins and my dreams end. I see Saffron in a white summer dress dotted with sunflowers, twirling beneath the apple trees with a straw hat on her head. I know that she's dead, that none of what I'm seeing is real, so I can't trust anything else that I'm seeing either.

Was that Maxx's firm hand on my forehead, brushing my hair back? Was that Parrish telling me a story about the hospital's horrendous coffee? Did I hear Tess crying at my bedside?

Day five is better. On day five, I open my eyes, and I remember what it feels like to move, to breathe, to talk. Slowly, my hand searches out the small remote on the edge of my bed, the one I was presented with on day four but couldn't use. The buttons take a bit of fumbling for me to figure out, but I manage to sit myself up with it.

Tess is sitting in a chair beside me, a pair of crutches resting against the couch behind her. She isn't looking at me, her attention on her phone. She's tapping words out in rapid order and murmuring under her breath. I know her well enough at this point to know that she's writing. In the hospital. On her phone.

A smile teases my lips, but it doesn't come. It hurts too much. I'm still too weak. I'm confused.

My mother reaches up to remove her earbuds, tucking them into her pocket before she looks up at me.

Our eyes meet.

Silence fills the space between us, but it's gentle and understanding. There's no urgency here. Justin is dead and whoever he took with him, they're gone, too. The critical moment has passed, and I slept through it. I slept while people died. In the end, I wasn't a queen or even a king piece on a board. I was useless. I accomplished nothing.

"You're awake," she says, her voice so full of awe that I almost feel awed myself. If Tess could've gotten up and hugged me then, I know that she would've. But she's still injured, wearing a boot and cast on her left leg, bandages on her arms, freshly healing scars on her face. Her head is partially shaved, too, and brown fuzz grows around her left ear.

In a sudden panic, she searches around for water and grabs a cup from a small silver table. She doesn't have to get up to grab it or hand it over. Our fingers brush, and my breath hitches. *She's alive. I was sure she'd die. I saw him shoot her the same way that he—*

I throw the water back and end up choking on it. Tess refills it with a large bottle from that same side table and hands it back. She offers me a paper towel to go along with it. I can barely grasp the items let alone hydrate properly. I do my best as she studies me with eyes that match my own, a gift from the universe to remind us that we belong together. In the weirdest way, I feel like I'm having a platonic love story with my own mother.

"What ..." My voice is a husky, distant thing, like I just barely stole it back from the reaching claws of a mad demon. It's mine again, but it was stolen, and it'll take a while to get used to the feeling of it in my chest. I gesture at myself and Tess nods, understanding.

She rattles off a list of maladies that I can scarcely keep track of. *A broken pelvis? A broken hip? Broken ribs. Broken clavicle. Lacerations, stitches, a*

gunshot to my right thigh, a concussion. There's more than that, but it slips through my mind the way Delphine's blood slipped through her fingers.

No. I close my eyes tight. I'm not ready to deal with that yet.

I feel this horrible sensation coil in my chest and around my heart. A boa constrictor of memory and pain. I can remember everything that happened like it happened minutes ago, not days. Not weeks.

I can remember Justin's last, ragged breath.

"He's dead?" I choke out, and the words are audible if scratchy.

"Justin Prior is dead, yes," Tess agrees, reaching out to take my hand. Her fingers are warm, but I feel her touch at a distance, obscured by pain killers and fatigue. It seems odd that I should be so tired after I slept for so long. "I need to call Carmen and Maxine. They're just downstairs in the—"

"Who else is dead." It's not a question. It's a demand. I'm staring at my lap and I'm praying that the dream I had of the boys and the Snickers bar and some girl who 'haunts the fourth-floor vending machines' was real. It could've been, right? I'm on so many drugs right now that it's equally possible I imagined the entire thing.

My gaze drifts over the room—it looks more like a penthouse suite than a hospital room—and over to the curtain on my left side. The fabric is a rich, saturated red velvet, but it makes me sick to stare at it, so I don't. *It looks too much like blood.*

I turn back to Tess.

She's staring at me with her lips pursed into a flat line.

"Maybe it's best if we don't talk about that right now. You need to focus on your recovery—"

"Mom, please." I don't have a lot of words in me, so each one is precious. My eyes water as I look at her, and I know that I don't want to hear what she has to say. She mentioned my grandmother and my sister, but that's it. As far as I know, everyone else that I love could be dead. "Please."

Tess looks away, toward the wall and the photographs of sailboats that adorn it. *Sailboats.* I think of Justin immediately, and a sadness creeps into my heart that I hate. I despise myself for feeling anything for that man, and if I could've killed him, I would have, but ... Delphine ...

"Did Delphine ... is she dead, too?" I ask softly, but I don't really need to. I knew she was dead as soon as she closed her eyes. "Is my mom dead?"

Another useless question, one that sends tears spilling down my cheeks in

hot, salty waves.

Tess turns to me again, pushing herself off the chair and using it as leverage to sit herself on the edge of the bed. She has tears in her eyes when she reaches out and puts her hands on either side of my face.

“I love you,” she tells me, and I hate that I cry harder. I hate myself for wishing that she’d stay stubborn and refuse to tell me what happened after I blacked out. I don’t want to know. Because as soon as I know, I’ll never be able to un-know.

I will *never* be the same Dakota that I was back in New York.

Never.

So I sit there and I listen. I listen to her tell me what happened to Agent Takahashi and Agent Sam, and my head hangs with shame. I saw what happened to them, but I’m having a hard time accepting it. Itsumi, with her wedding ring and the hurt in her eyes and her fear that something would go wrong with this investigation the way it did with her husband. Sam-Sam and his cheerful outlaw smile, his double-thumbs up, his crush on his senior.

They died like nothing, here in one second and gone in the next.

My eyes drift back to the curtain on my left, but I swipe the tears with the fabric of my hospital gown, rattling tubes in my arm, and I force myself to focus on Tess.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asks softly, but I just nod. It’s cowardly for me to hide away from the truth. I open my mouth to reply when something catches my attention.

My wedding ring is missing.

“Where is it?” I croak, riddled with wild panic.

I haven’t asked about the boys yet—with good reason. They are the last people I want to know about. They are not allowed to leave me here. I cannot do this without them. I don’t *want* to do this without them.

“Where is what?” Tess asks, but she figures it out quickly when she sees me staring at my shaking hand with wide eyes and fresh tears. “There was a lot of swelling; the ring had to be cut off.”

I want it back. It belonged to Chasm’s mom. I *cannot* lose that ring. I can’t. How would he feel if he found out that it was missing? What would he say?

“What happened while we were with ... *him*?” I can’t make myself say Justin’s name aloud. I don’t want to say his name ever. I want to forget he even existed, like maybe I’m Tess’ clone and there’s no other DNA in my

veins but for hers.

I can tell that Tess is struggling with this story as much as I am. Rather than skip ahead, she keeps going. She recants her version of events, and then she hesitates. I haven't told her that Justin taunted me with video from the church, from the ice palace, that I saw Walter lying on the floor, unmoving.

"People died in the church." Her voice is as light as air, but her words are an anchor, dragging me down and binding me to the shadows. "Many people you won't know, but some that you will." Another pause. Tess studies my face, hesitates, takes a deep breath. "Laverne. Seamus. Hamilton."

My head drops and I cover my face with my hands, emotions swirling me through like the autumn leaves outside the window. *Oh Parrish. Oh Chas. Oh Maxx. What have I done? This is all because of me, because you loved me, because you tried to help.* I know instinctively that none of that is true, but I feel guilt and shame and self-hatred anyway.

"Justin sent someone to ... Danyella passed away, honey."

The fragile glass pieces of my heart are no longer shards but dust, crunched beneath Justin's expensive loafers. I can't breathe as I consider how patently unfair Tess' statement is. Danyella is dead? For what? She had no part in this; her family had no part in this.

How am I still alive and she isn't? Does that make any sense?

But life does not pass out judgements based on merit or blame. It does not work that way.

Who's going to put on the production of Hamilton now? Who's going to tease me about mating habits and rattle off facts and listen to Italian opera? How can Danyella be dead when she didn't even come to the wedding? She was supposed to be safe.

"He sent his people to her house." Tess fills in my question without my ever having to ask it. "Lumen just barely managed to get out alive."

Lumen. Lumen's alive.

Fatigue is creeping over my shoulders like fog, but I endure. It's like ripping a bandage off. Only, this bandage is so big that it takes the skin of my soul along with it.

"He also sent his people to our house, Dakota. They killed our security team. They tried to kill your brothers and sisters, but that didn't happen." She reaches out to gently pry my fingers away from my face. She's smiling through tears. "Without Walter and Carmen and Maxine, my entire family

would be dead.” She makes sure that I understand that before she continues, explaining to me how Maxine saved Kimber, how Carmen saved Paul and the littles, how Walter ... “He gave his life to save Ben’s.”

Everything inside of me goes still, and then I’m turning and throwing my feet off the side of the bed.

“Dakota!” Tess yells as I fall to the floor. I can’t stand, and there are tubes in my arm, and I don’t care. I yank at the curtain separating my bed from the one next to it, and I claw myself up to my knees so that I can see who it is that’s sleeping there.

It’s Chasm.

It’s Chasm with a pale face and a bandage on his head and a breathing tube in his mouth.

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!” I scream, absolutely tearing my voice to shreds. I’m not ready to talk let alone yell. I’m not ready to crawl around on the floor like a crazy person. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to end!”

Tess is struggling to get hold of her crutches so that she can come to me, but she’s not in great shape either.

I’m sobbing on the floor now, my upper half clinging to Chas’ bed, my brain filling in all of my other questions with worst case scenarios. *Parrish and Maxx are dead. They’re dead. I know they’re dead.*

“Kota!” It’s Parrish with a pair of iced coffees in his hands. He’s squeezing them so hard that the tops come off and liquid spills down the sides. He drops them on the floor like they mean nothing and coffee splatters all over everything. Parrish slips in it as he makes his way to me, Maxx hot on his heels. The pair of them haul me up off the floor as I sob, clinging to them and clawing at them and gasping as I choke on my own screams.

They get me situated back in bed, one on either side of me.

I can’t pull my attention from Chas’ face.

“How ...” I struggle to finish the sentence, so X does it for me.

“How did this happen?” he asks, and even though I’m not looking at his face, I can hear him swallow. “He was shot in the head.”

In the head.

“Is he going to wake up?” That’s the last of me, I think. The last words I can speak right now. *Walter is dead; my grandfather is dead. Justin took any chance of having a father away from me. He stole everything from me. My mom. My sister. My best friend. Nevaeh. Seamus. Hamilton. And ... my*

husband. He tried to take my husband. I turn and find Maxx next, clinging to his arm, wishing I knew what to say besides *I'm sorry*. It feels so hollow and empty. He stares back at me from green eyes brimming with love, and I hope he understands how deeply I return his affection, how I would literally die for him.

“I don’t know.” He tells me the truth as gently as he can while Parrish sits silently on my other side. Maxx reaches up to cup my face, and my eyes close against the warmth of his hand. He’s so solid and strong, I know that he won’t readily admit to his grief over his father. He’ll try to hide it from me, and I’ll have to work hard to dig it up so that he can process it. I want to do that for him, ensure that I’m by his side for all the toughest moments. “I’m so happy that you’re here,” he says, and then he kisses me with so much tenderness that the tears start all over again.

Our mouths work gently, hesitantly, at one another, as if reconfirming that we are both, in fact, alive. When we pull apart, Maxx reaches up with a knuckle to swipe the moisture from my lower lip.

I turn to Parrish next, wondering if he knows how upset he’s going to be about Laverne when it finally hits him. He might say he doesn’t care, but he cares more than any other person I’ve ever met. He loves so fully and completely; it’s why he’s so closed-off. Letting a person in as deeply as he’s allowed me in, it opens a heart to hurt. And when Parrish Vanguard hurts, he *aches*.

“I love you so much,” Parrish breathes, taking hold of my chin. He looks at my mouth like he wants to kiss me, but like he’s afraid of it, too.

“I’ll call Carmen and let her know that you’re awake.” Tess politely excuses herself to the hallway, leaving the four of us alone in that room for what could be the last time. If Chasm doesn’t wake up, this might be our final chance to spend time as a group.

Chasm, please. I can’t promise that I won’t lose myself in moments of grief, but if you wake up, I’ll try to remember to be grateful where I can. I’ll never let you go. We’ll be husband and wife, and we’ll grow up, and then we’ll grow old, and I will always, always love you.

I’m crying again when Parrish kisses me, when he moves his lips from my mouth to my cheeks. He kisses my tears, too, unashamed of either my grief or his own. Maxx scoots in closer, putting his arm around me, and the three of us rest in silence, listening to the contractions of Chasm’s breathing machine.

Of all the people I could've lost, of all the people I did lose, somehow I know that Chasm's death would hurt the most.

Another sob rips through me as I accept that life is never going to be the same after this.

I accept it, and I hope that acceptance is enough for the universe to grant me one, small favor in return. *Please save Chas. Please, please, please. I will never want for or ask for anything else ever again.*

I mean that.

If Chas lives through this, I will keep that promise tucked into my heart every single day thereafter.

You have my word on that.

Carmen and Maxine slip into the room sometime later.

As soon as I see them, the tentative peace graced by the boys fades away.

"Mom," I whisper, gripped in the clutches of agony and despair. It'll take some time before I claw my way out of this pit. "Mom is dead. Grandpa is dead."

"Yes, they are," Carmen breathes, and the pain in her voice hits me right in the chest.

The boys make room for my sister and my grandmother, but they don't leave the room. A bomb threat wouldn't get them out of those doors. There isn't a force in heaven or down in hell that could move them from my side.

I pull Carmen's hand up to my face, my eyes heavy with tears. The liquid burns my sore eyes, but I can't help it. With my other hand, I reach for Maxine.

While I still have a mother in Tess, the horrible reality of my existence has stolen Maxine's. I ruined the Banks family. Their lives are fucking *ruined* because I had the audacity to be born to a monster.

"I'm sorry," I tell them both, because Justin was my father. Because I couldn't save anyone; I couldn't even save myself. *Delphine*. Without her, I'd be dead. Tess would be—

"Sorry?" Carmen asks, and she scoots forward, reaching out to put her hands on either side of my face. Her expression is fierce, almost wild. "You have *nothing* to be sorry for." Carmen sniffs like she's trying to hold back the

tears, and then continues. “My daughter ... she wasn’t perfect. You know that. She wasn’t a very good mother to either you or Maxine, but ... in the end, I’m glad she was there. And Walter? He would’ve given his life a dozen times over to save that boy.”

“They both did what they thought was right,” Maxine adds in an awed whisper, like she’s as mesmerized by my existence as the boys are. I don’t understand that, how she can still love me, why she doesn’t hate me. I was horrible to her. I stole her boyfriend. I destroyed her life. “I’ve always been proud of Walter, but I have *never* felt pride for Saffron the way I do now.”

I close my eyes.

Saffron was there. She came for me. She fought for me.

She gave her life for me.

She gave me Carmen and Walter and Maxine. She gave me a childhood free of Medina’s bullshit, free from Justin’s cruelty, space to grow where Parrish was never a brother so he could be a lover instead.

My kidnapper. My mom.

Saffron. The image of Justin shooting her right in the heart, I filmed that. It’s possible that my sister saw it, that my grandma saw it. It’s possible that the entire world saw it.

I open my eyes as Tess reenters the room, Paul trailing behind her. He smiles when he sees me, lights up like it’s Christmas, and I wonder, strangely, briefly, distantly ... if he might be able to fill a role that suddenly needs to be filled. No Walter. No Justin. I want someone to take that spot, and I think that maybe, just maybe, Paul Vanguard could do it.

Grandpa, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for wanting someone to step in. But I could never replace you. Never.

Tess makes her way over to the chair by my side, handing her crutches over to Paul for safekeeping.

My mother—the only one I’ve got left now—is trying really, really hard to keep things casual.

You can never be casual again with someone who held your hands in the dark shadows of a box truck while you both lay bleeding to death. We are not strangers anymore. We are not reluctant familial relations. Maybe we’ll never be mother and daughter the way we might’ve been had she raised me, but we are undoubtedly family.

“I want to see his body,” I tell them all, and the words are strange and

small. I'm ashamed of them as soon as I say them, but I can't help myself. It's true. I want to see Justin. I need to make sure that he's dead. Yes, I saw him suck in that final breath, but there's a part of me that won't rest until I've seen it with my own eyes. "I need to ... I have to be sure that he's dead."

Tess hesitates, looking up at Paul. He waits beside her, like he doesn't dare move a single step further away. He's not wearing the ankle monitor anymore. That must be a good sign, right? Tess looks back at me.

"I don't know what the rules are, but I'm not opposed to it. I think ... it might help if we all went and looked at him." Tess' words trail off as Maxine scoots closer to me, rubbing my back in small circles.

The silence stretches on for too long, so my sister does what she does best and fills it.

"I want to hug you so badly, but I don't want to break you either," she breathes, and then she's crying and I'm crying, too. Because our mother is dead. Because our grandpa—in reality, our dad—is dead. Because I killed Maxine's family by being a stolen child. If it weren't for me— "Don't you dare," she hisses at me. "Mom and Grandpa wouldn't want you to feel guilty over this. Didn't you hear what they had to say to you that day?"

I know exactly what day she's referring to: sitting at the breakfast table altogether.

For a while there, I almost had it all. I had the boys, the Vanguard, the Banks.

"She said that you were worth it—and you were. You are. Dakota, we're family." Maxine curses and then bundles me up, putting her arms gingerly around me in the lightest Banks' style family hug I've ever experienced. "Mom wanted to save you, even if it meant giving her life. She knew that from the beginning. It's why she knew you were meant to be ours."

I nod against her shoulder, doing my best to hug my sister back, eyes squeezed shut, already hating this hospital bed and wishing I could get out of it.

Recovery is going to be a long process, I think.

"You are not responsible for the actions of others," Maxx tells me softly, and he and Parrish exchange a look before turning back to me. Multiple sets of eyes drift over to Chasm, silent and separate from this conversation and any part in it.

That's it.

Nobody talks again and, eventually, I fall back into a fitful sleep.

Those first few days and nights are a blur of grief, like a painting with a smear of gray over the top. It's only as the clock ticks and time passes that I'm able to see a little color again. It's watered down and weak, but it's there. I do my best to paint new memories with it.

The doctors came in today to discuss Chas' condition with both Tess and me. As his wife, I have a say in what happens to him, in the care that he receives, regardless of my age. It's a profound responsibility that makes me want to cry.

My childhood is officially gone, and I'm left alone in the dark while Maxx and Parrish sleep together on one couch bed. Maxine and Kimber are in the other, offering poor Carmen and Tess a break from their vigil over me.

I'm not able to stand, but I have a wheelchair beside my bed that my family or the nurses can help me into for walks around the hospital or visits to the physical therapy room. Biting my lip, I take a chance and slip out of my covers on my own.

It *hurts* when I slide into the wheelchair, and I bite my lip to cut off a gasp. My eyes flick over to the sleeping bundles on the other side of the room, but nobody stirs. If they realized I was out of bed on my own, they'd be furious.

I don't care.

I need whatever memories I can get with my husband. As I lay dying, I found that was all I had, my memories, like tumbled jewels cupped in shaking hands. Each precious gem was part of the trove that is Dakota Banks, and I could've gazed on them for an eternity and never tired of looking.

Now that I'm in my chair, I'm a little closer to Chas, close enough to reach out and take his hand.

"It's so posh in here," I whisper, wondering if I can't get any closer to him. If I were stronger, I would pull myself up on the bed beside him, injuries be damned. "I asked both Tess and Parrish how much this room costs, but neither would tell me. Not that it matters. You deserve this much at least."

I keep my voice low, rubbing my thumb over his skin, smiling as I remember the expression on his face when he saw me in that hideous dress. If I'd known it was the dress that I'd die in, I would've worn the one that Tess

offered, the one she married Paul in. I should've done it, stuck Justin with a petty pin of spite one final time.

"You were the only one who actually thought I looked good in the dress, huh?" I strain to see over the edge of the bed, to catch a glimpse of Chasm's sleeping face. He has no hair left. It's all been shaved off, and I miss it already. "When you wake up, we can grow our hair out together."

Quiet settles on the room again, and I close my eyes, trying to bite back what I know I have to do.

I don't want to do it.

More than anything, I want to run from this decision.

Kwang-seon McKenna, he deserves better than that.

I have to say goodbye properly.

I didn't get to say goodbye to Saffron or Walter, not Delphine or Danyella or Nevaeh. I want to be able to do it properly with the person who means the most. Because he does. More than Tess or Carmen or Kimber or anyone else.

Wetting my lips, I make a stupid decision that I'm sure I'm going to regret later, and I prepare myself to crawl up onto that bed. I don't care what I break or rip or tear, it's happening.

I reach out with my hands to grip the edge of the bed when gentle hands settle on my waist.

It's Maxx.

"I've got you, sweetheart." He lifts me up like it's nothing, gently placing me on the bed beside his best friend. When I look over at him, his expression is impossible to read in the dark. "Just don't wake Parrish. He ... still thinks that Chas is going to wake up." X's voice catches and he turns away to give us privacy.

I'm crying again, but there's no sound, just silent tears and contrition.

Just grief.

My hands cradle Chas' face, careful not to disturb the breathing tube. I force a smile I don't feel—just one more forced smile for the books—and I lean down, putting my lips to his ear.

"*Saranghae,*" I whisper, voice trembling. "I love you, husband."

I kiss his cheek with salty lips.

It's the sort of kiss that all fairy tales should have in the end.

I might have tubes shoved in my arms, a cast around my pelvis that looks like a diaper, and a broken leg. But I kiss Chas like I'm a princess in a

beautiful dress, hair upswept, crown on my head. I kiss him like he's a prince in a sharp suit, waiting to take me to the ball. He's no less beautiful to me for his shaved head or the apparatuses keeping him alive or his ice pale skin.

That's how I know, you know? Or if you don't know, then one day I hope you will. Because when somebody loves you fully, all the way down to your deepest, darkest parts, when they love you wholly for *who* you are and not just what you can do for them ... well.

That's Chasm.

In that moment, I *promise* myself that I will never marry another man—no matter how our story ends.

"Let's get you back to bed." Maxx lifts me into his arms and gently tucks me in, sitting beside me and taking my hand. We hold onto each other in silence, and I know he's as afraid as I am. I imagine he's afraid for more reasons than just one. Maxim Wright is always practical, and he knows that I am forever an optimist.

Well, I *was* an optimist.

"I know that he isn't going to wake up," I whisper, but Maxx shakes his head softly.

"That's not true. You still believe that he will." He holds me as I cry, right up to and past the brilliant, blazing sunrise.

He looks so different as a corpse.

That's all I can think as I sit in the wheelchair beside the metal table where Justin's body rests.

The morgue is both more and less creepy than I thought it would be. It's brightly lit, smells of cleaning chemicals, and it's weirdly busy. It's also sterile. It's cold. It's impersonal. Sitting here, I can fully understand why Saffron chose to bury the other Dakota under the oak tree.

I would rather be under an oak tree than in here.

"Are you okay?" Maxine asks me, putting a comforting hand on my shoulder. I cover her hand with my own, but the words I want to say are lodged in my throat. *How can you ask me that when you're hurting, too? How can you still love me?*

But I know. Because I'd love her, too, if our roles were reversed.

Seeing Justin dead makes me sad in so many ways I can't explain. Because we could've had something. Him and me and Delphine. *Oh fuck*. I miss my sister so much more than I ever could've imagined. We could've had princess bedrooms and boat trips and movie nights. All of that was possible, and it was thrown away for what? For this? Justin looks waxen and strange, so eerily still, so devoid of the energy that made him such a frightening presence in life.

Like this, he looks pathetic. And lonely. Because in the end, death comes for all of us. Death has come for Justin Prior and nobody will mourn him. The world is glad he's dead.

I still can't believe it ended the way it did. After everything that happened, it seems so anticlimactic that Justin could die from a simple stab wound to the neck. It's just more proof that he was a man and not an evil god.

I turn to look at my sister, and even though I'm so glad she's here, I wish Delphine was here, too.

"Are you going to have him cremated? Buried in a cardboard box? Ejected into space?" I almost smile at Maxine's morbid humor. "Or ... would you like to bury him somewhere that you can go to grieve?"

The question hits me like a brick to the chest, but I'm not sure what to say to that—especially because the employee is staring at us from across the room. I just hope he isn't recording our conversation or something. I am so done with recording. *Milk Carton is still out there, contaminating the world*. I'm not entirely sure who's in charge of the company now.

With Justin gone, it's only a matter of time before things get ... back to normal.

But can they ever really be normal again?

And what is normal anyway? I know it's more than just a setting on a dryer. It's a standard of living, an assumption of relative safety, of freedom, both in movement and in speech, an expectation of a roof over your head, clothes on your back, food in your mouth. We can have all of that, can't we? Even with grief clinging like a mournful owl to our shoulders, we can have that.

"Dakota." The door opens and Tess peeks in, not such an easy feat while on crutches. There's a frantic quality to her voice that strips me right to the core. The adrenaline I've been surviving on for months fires back into action, filling my body with a need to *move*, to fight, to worry and question and

struggle and fear.

Mostly that last thing.

“What is it?” I ask as Maxine turns my wheelchair toward the door.

“I need you to come with me—*now*.” She doesn’t elaborate, and I don’t question.

I think I know.

Chasm.

I can only pray that he doesn’t take his last breath without me.



Twelve Weeks Later ...

“Freedom is not of use to those who do not know how to employ it.” – Sylvia Day

That’s the first line of the note. I’m not sure that I want to read the rest of it. Because I know who this is from, the one person connected to the Slayer who has yet to be caught. Who might never be caught.

I’m sitting in bed at the ice palace, wrapped in flannel pj’s and blankets. I’ve got more than enough snacks and drinks on my nightstand to feed an army, but how can I complain when there are so many people around who love me enough to pamper me like this?

They Found the Ringleader—What Happens to the Circus When One of the Clowns Escapes? That’s just one of the many headlines I’ve read this week about Amin Volli, the monster who inadvertently helped save my life in the end there.

I don’t know how to feel about him.

I unfold the letter anyway, finding his pleasant cursive writing in a beautiful purple ink.

My father believed all along that he was the mastermind behind the Seattle

Slayer, but in the end, it all came down to the poet with a penchant for blood. Well, and a little help from Delphine Shaw. But to Mr. Volli, Justin was just a tool that he used to satisfy his own macabre desires.

If you think about it in terms of Justin's chess references: Amin Volli was the queen piece that Justin paid no attention to.

Dearest Dakota,

Now that Mr. Prior has fled this mortal coil, it seems prudent that I use the name you were gifted during your earliest memories. Isn't that fascinating? The way human beings are born ignorant and alone. We die the same way, but on the path between here and there, we can have such visceral, true-life experiences.

I'll be frank with you, Miss Banks: I like the winning side.

In the beginning, I thought Justin was the winning side.

Clearly not.

I imagine that if Amin Volli used emojis, there'd be like a skull and crossbones or ... Wasn't he a Millennial like Justin? A laughing-crying face then? I put the page aside for a minute, trying to decide if I ever clocked his age or even his generation. But, like some monsters, he appears as an immortal darkness, some wicked thing with no beginning and no end.

It's hard to say.

I return my attention to the note. As soon as I'm done reading it, I'll have to turn it into the FBI, and he knows it. He wouldn't have sent it to me if he didn't.

You're the winning side, so I'm pledging my loyalty to you—whether you want it or not. There's nothing you can say to convince me otherwise, so don't try. It'll be a waste of your time, and Miss Banks, I must say that your time is invaluablely precious.

You possess something that I do not have, but that in another life, I'd surely take a chance on: a heart.

Keep writing, and I will keep responding. You are talented, and all talents deserve a harsh critic to keep their feet from leaving the ground.

If I may, some advice that may have assisted your late father in his endeavors.

Don't allow your emotion to rule you—master it.

When I watched both Mr. Wright's and Mr. McKenna's 'sex tapes', I knew them immediately to be false. If your father had had the stomach for

observing such things, he would've seen what I saw. However, at that time, I felt as if he was allowing his anger to obliterate his larger goals. What use is a man who cannot control himself?

This leads me to lesson number two—never trust a serial killer.

Not even or especially me.

One day, I may try to kill you, but I will give you plenty of warning, and we will play a long game.

Only that would satisfy me.

As an aside for Maxim Wright: he isn't as good of an actor as he thinks he is. I've included a separate sheet of notes to critique his performance and offer him assistance in the future should he find himself in need. It was obvious even to my eyes that do not know or understand love that he was infatuated with your presence.

For now, I will employ this freedom to my greatest benefit.

May we meet again in this or another life.

Your Teacher, Amin Volli

Oh. Cool. So my high school app teacher is going to haunt me for the rest of my life?! Just reading that one line—*one day, I may try to kill you*—makes me feel like I've been dipped in a vat of ice water. I put it aside and do my best to sit up, hissing a bit at my overall soreness.

But then I think about Saffron, bleeding to death across the room.

I think about Walter giving his life to protect Ben.

I think about Danyella and all the wonderful plays she will never direct.

I think about the life draining from Delphine's eyes.

I sit up at the edge of the bed, putting my feet over the side. A broken pelvis is *not* a fun thing to heal. For now, everything is looking good, but there are a lot of possible complications—like sexual dysfunction. *You're such a weirdo. Of all the possible issues, that's the one you're stuck on?* But it was the way the news was delivered that really messed with my head. The doctor walked right in, looked me in the eye, and asked if I wanted privacy to discuss these things. I said no, because why would I?

So she stood there in front of Maxx and Parrish and my *grandmother*, and told me that I might have pain during intercourse, trouble reaching orgasm, all sorts of shitty things. *Fuck you, Justin. I hate you. I'm glad you're dead.*

My eyes water, but I push the tears aside. I'm supposed to take the time to

start walking around by myself. Three months of sitting in bed, of doing schoolwork via Zoom all day, I'm done with it. I want to go back to Whitehall—despite everything—and I want to see Lumen.

I'm up and on my feet when the door opens and Maxim sees me, his eyes widening. For someone who has PT appointments for his hand, who tried to die via self-induced gunshot, he's sure sensitive about me and my recovery. He never worries about himself.

"Kota, what are you doing?" He takes my arm gently, green eyes hooded with frustration at seeing me up, lips pursed. His voice when he speaks though, it's soft. "If you needed to get up—"

"I'm *supposed* to be walking now, Maxx. I'm going back to campus in less than three weeks."

He gives me a look like, *no way that's going to happen*. I turn and poke him right in the chest, wishing I still had my long hair so I could toss it haughtily over my shoulder. I don't care how long it takes—I'm going to grow it back out again. And I'm going to stick with the lime-green and black (at least for a little while). Saffron is ... she's the one who last dyed it for me.

Maxx is already lifting his hands, palms out to either side, in surrender. There's a warm, cocky smile on his face as he looks down at me. I love knowing that this kindness, this ... pseudo-submission is for me and only me. Maxx doesn't give up to anyone or anything else.

"You're right," he murmurs before I even talk, taking away all my steam. I poke him again for that.

"You don't get to agree *before* I lecture you." I watch as he drops his hands to his sides, and I get caught on the tightness of the fabric over his abs. My body glows on the inside and I slap a hand to my chest, looking away from him before I embarrass myself with an all-over blush.

He's mourning his father, you perv!

Anyway, he doesn't want me to hit on him. *Or maybe he thinks I don't want him to hit on me?* I look back at Maxx. He's not looking at my face; he's looking at my chest. He reaches up with a single finger and swipes it along my clavicle.

Check: no problems with arousal.

"I've just learned something fascinatingly clinical about myself," I declare *like an idiot*.

Maxx just stares at me for a long minute and then he smiles wider.

“You’re getting turned-on?” he asks, but more like a doctor and less like a boyfriend. When I go to poke him again, he grabs my wrist in his fingers and leans in toward me, eyes half-hooded. Now *that* move is like a boyfriend. “Because I’m already there.”

He puts my hand on his lower belly, and it all moves from there.

Months of nothing and then a clumsy, slow, but amazing first time after.

I’m alive. I’ve known that for months now, but it doesn’t fully hit until Maxx and I are tangled together, and I can feel his body inside of mine. I laugh, but that only slows him down for a minute. He kisses me, I grab him by the back of the neck, and we lose ourselves in one another for a little while.

For a long while, actually.

I imagine I’m in for some awkward conversations when we finally head downstairs. Best if I bring it up first, before somebody in this nosy family gets a look at these hickeys ...

“Why are you blushing like that?” Parrish whispers harshly, loading up both my plate and his with food. Watching him try to juggle both is amusing but inefficient. I wish he’d let me help him, but I’m so caught up in daydreams of Maxx that I don’t have the energy to protest. We managed to get our clothes on just *seconds* before Kimber appeared to tell us that dinner was ready.

“Huh?” I blink back at him and feel my lips curl at the princely pout he’s wearing. “Were you saying something?”

Parrish cocks a brow and then shoves my plate into my arms.

“Those aren’t broken. Get your own food,” he gripes, but since he’s just an ass who’s also in love with me, he quickly takes the plate back and focuses on getting me my dinner first. *My WHPA hoodie is hiding the hickeys so well. Glad I put it on. Nobody will be the wiser.*

“As soon as I can leave the house,” I begin, marveling at the feel of my feet as they meet the ground with slow, simple steps. I can walk. It’s a goddamn miracle amongst a storm of shit. “I was wondering if you guys would go do something with me?”

“What sort of something?” Maxx asks huskily and Parrish turns to stare at him.

“For fuck’s sake, are you *kidding* me?” Parrish asks, gagging like he’s about to be sick. He might not be able to see my hickeys, but he can *definitely* see Maxx’s. They’re likely visible from space. What can I say: I like to bite *hard*. “Did you two ... oh my God, that’s why she’s blushing.” Parrish stares at me with toasted coconut eyes and parted pink lips, and I can’t tell if he’s thrilled that I’ve proven that, I, um, am not currently experiencing any sexual dysfunction issues or if he’s pissed that Maxx was the first guy that I—

“Did you two ... what?” Tess asks, appearing out of nowhere the way she always does. She’s doing better than me in her recovery when it comes to moving around and getting back to a somewhat normal life. Oh. And she’s not going to jail. Seeing as the man she tried to murder was a serial killer, Tess ended up taking a reduced plea deal for a gross misdemeanor. Menacing? Brandishing a weapon? Something like that. It came with a fine, the loss of her concealed pistol license, and a year of probation.

The crime writer is now an outlaw. LOL. JK. Not even close.

“Mom, please,” Parrish growls under his breath, serving himself some turkey. It’s Christmas, believe it or not. Time goes that quickly when all you can do is sit in bed all day long. I’m so tired of being bedridden that I’ve been pushing myself. Like now, for example. I could really use a chair. “You know what we’re talking about.”

Tess closes her eyes, reaches up to rub at her temples, and then turns away like she didn’t hear anything at all. I can see she’s warring with some conflicting emotions. Like, yay, Dakota is feeling better and has normal function. Also, eww, he’s nineteen, get the fuck away from my daughter. Something like that.

“Please keep the discussions about your romantic activities to yourselves—and don’t forget to take your pills.” Tess points at Parrish, and he wrinkles his nose at her.

“Seriously? You tell me not to talk about it, and then you start harping about birth control pills? Are you worried I don’t know how to pull—” I elbow him so hard that he grunts, and Tess’ eyes blaze. She turns away with a huff and takes off in the direction of the dining room before their mother-son squabbles can escalate.

Parrish nearly drops both plates on the ground as he tries to juggle them.

“Dude, give me one of those.”

My breath catches the way it always does when *he* is around, and I whirl

around so quickly that even my short hair manages to hit him in the face.

Chasm smirks at me, reaching up a finger to trace the scar on the side of his head. It's a new habit of his, one that I doubt he'll be breaking anytime soon. Not only does Chas have a scar from the car accident, but he has a *bullet* permanently lodged in his right temporal lobe. The scar from the entry wound is buried in the short hair at the back of his head.

"Hi," I whisper, and his smirk changes into an awestruck smile that has both Parrish and Maxx gagging. "I saw you were sleeping earlier, and I didn't want to wake you up."

"Wife," he says, his voice a warning as he steps forward, putting a hand on either side of me and effectively pinning me against the buffet table. "You are *always* welcome to wake me up." He takes my mouth with a vengeance, gifting me with the impossible miracle of his kiss.

The projectile entered the left occipital region of his brain, but somehow managed not to damage any important structures. His medical team proposed that perhaps it was the distance from which he was shot or the specific weapon that was used that spared his life.

However it happened, he's here—and he spent *less* time in the hospital than I did.

Three weeks after waking up, he was out and walking while I was struggling with physical therapy. There are some slight EEG changes that his medical team is keeping track of (whatever that means, Danyella would've known), and he's suffering from something called ... err ...

"Left-sided homonymous hemianopia," Chasm inserts for me, and I nod, thanking him before I realize that he's filled in my thoughts for me. How is that even possible? "Stop worrying about what it's called, and just forget it completely. It's not so bad."

From what I've read, from what Chas has told me, that means he's lost a bit of vision in his left eye, like he can't see peripherally. I've been taking advantage of that to sneak up on him and kiss his neck before he realizes that I'm standing there.

He draws back, running his hand over his head. His hair is short—maybe an inch long at most—and I know that he hates it ... but I sort of love it. It's sexy as hell. He looks fierce with that hair, those scars, the way his gold eyes sweep me over and take me in like he's keeping track. We're rarely apart for more than thirty-forty minutes at a time. I smell codependency, but what can

you do? We're traumatized.

"So you two ...?" Chas draws his finger in a circle to indicate me and Maxx. "It, uh, all worked out okay then?"

"No issues whatsoever," Maxx asserts before I step on his foot. All that does is cause him to grin at me. Parrish narrows his eyes and shoves my plate into Chas' hands.

"Feed your wife, so I don't have to." His haughty voice is colored with affection that he can't possibly hide.

From what I hear, both he and Maxx ... they killed some of Justin's goons. Neither has remarked on it except to say that they don't regret it. Why should they? Justin permanently altered the course of our lives. Who we are now is not who we might've been. Our trajectories have shifted. If anything, the boys are *meaner* to the world, but sweeter to me. I don't necessarily dislike it, even if I feel like I should.

"My wife." Chas smiles at me and winks, and oh my *God*, he's so handsome that I could die. The fire in his eyes, it's an inferno of hope and love. It's a fireball of desire. It's a smoldering promise. My body wakes up around my consciousness, reminding me that I've only just *barely* scratched the surface of my pent-up desire. "Maxx's wife, too, apparently."

I snort and clamp a hand over my mouth, but nobody here is complaining.

Alright. Fine. Parrish complains plenty, but he's all hot air and pomp.

We fill our plates—Chas really does finish prepping mine for me—and the four of us head toward the dining room together. We've got that huge table set out in the living room, like a buffet or something. Only, nothing is catered because my grandma and Maxine refused to allow such blasphemy.

Instead, they came over and cooked all my favorites. Cooked all of Walter's favorites. Cooked all of Saffron's favorites. I'm staring down at the candied sweet potatoes right now, with the little marshmallows all over the top, and I want to cry. The Christmas tree, too, is fresh-cut in honor of them both. The Banks simply cannot abide by plastic trees.

"Go sit down, honey," Tess whispers as I pass by her in the foyer. I do as she asks, swiping tears from my face as I go. By the time I step into the dining room, I'm all smiles. I've been trying so hard not to let my grief get to me, but ... there are a lot of people I'm missing right now.

I sit down beside Maxine, leaving an empty chair for Chasm. I'm worried about him more than anyone else. He's used to hiding his feelings to keep

everyone around him happy. Not to say that he's the only person at this table who's in pain, but he's the only one who's going to pretend like he's okay when he's not.

"Any luck on the house search?" I ask, stabbing a Brussels sprout with my fork. Maxine smiles at me when I look over at her, reaching under the table to take my hand. She's only been back for a few days, on break from her classes at the U of O. *Please don't notice my hickeys.* She does, biting her lip to suppress a laugh. I yank my head away playfully, but she steals it back.

Isn't it strange how life goes on even if you don't want it to? Nearly *sixty* people lost their lives on my wedding day. And yet, here we are, eating a holiday meal with several important—*vital*—faces missing. Chas is missing Seamus; Maxx is missing Hamilton. Somewhere out there, the Schaeffers mourn Danyella. I don't know about Takahashi's or Sam's families, but surely there are people mourning them besides me.

Believe me when I say their deaths hit me harder than I expected. They were just trying to do their jobs by the rules they'd be given. That's it. If they hadn't been kind at heart, hadn't turned around to check on us after the accident, they might still be alive.

I exhale and close my eyes.

"We're going to look at a few next week," Carmen responds, and I can tell by her overexaggerated cheer that she's trying not to cry. I open my eyes and she passes her phone over to me with a forced smile that I recognize all too-well. "Take a look, Kota. Let us know if there's any that stand out to you." I take the phone as Parrish and Maxx finally end their silent skirmish about who gets the chair across from mine. Parrish wins, and his long legs find mine beneath it.

Maxx chuckles to himself, and shakes his head, grabbing a spot next to Kimber. She's seated on my grandmother's left, pretending to look at her own phone as she listens in on the conversation. She's really taken a liking to my family—especially to Maxine.

The little kids—and Paul, sans his house arrest bracelet—are just now getting their food. I can hear their chatter from here, and I smile.

It was a real possibility that this house and all the people in it might've been silenced forever.

You've got to tell everyone about Amin Volli's letter, Dakota. And I will. Just not yet.

Can't I enjoy dinner with my family without thinking about serial killers?

My gaze drops to my tattooed thigh. I've only recently gotten the cast off, and I don't like what I see. There are scars everywhere. I swear, there's not a part of my body that hasn't been affected. It'll take me a while to accept that, I think. Not only is my heart changed forever, but my body is, too. I ache in weird places, and I have nightmares that leave me thrashing in cold sweat.

I scroll through the houses on my grandma's phone with Chasm peering over my shoulder, all of which are in Bellevue. It's the next town over, two miles away at most. I still can't believe that she's planning to move here. I mean, our house was burned to the fucking ground, Walter is gone, so finding a new place to live is a necessity. But to come all the way over to the PNW? She loved the Catskills like an old friend.

"Are you sure you want to leave New York?" I ask, guilt creeping over me. "You love it there; you have a community there. You—"

"Kota, sweetheart." Carmen reaches out and puts her hand on mine. She's wearing her favorite red lipstick, but her dress is black. She wore a lot of black in the time before the funerals, but she hasn't been wearing much of it lately. The holiday must be stirring up her feelings. "It's always fun to embark on new adventures in life. Besides, you and your sister are here. This is where family is." She pauses when Tess steps into the room, smiling in her direction. Tess smiles back.

As Tess takes her seat, I find that I have hope Carmen can heal through their connection. Turns out that my grandmother is also a huge fan of Agatha Christie. Whoever woulda thunk?

"Are you actively trying to discourage her from moving here?" Maxine whispers, feigning shock. She reaches out and pokes me gently in the shoulder, and I smile, pushing the phone back in my grandmother's direction. Parrish rubs his foot along my calf, offering silent comfort. Our eyes meet across the table, and I feel some of the anxiety drain out of me.

"I just feel guilty," I admit, and silence falls over the room. I'm not the only person here who feels guilty. We all do in one way or another. My grandma feels guilty for calling the hotline number. Tess feels guilty for bringing me here. My sister feels guilty for lying to me. Maxx feels guilty for breaking my heart. Parrish feels guilty that he couldn't get to me during the livestream. Chasm feels guilty for being unable to save his father.

"Don't feel guilty," Carmen reassures me as Ben enters the room and takes

the other seat beside her. My brother absolutely loves her, which I find too adorable for words. “When people my age start acting old, we get old. A cross-country move is just the right thing to shake up my world.”

“I still miss the house,” I say, and Maxine groans, and then us Banks are sitting there and reminiscing in shared silence. Paul struggles to calm Amelia and Henry down. He sets their plates on the table, but neither is interested because they’re fixated on *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom*. They’re both playing on their own devices, so into the game that they barely notice Paul’s quiet rebukes.

My grandmother clears his throat, and the pair of them look up at her.

“Video games are fun, aren’t they?” she asks, and they both just stay silent while they stare at her. This isn’t the first time she’s reprimanded them, and it won’t be the last. I wasn’t sure that Tess would appreciate someone else telling her children what to do, but I think she likes it when the Banks do it.

“*They raised you, didn’t they? Why shouldn’t I trust them?*” she asked me when she caught me staring at her in surprise during a similar interaction last week.

“But video games aren’t so fun to watch other people play. We worked really hard to cook this food, so we’d appreciate it if you took a small break to eat.” Carmen finishes with a smile, and the twins sigh in unison, tossing their games onto the table and picking up their forks.

Paul seems absurdly impressed. Not so much when he got called out for being on his phone all the time. Yeah, he didn’t seem to enjoy that. I hide a smile by taking a bite of mashed potatoes. Maxx pushes a soda across the table to me, and I pop the top with my thumb. *Always taking care of me, these stupid boys with their stupid muscles*. I do not look at Maxx’s muscles. I don’t. My eyes shift over to where Chasm’s arm rests against mine, and we stare at each other.

After dinner, upstairs time. All three boys. Me. Bed. Stuff happening.

“If you need any help with the downpayment or anything,” Tess begins, looking down at her plate so she doesn’t have to see Carmen giving her a *sweetie, I’ve already told you no* expression. “Bellevue is expensive. Medina is worse. But it’d be nice if you were within walking distance, you know?” Tess looks back up and exhales. “Please, I know you’re against taking money from me, but it’s the least I can do after everything. I can never express how truly sorry I am for what happened or the way I took Dakota from you, but I

can at least do this.” She pauses and lets out a strange laugh. “I have a lot of extra money lying around, Carmen.”

Tess’ publisher has dropped the lawsuit against her. I mean, how could they not? Her publisher is greedy as fuck, and Tess is a goddamn goldmine. Her book sales have *surged*. She survived a real-life serial killer, one who tried to kill her and her daughter on livestream, who framed her husband, who set her house on fire.

Oh yeah, it’s safe to say her popularity has grown exponentially. She’s even writing a book about the experience which I wholeheartedly approve of. This time, she’s asking for my input as she writes it. All day, every day she’s been working in bed.

And yours truly? I’ve been working, too. I’m not sure what I’m going to do with what I’m writing, but now that I’ve started, I can’t seem to stop. Tess asked if I was interested in cowriting her book with her, but I’m not sure that’s the direction I want to go. We’ll see.

“That may be the case, but—” Carmen begins, but I stop her by standing up. Everyone at the table stops eating, looking at me like maybe I should sit back down. But I’m not in the state I was in twelve weeks ago. Hell, I had sex with Maxx today. I can certainly stand up for a few minutes.

“Take the money,” I tell her, steeling myself for a protest. Because I know my grandmother, and I know myself, and I know that in the situation she’s in, I’d say the same. But she’s keeping the land back in New York (especially knowing that her grandchild is buried under the oak tree) and she doesn’t have a ton of money saved up. Walter’s life insurance money was going to be her downpayment, but this area is much more expensive than back home. “Please. Tess wouldn’t offer if she couldn’t afford it.”

“Kota, it’s not as simple as all that.” Carmen looks to Maxine, but I know that neither of them has a truly good reason to refuse.

“Let me at least do this,” Tess begs, and I can tell from her voice how sincere she is about it. She wants them to live close. She wants them to have a nice house. Even a mediocre house in this area costs millions of dollars. “We’re all family now,” she adds when it seems like the protests might continue. “We’re family.”

And she’s right: we are.

Justin took loved ones from us, but he also unknowingly gifted us with this.

Carmen looks to Maxine again, like neither of them is quite sure what to say to that.

“Take the money—they could use a little less of it,” Maxine whispers.

“Just say yes,” I tell them, and they both look at me with such adoring exasperation that I smile. “Buy something close so we can see each other every day.”

“I don’t know about every day,” Carmen jokes, but the playfulness in her voice leaves as quickly as it came. She’s staring at the table, and I just know that she’s thinking about her daughter, her husband. I know I am. My hand drops to my thigh, to the triple heart tattoo with the ragged scar cutting right through it. “I ... okay then.”

I look up to see Tess smiling across the table at my grandmother. Tess can never be a replacement for Saffron, but she can certainly be a bright addition to the Banks family. *What’s left of it.* I exhale sharply to keep the tears back. Chasm notices. Parrish notices. Maxx notices.

The four of us will be linked together forever—regardless of the direction our romance takes.

“You should eat more,” Tess tells me when she sees that I’m still standing there. Her face shutters slightly as she looks me over. “You can’t heal if you don’t eat.”

“Mom,” Parrish says softly, and then he laughs. “You just can’t resist, can you?”

“Resist what?” she asks genuinely, looking over at him. “Being a mother? Raising you properly? Taking care of you? I’m sure the four of you were hoping that I’d let you continue with your ... activities forever. But things around here are going to get back to normal or as close to normal as possible.”

“Which means you’re determined to nag us to death,” Parrish murmurs, but he’s only teasing, trying to turn back the clock and make things feel normal again. We’re all going to have to learn a new normal, but that’s okay. We’ll manage.

“Man, don’t poke the bear,” Chasm grumbles, rubbing at the back of his head again. I still can’t believe there’s a bullet forever stuck in his brain. How insane is that? “I’d love to spend time with my wife later.”

“About that,” Tess begins, looking up at me before glancing to Chasm next. Before Justin died, he filed our marriage license. The ceremony had

nothing to do with the legality of it. We are officially hitched. I'm sure Tess doesn't like it. I'm sure she'd love to get it annulled. But then she looks at Chasm and whatever she sees in his face convinces her to change her words at the last minute. "I'm not going to force you guys apart. Obviously, that isn't going to work. But there are going to be rules."

Now she's looking at Maxx. Glaring at Maxx more like.

He stares innocently back at her before forcing a smile of his own.

"As long as they're reasonable, I have no problem with that." He takes a bite of his food as Tess narrows her eyes on him and I plant my face in my hand. Right. Maxx is like, a super overprotective dick now. Not ... that he wasn't before. He's just more protective toward me than he was before. Didn't know that was possible, but it is.

"For one, there will be no babies born before you hit legal drinking age." Tess doesn't look at me when she says that, but her voice is like steel.

"If Dakota had a baby in high school, grandma would disown her," Maxine adds oh so helpfully. I give her a look and she stuffs a bit of buttered roll into my mouth.

"I would never." Carmen meets my eyes, and I flush a crimson color that oddly resembles the cranberry sauce on my plate. "I would just be disappointed."

"I cannot believe I'm letting my daughter's boyfriends live in my house." Tess is grumbling to herself, but something about that statement seems to hit Chasm like a punch to the stomach.

"Should I move out?" Chas asks, changing the atmosphere at the table in an instant. Even Kimber stops staring at her phone to look up at him. His beautiful amber eyes are fixed on the plate in front of him as he uses his fork to move food around without ever taking a bite.

"Is that what you want?" Tess asks, looking over at Paul and trying for a small smile. He smiles back at her, and they both turn to Chasm again. "We were listed as your legal guardians in your father's will, but you could certainly get emancipated if you'd prefer that."

"I'm asking what you want," Chasm says quietly, looking up at her. Not at Parrish, not at me. At Tess.

"Kwang-seon, you know that you have always been and always will be a part of my family. Of course I'd love it if you stayed here." Tess hesitates. "Just don't impregnate my daughter."

Chasm doesn't say anything, but I can see the relief in his gaze.

"What about Maxx?" Parrish asks, trying to lighten the mood. "Can we kick him out? He's a legal adult."

"He's welcome to stay as long as he wants," Tess says, giving her son a harsh look in response. For his part, X just shakes his head and then flicks some mashed potatoes on Parrish's sleeve when Tess isn't looking. "Provided you all behave."

It's the most normal day we've had in a while, albeit tainted with sadness.

But grief isn't a static thing. It's right there staring at you after a tragedy, but it doesn't walk as fast as time runs. As the hours pass and then the days, the weeks, the months, it stays where it is, watching you. It may never go away, may always be visible in the distance, but with each step you take away from it, it becomes a little smaller, a little harder to see.

We all just needed time.

And time, we would get.

Not everyone who passed away in our lives is buried in the same place, but we're here at the Mima Mounds Natural Area Preserve today for a reason. I'm feeling good. I've packed food and drinks. I'm wearing a pretty dress that Maxine ordered for me from BlackMilk. This one is a *Totoro* tee dress that I've paired with lime green boots, to match my hair (obvs).

The scars on my body are bothering me less and less every day. The more I think about them, the more I realize that they're simply reflective of the scars decorating my heart. People can see on the outside what happened to me on the inside.

Justin stole nearly a year of my life, shattered my happy-go-lucky views of the world, and punished me by taking away people that I loved. By stealing my innocence. By turning me into a killer. I still wake up some days with nightmares wracking my brain, sitting in the back of that limo and watching my veil drift as we spin, feeling the knife puncture Heath Cousins' skin, finding JJ's cold, dead body in the box.

I think about the people who aren't here with us when they should be. *Walter. Saffron. Danyella. Delphine. Seamus. Hamilton. Nevaeh. Takahashi. Sam. Veronica. Philippa. Gavin. Antonio. Judge Rossi. Laverne. The Hearsts.*

There are too many victims to name.

But after considering the danger we were truly in, it could've been even worse. Luck and togetherness played their parts in keeping us safe. Luck that my grandparents were at the house to rescue my siblings. Luck that Maxx visited the burning ice palace and saved my family from the fire. Luck that Delphine was on my side in the end.

Togetherness.

Justin never did understand why we kept coming together. He tried to make me believe that Chasm and Maxx had cheated on me, showed Parrish that he'd been cheated on, turned me against Tess when it was as easy as squirting lighter fluid onto a raging fire.

Yet ... here we are.

"Let me help you," Chas murmurs, taking my arm. I don't need the help, but you try explaining to three overprotective guys that the bedrest you've been on is over, that you're getting back into the swing of life, that nobody is going to take you away from them.

Virtually impossible.

"I'm not the one who was shot in the head." I glare at him, but he shrugs, reaching up to trace his scar again. It's nothing short of a fucking miracle that he's still alive. A bullet was literally fired into his brain and yet, here he stands. He's the sort of person that medical journals are written about.

"I knew I had to wake up," he told me after those first few groggy days when he was coming to and couldn't speak. I will forever remember the hot heat of his fingers as he wrapped them around mine with surprising strength, the glint in his feverish amber eyes, the shape of his perfect mouth. *"Because I could hear you talking to me, and I knew you needed me. Wife, I don't think I'll ever be able to exist without you."*

Although the memory is months past, my breath catches strangely and Chas notices. His lips make a shape that's at odds with the depth of grief in his gaze. He's smirking at me on the outside—maybe a little on the inside, too—but he's still not over losing Seamus. Of course he isn't.

I allow Chasm to take my arm and guide me into the grass. Maxx is right behind us with the picnic basket, the blanket, and an umbrella slung over his shoulder. Parrish carries nothing because, well, he's Parrish Vanguard and he doesn't do manual labor. Or so he said when X tried to hand him the umbrella.

None of them knows why I invited them here or what the plan is exactly.

Maxx thinks we're here to hike, but, ah, LOL. No.

"The trail is only a half-mile," I explain as Chasm holds onto my arm and looks down at me. Our eyes meet as the wind picks up. It is January after all, and the air tastes like a storm. It might rain. That's what the giant umbrella is for.

We're having this picnic today, rain or shine.

"We drove two hours for a half-mile trail?" Maxx asks, still confused as to why we're here. I've kept mum about the whole situation, but they'll find out soon enough.

"As if she could walk a longer trail than that, for shame," Parrish admonishes, dropping his arms by his side and adjusting his jean jacket. Paired with his Baphomet necklace and black joggers, he looks a little more casual and a little less preppy. Maybe he's gearing up for his future career as a tattoo artist? Tess has been on both him and Chasm lately, asking what their plans are for after graduation, where they plan on attending university.

Parrish hit her hard and fast with a fact: he's not going to university.

Tess was genuinely upset for the rest of the evening, but I think the Justin situation really impressed upon her how not-serious this declaration was. In the scheme of what we've been through, Parrish's decision to skip additional schooling is a drop in the vast ocean of life.

Not only that, but he's the sole inheritor of Laverne's vast fortunes—her properties, the vault, her businesses, her bank account. She did almost get me killed by drugging me and letting Volli kidnap me. That's when Justin and I played Russian roulette together, so ... yeah, I hate the woman but I'm still sorry that Parrish is hurting over her death.

Even if he *still* refuses to admit it.

"Do you think they'll ever catch him?" I ask Chas as he escorts me along the trail, the feel of his hot hand on my arm a reminder that things are better than ever in the romance category. Almost dying really revs up a person's lovers. They've all been so incredibly attentive, so sweet, so ... not sweet. Last night, I would hazard to say that Chasm wasn't sweet at all. In a good way. A very good way.

"Mr. Volli?" he asks, but he doesn't need to clarify because he knows. I've shared the note with everyone and handed it over to the authorities, so they're more than aware of his interests. Whenever I write anything on Google docs

or store it in the cloud, I come back to find critiques from Mr. Volli. I'm not sure how he's doing it—I always got the idea that Justin was the hacker and not him—but he's doing it. And the FBI hasn't been able to track him down either. "Probably not. I'm sure he'll come back to haunt us one day." He rolls his eyes like he's being sarcastic, but I'm not sure that he is.

I lean into Chasm, the shine of the winter sunlight on my ring a reminder that he's my husband. It'll be interesting, going back to Whitehall with everything that's happened, with the deaths of Veronica and Antonio, Gavin and Philippa on our shoulders. With Danyella's death a pall that I will never be able to shake.

"What is this place anyway?" Maxx asks, moving into the grass so that he can walk beside us while we traverse the trail.

"Four-hundred and forty-five acres of national natural landmark." I gesture with my arm in the direction of the strange mounds decorating the grass on either side of the trail. "These are the Mima Mounds, and nobody's ever been able to discern where they came from."

"We drove all the way out here for grass mounds?" Parrish asks, playing with his necklace as he stares out at the rolling brown grass, the gentle mounds, and the woods beyond. "I love you, Gamer Girl, but wouldn't you rather be at home playing the new *Nioh* game?"

Oh, that's tempting. A game series filled with Japanese lore. It was hard to pull myself away, won't lie. I've been gun-shy about technology lately, but like, not *that* gun shy. You try spending months in bed after spending months being hunted by a serial killer. It's a weird transition. So, yeah, I've been gaming. I've got a lot of social media followers, too, like even *more* than I did for being a kidnapped daughter of a millionaire crime novelist, all of which was revealed by a Netflix doc. Think about how juicy that is? Like, and now I've survived being killed by a serial killer on livestream.

Yeah, I'm lit. I'm viral. I'm in influencer god territory. Cosmic level content creator.

"We drove all the way out here for something else," I tell them mysteriously. I'm working on that, trying to be mysterious and everything. It hasn't been working thus far, but surely, I'll get there, right? I can't stay awkward and weird forever. Or ... can I? "Would you guys still be with me if I kept wearing Pokémon clothes and loving video games and Ashnikko until I was like, fifty? Eighty? Forever?"

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Parrish drawls, waving his hand around like royalty. “I’m assuming you’ll be doing those things long into the afterlife. Longer than that. Your headstone will read *Gamer Girl, She Lived and Did Some Stuff, What a Weirdo*. In your next life, you’ll be reborn on some distant moon with extra arms and a tail.”

I smile at him, and he catches the genuine affection in my expression. I don’t force smiles anymore. I don’t think I’ll ever force smiles again. Between Justin and Tess, I’m done with it. I’m going to be honest with myself about my emotions, but I’m also going to sit with them. Because emotions can amp up quickly, but they can fade quickly, too. That’s why I’m taking my time with everything from now on.

If I hadn’t judged everyone here in the beginning, I might’ve gotten to know them sooner and saved myself a lot of heartbreak.

Parrish wets his lips as I stop walking. He doesn’t because he’s turned around and he’s staring at me. He takes a few too many steps backward and slams into a picnic table, nearly falling into the gravel with his arms pinwheeling. Face burning, he brushes off his jacket and scowls, those gold-flecked brown eyes of his fixed on the distant mounds and not on my face. Parrish shakes his jacket out, schooling his pretty lips into a flat line.

“You’re not as cool as you think you are,” I tell him, and he smirks at me, moving close to bend down in front of me. Our noses are nearly touching as he reaches out and gives my own necklace a tug. It’s a *Totoro* Catbus necklace because ... why not? Life is so fucking short. I’m going to be happy while I can.

“Think I am? Gamer Girl, I *know* exactly what and who I am.” His eyes flick to my mouth like he might kiss me, but then Maxx stabs the umbrella into the ground and opens it suddenly, nearly knocking Parrish in the back of the head as the blue fabric spreads wide, protection from any future rain drops.

“An asshole? Is that what you know you are?” Maxx asks, setting the picnic basket on the table. Chasm is currently staring out at the mounds, a distant expression on his face. He smiles as he turns back and notices that I’m staring at him. But it’s a hollow, sad smile.

That’s why we’re here, to hopefully help us all feel better.

“I’m okay,” he tells me, and then because I’ve been practicing Korean a lot, he tries it in his language, too. “*Gwaenchanha*.” His smile gets a little

more real. “*Daijoubu.*” That last one is in Japanese. Now that the boys have realized that my Korean is getting better, they’ve switched over to Japanese. I wasn’t aware that anyone but Chasm spoke it well-enough to carry on a conversation. Color me surprised. We are all well on our way to becoming polyglots. What should I learn next? French? Spanish? Czech? *I would so take a trip to Prague.*

“One day you guys will have to learn something weird like Klingon or High Valyrian to talk behind my back.” I snort and cross my arms as they all stare at me. Chasm is the first to tease me about what I’ve just said which is, admittedly, pretty nerdy.

“Klingon? Like what? How old *are* you?” he asks, poking me in the cheek as I swat his hand away defensively. “You’re a Trekkie, too? Since when? And High Valyrian? That’s a *Game of Thrones* made-up language, isn’t it? Jesus H. Christ.”

“Alright, enough of teasing Dakota Banks,” I declare, and then I hear a twig snap. All four of us go completely still, looking in the direction of the woods to see a squirrel scrambling up the trunk of a tree. Doesn’t mean there’s not somebody there. Also means that we’re the only car in the parking lot and probably alone.

Being paranoid isn’t a reaction that fades quickly. It might stick with us for life. Did I mention that we all left our phones in the car? Yeah. It’s still like that.

“Pray tell why we’re here,” Parrish says, and I look over to see him lounging on the surface of the picnic table, stretched out like a king and propped up by his elbows, one leg thrown over the other, face lifted up like he’s trying to absorb the cold, slim rays of the winter sun. “Before we get stabbed or shot by your sophomore app teacher.”

I clap my hands together and move up to the picnic basket, assuming Maxx will move out of the way, so I have easier access to it. He doesn’t. He stands right there so that we’re close, so that I can feel the heat of his skin through the bomber jacket I’m wearing. It, too, has a depiction of Totoro on the back. I’m on theme for today. Having a super-rich mother is not exactly the death knell that I acted like it might be. I’ve been taking advantage of her offer to buy me new clothes.

This time, she’s not forcing me to wear what she wants: she’s letting me choose my own things.

“We’re here for a proper memorial.” I open the basket to reveal the food inside. I worked really, really hard on the stuff that’s in there, heading over to my grandmother’s new place down the block to cook. None of us really knows anything about making traditional Korean dishes, but I’ve been writing down what Chasm does when he cooks which is surprisingly regular. He’s taken over Tess’ kitchen recently.

Carmen helped me prepare *banchan* (side dishes), *kimbap* (rice rolls with seaweed, like sushi), and *kimchi jjigae* (stew with kimchi, tofu, and pork) which is currently housed in a large thermos. I convinced my grandma to buy some soju for us to bring out here. I explained that we wouldn’t even be drinking it.

It’s not for us.

“You made all of this?” Chasm asks, stumbling over to look through the basket. He’s stunned. I don’t cook often and when I do, it’s usually a recipe from my childhood. But not today. I’ve gone outside the box and I’ve done my best to prepare some of the items that I know Chas likes. “What ... why?” He seems genuinely confused as I look his way, picking up a green soju bottle.

“We’re here to say goodbye,” I tell them, and my voice breaks on that last word.

With Saffron flitting in and out of my life, I didn’t realize that I’d miss her this much. But I do. I’m sad for all the Whitehall teens on my checklist that Mr. Volli killed, young lives cut short. I’m grieving the loss of Lumen’s personality and the deep sadness in her voice as she struggles to get past the image of Danyella dying in her arms.

I’m devastated most of all by the losses suffered by those around me. Chasm will never get the love and affection he so desperately needed and wanted from Seamus. Maxx and his father will never get the chance to work out their differences on motocross and career paths. Parrish will never know Caroline, and even if he truly didn’t want to know her, he lost his grandmother who I know he loved despite her crotchety personality.

As for me, I not only lost my real father—Walter Banks—but I lost Justin, too, and all the possible future threads we might’ve traced together.

In the end, we all lost a parent and that deserves acknowledgement.

“You want to have a memorial service?” Chas asks, his voice small. “We already had a funeral.”

We did. We've been to a lot of funerals lately. Never gets any easier.

"This is different. Those felt like they were for other people. I wanted today to be about us." I take the stack of *soju-jan* (soju glasses) from the basket and walk over to stand beside one of the mounds. "I read that in the Joseon era of Korea, they used mounds to bury the dead. As soon as I saw that, I thought about this place." I gesture at the mounds with the bottle in my hand as the boys move up to stand with me.

We stand in an even row, listening to the wind whisper across the silent plain, the small mounds the only disruption between us and the trees.

"You want to say goodbye here?" Chasm asks, still sounding strange and faraway. I know that he never really got the attention and recognition from Seamus that he craved. I still don't entirely understand why Justin killed a man who was supposedly his friend.

"I hope you don't find any of this disrespectful," I tell him, suddenly alarmed that he might not like me making his traditional food or trying to recreate this ritual. "I just now realized that you might—"

He turns to me suddenly and I see that there are tears in his eyes.

I have yet to see Kwang-seon McKenna cry for his father. He sweeps a hand over his still-growing hair, his lightning bolt bangs a trait I miss like the loss of an old friend.

"Disrespectful? Dakota, there's nothing disrespectful about this. I ... I really love you, you know?" he whispers, and I feel tears sting my own eyes. I throw my arms around him, and he returns the gesture, his black puffer jacket surrounding me with warmth, drawing me into the scent of peppermint and dark chocolate. He holds me so tightly, like he's trying to wrap the pair of us up in this moment, tie it in a pretty bow so we can hide there.

But that's not why we're here.

We're here to break the invisible barrier surrounding us, break from the heaviness, from the violence, from the grief.

"Here." I draw back and I pour Chas a glass of soju. He immediately tosses it back and I give him a look. "Don't drink too much. I struggled to get my grandma to buy us a single bottle."

"We only have one?" he asks, sniffing as he stares down at the cup. I pour a second and then move onto Maxx. He's not looking at me. Instead, he stares out at the woods, a soft frown on his face, one that mollifies the true intensity of his emotions. I touch his arm lightly and he looks down at me.

For a minute, X holds that stoic expression, a pillar of strength and resilience.

I also have not seen him cry.

With these guys, it's not some dumb shit like *boys don't cry* or anything like that. I can only guess that they've been too worried about me to properly come to terms with it. As for Maxx and Parrish, too worried about Chasm. I don't think Chas ever worries about himself—though I think he should.

“Here.” I fill a second glass, passing it over to Maxx. He takes it, knowing what even that light touch between his fingers and mine will do for me. He knows even something that small is enough to steal my breath. I can't go there right now though. Not until after we've finished this.

“I appreciate this,” he tells me, and I can hear in his voice that he means it. It can't have been easy to find out that Hamilton was gone, that his adorable family was broken. While Tiffany is as resilient as Maxine, I don't know if Laurent will ever fall in love again. “I needed this—even if I don't want to admit it.”

I give Maxx a small kiss on the cheek and then I turn to Parrish.

He's waiting with his hand outstretched, his face neutral but his expression mild. He's hurting for us, but that's all. He's not upset about his grandma or Caroline or his long-time friend Danyella Schaeffer. No way. Not at all. *Liar*. Either way, I'm pouring him a drink to say goodbye if he wants to.

“He managed to take a parent from each of us.” I pour myself a glass of soju and then I turn back to face the mounds, the woods, the gray-blue sky. *May have underestimated how cold it was going to be out here today. Brr*. Maxx comes up behind me, folding me into his jacket. I snuggle close and then lift my cup up in the direction of the mound, pretending as if it's a grave.

I'm not sure what to say or do, so I end up just standing there like an idiot with the glass in my hand. It's Maxx who takes over and salvages the situation for me.

“Dad,” he says, and his voice cracks. It gets caught on a strange note, and then I look up and see the reality of the situation on his face.

Sometimes, it feels like we got off lucky, that Justin could've been and done so much worse, so how dare we complain. I lived. Tess lived. The house fire was a failure. I mean, there really were some remarkable moments on this journey.

That doesn't change the pain of losing someone close to you.

I can't explain it—I wanted Justin dead, no doubt—but it's weird. Now

that he's gone, everything is changing again and change is fucking hard.

"Dad," X continues, untangling himself from me. With his cup carefully balanced in one hand, he slips out of his jacket sleeve on the right side, switches the cup to his other hand, and then drops the left sleeve. The garment is slung effortlessly over my shoulders as he steps forward. "I miss you a fucking lot. Laurent is a wreck right now. And ... Tiff ... Tiff doesn't know how to let herself grieve." Maxx stares at the rim of the cup, green eyes dark with memories. "Let's have a drink here on my twenty-first, too, okay?" He pours the cup onto the mound before reaching out to take the bottle with its remaining alcohol from my hand. "I'm not driving back." Maxx steals the Jeep's keys from his jacket pocket and tosses them at Parrish.

We all wait while Maxx takes a gulp of the liquid, exhaling and dropping the bottle to his side.

"I love you, I miss you. I'm glad you got the chance to meet the girl I like. She's worth it." He takes another drink and then nods his chin in my direction, indicating, I guess, that he's done.

Chasm stares at him and then turns to Parrish, shaking his head.

"I'm not ready. You go." Chas steps back, like he's distancing himself from the experience so that he can think. His brow is scrunched as he stares into his cup.

"Caroline, Godspeed. Thank you for the favorable physical genetics." Parrish holds out his cup but at the last moment, he draws it back and drinks it. "Also, no drink for you. In the next life, don't abandon your handsome, talented, intelligent son." He looks into his own glass, the flippancy fading from his handsome face. "Laverne, you didn't know kindness or compassion, but in your way, you loved me. I know that." He exhales heavily and closes his eyes. "Mostly, this is for Danyella. This is for Walter and Takahashi and Sam." Parrish extends his glass and gives the liquid to the earth.

Guess it's my turn?

I move a little closer to the mound and squat down beside it, reaching out to run my palm across the grass.

"Hey Mom," I start, and there are tears, but there aren't a lot. I've been crying on and off for weeks. I've had a lot of time in bed to think about this, to rail at Justin, curse his ghost, to sob. "You said you'd be there for me, and you were. You gave me life the same way that Tess gave me life. Not just once when I was kidnapped, but also when you saved Maxx. When you shot

Justin for me. When you attacked Mr. Volli and knocked him off the second floor.” I smile at that. She never did call him Amin Volli much. Just ‘that weirdo teacher’. She was the only one who could track that man. Go figure. “Whenever the scar beside my tattoo aches and throbs—which is a lot—I think about you. All I hope is that you’re in peace and you’re happy.” I swipe my jacket sleeve over my eyes and then I pour my own soju into the ground, watching as it’s absorbed by hungry dirt and grass.

I like this ritual.

If Saffron is part of the earth—her ashes are scattered in the sea—and this drink is going into the earth, then surely she’s able to take part in it? I don’t know what happens after this life, but I do know that while I’m here, I have to live in this one. That’s what’s important to me.

Maxx adds liquid to my glass, and I close my eyes.

“Grandpa.” That one word. It’s all I can do not to break down, not to freak out, not to scream. I had a period of denial there in the hospital where I was certain that a mistake had been made, that Walter was coming back to make cornbread and chili, to give Chasm advice about what it means to be a man, to hug me and hold me and comfort me the way he’s done all my life. I don’t have anything to say to his spirit that needs to be said aloud. If he’s here, he knows. If he’s somewhere else, then I hope that I left an indelible mark on his spirit that makes him smile every now and again.

I pour out the second glass; Maxx adds more liquid.

“Hey Danyella,” I start, sniffing a little. Somehow, her death feels the most tragic. She was so purely innocent and perfectly good that if justice were a true concept, she would be alive. Lumen would not be. I would not be. Danyella deserved to live more than either of us. “I’m going to take over the play for you. Everybody on the production crew is scared of me, so when I texted around and asked if it was okay for me to take your spot, they agreed.” I offer a small laugh, but it sounds so hollow in the vastness of the space around us. I offer her a drink as well, and X adds more soju to my glass.

This time, I drink it myself and close my eyes.

Delphine saved my life at the expense of her own. I don’t know if she could’ve acted sooner, if it might’ve been possible to save Saffron that day. But I know she was trying her best from the beginning, holding onto her role as dutiful, simpering daughter so that Justin would never uncover her deceit the way he did mine. She protected me from Raúl, kept me company when I

was locked in the tower, and she loved me.

She fucking loved me.

“Big sister.” My hand trembles as X pours for me, and I toss the soju out for her spirit. Out of them all, I think she’s the most likely to stick around and watch over me. “We’ll meet again. I’m sure of it. In the next life, let’s be sisters again.”

I rise up to my feet, glancing around to make sure that it’s just the four of us here.

And then I scream. I cup my hands around my mouth and yell, “I love you!” at the top of my lungs, listening to the words echo back at me. I drop my arms and turn to see all three boys staring at me, holding tiny soju glasses in their big hands.

I think I’m crying, but I’m smiling, too, so it’s okay.

I grab the bottle and turn, splashing the last of it onto the ground for everyone else that died. The Medina aristocrats in the church, Lumen’s parents, Agent Murphy, Nevaeh. Everyone.

For my father.

“Justin, I don’t forgive you, but I’m sorry you were never capable of feeling what I feel.” I step back from the mound, listening to the wind and then to quiet footsteps as Chasm finally comes up to stand beside me.

“I’m not good at these kinds of things,” he says, and his eyes are wet even if the expression on his handsome face shows nothing but stoic strength. “Did you see all of those things Seamus did for me at the end?” Chasm asks quietly but confidently, like he sees something special in the final memories of his father. “He set up that trust for me with shares of Milk Carton. He reaffirmed me in his will, and his desire for me to live with Tess should anything happen to him. He ...” Chas stops talking, but I can tell he isn’t done. I sidle closer to him and take his arm, putting my head up against his shoulder. “At the cabin that night we found him drinking soju, you know what he did when I came back by myself that night? Besides give me the ring, I mean.”

I wait because I can sense this is a hypothetical question. That’s all that Chas needs, somebody to listen and care about what he has to say. My hand unconsciously dips into my pocket to touch the ring. We’re going to have it repaired, but we haven’t gotten around to it yet. The shape of it is a comforting presence.

“He gave me a hug.” Chas’ lips twitch in bemusement. “I haven’t had a hug from my father in *years*. He knew he was going to die, and he was protecting me. He protected me.” He takes one last sip of his soju and then extends the cup. “Dad, I ...” He stops talking again, but this time, some of the stoicism slips away and he looks painfully seventeen and alone. “*Bogo sipeoyo.*” He runs the sleeve of his jacket over his face, droplets clinging to his gorgeous lashes. *I miss you; I want to see you.*

He drops the glass and then he squats down and he’s fucking weeping into the sleeve of his jacket. I drop down next to him, putting my arm around his shoulders to comfort him. He takes it a step further, snatching me up and pulling me into his lap. Chas clings to me for several minutes as I wait patiently and stroke my fingers over his hair.

When I look up, I see Maxx smiling sadly at me. Because he knows. And even Parrish as he looks at us, he knows, too. Chas needs something from me that they don’t, that I can’t explain.

None of us is in a rush, so we stay there together for the rest of the day. I sit primarily on Chasm’s lap as we eat the food I made—with Carmen’s help—and watch the sky turn dark. At night, there are so many stars.

I stand up from the bench and move out from under the umbrella, head tilted up toward the sky. The night is an ebon sapphire that stretches across the dome of the world in an unbroken wave of white and silver diamonds, embedded in the weave of the universe.

The princess realized then why she could never enjoy happily ever after.

Because happily ever after does not exist. The thing about life is that it’s a story without an end. Every day is a new page. Every adventure is a new chapter.

These aren’t glow-in-the-dark stars anymore; these are real.

I blink like I’m waking from a dream—correction: a nightmare—and realize that I’m waiting for *The End* to pen itself in the sky like the tail of a shooting star.

But stories like mine?

Well, they’re never really over, are they?

Our first day back at Whitehall is weird for so many reasons.

It begins with Maxx climbing into my bed and lying on his side, head propped on a hand as he looks down at me. I crack my eyes open to find him waiting there. It's still dark outside, way too early for any sane human being to wake up. I know it's winter, but also, gross.

"I still can't believe the Vanguard's get up this early or that you *like* getting up this early."

Maxx leans over and brushes his mouth against mine. Teasing me this early in the morning? That's practically a crime.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to get up?" he asks, voice husky as he leans down to kiss me again.

"Dude, you're supposed to be waking her up, not trying to sleep with her." Chasm appears in the doorway behind Maxx, shirtless. That's when I notice that Maxx is also shirtless.

"Can we eat breakfast before we get dressed?" Parrish murmurs, appearing next to Chas. He ... also appears to be shirtless. I'm starting to think this is a coup. While Parrish lives across the hall and seeing him shirtless is a common occurrence once again, Maxx and Chasm share the suite downstairs.

So why are they up here half-naked?

"Boys." Tess appears beside Parrish, arms crossed, fully dressed in slacks and a dress shirt. She's going in to discuss details for the *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun* movie. Now that we've talked about it, I've decided that I do want to share my story. "What have I told you three about shirts? Get dressed for school and don't make me ask again."

"Oh yes, my holy and great lord," Parrish replies which earns him a look. Chas offers a slight bow and a respectful tone.

"Of course, Mrs. Vanguard."

X doesn't say anything, nor does he make any move to get up. Tess retreats with a weary but bemused sigh.

"Chas has offered to let me rent the cabin by the lake for the price of ... free. If I moved in there, do you think we'd see each other more or less?" X glances over his shoulder at Chasm, and I see my chance to escape. If I get trapped in here with three shirtless boys, I'll be late for class. "Are you sure you don't want to move with me? You really want to stay here?"

"I'm not going anywhere just yet," Chas says, and X finally notices why the other two boys are staring at me. I was wearing a t-shirt up top but lacy panties underneath. Oops. "Look at this. I can't miss any chances to see these

sorts of things.”

“Okay, so you like the panties?” I tease because obviously I knew what I was doing when I put them on.

“We were actually staring at your hair,” Parrish fills in helpfully.

My hands fly up to find my short hair in ridiculous disarray, sticking out on all sides like an anime character. I sprint into the bathroom, flinging the door shut and locking it behind me. A quick look in the mirror is all it takes for me to see that I have a black and green tempest on my head.

Great.

So unbelievably sexy.

I’m frowning in self-defense as I make my way down the stairs in my new uniform, holding a book bag with no pins on it. I’m just ... after the heart pin cam, I’m good with a blank bag.

Alright, fine. I put one sticker on it. One.

It says *Talk to Me About Musicals and Serial Killers*. The stupid thing is supposed to be a joke—I ordered it online in a morose but comedic state and stuck it there. Starting to regret that now.

Kimber is staring at my bag, a carton of milk in her right hand. It’s poised over her coffee (she’s now addicted to Saffron’s *plain ol’ cups o’ joe* and has been using the coffeemaker my late mother purchased), but she doesn’t pour it. Her gaze is fixated on my sticker.

I look at her, look at my bag, cringe.

“Oh my God, you’re so *weird*,” she whispers like she doesn’t understand me at all. That’s okay. I think we’ve found common ground here. I’m not her sister, I’m her sister-in-law. “You’d have to be, I guess, in order to date my brother.” Kimber finally pours her milk as Maxx passes a plate of food across the counter for me.

“I don’t care who drives what to school, but keep in mind that Dakota doesn’t have her license yet,” Tess says, looking at her phone and then turning to Paul. “Are you ready? I’m late.”

“I’m ready,” Paul promises, standing up from the kitchen table. I notice that he was engaged in conversation with Parrish, that he wasn’t on his phone. That’s a new thing. Tess’ husband kisses her on the cheek as she waves at us.

“Have fun, be good, and try not to start anything with the other Whitehall kids.” She’s looking right at Parrish as she says that. He stares back at her,

aghast.

“As if I’d waste my time starting shit with people who are less than dirt,” he says, taking a bite of his toast. He leaves the piece of bread hanging from his mouth and gives Tess two thumbs up, like Agent Sam. She’s not amused, but she leaves, and I sit down next to Chasm at the table.

“You know what my grandmother used to call morning hair like yours?” he begins, looking up at me and then scratching at the scar on the back of his head. “*Kkachi meori*—magpie hair.” He chuckles, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“As if your hair wasn’t a disaster, too.” He grins at my response, but he knows his newly short hair looks amazing on him. “Want to drive me to school in your yellow Porsche?” I ask, putting an elbow on the table and resting my chin in my hand. He smirks and leans down, peering at me with all the heat and the affection of the last few months. There’s a sadness still lurking behind his eyes, but at least for this morning, it’s well-hidden.

“Nothing would please me more, Wife,” he says, sitting up and crossing his arms over his chest. His tie is crooked and he’s thrown a leather jacket over his blazer. It’s an attractive combo, giving him that ‘bad boy’ look without the criminal record, failing grades, or propensity for domestic violence. Heh. Like a good-bad boy? That’s Chasm. “I like your new nickname, but I still miss calling you Little Sister. *Naekkeo* works just fine though.” He snorts, and I grin.

“*Oppa* is okay, isn’t it?” I ask and he laughs, reaching up to brush some hair from my forehead.

“Cutie, *oppa* will always work for me.”

“You guys are *all* weird,” Kimber corrects as Maxx joins me, sitting across from Chas next to Parrish. We ignore her because, well, she’s still Kimber. “Also, don’t forget that you promised to make me cool.”

“You also promised to keep Veronica a secret from Mom which you failed to do,” Parrish retorts easily, and then he lifts his phone to his face. “Fuckability rating update: serial killer’s daughter is most definitely an eleven. Looks good in everything. Looks better naked.” He finishes the video and sets his phone aside, like he didn’t just record a TikTok that’ll make my first day back that much more interesting.

“I cannot wait to see what sort of reputation you carve out at Whitehall,” Maxx grumbles, moving his laptop from one of the chairs to the table. He’s

got class today, albeit online class. His hand trembles as he scrolls on the trackpad, and I resist the guilty feeling tickling my spine. I know his hand hurts him every day, that he might never have full function in it. Might never be pain free.

He's sacrificed a lot for me. They all have. I won't soon forget that.

"We should hurry and go," I say, shoving an entire slice of bacon into my mouth. It occurs to me then that Chasm's car is a two-seater. "Err, should we ride with you, Pear-Pear?" I've never actually had the privilege of being driven around by Parrish apart from that initial ride to school, barefoot and ashamed about a pastry. Was it a scone? I can't remember.

"Ride with Chas. We can take turns." Parrish makes a face as he stands up that has my skin burning red. He pauses behind me, kisses me on the side of the neck and takes off. "See you guys in a few. I'll make a grand entrance and clear the way. Kimber, *kaja*." *Let's go*.

It occurs to me that this is the first time in a long while where we've been able to do things like that, get in a car by ourselves. Drive to school alone.

Yes, Mr. Volli is on the run, but somehow, I believe him when he says he'll warn me before trying to kill me. I know it doesn't make any sense, but I'm not afraid of him the same way I was afraid of Justin.

At least ... I'm not afraid of him now.

I finish my food just before Chas does, deciding to sneak upstairs for a second.

When I come back, I've brushed my teeth and I'm ready.

"Did you go all the way up the stairs to brush your teeth for a second time?" Maxx queries when I reappear, prepared to offer him a goodbye kiss. His gaze is hot as it sweeps over me. "Not only are you a dork, but I guess we're still in the honeymoon stage."

"We are in the honeymoon stage," Chasm corrects just before Maxx gives me a kiss that promises how right they both are. "Shall we?" Chas asks, taking my arm to lead me into the garage. He's been practicing driving with Tess, learning how to make up for his ... err ... *homonymous hemianopia*. I'm excited to see him in action. "While we drive, I can quiz you on your Korean vocabulary. How would you say 'Oppa, you're looking so unbelievably sexy this morning'?"

"*Hajima*," I say as I slap him, and he laughs. He knows damn well that I've memorized that stupid sentence. I just refuse to say it where anyone can hear

me. Instead, I tell him to knock it off in Korean. Pretty good, right?

I figure there'll be a crowd when we arrive at Whitehall but instead, Chas and I pull into the parking lot to find Lumen and nobody else. We have a lot to talk about, but she seems willing to work through this. Nothing that happened was our fault; we can still be friends.

Whatever happened to the body she and Danyella buried, I have no idea. My guess is that Justin or Volli moved it. The chances of it ever being found are slim.

“Good morning, my friends,” she says, wearing a beauty queen smile as a mask for her grief. I understand that expression well. “I hope you're both prepared for what awaits you inside.”

“Parrish strutting like a peacock?” I ask at the same time that Chasm suggests, “Parrish acting like an ass?”

“Precisely both of those things,” Lumen tells me, reaching out to open the door. I notice that she has some new pins on her bag, including one that says *Did You See My Bag?* Heh. It's a BTS reference. As in K-pop. As in, I've somehow managed to alter Lumen's music tastes. *Win.*

The doors open and I look down the length of the hallway, at all the students that are staring right back at me. One of the girls closest to the door notices my own sticker—the one about serial killers—and carefully moves out of my way.

Parrish is waiting a dozen feet in as Chasm gently puts his hand on my back.

“If things get bad, we'll have Maxx dress up in his uniform so we can kick some ass.” Chas pushes me forward as Parrish smiles, looking over his shoulder, one hand tucked into his pocket. I notice that he's purchased a small carton of *milk* from one of the vending machines in the hallway.

He opens it as we walk down the hall, and then chugs it. I see that there's no missing child on the side of this one.

Instead, it's an image from the FBI's most wanted list.

It's Amin fucking Volli.

“Welcome to Whitehall. I'd say it was hell, but we've seen hell. I guess this was only ever limbo.” Parrish hands the remainder of the milk to Chas and then off we go with Lumen trailing behind.

Back to school.

Back to real life.

Back to every day for the rest of my mine.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Tess asks me, looking decidedly nervous to go onstage, anxious in a way I’ve never seen before. The last time we were here, in this exact studio, in this exact spot, I didn’t like her. I’m sure that she loved me, but I’m also sure that she didn’t like me either.

Everything is different now.

I’m here because Tess wants me to be, and I respect that. I agreed to it because I knew that if I didn’t, she wouldn’t make me go.

“I’m sure,” I respond confidently, but my palms are already sweaty. It’s not easy to go through such intimate moments on a viral video. Dying is as intimate as being born, and I was right there at the threshold. Ten more minutes without an ambulance and I would be gone, too.

The whole world saw that, saw my blood strewn across the floor, saw my mother shot in the heart.

Heh.

Guess they all know now that the video the boys and I made was true? I’ve gotten a lot of apologies lately—some from the students at *Whitehall*. Even those brats are giving us a little credit ... and a little extra walking room in the hallways.

Pretty sure people will be scared of me for a while, maybe forever.

Justin might be dead, but Tess is still rich so ... the Vanguard name lives on despite my father’s best attempts. *Thank God I’m dating that prick now*, I think as I imagine Parrish sitting in the front row of the audience, dressed in his preppy best. His necklace for today has the Green Man’s face on it. Supposedly it’s a symbol of rebirth and also something that asshole tattooed onto the top of his foot yesterday.

I walked in on him swiping blood from his skin and grinning up at me like a devil.

I give a full-body shudder that Tess notices, lifting a brow in question. I’m sure she doesn’t want to know that I’m fantasizing about her son. She’s been respectful about us dating but locking ourselves into a room together never goes down well.

“*Welcome back, familia.*” Martina Cortez begins her show the way she

always does, the sound of it echoing from the stage. Her influencer granddaughter—the one that’s still alive—is here, too. She already took my interview for her channel. *“Today is a monumental day for the show. Not only am I back after surviving one of the most shocking cases in recent history, but I’m here with repeat guests and fellow survivors: bestselling author Tess Vanguard and her kidnapped daughter.”*

Tess cringes which saves me the trouble of doing it, so I just end up laughing instead, hand over my mouth. Right. The kidnapped daughter. I guess there are worse things to be famous for. Justin is famous for killing people so ... whatever. I can deal with this.

“Sorry,” Tess mutters under her breath, looking over at me with a slight smile. “I know that in time, people will forget that you’re a kidnapped child. You’ll just be Dakota Banks and that’s what everyone will love you for.”

I just stare at her because, um, who is this person standing in front of me?

“Even if it’s OnlyFans?” I ask, and even if my grandmother didn’t get the joke, Tess certainly does.

“OnlyFans? Oh hell no. I don’t care if you’re thirty-five; I’ll hunt you down.” She turns back to the curtains as I laugh again. She’s smiling anyway because she knows that our relationship can’t be built on the time we lost at the beginning, it can only go forward from here.

“I’d never, but you know that, right?” I straighten out my dress and prepare to go onstage. Martina’s voice echoes through her headset.

“Coming up in this twelve-part special: The Seattle Slayer - A Drama Unfolding, we’ll be covering a secret FBI taskforce working entirely in paper, tape recorders, and good old-fashioned gumshoeing. Join us for a story of love, revenge, money—and murder.”

“Now I’m starting to wonder if I even want to do this,” Tess adds in exasperation, but it’s far too late now. We are *seconds* away from heading onstage. This will be our first public statement since the day of the wedding. Sort of a big fucking deal.

Martina’s assistant ushers us onto the stage where we approach the host. Martina Cortez is sitting in a wheelchair today, having only recently been released from the hospital. She was at the wedding along with the rest of Medina’s best and brightest. Martina found herself shot in the spine, permanently paralyzed from the waist down. Not only that, but she lost her granddaughter, Francisca.

I feel like an asshole for telling her to eat a bag of dicks.

“Our sordid tale begins with seduction, sex, and a Cinderella story. The day that Tess Vanguard met Justin Prior, she was young, smitten, and hopelessly turned-on.”

Tess’ mouth flattens to a line, and I struggle to hold back my laughter. Maybe ... I don’t feel so bad about the bag of dicks thing after all.

“Please say hello to Tess Vanguard and the daughter of her sensual tryst, Dakota Banks.”

Tess and I look at one another for the last time, and then we step onto the stage.



Three Years Later ...

I'm packing my room for the move when my fingers drift over the spines of the Harry Potter books where Saffron left her messages to me. I hesitate, drawing my hand back and wondering if this is the right time to do this, to crack these covers and read one of the precious few notes that she left behind.

Maxine has read them. All of them. I even offered to let her keep one or a few or even all of the books, but she declined, looking at me over her shoulder with a smile on her face.

"No, Kota," she said, turning back to the books and then closing the cover on the first one, "*these are for you. You keep them for when you really need them, okay? Just like Mom said.*"

And I thought I needed them back then, right after I got home from the hospital.

I wanted to be alone when I read them, so I waited. And waited. And waited. I waited until I could walk on my own, until there weren't worried family members hovering around me on a near constant rotation. I got up. I walked to the shelf.

I wasn't able to convince myself to read the notes.

For three years—all the rest of high school and then some—I haven't been able to read these messages. Every day, they've been here, watching me sleep, watching my bed empty more frequently as I began to stay overnight with the boys, watching as I pack my things to move.

“Hey.” My husband is standing in the doorway when I turn around to offer him a smile in return. Whenever I see his beautiful, bejeweled eyes or his exaggerated bad boy slouch, a fire lights up inside of me, and I know that I made the right choice.

Chasm is my husband. He's my everything. I've chosen him, and we're finally fucking moving in together.

Today, he's dressed in a suit. Black jacket, slacks, a loose silk tie hanging crookedly over one shoulder. He's the CEO, so he doesn't need to dress quite so nicely, but he does anyway. I think he likes the effect it has on people. It's certainly having an effect on me now.

He knows it, too, and he milks it for all it's worth, running his hand over his short, dark hair as he smirks at me. After the shooting, he decided he liked his hair like that and hung onto it. A single finger taps at the scar on the back of his head as he studies me with a man's hungry gaze. When he slides that hand over the back of his neck, my breath hitches.

My cheeks flush with heat and I take one of the books from my shelf, holding it tightly against my chest as Chasm pushes up from where he's standing and comes over to pause in front of me. He's twenty-one and I'm nearly twenty, and the only thing that's changed between us is the intensity of our relationship.

I thought I loved him before. I thought I wanted him before. This is so beyond all of that.

“When we're old, I'll love you best, I think,” I blurt out and he cocks a sharp brow, dipping his hand into his pocket. His hair is solid black now, but though it's always short, it's not always black. He still wears his lip rings and his plugs, still dresses in expensive sneakers and striped shirts on the weekends. He doesn't have to please anyone but himself: Milk Carton is fully and completely his business venture now.

Kwang-seon McKenna calls all the shots.

“That's nice, but I think while we're young, you should love me as hard and as often as you can.” The words come out like a musing as he turns to the shelf and tickles his own fingers along the spines of the books. He selects one

of the Harry Potter books as well, but I stop him with a hand on his wrist. Without even asking, he knows. Chasm and I have learned to read each other so well.

For a brief few seconds there, I wonder how Maxx and Parrish are doing, what they'd say or do if they were here right now. But each guy is off doing his own thing, so ... it's just me and Chas.

"I'll let you read those in peace," he tells me, his expression turning serious. But then his hands land on my shoulders and it's hard to remember what I'm supposed to be doing here in the first place. With the book held between us, Chas leans in, his hot mouth discovering mine like it's the first time. He even lifts up one hand, placing firm fingers on the back of my neck.

He kisses me nice and slow, savoring me, a true stop-and-smell-the-roses sort of kiss.

"Now I don't want you to go," I murmur stubbornly, fingers clenching tight on the book as he swipes my bottom lip with his tongue. Oh. Yes, please. "Really, really don't want you to go."

Chasm stands up straight, leaving one hand on my shoulder. With the other, he pushes hair back from my face. It's a good eighteen inches longer than it was when Justin hacked it off, but it'll take me years to get back to the length it was. Not sure if I want to grow it that long. Actually, I might cut it short again.

"I've been working too much, huh?" Chasm asks, scratching at the car accident scar on his temple like he already knows the answer to that question. Not only has he been working, he's been going to school, too. Because Milk Carton was involved in so many lawsuits (rightfully so), Chas changed the focus of the company as well as the focus of his degree: computer science with minors in business *and* law. He's that smart. He cares that much about Fort Humboldt Security and Seamus' legacy.

Instead of a hacking and spying app, Milk Carton is now an app for digital security. Call it ... an anti-hacking app if you want. It does all sorts of things. One feature that's shot the app to popularity is the anti-AI filters. They can be used on videos, on pictures, on faces and art and even embedded in text, and while they aren't visible to the naked eye, they prevent AI from scanning or learning or ID'ing whatever is protected.

No art scanned for use in AI art generators. No writing scanned for AI chatbots. No faces scanned for facial recognition technology. No GPS

tracking.

I'm proud of Chasm for everything he's achieved, but I also miss him when he's working.

"Tonight's our housewarming party," I say, and he smiles beautifully at me, this blossoming on his lips that not only gives me hope for tonight but for the future in general. "No working tonight, right?"

"No work, I promise. Not Milk Carton shit, not homework, just you and me, naked in our bed." He cups the side of my head and then draws back, slipping his hands back in his pockets.

He looks so cool and grown up as he turns to leave the room.

At least until he bumps into Tess. Like, physically slams into her as he turns around.

"Oh, *mianhaeyo*, Mrs. Vanguard," he mumbles, stumbling over the words and making me laugh. Tess smiles and gives him a loving pat on the arm.

"I still don't understand why you insist on calling me that. Tess is just fine." She hesitates strangely, reaching up to tuck some glossy espresso hair behind her ear. She's dressed in a fabulous lavender pantsuit with wide legs and a cropped jacket. The crisp white shirt underneath is paired with a brilliant purple tie. And her shoes? Red-bottoms, of course. "*Mom* is okay, too."

"*Jangmonim*?" he queries with another smile. "It means mother-in-law."

"Just Mom is fine," Tess grumbles, narrowing her eyes on him. "Or even *eomma*."

"Ah, *eomma*," he says with a laugh, leaning down to kiss her cheek. That pleases her. A faint pink flush takes over her cheeks as she straightens her tie. *Eomma* means mom in Korean, by the way. "Just *eomma* then. I'll try, but you know how my *halmeoni* raised me."

"Beautifully," Tess responds and Chas grins at her. "Are you heading back to the office?" she asks him because she knows his schedule as well as I do.

"Heading to the house to set things up," he replies and when it looks like I might protest—after all, I don't have to pack up today, I could go with him to help—he shakes his head and points at me. "Finish packing your stuff. Tonight's your first official night living with your husband in our own place." Chasm waves before he disappears, and I sigh.

"Still in love, eh?" Tess asks, coming over to stand beside me. When she sees what I'm holding in my hands, her face falls slightly. I don't think she's

ever gotten over the fact that Saffron tried to save us, that she died and we didn't. I don't think Tess ever realized how much she'd appreciate and love her daughter's kidnapper. "That makes me happy. I was sure when I first found out that you and Chasm were together that he was ... Well, he'd made it appear that he'd had a ... rich dating history."

I snort at that. Tess well-knows by now that poor Kwang-seon was a virgin when we got together. She knows everything, certainly more than she ever wanted to know. I think after all the lies, we went a little overboard with the truth. Some serious TMI situations have occurred over the years.

"Yeah, well, one could argue that *I* am the one with the rich dating history." I crack the cover on the first book. I thought I'd wanted to be alone for this, but now that Tess is here, it feels okay, like she's the person I want in here with me today.

She hesitates slightly before stepping close, and then she's reading Saffron's words over my shoulder with me.

Once upon a time, there was a baby dressed in pink overalls. She didn't cry when I climbed in the window of her daycare and stole her away. Instead, she laughed, she smiled. She trusted me when she shouldn't have.

That's what the first one says. I told myself I wasn't going to cry when I read these, but I can tell already that wasn't a realistic goal.

"Are you okay standing here while I read them?" I ask, looking over at Tess. But she doesn't look angry anymore. I don't think she's been angry at Saffron for years.

"The more important question is: are *you* okay with reading these right now? It doesn't have to be today." Tess waits patiently for me to answer, and I smile back at her, swiping my arm over my eyes. I nod and hand her the first book so she can add it to my box while I open the second.

That little girl rode with me in a muscle car without air conditioning from Washington state to New York state. We didn't rush. We meandered. For three weeks, we saw the country together.

Damn, Saffron. Damn, damn, damn. I move quickly from one book to the other until I've seen the whole story play out in seven parts.

It reads like this.

Once upon a time, there was a baby dressed in pink overalls. She didn't cry when I climbed in the window of her daycare and stole her away. Instead, she laughed, she smiled. She trusted me when she shouldn't have.

That little girl rode with me in a muscle car without air conditioning from Washington state to New York state. We didn't rush. We meandered. For three weeks, we saw the country together.

There are pictures of us in the Oregon high desert, at the lost coast of California, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, the arch in Missouri, Thorncrown Chapel in Arkansas, Cape Cod in Massachusetts. They're all from an old Polaroid camera, so I can't say if they're still good. These I buried under the oldest apple tree, the one with the split in the trunk. You know the one. Maybe we can dig them up together?

You might wonder why I did that. I couldn't risk my parents ever knowing the truth. I was right about that, by the way. As soon as they knew, they did the right thing. Sometimes the right thing isn't as cut-and-dried as it first appears. I wish they'd left you alone. At the same time, I know that what was meant to happen has happened.

For fourteen years after that, I found myself with the need to keep moving. I can't say what gave me wanderlust or why I could never find the strength to cure it. But I can tell you this: the people who kept me coming back to that house were not my parents. It was you. It was Maxine. The only two things I have ever done right are rescue you and give birth to your sister.

It's hard to say the words aloud, but will you tell Tess that I'm sorry. If I could go back in time, I would make the same choices, yes, but as a mother to a mother, I know she must've suffered. Tell her that for me, okay? If she brings it up in conversation, I'll deny it. But it's true. I am truly sorry for what I did to her.

No matter what that man says to you, no matter what he does, no matter what—and this is the most important part—no matter what you do, you are and will always remain my daughter. Miss you and love you fierce. Mama. P.S. the coffee at this place is hell!

Tears are sliding down my face as I read, but I can't hold back a laugh at the end there. Oh, Saffron.

Fuck.

Having TXT's 9 and Three Quarters (Run Away) playing in the background is not helping.

"I never did expect her to apologize to me," Tess offers sadly, taking the last book from me and placing the set in the box beside her. When she looks away suddenly and pretends to cough, I wonder if she isn't wiping tears, too.

I smile.

“Like she said, what was supposed to happen has happened.” I close the lid on the box and use the heavy tape dispenser at my side to swipe a thick swath of tape over the top. I don’t think I’m going to open this box until I have time to take it to a professional.

I want these books preserved. My mom isn’t here, so they need to last forever.

I think sometimes it’s not just the physical book, but the story behind it that lasts forever. From time to time, when you’re reading (or I imagine writing) something, you don’t know where you’re going with it or what it means. You might understand the plot, but you don’t know what all of those quiet in-between moments will signify later.

With my hands still on the box, I think I’ve figured it out. I’ve been fed a rapid-fire metaphor for growing up. It doesn’t just happen at one age, it happens at all of them. I look up and see Tess staring at me, and she smiles back. For the first time, I realize that I can as easily empathize with my sixteen-year-old self as I can with Tess, who’s approaching forty.

We keep staring at each other, and I wonder if she isn’t thinking the same thing.

“I’m going to have these put behind glass, and I’ll only read them once a year on my birthday. That way, they should last a while.” I turn away from the box and begin gathering perfectly dust-free (courtesy of me and not the maid) Unicorn figurines. Yeah, they’re resin cast unicorn figures in bright colors with kitschy themes, but they are *art*. They are not alt-girl toys.

I toss them in their own box. Apparently, I have enough to fill a whole other box with the damn things.

“Married and living together,” Tess says, and then she swallows strangely, like she’s choking on the idea. She can’t help herself. She’s an overprotective mom, but she cares. And she tries. Most importantly, she’s willing to admit when she’s wrong. “It won’t be the same as living here with me during high school. It’ll be like—”

“I beat the love game early, so I understand it well.” I pick up a decorative pillow off the end of the bed. It’s in the shape of a black king chess piece. I smile. I didn’t make the first move, but in the end, the only important part was surviving the encounter.

I played a long-game with Justin and neither of us came out as the winner.

I had just enough bullshit up my sleeve to outwit his narcissism. He brought his daughters into the game and treated us both in such a way that Delphine felt she had no choice. He reaped what he sowed. I only wish he'd suffered more first.

"You understand it well?" Tess repeats sarcastically, shaking her head and stealing one of the boxes from me. "We'll see." She laughs again but more in disbelief than anything else. I wonder if she's talked to her son today?

I'd have given anything to talk to her son today.

But sometimes, one person has to go this way ... and the other goes that way.

I tuck the pillow under my arm and grab the second box, carrying it down the spiral staircase and into the foyer where I met Parrish for the first time. I pause there, staring at the spot where he stood just four years ago and asked me who the fuck I was.

That jerk. I turn away and head outside, loading the boxes into my BMW. It's the same one that Tess gave me for my sixteenth birthday, that was restored after the fire. She's offered to buy me newer and better cars since, but ... while I can empathize with and understand the actions of others, I don't have to agree with them, and I don't have to live the way they do. I don't need a new car to be happy.

"I heard from Laurent about Maxx," Tess teases, but I ignore her. I heard from Laurent about Maxx, too. Would've preferred to hear from Maxx about Maxx but whatever. He must *loooove* motocross. Motocross must be the best girlfriend I never was.

"We should go," I respond tightly, and Tess gives a private little smile that says she knows me far too well. She's seen the ups and downs of me having three boyfriends. It's not just three times the drama, it's like *nine* times the drama. It's exponential.

But right now, I only have one husband and he's waiting for me.

Tess and I drive my BMW over to the party together. Paul is already at our new place, so he can take my mother home afterward. As we drive over—it's a five-minute drive—we put the top down, the salty breeze off Lake Washington tangling our hair.

The song *Mixtape: Time Out* by Stray Kids plays as we drive, and I turn it up so that the sound of it mixes with the wind. Today is a monumental day, and it deserves its own soundtrack. After this, I might blast one of

Ashnikko's new tracks or maybe some N.Flying. *Should I play Blue Moon or Lover or Moonshot?* Might have to take a scenic coastal drive tomorrow and listen to music so loud that my ears hurt. *Bouncy (K-Hot Chilli Peppers)* is stuck in my head, too, but I know Tess hates it, so I decide not to torture her.

"I've always loved this place," Tess tells me as we pull up to the already open gate and down a short gravel drive bordered by flowers. The house itself is a pale pink cottage circa 1950. It's a little small, but it's near the water and far more expensive than I'm comfortable with. But Chas insisted, and he used the money from the sale of his father's house, so ... who was I to complain? "I'd see it every day on my way to Whitehall and wonder what it would be like to live here."

"I promise to give you a comprehensive report," I tell her with a grin, parking in the mess of luxury vehicles outside my new place.

I spot Chasm's yellow Porsche right away and feel my heart jump a bit. *We've only been apart for like five seconds, but I've got butterflies knowing I'm about to see you again.*

"Baby sister!" Maxine comes charging out the front door with a very handsome man striding along behind her. My sister wraps me up in her arms and gives me a Banks' style family hug. I can see our rabbit, GG, off to the side, in his portion of the fenced front yard. The entire backyard is ocean-cliff and views for days. Doesn't bother me to have a bunny hutch in view of the street.

Luckily, we don't have an HOA. Heh. That was sort of a requirement for me.

"I thought you had to work on your thesis," I tell her, faux punching her in the shoulder when she pulls back to look me over. "What are you doing here?"

Maxine stares at me like I'm nuts.

"As if I'd miss my baby sister's first day in her new house. You're nineteen and you *own* a house. Do you know how impossibly incredible that is? Besides, you'll be living as a married woman officially from today onward. How could I not be here?"

"Yes, married at nineteen. God, help me," Tess murmurs as she comes up to stand beside us. Her gaze drifts past my sister to the man standing behind her. "And who's this?"

"Oh." Maxine turns around and gestures at the man with her. "This is my

friend, River. We met when I was working at Yosemite last summer.” She grins as the man introduces himself to us, shaking our hands and looking confident despite the murmur of people from inside.

Maxine calls him a friend, huh? I squint my eyes as I notice his and how attuned they are to my sister’s every move. I’ll have to interrogate him later, ask his intentions, do what Walter would’ve done and scare the pants off the guy to make sure he’s resilient enough for our Maxie.

“Dakota?” A familiar voice precedes a smiling brunette girl in jeans and a t-shirt. She looks casual enough, but for her to be here, that means she must’ve come a long way.

“Sally?” I’m so shocked to see her here that I forget to move when she lifts her arms and offers to hug me. She looks unsure for a moment, dropping her arms a bit, but I finally get it together enough to hug her back. “You flew all the way over here for a housewarming party?” I ask, drawing back to look at her.

I can see her gaze slip past me to Tess, like there’s a secret they’re all keeping from me.

Sally seems to realize she’s almost spoiled the surprise and smiles brightly at me.

“Well, your mother covered the ticket so ... Anyway, yeah. I even brought some of Nevaeh’s things with me. Her parents thought you’d like to have them.” That sobers the mood a little, but only a little. Because, like I said, grief gets smaller in the rearview mirror as you drive. That doesn’t mean you forget it or that you forget the person, only that the distance between you and the shadow of that pain grows until it no longer has total control over you.

“I appreciate that,” I tell her, slinging an arm over her shoulder. As we head inside together, I’m expecting a low-key setup, maybe some flowers in a vase, a lame banner (Maxine loves lame banners), a cake.

I don’t expect what I find.

“Welcome home, my wife,” Chas says, holding a bouquet of sunflowers in one hand. In the other, he has a hard copy of my new game.

My eyes tear up and I clamp both hands over my mouth, my entire body quivering with excitement. Somebody’s even mounted the TV on the wall already and set up the furniture so I’ll have somewhere to play tonight.

Before you go thinking that I’m crazy, let me clarify: this isn’t just any game.

This is *my* game.

I helped develop it; I wrote the story for it; it's based on my life.

The Slayer's Daughter.

It's a mystery RPG with an open world, an imaginary Medina complete with combat between my character and various serial killers. The pervert. The dirty cop. The arsonist. The podcast host. The black widow. The poet with a penchant for blood.

There's even a few made up ones in there (just for some extra flavor and gameplay).

Even I wasn't supposed to get a final copy for another few weeks. So how on earth did they get ahold of this one?

I stumble forward and throw my arms around Chas' neck, ignoring the game as I close my eyes and let him tuck me close, even as I knock a few sunflower petals to the floor with the force of my hug.

Once again, my mind strays to Parrish and Maxx. I bet they'd have been happy to present this game to me, too. I bet they'd want to be here to see me walk into my first place, to press start on the first creative project I've ever put out into the world.

Only, they're not here. Chasm is here. He's my husband.

We pull apart from each other and he places the game in my hands.

"No online gameplay until the official launch," he warns me but I'm already trying to figure out if it'd be rude for me to start playing right now or if I have to wait until everyone eats. I mean, they're all here for the game's reveal, right? That's why Sally flew in, why Maxine dragged a new guy to Medina, why Ben brought his Kindle instead of a paperback (he prefers print but abhors being caught without a book to read). "What are you waiting for? Start that shit up." Chas turns and gestures at the screen with the sunflowers, knocking loose yet more petals.

"Oh my goodness, let me get those into a vase for you," my grandmother grumbles, taking the bouquet from him before it's entirely ruined.

"Yay, a whole evening of watching someone else play a videogame," Kimber whines and Maxine slaps her playfully in the side of the head.

"Oh knock it off," Tess warns her, uncaring that her daughter is eighteen years old. We're all still aware of who the boss is.

"Congratulations, honey," Paul says, giving me a quick hug. He's become a father to me in a way that Justin failed to do. In a way that he didn't want to

do, more like. But every time we take a boat out on the Sound, I think about the man who made me in more ways than simple genetics. For better or worse, he shaped who I am and who I'm becoming.

I hug the game to my chest and resist the urge to look over my shoulder for Parrish or Maxx. They're not coming tonight, and that's okay. Because growing up is about change, about goodbyes, about—

“Hey.”

The voice isn't coming from behind me. It's coming from in front of me. I lift my head to see Parrish lounging on the balcony in the sunlight. The deck hangs out over the edge of the cliff, the sparkling waters of the lake behind him. He has his head tilted back, eyes closed.

I haven't seen him in *weeks*, and I'm struck like it's the first time.

He's so beautiful as to be catastrophic, a disaster just waiting to happen.

He opens his eyes and turns to me as Amelia and Henry scramble out of our way (they know better than to get between me and Parrish when we argue). I tell myself I'm not going to move, but my feet betray me. I'm halfway to him before a rough laugh draws my attention to the left.

And there's Maxx, standing on the opposite side of the balcony, but tucked up close to the house in such a way that I didn't see him until now. Looks like he was seeking the shade. Probably because he's sunburned as *fuck*, from his left shoulder to his left hand. Just the one arm and the left side of his face.

I look him over with fresh eyes. How long has it been since we've seen each other? *At least a month.*

“You're back early,” I blurt without meaning to, and he raises an eyebrow at me.

“Like what? Like you wish I hadn't come back early?” he asks, and I can't tell if he's being cheeky or if he's being serious.

“Wife,” Chasm says, appearing behind me. He hugs me from behind to assert dominance. *Here comes some of the horn locking.* I've realized over the years what happens to the mischievous squabbles of boys when their game is being played by men. “Look what I dragged in just for you.” He licks the shell of my ear, and my body automatically arches against his. “Your old boyfriends.”

“Old?” Parrish stands up straight and tucks his hand into the front pocket of the suit jacket he's wearing. It's dove gray, paired with a white dress shirt and skull-studded loafers. He has the sleeves folded up to show off his tattoos

and he doesn't just smell like dewy clovers and linen, he smells like *ink*. Probably because he's just come from a tattoo expo. When he's not (metaphorically) slaughtering other socialites with Laverne's fortune and the Vanguard influence, he's inking himself and anyone else he can get his hands on. "I'm not the one who booked a Botox session with my dermatologist."

"It's not Botox; it's platelet rich plasma. It's not just a beauty treatment, it's a treatment for sports related injuries, Parrish." X stares at him, the challenge of dominance in his gaze. Parrish returns the stare, but neither of them wins because *I* am in charge. And if I weren't in charge, then Chasm would be in charge.

Those two are too hotheaded for their own good.

I touch my hands to Chasm's, and he lets me go. I step forward, between the other two boys.

"I wasn't told you'd be coming today," I start breezily, affecting a disinterested air.

"Right. Because it was a surprise party," Parrish says dryly, and then he steps forward, sliding an inked hand into my hair. "That would've spoiled the surprise as badly as I spoil you." He nips my lower lip and when I try to kiss him, he takes ahold of my hair a little more forcefully and I gasp.

"On the balcony with the whole family inside," Maxx reminds him, but it's a moot point. Parrish uses his other arm to drag me close, kissing me in the sunshine until I can't breathe. I'm wondering if he's going to try to take things further when Tess clears her throat from behind me.

Parrish looks up with a scowl.

"Too old to be scolded, mother," he says, but she just sighs and moves over to stand beside us anyway. Parrish remains where he is, holding me too close to him. I try to break away, but he maintains the position until Tess takes a sip of her wine, and then he relents, like he thinks he won their stare-off.

"Try to keep your behavior PG when your younger siblings are around. I might not be able to tell you what to do, but I can certainly keep them home next time."

"You're wicked," Parrish replies, but he releases me. Not because of her threat, but because he respects and loves her. Besides, he knows she'd never be so cruel as to keep his siblings away from him.

"Give me a hug. I haven't seen you in weeks. How was your expo?" she asks as Parrish offers her that hug and then lets her go. He shrugs loosely as

Tess moves around him, peering at her son with half-narrowed eyes. She pauses on the other side of him and points at his neck. “You got a new tattoo, didn’t you? You said you weren’t going to get any new tattoos for a while. Honey, you’ve got *a lot*.”

“And I’m going to get a lot more. I’m a tycoon, mother.” He pauses and his lips twitch. “I’m wealthy beyond all reason, and I do as I please. I don’t exactly need to look business professional.”

“Very funny. Inheriting money is not an excuse to stop trying.”

“Whoever said I stopped trying?” Parrish asks with a smile that would otherwise give me chills if we weren’t romantically engaged. He’s as cruel and cold as he ever was—to the world. Just not to me. Something about that day cemented his priorities in a way I may never understand. He collects power, and he wields it like a sword. He fucking *crushes* people in business and high society, and he *loves* it. “I try every day, but I do it in a bespoke suit with monsters inked into my throat.” He uses tattooed fingers to emphasize a tattooed neck, and smirks.

“Oh, Jesus,” Tess scoffs with a disbelieving shake of her head. She decides to ignore his taunts. If the two of them get into it, their bickering will go on for hours. “Maxim, you’re home. And just in time to spend a night at your new place.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, giving her a hug when she offers one. They part with slightly bigger smiles than she shared with Parrish. “I thought your sister had another event this weekend?”

“She does, but I bailed early. Started driving yesterday morning and then went all through the night.” He pauses when Tess looks down at his sunburned arm with a question in her eyes. I’d love to know the answer to that, too.

I walk over to stand beside him, and he grins at me. Does he think his pretty smile and his tousled hair and his *muscles* make him charming? Hmm?

I don’t grin back.

“How did you get *this* sunburned?” I ask, and he laughs, and then he puts his arm around me, pulling me into him. He puts his mouth right up against mine before answering. He smells like summer, bright and sunny and warm. He *looks* like trouble, with that All-American smile hiding his devious sexual nature. Ahem.

Let’s just say that the last several years have heightened the mammalian

chemistry that X and I share.

It's disturbingly primal.

"Forgot my sunscreen while I was driving back. I guess my arm was resting on the door in the sun the entire time. I didn't care. I just needed to get here so I could see you."

Wow.

When Maxx kisses me, I think Tess realizes she's fighting a losing battle and excuses herself. Lucky her. His tongue has just invaded my mouth, and I'm losing my own battle, hands roaming his strong body. His left hand trembles when he touches his fingers to my chin, but that's okay. We all have our scars. Parrish's chest has tick marks; Chasm has a bullet in his head; Maxx suffers nerve pain; I have metal pins in my bones.

"Tell me you missed me without words," X commands, already starting in on this shit. I'd fight him, but I don't want to. I want to give in and be swept away. While he was chasing Tiffany and Laurent around on his sister's motocross tour, I was here pining. Dickhead.

And Parrish? If I didn't have to go to work—as in, I was working on the game that's still clutched against my chest—I'd have gone with him to the expo. Or with Maxx. Or ... still stayed here with Chasm. I'm not sure. The important takeaway here is this: they all thought I was going to choose between them, but I never did. And they never asked me to. And here we stand, together.

Maxx's hands roam low and cup my ass, fingers sliding up and under my skirt so he can knead my cheeks with his fingers. He's gotten older, and stronger, and he *always* knows what he wants. *Me*. It's always me. His sports medicine career has been discarded in favor of Parrish's pursuits. He's the head of the Vanguard heir's security. I honestly don't want to know what the pair of them get up to when they're 'at work'. Even now, he's wearing a gun at his hip. Parrish probably has one under his suit jacket.

Ah, who am I kidding? I bet Chas has one, too. After all, Milk Carton works oh-so closely with the Vanguard Group. I am the axis upon which these three men spin.

Chasm carefully pulls the curtains inside closed, and then shuts the balcony doors.

"I wouldn't take it all the way out here, but at least we have a minute," he says from right behind me. I turn suddenly and he's right there, taking my

face between his hands and kissing me. Maxx wraps me up from behind and Parrish moves up to my left side, leaning in to put his lips near my ear.

“If I were you, I’d be prepared for a *long* fucking night.” He whispers the innuendo like it’s fire, sparks and embers burning the side of my neck and making me squirm. “Although, I have to say, I spent a pretty penny on this place. Shouldn’t we get a night alone here first?”

“The only person who didn’t contribute money was Maxx,” Chasm corrects, and then I’m looking over my shoulder, and Maxx and I are giving each other the *Look*. We give each other the *Look* a lot. *Goddamn rich people*.

“We both voted for an affordable apartment that we could split four ways,” I remind them, but we all know that while Chasm might’ve agreed to something like that (it would’ve been a good way to bond and start off our life together), Parrish would never. “My lover has champagne tastes,” I murmur and he laughs at that.

“Champagne tastes on a champagne budget. Oh, Gamer Girl. Go play your fucking game.” He steps back with another laugh and opens the balcony door.

“Shall we?” I ask, holding up the game case. It’s rare to have a physical copy of anything anymore, but sometimes, a person needs to touch fucking grass. Or, in this case, a game case. Touch something. Go outside. Make your own memories.

I’m not saying you can’t game, too, right? I’m a gamer girl for life.

“Do you think we can kill Justin in this game in a way we couldn’t in real life?” X muses as Chasm snorts and snatches one of the champagne bottles off the table with his hand. When he uncorks it and swigs some directly from the bottle, Tess is quiet. She looks unhappy, but hey, we’re on our own now.

She’s done the best she could, and now it’s our turn.

I want to prove to her that we can do this. And by this, I mean life.

“Gather around and see the wonders that my sister has created!” Maxine calls out, gesturing dramatically for people to take their seats.

“I didn’t make the game by myself, there was a whole team of ...” I trail off, but you know what? I’m tired of being humble. Just for today, I want to pretend that I’m an asshole like Maxx or Parrish. With a sigh, I take a bow. I’m in school now, so one day, I’ll be able to helm even more projects.

That way, I’ll get the freedom to write the storyline—always.

Win-win. Writing and gaming.

“You turned out better than I thought,” Kimber murmurs, taking a champagne glass and holding it out so Chas can pour some for her. Tess plucks it from her hand and accepts the drink instead.

“Um, thanks?” I respond, pausing when I hear the click of high heels in the front hall.

“I didn’t miss anything, did I?” Lumen asks as she saunters in with a gift bag on one arm. She’s wearing a short skirt, a crop, and a tan from her trip to Bali. She tosses her hair and smiles at me, giving a little pageant wave as I smile back. Apparently, her dream job is to date celebrities and influencers (men and women both) on a rotating basis. She always has someone rich to fund her every whim. “It’s not exactly a time sensitive situation, is it?”

Seeing her ... I do not allow myself to fixate on Danyella’s absence. If I do, I’ll go down the rabbit hole with Walter and Saffron and Delphine and—

“It’s rude not to be punctual to a surprise party. The surprise is *over* now, Lumen.” Chas rolls his eyes as Parrish opens an expensive Scotch for him and Maxx to share.

“Come, sit,” I tell her and then I turn and slide the disc into my computer. Chasm’s already set it up so that the giant flatscreen is my monitor. “If you want to really get into it ...” I address the room at large, nodding with my chin in the direction of a table across the room. It’s covered in VR headsets. Chas hands me a pair and I slip them on, standing up and moving into the center of the living room.

“I suppose I can try it,” Carmen begins, and about twenty seconds later, I hear her cough nervously and place the goggles back on the table. “Never mind. I’ll watch from the TV.”

I stay where I am, waiting for the game to start.

It doesn’t ask if you want to start a new game, it just drops you into it.

Sometimes, we don’t get a choice of when and where we start.

The VR world settles in around me, three-hundred-and-sixty degrees of virtual reality that I’ve just become a part of. My avatar’s hair is long, dyed black and lime green, and I’m sitting in the back seat of a Mercedes. There are reporters waiting on the road just ahead of us.

“*Are you sure you don’t want to sit up front?*” the Tess-inspired figure asks as the opening sequence begins to play. I take a deep breath, settle in, and prepare myself to live it all, one final time.

Each moment we live—no matter how small—etches itself into this collection of memories we call a soul. Some are as vibrant as the sun, but others are fireflies, gently blinking in the darkness. We sunbathe, we go out at night with nets, trying to catch a beam or a flicker.

The big moments, they're like wind and water, shaping the stone.

I'm the lost daughter of a serial killer, but I'm so much more.

In parting: disconnect a little, live a lot, try something new, fall in love, make mistakes, learn from them, make some more.

Mostly, live your life.

It's yours and yours alone, nobody else's.

Six Months Later ...

The buzzer at the front gate goes off and since Chasm's on his phone, he glances at the camera first.

There's a delivery.

We haven't had a problem with deliveries in years.

"What are you working on now?" Chas asks me, moving over to stand beside me at the table. "Is this a new story?"

"Brand-new," I agree, watching Parrish from across the table. He's off today, so he's lounging, staring out the window with a disturbed half-smile on his face. When he turns to look at me, I know what he's thinking about. We had some fun last night. Ahem. I'd say *good, clean fun* but that would be a lie.

"Brand-new?" Parrish repeats, leaning over the table in a pretty white shirt—with a huge paint splatter on the front. That wasn't there when he left for work this morning; he must've spilled some ink when he was tattooing Maxx's arm. I can't help but admire what a little chaotic splatter does for his image. He looks good wearing an artistic mess. Although, it'd be nice if the stain wasn't so ... *red*. "When do I get to read it?"

"Nobody gets to read it until it's done," I declare, shutting the lid on the laptop as Maxim appears in the entrance to the kitchen, dressed to race. He's meeting Tiff at the track in like, an hour. He only does it for fun now, but it's like a bonding thing between him and his sister, so he always makes time for

it.

“Seriously, Kota? You already let me read it,” he teases with a crooked half-smile. He walks over to stand beside me, putting his hand on the top of my head as he leans down, his lips against my temple. “Caught you in a lie.” I slap his ass as he laughs and kisses my temple. “I’ll see you all later. Parrish, don’t you dare go to the fucking office without me.”

He heads for the side door that leads to the garage as Parrish dutifully ignores him, tapping his fingers on the tabletop.

“You let *him* read it?” he asks me with a cute little curl of his lip. “For shame, Gamer Girl.”

“I see how it is: my wife lets her boyfriend read her work before her husband does.” I stand up and give Chasm a raw look, wearing his ring on my finger along with the one that Parrish stole from Lumen. I won’t get one from Maxx unless he means he wants to marry me, like, *tomorrow* and he’s dead serious about it. I mean, he *is* dead serious about me, but he wants a huge church wedding with a white dress and all that shit. I’m not ready for that. Sometimes, when I close my eyes, I still see white veils lying in pools of blood.

“Oh, hell no. She’s my wife, too, for all intents and purposes,” Parrish claims, and I give him a look.

“Not your wife yet. If he wanted to, he would,” I say, quoting an old meme. He watches me slyly as I pad down the hallway to the front door. I glance out the peephole, nobody there. I open the door to collect the package when I notice familiar cursive handwriting on one of the labels.

My mind goes blank as I struggle to process what I’m seeing.

Chasm comes up to stand beside me as Maxx backs out of the attached garage in his orange Jeep. I can hear Parrish drifting lazily down the hallway behind us. I think he’s having coffee with Tess today or something. Maybe Paul, too. Even if he does, he’ll take his gun with him. Never leaves the house without it.

I stand frozen at the threshold of our little pink cottage, breathing ragged and uneven, and I put my fingers up against the screen door. GG hops past the front walk as I push it open and look down at the unassuming cardboard box on my porch.

Here I was, getting used to living alone with the guys.

So what the hell is this? I want to *make* games for a living, not play another

with real-life stakes.

Again, we don't always get a choice as to when we press start in life.

"Chas ... do you see that?" I point at the label, clearly written and attached by a one Amin Volli.

"I see it," he says as we turn to stare at one another. One hand comes up to press against the scar on the back of his head, the other slides beneath his suit jacket, double-checking that his own weapon is tucked safely in its holster. Maxx will have one—more like five—on him, too.

Thank God that I committed to three boys turned ruthless men.

Whatever happens this time, they will *never* hesitate to pull the trigger.

I told you guys: there's *always* a sense of dread in me when I think about the box.

I just didn't specify which box it was.

THE END...



Thank you so much for reading the *Lost Daughter of a Serial Killer* series! I'm happy that Dakota and her boys got their happy(ish) ending, but I'm also sad to see them go. I don't have any plans to continue this story, but if you're like me and you want to know what the ultimate canon ending is, it's this: happily ever after. ;) Dakota and the boys will always prevail.

If you enjoyed this series, I have a few other completed series with similar styles. I'd recommend *Rich Boys of Burberry Prep* if you're into bully romance. For another murder mystery series, try *Adamson All-Boys Academy* (girl dressed as a boy trope!). If you'd like a fantasy series similar to this one, I'd try my *Harem of Hearts* trilogy.

If you enjoyed this series, I'd truly appreciate it if you took the time to leave a review or share the word on TikTok. My books are created completely and wholly through the work of two people: myself and my partner. We do the covers (mostly my partner), the writing (me), the editing, the marketing, the website, social media, etc. There's nobody but us, and if you enjoy the stories, we'd truly appreciate you spreading the word. We excel at storytelling, but marketing ... not so much. =P

Here are some fun facts before you go: When I started brainstorming this series, the original title of the first book was *Parrish Lost*. Not only that, but it had a completely different cover. Book two was going to reference Chasm's name in some way. And book three? That's the reason Maxx and

Maxine have essentially the same name. In the original version, one of the two Maxes was going to be kidnapped by Justin, and the title of book three was going to be ambiguous, something like *Stolen Max*. Book two would've ended with a cliffhanger wherein the reader wouldn't know which of the double Maxes was taken.

The initial brainchild of this series came in two parts. One was a news story about a real-life girl who was kidnapped at birth and lived a happy life with her kidnappers. The other was the song *Satisfied* from the musical *Hamilton*. If you've never heard it, it's essentially from the POV of a woman who loses the guy she's into to her sister. Every time I listened to that song, I felt bad for her. I somehow wanted her to get the guy (although maybe not after the way the musical ends), and so that's where I got the idea for Maxine. Many people suspected her of being in on the plot at different times, but that was never an option for me. The golden rule of this series was that Maxine was always on Dakota's side. Always. Boys be damned.

Another amazing benefit to this story was that it opened a whole new world for me: in order to write Chasm's character, I've been learning to speak Korean and have even planned a trip to visit South Korea! I have a tutor that I meet with online who lives on Jeju Island. Not just that, but I've been learning about Korean food from an amazing YouTuber named Maangchi, and anything that Chasm cooks in the series, I've made myself. Any mistakes in the language as I've written it in these books are mine (romanization of Korean words isn't ideal), but I was inspired by some of my favorite K-pop songs to just go for it. Sometimes, the English parts in the songs aren't exactly correct, but they're fun anyway and experimenting with language is a blast.

If you're considering it, grab a language learning app on your phone and get started; you won't regret it. For Korean, I recommend Pimsleur, Teuida, and Hey Korea. Duolingo and Rosetta Stone aren't bad choices either. For vocabulary, download the Anki app and get some free Korean flashcard packs. There's nothing quite like learning from a native speaker, so if you're into that, Preply has great tutors.

This book is approximately 346,000 words long which is by *far* and above the longest book I have ever written (average book length is 70,000 to 90,000 words). Overall, this series is in excess of a million words.

Thanks again for reading! See you next time!

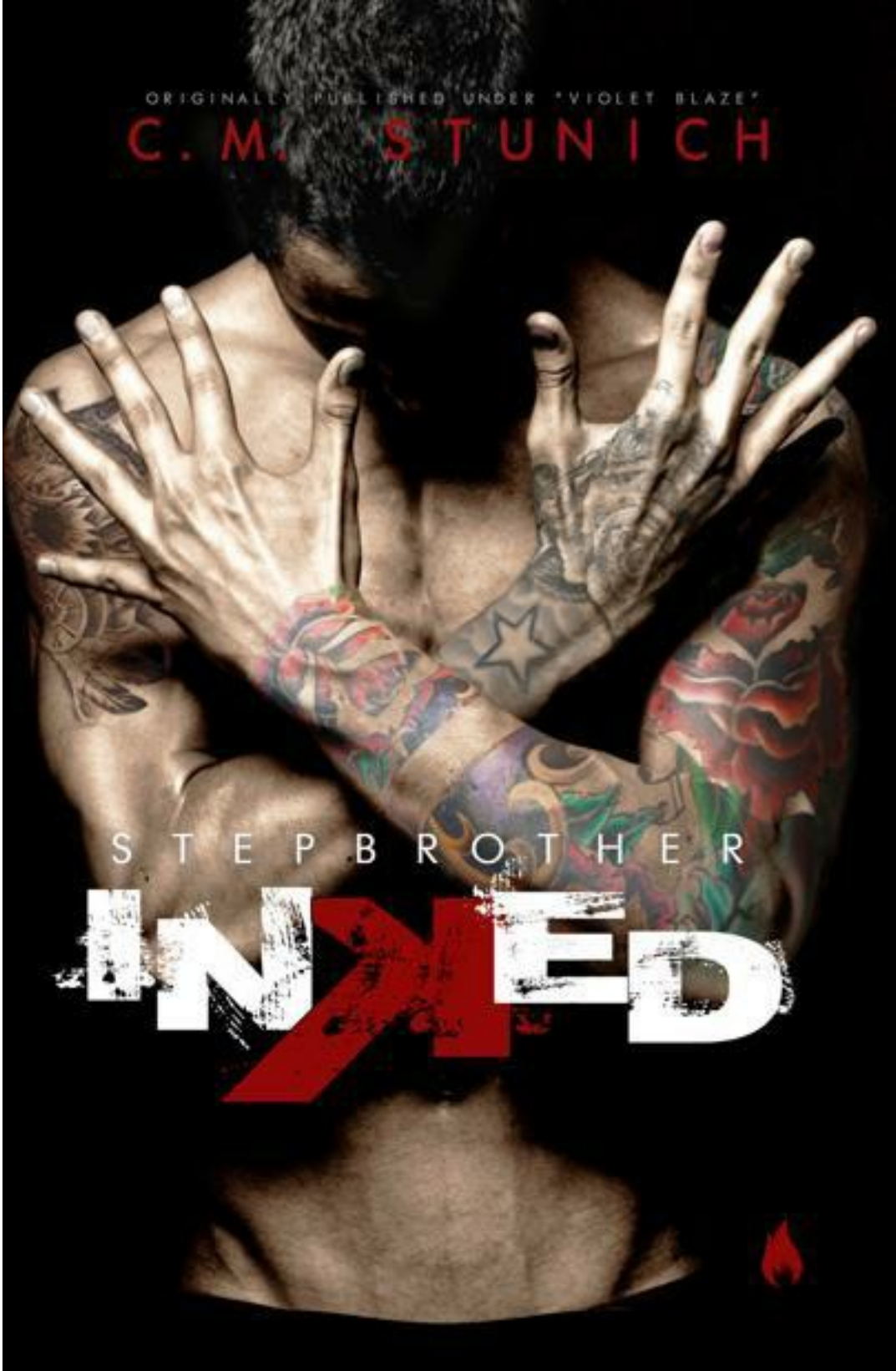
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A
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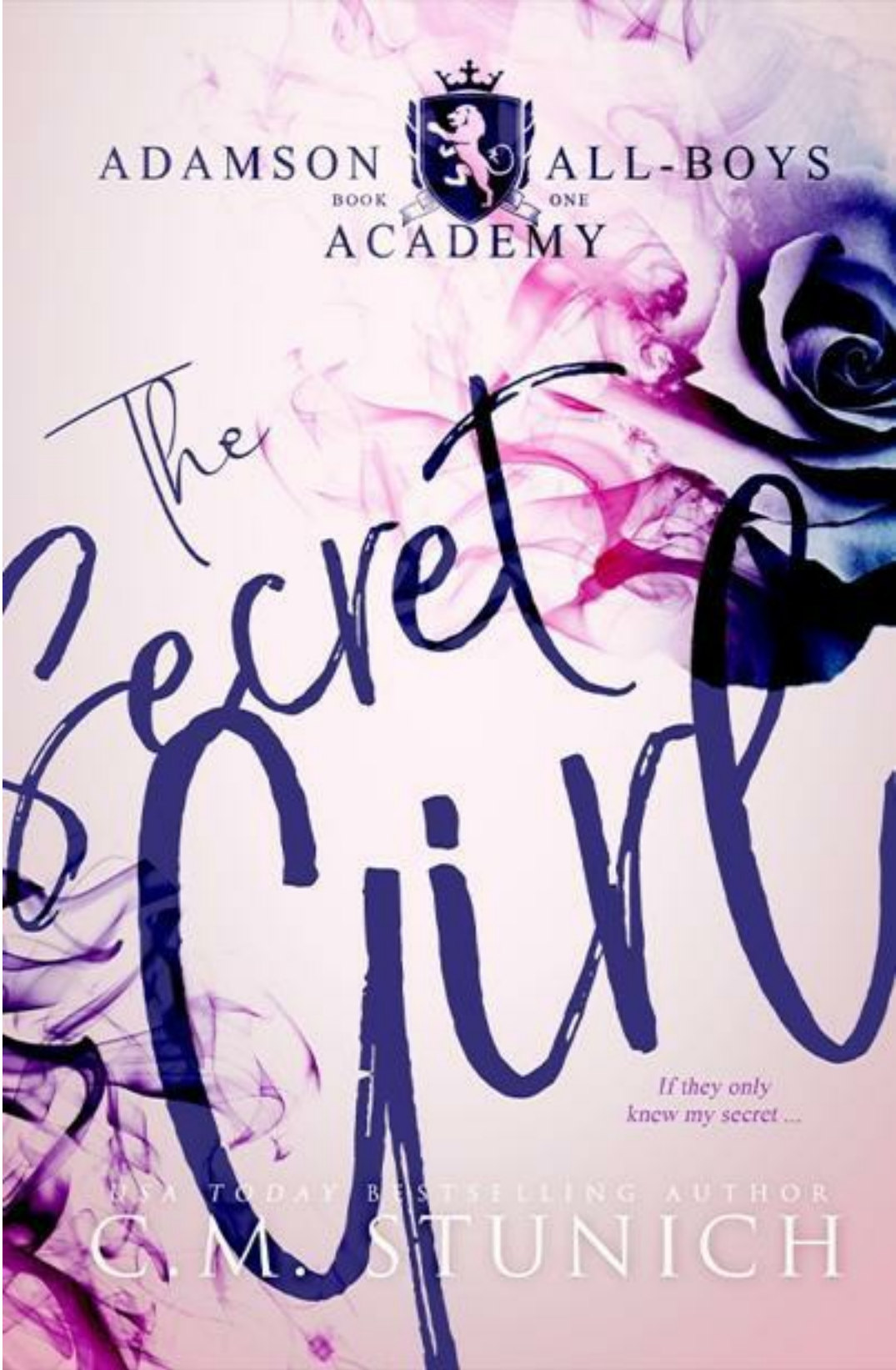


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P.S. I heart the f*ck out of you! Thanks for reading! I love your faces.

<3 C.M. Stunich



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About the Author

C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.

She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels - romance, new adult, fantasy, and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her

crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.

Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.