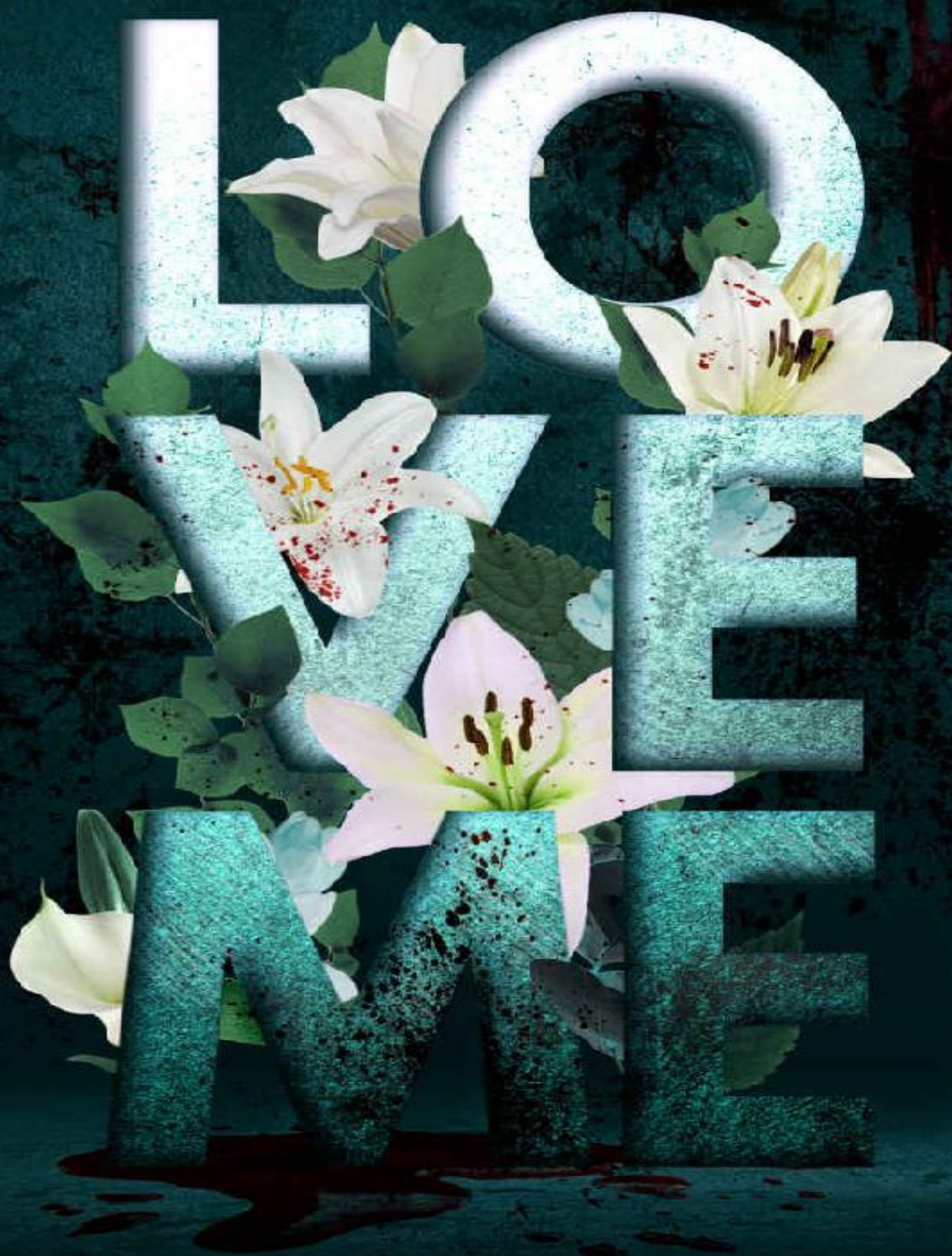


WITSEC BOOK THREE



ASHLEY N. ROSTEK



WITSEC BOOK THREE



ASHLEY N. ROSTEK

LOVE ME

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Edited by Alexandra Fresch of To the Letter Services

Photography & Cover design by The Dirty Tease

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BOOKS BY ASHLEY N. ROSTEK

**WITSEC Series**

Find Me

Save Me

Love Me

**The Maura Quinn Series**

Embrace the Darkness

Endure the Pain

Endurance

Escape the Reaper

## KEELAN

I TIGHTENED MY ARM AROUND LOGAN'S NECK WHEN HE BEGAN TO RESIST after my little brothers helped Shiloh escape through her bedroom window. I had Logan on the floor between my legs in a rear choke hold. He tried to twist to the side, and I quickly hooked my legs over his thighs, locking him down. He then threw himself backward into my chest. I rolled with the impact, squeezing even tighter around his neck as I did. "Keep it up and I'll fucking choke you out," I growled. With murderous rage pumping through my veins, I wished he would, just so I'd have the pleasure of feeling this fucker go limp in my arms. The fear that had slammed into me when Shi had called me for help, then hearing her screaming for it as I'd run into her house...I added pressure around his neck.

"Keelan," Knox said as he took a step closer from where he stood in the doorway to Shiloh's room.

Shi had said Logan had drugged her. How could he do that to her—to his niece who had been through so much?

Logan smacked my arm. "I give," he forced out with what little breath he had left.

I didn't care how badly he wanted to protect her.

It was wrong.

He'd hurt her.

He'd hurt my girlfriend and for that, something dark inside me urged me to cut the weak tether holding me back from adding that last bit of pressure around his neck needed to knock him out.

"Keelan!" Knox barked, successfully distracting me from my rage and granting me a moment of clarity. Logan was Shi's only remaining family. It

didn't matter how badly I wanted to kick his ass. He'd hurt Shi and how Logan was dealt with was up to her. I had to respect that.

For Shi, I dropped my arm from around his neck and shoved him off me.

He rolled away, gasping for air. I got to my feet as Creed ran into the room. He glanced at Logan, his expression hardening into a glare, and before I could ask, he said, "Colt took her somewhere safe."

I met Knox's already waiting stare. He tilted his head. "Let's go."

The three of us were making our way down the hall when Logan yelled out, "Wait!"

None of us did.

We entered the living room, heading for the front door when the fed walked through it. Ian, I was pretty sure his name was. Like when we had first met him at the hospital after Jacob had attacked Shi, he was wearing a suit, only the one he was wearing now was charcoal-colored.

He eyed me and my brothers in an assessing way before his eyes drifted behind us as Logan stepped out from the hall. Whatever he took from staring at us, he let out a sigh. "It appears I'm too late."

Logan cleared and rubbed at his throat. "I told you I'd handle this."

"Taking your niece against her will isn't handling anything," Ian said in a voice that he managed to make light despite how messed-up the situation was. "It's abduction, and last time I checked, that was a felony."

"So is drugging someone," Creed said in Logan's direction.

Ian looked from Creed to Logan and his demeanor stiffened. "You tried to drug her?"

"He *did* drug her," Creed snapped as he fisted his hands at his sides. "She couldn't walk and was fighting to stay conscious when we helped her get away from this fucker."

Knox put his hand on Creed's shoulder as if he was worried Creed was moments away from going after Logan. Not that I blamed my baby brother for wanting to pick a fight with Shi's uncle, but it was a fight he wouldn't win.

"Christ, Logan," Ian said as he ran his fingers through his hair.

"Her location is compromised. She isn't safe here," Logan snarled.

"Regardless, legally she's an adult," Ian said. "You can't make her leave if she doesn't want to."

"She didn't compromise her safety by telling us," Creed argued. "And she's a hell of a lot safer here than she'd be with the dick who drugged her

because he didn't get his way."

The hard look Logan gave Creed made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. "What if you break up?" Logan questioned. "What if this strange relationship between the five of you ends horribly? How do I know one of you won't compromise her safety to get back at her?"

"I'd say you don't know us very well, because we'd never do that even if things did end badly, but you won't even give us a chance," Creed said and straightened his shoulders. "I love Shiloh. I know that won't sway you, but I'm telling you anyway so I can look back at this moment and know I tried. I tried to reason with you for her."

Seeing Logan stare at Creed with contempt, I could confidently say he was unswayed. "I think children should stay out of adult conversations. Clearly, comprehending the risk Shiloh has put herself in is too much for your young brain to handle."

Fists turning white, Creed tried to step toward Logan. Knox yanked him back and put himself between Shi's uncle and our youngest brother. Knox was taller and had at least twenty pounds of muscle more than Logan. However, if shit went sideways and they brawled it out, I wasn't completely confident Knox could win. All my brothers knew a little bit of martial arts from what I'd taught them over the years, but none of them were as skilled as Shi, and Logan had taught Shi everything she knew.

"You want to have an adult conversation, then let's have a conversation," Knox said in a voice that dared Logan to say otherwise. "We should go over why you decided that it'd be okay to drug your niece. You know, for the young mind to comprehend it clearly."

Creed glanced at me with wide eyes. We both knew Knox was about to tear into Logan and he'd do it calmly and brutally.

"Shiloh told you that she didn't want to be relocated, which you refused to accept because you think you know better. Fine, I'll humor that. You were her guardian for a year, and I'm sure that in the year you watched over her as she drank and smoked and ran herself into the ground rather than face her grief, you gained some extensive knowledge and experience on what it is to be a parent." Knox's words were like verbal assaults, each knocking Logan down a peg and leaving us all stunned. "Because of her unwillingness to leave and the fact that you trained her to protect herself so well so she could live on her own without you around to protect her all this time, you knew you couldn't force her. Am I right so far?" Knox didn't wait for Logan to answer.



“So you decided to drug her without sparing a single fuck that she had been drugged and almost raped less than a month ago, or that men have repeatedly come into her life and tried to strip away her consent. But you figured you’re allowed to do that, right? You’re protecting her because she can’t do it herself? Did I get all that correct?”

Logan’s clenched jaw and lack of response was answer enough.

I could sense the anger pouring off of Knox, but he only let a tiny bit show with a shake of his head. “You can’t have it both ways,” he said. “You can’t leave her behind, deeming her capable of protecting herself if X showed up, and then return and treat her as if she’s not.”

Logan and Knox fell into a stare-off, both glaring at one another until Knox finished with, “Unless you never really thought that, which begs the question...why did you leave her alone in the first place?”

I had to hand it to my brother. He was a perceptive bastard, especially when it came to Shi.

“Shi will never be safe as long as X is out there,” Logan gritted as if that justified leaving his niece, who’d been spiraling and needed someone to be there for her.

“We understand the danger X is to Shi,” I said, though I knew my words were a waste of breath. It was obvious his vision was tunneled from desperation. Nothing I or anyone could say would reach or reason with him. But that didn’t negate the fact that we did understand, at least the best we could.

When Shi had admitted she was in witness protection because there was a man out there who had stalked her for years, murdered her family, and almost killed her, too, we had been shocked. Of course, at the time, the twins had already been halfway, if not all the way in love with Shi and had said it hadn’t changed anything for them. I wished I could have said the same, that my growing feelings for Shi or how she had become a part of our family made the danger of X showing up not matter. But that hadn’t been the case for Knox and me. I supposed we were more jaded—too experienced with loss to throw caution to the wind when it came to our family. So Knox and I had made sure all four of us talked about it extensively...the implications of her being in our lives.

As we’d gotten more information from Shi later that same day so as to not rush her, because we understood how difficult it was to talk about the night her family had been murdered, we’d researched X as much as we could.

We had found Maryland news articles that reported what had happened that night. They hadn't given much detail. Just that X had broken into their home while she and her family had been out of the house, nailed every window and door shut on the first floor, apart from the front door, then waited for the family to return and butchered them throughout the night. Strangely, everything we had read about that night had no mention of Shi. It was as if she hadn't existed, and we assumed that it had to do with her being in WITSEC. Then we had learned X was connected to the murders of multiple young women that had happened in the past year. Young brunette girls around Shi's age.

With the research, the twins had seemed to take the implications more seriously. It still hadn't changed their minds about being with Shi, but Knox and I had seen the momentary consideration flash in their eyes of *what if*. Seeing that and knowing all four of us were on the same page, it had made it easier for me to accept that we could keep her around and I could allow myself to embrace the feelings I had for her without guilt. Surprisingly, Knox, who had been the most difficult about Shi coming into our lives, hadn't protested to her staying, either.

Proving my assumption about him correct, Logan scoffed, "You don't understand shit."

Knox glanced at me then, and with that look, I could tell he had come to the same conclusion as well. Dragging Creed with us, we headed for the door. There was no point in arguing with someone who refused to listen. We may not have lost people we loved in a violent way, the way he and Shi had, but we understood loss and we knew what it looked like when someone was being ruled by their grief and fear.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" Logan snapped.

Ian, surprisingly, stepped out of the way so we could walk through the front door. Not trusting either of them, I purposely walked out of the house last.

Logan grabbed my arm. "You're not going anywhere until you tell me where my niece is."

I didn't yank free from his grasp. Instead, I leveled my gaze with his. "Get your hand off me."

His grip tightened. "Where is she?"

Out of respect for Shi, I hadn't choked him out. However, that didn't mean I wouldn't defend myself. I brought the elbow of my free arm down on

his arm, forcing him to release me.

Logan fisted my shirt next. I threw my arm over his and clamped his wrist between my inner, upper arm and ribs. Twisting to the side, I hyperextended his arm. With his free hand, he threw a punch, but I blocked it.

“You got skill,” he forced out as he managed to get his arm free. “I’ll make you a deal.” He took a step back, rolling his shoulder. “Let’s spar right now. If you can beat me, she can stay.”

“Keelan,” Knox said. His tone was a warning: don’t even humor Logan if I wasn’t confident I could win.

From the short interactions I’d had with him, I could tell he wouldn’t fight fair. I couldn’t really hold that against him because we’d both be fighting for Shi.

I widened my stance. “Deal.”

Right as the word left my mouth, Logan lunged for me.

TIME SLOWED DOWN WHEN YOUR WORLD—YOUR SOUL—WAS SHAKEN, fractured, or destroyed. You felt every painful heartbeat pound in your chest. Every breath took thought. It was not living when time slowed. It was surviving. And then there was the aftermath, when time sped back up again and you looked around at everything continuing on like normal, but you stood there watching it like an outsider. *How do you deal with being forever changed?*

Keelan was hurt and my time had slowed.

The guys had come to my rescue after my uncle had drugged me. A part of me didn't want to believe it. Another part of me wondered why I was surprised. I'd known things could escalate to that. It was why I had grabbed my gun after Logan had found out the guys knew the truth about me. Logan's desperation to keep me safe made him go to any lengths necessary. To him, the end justified the means.

Creed was currently driving Colt and me to the hospital. Eyes focused on the road, Creed calmly started to explain what had happened after Colt had raced away with me to their cabin in the mountains. "Keelan and your uncle fought."

Colt let out a curse.

The memory of Keelan restraining Logan on the ground in a choke hold so I could escape through my bedroom window popped into my head.

"How badly is Keelan hurt?" I was surprised at how controlled my voice sounded, because on the inside was utter chaos. The panic alone made me feel like I was moments away from jumping out of my skin.

Creed glanced at me through the rearview mirror. "He's all right. He has

a mild concussion and he dislocated his shoulder.”

Logan had hurt him because of me.

Maybe I should have just let him take me.

Maybe this was the universe’s way of reminding me that those I cared about always got hurt.

My brow scrunched up and my eyes began to burn, but I refused to let myself cry.

Colt reached back for me from where he sat in the front passenger’s seat.

I stared down at the hand he held out. I didn’t deserve him or his comfort. His brother was hurt. The last thing he needed to worry about was comforting me.

“I’m fine,” I said, fisting my hand in my lap so I wouldn’t be tempted to take the comfort Colt offered. I glanced out the window and tried to distract myself with the lush green forest passing by as we made our way down the mountain. It was amazing how different it was up here compared to the bottom, where the city was. I wondered how noticeable the change from forest to desert would be. As we got closer to the bottom, would the trees begin to turn yellow? Or would it be like the Pacific Ocean meeting the Atlantic? A wall of rich green pine trees would draw a line in the earth, identifying the end of the forest, and from that point on there would be saguaro cacti and tumbleweeds.

The sound of a click pulled my attention back into the car and I looked forward just as Colt was crawling over the center console between the driver’s and passenger’s seats. “Colt! We’re driving,” I admonished as he sat in the backseat next to me.

“Don’t do this again.” His tone was pleading as he gently cupped my face with his hands. I gripped his wrists, trying to pull away. Refusing to let me go, his grip tightened. “I’m serious, babe. Don’t shut us out again.”

“I’m not shutting you out.”

His eyes, which were a beautiful mixture of green and blue, bored into mine. “I can see the guilt all over your face. It’s making you punish yourself. You must stop doing that. What happened is not your fault.”

“Isn’t it, though? Keelan wouldn’t be hurt right now if it weren’t for me.”

“No.” His tone was firm like steel. “Keelan fought for you because you matter. Because you’re ours and we protect what’s ours.”

What I wouldn’t give to just swoon at those words. To be able to feel anything other than the crushing guilt in my chest. “Everyone I care about

gets hurt.”

“Damnit, Shi! Stop thinking like that,” Creed snapped from the front.

“How?” I snapped back. “How do I do that? Maybe I’m being ridiculous, but it’s hard not to think this way when I’m the common denominator. My parents and sister are dead because Mr. X wanted me. Logan hurt Keelan because I called Keelan for help. I’m the problem. My conscience is screaming at me that I am, and I should have let Logan take me, but I’m selfish. I’m selfish because I can’t bring myself to let any of you go.”

Colt’s brow scrunched up. “If you’re selfish, then I’m selfish, because I can’t let you go, either.”

“If he had taken you, we would have found you and brought you back,” Creed said in a softer tone. “As for how to stop blaming yourself…” He let out a sigh. “You matter to us. You matter so damn much and it’s so frustrating that you think you don’t.”

“It’s not a solution, but we’ll keep saying it until it sticks,” Colt said.

“Do we matter to you?” Creed asked.

“More than anything, but I—”

“Would you fight for us?” Colt cut me off. “If someone tried to hurt us or tried to take us away, would you fight for us?”

Seeing Colt’s point, I nodded. Of course I’d fight for them.

“How come it’s all right for you to fight for us, but not all right for us to fight for you?” Colt asked.

I opened my mouth, but Colt cut me off again. “Don’t you dare say you aren’t worth it. You are. It breaks my heart that you can’t see it.”

I glanced down. “No one is worth getting hurt for.”

Colt tilted my head back, forcing my eyes to meet his. “You’re worth defending. Keelan chose to defend you. It was your uncle’s choice to hurt Keelan. You are not responsible for the actions of others. You are not responsible for your uncle’s actions, and you are sure as hell not responsible for X’s.”

“Logan thinks he’s protecting me.” I wasn’t defending Logan. Just voicing his reason.

“We get that he wanted to protect you. But Christ, Shi, he drugged you,” Creed said with barely contained rage. “I get that X still being out there is making him desperate, but you could have been hurt—no, you *were* hurt.”

“He went about it the wrong way,” Colt added.

I agreed, but I also felt the need to excuse Logan’s actions. Feeling torn, I



pushed the conversation away from the topic of my uncle. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I’m sorry I’m like this. I mean, how pitiful is it to not see your worth?”

Colt’s hands moved to the back of my neck. “This is only a guess, but I think after years of being tormented by Mr. X, you probably began to wonder why you were special and over time convinced yourself that you weren’t in hopes he’d leave you alone.”

“Maybe. I’ve asked myself that over the years. Why me? Why not Shayla? She was so beautiful, and it was like she was this beacon that drew people to her, where I was shy and comfortable hiding in her shadow.”

“You do realize you were her identical twin, right?” Creed asked.

When I frowned, unsure of his point, Colt chuckled. “Your sister’s personality may have been more outgoing, but there’s no way she was more beautiful than you.”

“And you’re a beacon, too, Shi. You drew us in,” Creed said.

I pursed my lips to stop myself from smiling. Colt surprised me with a quick kiss and stared down at me with a grin. “You’re allowed to feel happy about that,” he whispered.

“Even right now?” I asked.

He nodded. “Keelan may be banged-up, but I know he’d rather you were smiling right now instead of blaming yourself. So let the guilt go.”

I exhaled slowly, and with the air leaving my lungs, the weight on my chest lightened.

“That’s it, babe.” Colt kissed me again before pulling me into his arms. He held me like that as I worked to push down the feeling I’d let dig roots and grow in my soul. Because of how deep the roots went, it’d take more than today to expel the guilt completely. It was another long battle. One I’d have to win if I wanted to believe what they did.



We followed Creed through the maze that was the hospital. As we turned down a hall that led to the room Keelan was in, I saw Ian. He was leaning against the wall, on his phone. As I passed him, we locked eyes.

“I got to go,” I heard him say to whoever he was on the phone with as Creed opened a door, I assumed to Keelan’s room.

Colt and Creed went in ahead of me and after taking a few steps inside, my feet seemed to plant themselves into the ground. The room held two beds. Keelan was lying upright in one, with his arm in a sling. He had a bruise on the left side of his jaw and there was a bandage near his right temple.

In the other bed was Logan. He was sitting at the foot of it with his feet touching the white-and-pale-gray checkered floor. He was holding an ice pack to his right eye with one hand and hugging his ribs with the other. The only other visible injury was his swollen and split lip.

Knox was leaning against the wall on Keelan's side of the room, arms folded over his chest, looking unhurt and calm. Not pleased, but calm.

All three of them had looked in our direction when we'd entered the room and one after the other locked their gazes on me. Creed went to stand next to Knox, while Colt went to Keelan's bedside, his eyes taking in his brother's injuries before setting an angry glare on my uncle.

No one said a word and the tension in the room intensified with each second that passed. I kept looking from Keelan to Logan. Back and forth. Angry to devastated. But mostly angry.

The door we'd just come through opened and Ian walked in. He took in the room, reading the growing unease. Smartly, he stayed by the door.

"Shi," Logan said, breaking the silence and the tether that rooted me where I stood.

I stormed toward him. My hand flew out so quickly and I smacked him across his cheek hard enough to cause my palm to sting.

Logan could have stopped me from striking him, but he hadn't. He had just sat there and let it happen, with guilt-filled eyes. That pissed me off more.

I shoved him. Still, he did nothing. "Damn you, Logan!" I shoved him again and slammed my fists down on his chest. I wanted him to fight back. I wanted him to give me a reason to hate him.

An arm hooked around my waist and pulled me backward, putting Logan out of my reach. The feel of the bulky body told me it was Knox holding me. I didn't fight him to get back to my uncle. Instead, I grasped his arm around my middle, holding it in place.

"The messed-up part is I understand why you did it," I seethed at Logan, and squeezed Knox's forearm as if I could pull his strength into myself for what I needed to say next. His hold tightened, telling me he had me, he wouldn't let go. "I had been drowning in my grief," I forced out, my burning

eyes fixed on my uncle. “And you left me the moment I was legally able to live on my own to get revenge on Mr. X. You said it was for my sake, but if that were true, you wouldn’t have lied to me and said Ian pleaded with you to help him. You left for *you*. Because it was what *you* needed to deal with your own grief. It pisses me off because I wish I could hold how much that hurt me against you, but I can’t.” My voice cracked and I saw pain furrow Logan’s brow. Seeing that pain ate at me—ate at my strength. “Losing them broke us, Logan. I understand what it means to grasp hold of anything to lessen that pain. It feels like you can finally take a breath when all the air is gone.” Blinking to clear my blurry eyes, I felt two tears roll down my cheeks. “I can’t fault you, but damn you! Damn you for adding to *my* pain. You lied to me and abandoned me when I felt like dying would be my only escape!” I roared, all the hurt he made me feel riding my voice. I moved my hand up Knox’s arm, pulling him even closer, and I pointed at Keelan and the twins. “They saved me. They did what you couldn’t do, and damn you for trying to take away what I found to help me breathe!”

I was so angry my whole body shook. Feeling it, Knox began to knead my shoulder with his fingers.

Logan looked down, glaring at the floor. “Shiloh, I...” He trailed off.

I waited for him to continue. He didn’t. Instead, he sat there as if unable to figure out what to say.

I had said what I needed to, at least. It was what I should have said to Logan the moment he’d returned, but at the time, I hadn’t known how to handle it. Maybe I was still handling it poorly. I’d never been in a situation where my only family member hurt me repeatedly but was justified because he thought he was protecting me.

Regardless, I’d said everything that had been weighing on my heart. How we moved on from this was on him. I hoped he listened. I hoped *he* understood. But hoping for something hadn’t always worked in my favor.

Logan didn’t respond. He just continued to stare at the floor.

I wiped my wet cheeks and walked out of Knox’s embrace over to Keelan. Gently, I cupped Keelan’s face. “I’m so sorry.”

His good arm wrapped around me. “Come here,” he said, pulling me down to sit in his lap. His hand traveled up my spine to the back of my neck and he touched his forehead to mine. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

I wanted to argue, but kept my mouth shut.

“It’s just a couple of bumps and bruises,” he played down.

“You have a concussion, Keelan.”

“It was worth it.”

I wanted to say it wasn't. *I wasn't*. It was almost like a knee-jerk reaction to say that, but I refrained.

The corner of Keelan's mouth lifted. “That's an interesting face you're making. I can't tell if you're pissed off or you swallowed something sour.”

Colt sighed next to us. “She's trying very hard not to disagree with you. She doesn't think she's worth fighting for. We had a very long discussion about it on the ride here.”

Keelan's hand moved to my cheek, his golden-brown eyes holding mine. “Yes, baby girl, you are.” His tone was firm and unbudging, as if nothing could change his mind. “But that wasn't what I meant.”

“I told him if he could beat me, you could stay,” Logan said. I glanced at my uncle. His shoulders were slumped a little, his gaze still glued to the floor. “I needed to know if they could protect you.” As if finding the strength to do so, Logan looked at me. “I knew I fucked up when I heard you scream for help. It was the fear in your voice and knowing I'd put it there.” The muscle in his jaw ticked and his eyes turned haunted.

“Who won?” I asked.

“Keelan,” Knox answered, with a hardened expression pointed at Logan. “You fought dirty.”

“He fought like he wanted to kill Keelan,” Creed grumbled as he also stared at my uncle with an unfriendly look.

“You think X will fight fair if he finds her?” A harshness seeped into Logan's voice as he spoke. “My niece is all I have left in this world. I pray every night that I find him before he finds her.” He stiffly got to his feet, hugging his ribs as he did. “I needed to know at least one of you has what it takes to protect her.”

“And one of us proved that to you,” Knox said as his hardened expression shifted to one of suspicion.

Logan stepped toward him. They both stared each other down and the air in the room began to feel heavy. “You've no idea what the four of you are risking by being with her.” Logan shook his head slightly. Anger narrowed Knox's eyes. Logan didn't seem intimidated. “If he finds her, you four...” Logan trailed off and sighed heavily. “I can't even imagine what he'll do to you, but you should know that to X, you've touched what he thinks is his. Shiloh is his obsession. In his mind, they are in love and possessing her is all

that matters to him. If he sees that she cares for you four, or worse, he finds out that she's had sex with any of you, which I'm pretty sure has already happened with a few of you, he'll come after you four like a jealous husband. Only this jealous husband is a psychotic serial killer."

"We did research on X after Shiloh told us," Colt said, surprising me. I hadn't known that.

"Reading a few news articles you found on the internet isn't enough to fully understand what you're risking," Logan said and then turned to look at me. "Did you tell them everything? Did you tell them about the girls he's murdering? The years of stalking? That night?"

*That night* didn't need to be clarified. I knew which one he referred to and he knew the lengths I'd gone to not to even think of it. "I haven't told them everything that happened that night, but—"

Cutting me off, Logan let out a slew of curses. "You know better, Shi. What the fuck were you thinking dragging them into all of this?"

He was right. I'd known I'd messed up the moment I had told them the truth. A part of me at the time, though, hadn't cared. I'd been so broken and alone and then the guys had come into my life. It was like this tiny light had finally appeared in the darkness, and the more I got to know them, the more that light grew. My desperation to keep that light from going out made me not care. Colt was wrong. I was selfish. A chance at happiness wasn't worth this risk.

"If you want someone to blame, blame me," Knox said. "I'm the one who made Shiloh tell us."

"How did you even know to make her tell you anything?" Logan argued.

"All I had to do was look at her to know something wasn't right," Knox snapped. "Why would someone leave their eighteen-year-old niece behind alone who was clearly going through something she didn't know how to handle? Almost every night since she moved in next door, we could hear her screaming from her nightmares. Afterward, she would go running before the sun was even up. She'd run for hours like she was running from something that would get her if she stopped. Then we got to know her. We saw the scars she refused to tell us how she got. We saw the way she would react to things with flinches. It became obvious she had been through something violently traumatic. So I began asking questions. *I* pushed her to answer because I could see she needed help. Don't you dare shame her for doing the best she could and failing your expectations. Not when you failed to meet

expectations as a parent.”

Logan’s jaw clenched. “Shiloh can’t afford to be reckless.”

“I mean this with the utmost disrespect—fuck you,” Creed seethed.

“Creed,” Keelan admonished, but there was zero oomph in his voice.

Creed shook his head. “I can’t stand this. The more this fucker talks, the more Shi is retreating into herself.”

Everyone glanced in my direction and Keelan’s arm tightened around me.

“Enough,” Ian snapped from where he stood by the door, drawing everyone’s attention. Ian looked at Logan. “What’s done is done. She doesn’t want to be relocated and I don’t believe them knowing is a big enough risk to enforce that she be relocated, either. Apart from this sheriff, who we need to handle sooner rather than later, I don’t think she’s compromised here.”

“Do you think the sheriff will discover who she really is?” Knox asked.

Ian shook his head. “I’m sure he’s done a background check. With her being in WITSEC, all the information he’ll find was created for her new identity.”

“Is there a different way he could find who she truly is? Like with her fingerprints or something like that?” Creed asked.

Ian smirked at Logan. “WITSEC goes to extensive lengths to hide those in the program, and if we happened to miss something, well, I’m sure Logan called in a few favors to some old friends to make sure Shiloh’s true identity is unattainable.”

Everyone looked at Logan, who held a schooled expression. “I had her completely erased.”

Ian’s smirk stretched into a smile. “I noticed.”

Logan stared at Ian. “You’re the only one who has her information, the original police reports from the years of him stalking her to the night he murdered our family. I even left you Shi’s hospital records. I know you’re going to need it when we catch him.”

“Is that really why, or is it because Carlos or Eddie couldn’t get past the encryption I have protecting her file?” Ian asked him.

“Eddie can get past anything,” Logan said, admitting which of his ex-Navy SEAL buddies had helped him. “How do you think I knew about the hospital records?”

“What do you mean by completely erased?” Keelan asked.

“It means there’s no record I ever existed,” I answered. “If you were to look up my family online, you would find that Shayla was an only child and



that Mr. X was stalking her. News articles that covered the night my family was murdered were altered. Of course, erasing me isn't completely foolproof because the police involved, the people from my old life who knew me and my family know the truth. Not to mention Shayla was my identical twin."

"I told you I had all of Shayla's photos online erased," Logan said. "The only way for someone to connect you to your parents and sister is if someone tells them."

With a furrowed brow, Creed looked from Logan to Ian and back to Logan. "Not that I care, but should you really be admitting to doing all that to a fed?"

Logan smirked. "I'm sure Ian's called in a favor or two."

"By the time this is all over, you'll owe me enough to last a lifetime," Ian said. "Especially with all the felonies I have to look the other way on."

"Ian and Logan are ex-SEAL buddies," I told the guys.

Ian's brows rose. "I thought we were lovers?"

Logan huffed a laugh, then grimaced, clutching his ribs. He stepped around Knox, heading toward the door. "I'm not your type. My hair isn't blond and my breasts don't have their own zip code."

Ian shrugged. "And remind me what your type is? Long legs that spread \_\_\_"

"I don't need to hear that information," I snapped, covering my ears.

As he reached to open the door to leave, Logan glanced back at me, a small smile on his face. For just a moment, all the bad seemed to have been forgotten. But as we locked eyes, it all came back. His smile dropped. "I'm sticking around until we get the shit with the sheriff handled. I know things are rocky right now, but if you ever need me, I'll come. No matter what, Shi." He didn't wait for me to respond and walked out, with Ian following him.

I glanced around at the guys and noticed Knox watching the door close with that suspicious look again. What was weird was that Keelan and Creed were also staring at the door with the same look. Colt, however, was staring at his brothers like me, looking as confused as I felt.

"Why do you all look like that?" Colt asked them.

Knox, Keelan, and Creed exchanged a look.

"I don't trust him," Creed said, looking at me. "He didn't apologize for drugging you. Instead, he deflected by telling you things you would want to hear, and I didn't believe him when he said he was testing us to see if we

could protect you. That's not how the fight went down. I'm sorry, Shi. I hope I'm wrong, but something doesn't feel right."

The eldest Stone brothers said nothing and that told me that they agreed with Creed.

He had apologized yesterday before... Now that I thought about it, maybe he hadn't. Was telling someone you didn't know how to apologize to them the same as saying you were sorry? And if what Creed said was true, then everything Logan had said—his sad speech as to why he couldn't step up as a parent—had been a lie to get me to let my guard down.

Logan was good at lies, especially if they manipulated a situation to get what he wanted. I'd just never thought he would do that to me. Or, honestly, I'd never wanted to believe he'd do that to me.

I went to get off Keelan's lap, but he refused to let me go. "I have this feeling that you're a flight risk," he said in a low voice, but everyone seemed to hear.

Unable to meet his eyes, I stared at the strap of his sling. "You're putting yourselves at risk being with me. I'm putting you at risk staying—"

"You promised, Shi," Creed said. "Run or fight, we do it together, remember?"

It had been wrong to make that promise.

"One of us could die tomorrow," Knox said. "Be it a heart attack, a brain aneurysm, or a car crash. What have I told you about living in fear?"

*Living in fear isn't living.*

THE NEXT MORNING, I JERKED AWAKE HOURS BEFORE MY ALARM WAS DUE TO go off. I lay there trying to calm the pounding in my chest. Keelan was sleeping soundlessly next to me, which I was grateful for. He needed to rest.

Once I was calm, I rolled onto my back with the intent to go back to sleep. Instead, I found myself staring at the dancing shadows on the ceiling as my mind became overwhelmed with thoughts. Thoughts of what I needed to get done that day, what assignments were due for school, which in turn reminded me of Cassy. Then I found myself thinking about her father, the sheriff, and then I was thinking about Logan, which pulled Mr. X into my thoughts. That was my breaking point.

Careful not to wake Keelan, I pushed off the covers and crept out of his room. I went home and changed into yellow athletic leggings and a matching racerback top. By the time I was stretching in my front yard, the sun was starting to rise.

Before I took off running through the neighborhood, I set a timer on my phone for one hour. That was it. I refused to let my run exceed that.

At the end of that hour, the sun had risen from behind the mountains and I had worked up a good sweat. It amazed me that even though it was late October, it was still hot out. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I turned off the alarm. I was down the street from my house and felt the temptation to run the rest of the way.

*One hour. No more,* I told myself and made myself walk.

As I approached my house, I saw Knox sitting on the steps leading up to my porch, drinking from a coffee mug. Walking toward him across my lawn, I pulled my earbuds out. “Did I wake you when I left this morning?”

“I went to check on Keelan and you weren’t there. Did you have a nightmare?”

I shook my head. “I woke up and my brain wouldn’t let me fall back to sleep. I figured a run would help me clear it.”

“Did it help?” he asked as he brought the mug to his mouth to take a sip.

I nodded.

“How long did you run for?”

“I only let myself run for an hour.”

Knox stood. “You’re allowed to run for however long you want. As long as you’re not running to avoid dealing with things.”

“I know. But it’s so easy to cross that line—to chase the pain that I can control versus feeling the pain I cannot. So for now, I’m going to take baby steps.”

Understanding, he nodded. “Want breakfast?”

I fought to not smile and failed. “Does breakfast come with stipulations?”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I need my sacrificial lamb.”

I laughed. “They’re not that bad.”

“With *you*, they’re not that bad. With Keelan and me...well, let’s just say I’ve been told to fuck off more times than I can count.”

I snorted and started up the steps, passing him. “I’ll be over after I shower.”

He grabbed my hand, stopping me as I reached the top of the porch. I spun around, finding myself taller than him for once with him standing on the bottom step. He didn’t seem to like that and moved up a step, bringing us to equal heights. He leaned close as he pulled me to the edge. I knew what he intended. At least, my heart did. Why else would it be beating a million beats per minute?

His lips were a breath away from mine when I blurted, “I’m all sweaty.”

He pulled back enough to meet my eyes and I could see the incredulous look he wore.

My cheeks became hot. “You don’t care?”

“No,” he said simply.

“Right, ignore me,” I mumbled as I fisted the front of his shirt and touched my lips to his.

At first, his mouth stretched into a smile against mine, and then he returned my kiss. The kiss was short and chaste. I wasn’t all right with that. For too long he had held back from me. Now that he was mine, I’d stretch

these moments for as long as he would let me. Before he could get too far, I recaptured his mouth and the first thing I did was suck his bottom lip between mine. The moment I grazed my teeth over it, he let out a guttural noise and his hand went to the back of my head. The way he kissed me back was anything but chaste. It was demanding and skilled in a naughty way. Especially his tongue. Gosh, that tongue was muddling my brain with the way it was stroking mine. Normally, I tried to give as good as I got, but found my resolve fading fast.

His hand flattened on my stomach before he broke away. It was probably for the best. My knees had been moments away from buckling. If I hadn't been holding onto his shoulders, they probably would have given out sooner. Feeling his hand still pressed against my stomach, I realized that I was leaning very far over the steps. He took another step up, moving me to stand upright and safely on the porch as he did. "Go shower," he ordered as he dropped his hand from my stomach and made his way back down the steps.

I put my hands on my hips as I watched him walk back to his house. "Because I was already going to take a shower, I'll let that little bossy moment slide."

He smirked over his shoulder. "I don't care what you have to tell yourself as long as you do as you're told."

My mouth fell open. For a moment I was speechless. Then a mischievous smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. "Just for that, I'm going to take a longer shower. I'm feeling really dirty and there are certain areas that might need extra attention."

Knox paused just before entering the house. I noticed his smirk hadn't wavered as he glanced at me. "Well, if there is a need, make sure you're thinking of me."

Knox went inside, leaving me standing there, gaping.



I took a fast shower. Deciding to do my makeup after breakfast, I put on an olive-green sundress with cap sleeves and nude wedges I found in my closet. Leaving my hair down to air-dry, I headed next door.

Keelan was sitting at the kitchen island drinking coffee when I walked in. Noticing me, he said with a tired smile, "You look beautiful."

I passed him, heading for the coffee maker. “Thank you.”

Knox, who was cooking at the stove, turned and his eyes looked me up and down. “That was quick.”

I stiffened for a breath before I pulled a mug from the cabinet and began filling it with coffee. “I’ve had a lot of practice getting myself...” I trailed off on purpose and turned back around with a filled mug in hand. As I passed him, heading toward the fridge to get the creamer, I finished, “Clean.”

I knew I had won when I caught the corner of his mouth lifting before he turned back toward the stove.

“Wow,” Keelan said, drawing our attention. With his good elbow on the counter, he rested his chin on his fist as he stared at me with awe. “I don’t know if I should be proud at how brazenly you delivered that or sad that you didn’t blush.”

“Maybe the four of you have corrupted me?” I shot over my shoulder as I grabbed the creamer from the fridge and used the counter to the right to stir some into my mug.

A body molded itself to my backside and lips grazed my ear as a hand slid over my lower stomach. “Oh, baby girl, if that’s true...” Keelan said in a low voice that gave me goosebumps. “You’ve just made me very determined to find new ways to make you blush.”

His seductive tone set my blood on fire and just like that, heat traveled up the back of my neck to my cheeks.

He huffed a laugh. “Maybe we haven’t corrupted you as much as you thought.” His words promised he had every intention of continuing my corruption and his confidence assured me that I’d enjoy every minute of it.

I made myself take a sip of my coffee instead of letting out the whimper I blocked in the back of my throat. He chuckled, giving me the impression I hadn’t been successful in hiding the effect he had on me.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” Knox announced, reminding me that I needed to wake the twins.

Keelan kissed the top of my head before stepping away to return to his seat at the island.

I took one more sip of coffee and proudly walked out of the kitchen on steady legs.

I went to Creed’s room first. He grumbled when I first tried to wake him, but once he realized it was me doing the waking, he tried to grab me. As much as I wanted to fall into bed with him, I knew breakfast was almost



ready and Knox would come looking if I took too long. Creed cursed his eldest brother as I backed out of his room.

Colt was already awake when I poked my head into his room. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, scrolling through his phone in nothing but his boxers, which left most of his tan and hard body on display. I took in the sight, and I couldn't seem to stop staring even when his head turned in my direction. He stood, his face lit up. My gaze dropped down his smooth and defined chest. As if to a beacon, my eyes were pulled to the V of his hips.

Colt had taken a step toward me, then stilled. When I was finally able to look away from his body, I found him smirking. He flicked his fingers in a *come here* gesture.

I shook my head as I kept my feet planted in the doorway. "If I come in this room, we'll miss out on breakfast."

"I'll buy you breakfast on the way to school." His voice was deep and pure seduction. It awakened the butterflies in my stomach and it took a lot of effort to stop them from flying south. I was sure he would buy me breakfast later, after he sated a different hunger showing in his eyes.

Colt took another step forward at the same time I felt a presence behind me. Arms wrapped around my middle before lips started kissing their way up my neck. "I'd rather eat something else for breakfast," Creed said, and bit lightly on the spot just below my ear that he knew would make my toes curl.

*Oh-my-lanta. This is so unfair.* On their own, I'd found that I barely had the strength to resist them, but together, I was a goner.

"Shiloh isn't on the menu," a stern voice said from behind us.

Hearing Knox was enough to smack some sense into me and I wiggled out of Creed's embrace.

Colt and Creed smirked at their brother, unashamed.

"Shi is always on the menu," Creed said.

"Consensually, of course," Colt added.

Knox folded his arms across his chest, frowning at his little brothers.

"I should have taken a longer shower," I mumbled to myself and moved past Creed, then Knox, heading back toward the kitchen.

As I walked away, I heard Knox say, "You horny shits better be taking things at her pace. Just because you started having sex doesn't mean she's ready for everything."

"You should be having this conversation with Keelan. We've always understood the pace we've needed to take with her," Colt argued, and that

made me stop just before exiting the hall. It was rude to eavesdrop, but I didn't care. They were talking about me and I wanted to hear it.

I felt Keelan come up next to me as Creed's voice carried down the hall, "Yeah. Keelan is the dirty bastard who's been playing teacher in the bedroom, which honestly, I don't know if I want to punch him or thank him, because *fuuuuck*."

Keelan chuckled, gaining their attention. "By that reaction, I'd say all the thanks belongs to Shi."

The three of them glanced at me, even Colt, who was standing in his doorway, now dressed in basketball shorts.

Could your whole body blush? Because every inch of my skin felt hot.

Creed grinned at me. "Oh, I've thanked her."

*Holy moly*, he was giving me naughty flashbacks of his head between my legs, and from the cocksure smirk he held, he knew what I was thinking, too.

"I was going to thank her again this morning," he continued. "Until my older brother decided to cockblock—"

Knox smacked the back of Creed's head, then gave Keelan a look of disapproval.

"Don't give me that look," Keelan said, his tone turning serious. "Not that it's any of your business, but I don't do anything with Shi she isn't ready for." Keelan glanced at me for just a breath of a second, and in that brief moment, I saw uncertainty. I didn't like that. He may have been intense and seemed to have difficulty restraining his naughty side when we had sex, but I loved it. I didn't like it when any of them held back from me. I understood why. I wasn't as experienced as them and my past had damaged me in a way that I couldn't fix overnight, no matter how much I wished I could. But was it wrong that I wanted them to throw caution to the wind—to an extent, of course—and be with me completely? I gave in to them completely in those intimate moments.

My posture straightened. "Do you all think I am incapable of telling any of you no?"

Colt, Creed, and Keelan wisely stayed quiet.

"Regardless, they still need to take things at your pace," Knox said.

"My pace isn't glacial, Knox," I said, my patience wavering a bit.

Knox frowned, but his voice was calm. "I didn't say it was."

I exhaled slowly, regaining control. "I know you all mean well."

"I'm sensing a *but* coming," Creed mumbled.

I shook my head. “No buts. It’s just, everything...what we’ve done so far...” My cheeks became hot again as I stammered over what to say. “Don’t change the pace. Not that there really is a pace anymore. I’m already having sex with you, for crying out loud. Well, most of you, and I’ve told two out of three what I’m not comfortable trying yet.”

Keelan’s brows furrowed. “I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’m not one of the two.”

“It hasn’t come up yet. That’s why I haven’t told you,” I explained.

I could see that Keelan was about to ask what it was, but Creed spoke before him. “I find that surprising. Then again, you’d need another one of us there to do it.”

“I’m not ready for the one-on-one experience either,” I grumbled, beyond embarrassed.

Knox, who seemed to realize what we were talking about, let out a curse.

“Ah,” Keelan said. “I think I’ve caught on.” He smirked at the twins. “Sounds to me like you two assholes need to take a couple of steps down from the top of that moral hill you’re standing on. It hasn’t even crossed my mind to take that step with Shi.”

Creed gave him a disbelieving look. “I highly doubt you haven’t thought about doing it with her.”

Colt groaned, rubbing his hands down his face.

One side of Keelan’s mouth lifted. “Still didn’t even consider bringing it up. Shi is in no way ready for that.”

“We didn’t bring it up,” Creed blurted, making me wince. What I wouldn’t have given for the ground to open up and swallow me in that moment.

“Creed,” Colt said low, tone full of warning.

“You really expect me to believe that Shi was the one to bring up anal?” Keelan asked.

“Cheese and rice! I did! I brought it up! I brought up anal and double penetration. My butt is off-limits. All right?”

They had all gone quiet. So quiet you could hear a pin drop. Until Colt, who had his eyes closed and his hand draped over his nose and mouth, snorted. Keelan turned away from me, his shoulders shaking. Creed was the first to let a laugh escape. That was what broke their control and had all four of them exploding with laughter that bounced off the hall walls. Even Knox, who was a little hunched over, had a hand on the wall as if to keep him from

losing his balance. It was a beautiful sound despite it being at my expense.

Trying not to laugh with them, I said, "It's not that funny."

That seemed to set them off more. I waited until they calmed down with my arms folded over my chest.

Colt cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, babe. We weren't laughing at you."

"I've heard that before," I grumbled. "At least I'm not naked this time."

Keelan's head whipped toward Colt and Creed. "You laughed at Shiloh when she was naked?"

Creed frowned at Keelan. "Not because she was naked."

"She just happened to be that way when the topic came up," Colt explained.

I could see Keelan wanted more information, but it was time to drop this mortifying conversation. "Now that is settled, can we go eat before the food gets cold?"

"Yes," Knox said, seeming just as eager to move on from what we were talking about. "Let's go eat."

We all sat down at the table and filled our plates with the delicious food Knox had made. Colt placed some French toast on one side of my plate a second before Creed dropped sausage on the other. My heart clenched a little as I stared down at my plate.

"Do you not like French toast?" Knox asked as he added food to his plate.

"I love it," I said sullenly. "Shayla and I made French toast for my mother every year for Mother's Day. It was her favorite."

"We would make our dad chocolate-chip waffles for Father's Day," Creed said, and that seemed to surprise everyone.

"That's right," Keelan said with a sad smile. "Knox always lost his shit every time the two of you stole a handful of chocolate chips whenever his back was turned."

"You stole the chocolate chips, too," Creed grumbled. "You just never got caught and played the innocent bystander when we did."

Keelan's smile grew into a somewhat happy one. "I can't help it, I'm older and wiser."

As Creed and Keelan bickered, I took notice of how silent Colt and Knox were. Knox was quietly eating as he watched his brothers go back and forth. He appeared bored, but there was sadness in his eyes. Colt seemed to be frozen, lost in his thoughts as he stared down at his untouched plate. Hoping to comfort him, I placed my hand on his forearm.

“My dad always requested an omelet with whatever we wanted to put in it. He loved surprises and always looked forward to finding out what ingredients we’d choose each year,” I said, shifting from their dad to mine, hoping to ease their pain. “One year, when Shay and I were little, we wanted to make him a green eggs and ham omelet. We put ham and every green vegetable we could think of in it, which included broccoli and peas. It must have been so gross, but he ate every bite like it was the most delicious omelet Shay and I had ever made him.” My eyes welled up and I had to blink a couple of times to keep any tears from falling.

“Our mother loved banana pancakes,” Knox said, shocking all of us. Even Colt looked up from his plate.

“She loved banana everything. Banana cream pie and banana bread and muffins,” Keelan said, looking from Creed to Colt and back again. “When she was pregnant with you two, Dad said that all she wanted to eat was banana pudding.”

As Keelan talked about their mother, Colt and Creed hung on his every word. Their mother had passed away from lung cancer when the twins had been six, which would have made Keelan eleven and Knox thirteen. Knox and Keelan had more time with and memories of their mother, whereas Colt and Creed probably didn’t remember much about her. If they did, I had a feeling they weren’t memories of when she had been healthy.

Silence blanketed the table as we ate. Since I had been the one to drag us all down memory lane, I felt obligated to pull us out of it. “Anything eventful going on at work today?”

“I’ll be working from home,” Keelan said.

“You shouldn’t be working at all,” Knox grumbled.

Keelan shrugged. “You can’t finish the preparations for the mud run tomorrow and find coverage for all my classes.” With Keelan’s injuries, it’d be a while before he could teach again. Last night, I had offered to help in any way that I could, even if that meant teaching the class with someone else. Keelan had explained that with everything that was going on with the sheriff and Jacob, it might be best to take a break from teaching with him. I agreed. My life was full of...hurdles and that wasn’t fair to the women paying for the class.

“I need to find someone to help me with Shi’s training on the weekend, too,” Keelan added.

“I’d suggest Derek, but he’s covering the front desk,” Knox said.

“Derek?” I said.

“Derek’s our fill-in guy,” Creed said. “He’s worked in every department.”

“The guy has impressive MMA training,” Keelan added.

“He hates teaching classes, though,” Colt said. “He prefers one-on-one teaching, which is why he does personal training.”

“I thought personal training was to teach people how to get into shape?” I asked.

“It is. We don’t offer one-on-one self-defense training,” Knox said.

Keelan gave him a look that clearly screamed *W.T.F.?*

I wasn’t surprised. I had a feeling that was the case. It was one of the reasons I had been reluctant to let Keelan train me. By the look he was giving Knox, he was worried me knowing would cause issues with our arrangement. “So Derek is a no-go,” I said, moving the conversation on.

The four of them stared at me, then exchanged looks with each other with varying tells of surprise. Like always, Keelan was the quickest to recover. “Derek wants to continue working the front desk part-time so he can still do personal training. We just need to hire someone to cover what’s left of Stephanie’s shifts.”

“If you give me a week or two to find someone, you can ask Derek to help you with Shiloh’s training,” Knox said to Keelan.

Keelan looked at me. “Would you be comfortable with that?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“We should make a decision about the Halloween party,” Creed said, changing the subject.

“It’s not a good idea,” Knox said at the same time I said, “Have it.”

Knox frowned at me, and I could see he was getting ready to argue.

“You have to trust me to know what I can and cannot handle,” I said to him. “I’m so sick of missing out on things. I used to love horror movies. I don’t remember what it’s like to feel the thrill and excitement of being scared for a stupid reason. So much was taken from me, and if I ever want to get any of it back, I have to try. If all I can handle is to stand in the middle of a Halloween party for ten minutes, then at least I gained ten minutes. It’s a small step, but it’s still progress.”

They became quiet as they seemed to process what I had said.

“We’ll keep the decorations tame and Creed or I will stick by her side,” Colt said, siding with me.

I squeezed his hand, smiling.

Keelan looked at Knox. "Want to chaperone a high-school party?"

Knox gave him a look that said that was the last thing he'd want to do.

"And by chaperone, I mean we lock ourselves in one of our rooms and play video games," Keelan added. "It'd be one less room the horny high-schoolers try to screw in. Plus, we'll be close if anything happens with Shi."

I arched a brow at Keelan. "You know you're dating a high-schooler, right?"

"Nope." Keelan shook his head, standing. "You're supposed to be in college." He pointed at Colt, then Creed. "You're the one dating the high-schoolers."

Colt and Creed both rolled their eyes at him as he scooped up his empty plate and took it over to the sink.

I glanced from Keelan to Knox and back to Keelan again. "Does it bother you that I'm still in high school?" The insecure question left my mouth before I could stop it.

Before he made it to the sink, Keelan stopped abruptly and turned around to face me with a blindsided expression. "I was only playing around."

I looked at Knox. He was staring at me and appeared a little angry.

Was he mad that I'd pointed it out?

*Knox is a man. You're just a girl still in high school.* Stephanie's stupid voice filled my head.

Doing my best not to show what I was feeling, I looked away from him and stood from the table. "Speaking of school, I need to finish getting ready." I passed Keelan to set my dirty plate in the sink.

I could feel them all watching me.

"We'll take my car today," Colt said. There was a hint of irritation in his voice.

I glanced at the table as I headed for the door. Colt held an unreadable expression as he stared at me. Creed and Keelan, though, were glaring at Knox.

"Okay," I shot over my shoulder. As I went to close the front door behind me, I could have sworn I heard Colt say, "Seriously, Knox?"

AT LUNCH, COLT, CREED, AND ETHAN WERE PLANNING OUT THE HALLOWEEN party. I listened as I ate a Greek pasta salad that had been my mother's recipe. It was so good that Creed kept stealing bites of it.

As I chewed, I caught Isabelle staring at the chunk of her neon green hair she was playing with. The look she held wasn't a happy one.

"Over the green?" I asked her as I went to take another bite. Creed grabbed my wrist and pulled the fork to his mouth. I didn't resist. I still had a bunch left over at home and I loved it when others enjoyed my food.

"A little," Isabelle said. "The neon won't look good with the costume I'm making to wear for the Halloween party."

"Then change it," I suggested. "Want me to go with you?"

Isabelle nodded. "Do you have a costume picked out?"

I glanced at Colt. "I would if I knew what I was going as."

He appeared puzzled for a moment, and I had the pleasure of seeing his *oh yeah* moment. Colt had beaten Creed and I in the last race the three of us had had with Ethan. His and Creed's stakes had been who would get to take me on a date first, and with me, Colt had won the privilege of picking my costume for the Halloween party. "Let me think about it and I'll tell you later today," Colt said.

"Want to go out tomorrow?" Isabelle asked me.

"I'm doing a mud run tomorrow."

Her brows rose. "A mud run? Like with muddy obstacles?"

I nodded.

"Desert Stone is hosting it, right?" Ethan asked Colt and Creed.

Creed nodded as he chewed more stolen pasta salad.



“I want to do it,” Isabelle said excitedly. “Is it too late to sign up?”

*Crap.* I glanced at Colt again. “Was I supposed to sign up?” What I vaguely remembered from the flyer I had seen at the gym was that there was going to be a mud run, location and time info, and a website to... *Cheese and rice!* There was a website to sign up.

Laughter filled Colt’s eyes. “Keelan got you signed up after you asked him about it.” He looked at Isabelle. “It’s not too late to sign up. Tickets are one hundred dollars.”

Isabelle seemed to deflate at that.

“Text me the link and I’ll get us signed up,” Ethan said to Colt as he pulled his phone out.

Isabelle’s head whipped toward Ethan and she began to protest. “Ethan —”

Ethan cut her off with a quick kiss. “I got it.”

His attempt to reassure her didn’t work. There was a tightness to her face, as if she was fighting not to show her unease. “That’s a lot of money,” she said in a low voice.

“Then I’ll pay for half of your ticket,” I said as I reached into my bag for my wallet. They all looked at me. I saw Isabelle getting ready to protest again. “I didn’t have to pay for my ticket, and I really want you to come. In fact, I insist you come, which means it’s only fair I pay.” I pulled out fifty dollars and held it out to Ethan.

Ignoring the money, Ethan tapped away on his phone. “You’re not paying for my girlfriend.”

“I’m helping pay for my friend,” I said.

“All signed up,” Ethan announced as he put his phone in his back pocket. He leveled serious green eyes with mine. “I got it, Shi.”

If he wanted to pay, then I wasn’t going to argue. I was just trying to make Isabelle more comfortable about it. “All right.” I put my money back in my wallet.

“Thank you,” Isabelle said to me and then grabbed Ethan and whispered something in his ear. A smile spread across his mouth.

I leaned toward Creed and asked in a low voice, “Why didn’t anyone tell me that the mud run cost a hundred dollars?”

Creed took my fork and took over the pasta retrieval. “Because you would have been difficult if you found out that we paid for it.”

“Technically, Keelan paid for it,” Colt corrected, having overheard.

I felt terrible. Keelan had paid for us to do the run together and now he couldn't participate. Not with his injuries. I sighed. "Is it wrong that I want to pay for myself?"

Creed put a big bite of pasta in my mouth. "No," he agreed. "But Keelan wanted to do it."

"And you have a hard time letting others do things for you," Colt whispered.

"I've been working on it," I grumbled around my food. I really had been and would continue to do so twice a week until the unforeseeable future, thanks to the take-no-prisoners Dr. Bolton. She was taking things at my pace, but wasn't letting anything slide this time around. I appreciated that. I was determined to move forward, and I needed someone who would make me do the work.



In art class, the teacher was out sick, and we had a sub who put on a historical art documentary. The lights were off and the sound on the TV was louder than it needed to be. Despite the setting being perfect to watch the movie, I was having difficulty paying attention. It wasn't because the documentary was boring. It was because of Creed.

As soon as the lights had been turned off, Creed had put his hand on my bare knee. As minutes passed, that hand slowly moved up, fingers trailing along the inside of my thigh as it did. All the blood in my body seemed to flood between my legs.

"Creed," I whispered and glanced around the room, nervous others could see. The sides of the table Creed and I were seated at were walled, but the front of it was open. Thankfully there was another pair of students sitting at their own table directly in front of us or the substitute might have gotten a direct view up my dress. There was a table behind us, but it was empty, and behind that table was the back of the classroom.

Creed brought his lips to my ear and whispered, "No one can see, Shi." His hand slipped up higher. "Want me to stop?"

Every inch of my body was buzzing. It wasn't a good idea. I knew that, yet I still shook my head.

I felt his mouth stretch into a smile against my ear. With a whisper I

could barely hear, he said, “Open your legs.”

The fear of getting caught mixed with the anticipation of what he was about to do was dizzying. I spread my thighs a little wider and he moved his hand the rest of the way up until his fingers slid over my underwear.

My breath hitched.

“Don’t make a sound,” he whispered as his fingers pushed my underwear to the side. I put one of my hands on his thigh and the moment he found my clit, my fingers fisted his pants. When he slid a finger inside of me, I gripped his forearm with my other hand. That forearm flexed each time his finger pumped in and out of me.

“I don’t think I can be quiet,” I breathed. I had to bite my lip to stop myself from whimpering.

“Yes, you can,” he whispered as he pushed a second finger inside me.

Chasing the pleasure, I rolled my pelvis slightly, meeting each plunge of his fingers. I let out a choppy exhale when he moved his thumb to my clit and each time my hips rocked, I rubbed myself against it.

I was going to come. He was getting me to the peak so fast my thighs began to shake. His nose brushed my ear. “I know you’re close, Shi. I can tell by how hard your pussy is squeezing around my fingers.”

*Gah, his filthy mouth!*

A good girl shouldn’t like such things, but I loved it.

I couldn’t get enough.

The moment my orgasm hit, my thighs clamped around his hand and my head lolled to the side, landing on his shoulder. Biting my lip, I didn’t move from there as I rode the waves rippling through my body.

I released a shaky breath once my body began to relax. He hadn’t removed his fingers from me. Instead, he waited patiently, watching me with a smug grin that made my hackles rise as much as it made me want to do filthy things to him. I sat up, my cheeks scorching hot. The sound of the loud TV returned to my ears, which had gone deaf temporarily, and the reality of us sitting in class made me plummet from the high of just having had an orgasm.

Creed pulled his fingers from me and his hand from between my legs. Without dropping his smug look, he relaxed back in his seat and brought wet fingers toward his mouth.

I grabbed his wrist, stopping him before he could taste me, and brought his hand to my mouth instead. It was a delight watching his smugness fade

into hunger as I put his fingers between my lips and sucked them clean.

He pulled his fingers from my mouth and buried his face in my neck. “That was my cum to taste, Shi,” he whispered against my skin.

I smiled. “Pretty sure it was mine.”

His teeth grazed my neck. “You’re lucky we’re in class, you little tease.”

I turned my head, bringing my mouth inches from his. “My panties are soaked and now I need to go take them off,” I said, adding fuel to the fire, and pushed my chair back. He let out a groan loud enough that one of the students sitting in front of us turned. I stood, leaving Creed with that information, and left the class.

I was almost to the bathroom when my hand was grabbed and I was yanked to the left. I was being pulled into a dark, empty classroom when I realized it was Creed. He shut the door and pushed me up against a wall before slamming his lips against mine.

His hands slid down my back until they smoothed over my butt. He gave it a good squeeze as his tongue conquered my mouth. Standing on my tiptoes, I threw my arms around his neck, needing him closer.

His hands dropped to the backs of my thighs and he lifted me. I let out a tiny squeal into his mouth that he swallowed up. He carried me over to a desk and sat me on it. As he kissed down my neck, his hands went up the skirt of my dress and he grabbed the sides of my underwear. “Lift,” he ordered against my collarbone.

I gripped the edges of the desk, lifting myself just enough for him to pull off my Captain America underwear. He tucked them into his back pocket and yanked my hips toward the edge of the desk. As he retrieved a condom from his wallet, I reached for his pants, unfastening them. Ready with the condom, he watched as I took him from his pants. I stroked his hard, smooth length once, twice before he pulled himself from my hands and slid on the condom. As he aligned himself with my center, I arched back a little with a hand flat on the desk behind me and my other clutching his shoulder.

He entered me slowly about halfway, then slammed the rest of himself into me. My head lolled backward and I moaned.

“You can’t make those sexy noises here,” he gritted as he withdrew and slammed back into me. “Fuck,” he hissed as I whimpered. He gripped the back of my neck and brought my mouth to his. Our kiss was messy and hot, evidence we were drunk on lust. “It has to be quick and hard, Shi. I’ll fuck you properly at home.”

His words had me clenching around him.

He smirked as he hiked my leg over his hip and began pounding into me. It was a battle to stay quiet. I liked to let everything go and just feel in these moments with the guys. Instead, I only let myself breathe. Well, pant. I was panting rapidly because he was going to make me come again.

“Creed,” I gasped as I squeezed around him, preparing for what was coming.

“If you clench my dick any tighter...fuck it.” His speed picked up, making the desk rattle and shake beneath me.

I exploded in the best way possible. I shuddered out quiet whimpers behind my clamped lips. With two more thrusts, his release followed. Resting his forehead on my chest, he nestled his face between my breasts, and he stayed there as he tried to catch his breath. “Cheese and fucking rice, I love you.”

I ran my fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp. “I love you, too.”

He lifted his head from my chest, smiling. “I think that’s the first time you’ve said it.”

I thought back to the first time we’d had sex, which had happened to be in his truck on the way to get ice cream. “I was the one to say it first.”

Stepping back, he withdrew from me and rolled off the condom. “When I asked if you loved me, you said maybe.”

I fixed my dress. “Well then, I admitted that I loved you first. Why else would you have said it then?”

“My, someone’s in a competitive mood today.” He chuckled as he tossed the condom in the trash and put himself back into his pants. “I would have said it eventually,” he admitted. As he stuffed his hands into his pockets, his eyes met mine. “I’ve been in love with you for a while. I just didn’t want to scare you.”

I hopped off the desk and made my way over to him. Throwing my arms around his neck, I pushed up on my toes and kissed him. “Are you going to give me my panties back?”

“No.”

“You’re not going to start collecting my underwear like you did my sweatshirts, are you?”

He grinned and opened the door. “We better get back to class.”

AFTER SCHOOL I RAN BY DESERT STONE. WALKING IN, I WAS GREETED BY Derek, the redheaded personal trainer who had been covering the front desk ever since Stephanie had quit.

“Hey, Shiloh.” He eyed my dress and lack of gym bag. “What brings you in today?”

I walked up to the front of the desk and rested my elbows on the high counter. “You might be able to help me,” I said just as Knox walked out from the hall that led to his office behind the front desk. The sound of my voice pulled his attention away from whoever he had been texting. Seeing me, he pivoted from the direction he was headed and came to stand behind Derek.

“What can I help you with?” Derek asked me when I hadn’t elaborated.

I looked from Knox to him. “I need a shirt. Preferably a tank.”

“A Desert Stone shirt?” Derek clarified.

“I could have brought you home a shirt,” Knox said, startling Derek, who hadn’t known Knox was standing behind him.

I looked back at Knox. “You’ve been busy setting up the mud run. I didn’t want to add to your plate. Plus, I need to go to the grocery store, and this was on my way.”

He sighed through his nose and opened a large drawer in one of the few lateral filing cabinets up against the wall behind the front desk. He pulled out two shirts. One was a tank and the other was a racerback. Both were navy and had *Desert Stone Fitness* written on the front.

Knox walked around the front desk to hand them to me. I checked their sizes, finding that they were right. I held one in each of my hands, debating which one I wanted. When I couldn’t decide, I figured, *Why not get both?*

“Are you going to let me pay for them?”

“Why’d you want a shirt?” he asked, avoiding my question.

I held one of the shirts up to my chest, displaying the Desert Stone logo.

“I wanted to represent at the mud run.”

That earned me a smile and it was beautiful. “I’ll take care of the shirts, Derek. Don’t let her try to pay for them.”

“Understood, boss,” Derek said.

I shook my head but didn’t argue. “When are you getting off?” I asked Knox.

“I shouldn’t be much longer. Why?”

“Just want to make sure you’ll be home for dinner. There is this new recipe I want to try.”

“What are you making?”

I gave him a mischievous grin. “Something to eat.”

He nodded once and took a step backward. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll come with you to the store.” Not giving me an opportunity to respond, he spun around and went back toward his office.

*Is he that worried about what I’m going to cook?* I wondered.

As I stood there frowning, I caught Derek staring at me. Silence began to stretch between us. It was loud. Not in the sense that it hurt my ears, but in a way that was very obvious. Derek and I didn’t really know each other. Sure, he and I had been pleasant up until now in the sort of way acquaintances were, but conversation didn’t flow as easily with him as it had when I’d first met Ethan. I didn’t want to compare my interactions with Derek to how I’d gotten to know my guys. It would be like comparing apples to oranges. There was an attraction between me and my guys. I hadn’t understood it at first, or I hadn’t been ready for it. Not that it mattered, because I wasn’t attracted to Derek. As the silence continued, I figured I needed to make a better effort. Getting to know him, I mean. He might be training me soon and it couldn’t hurt to have another friend.

Just as I opened my mouth to say something, Derek asked, “You’re doing the mud run?”

“I am, with Colt and Creed and some of our friends,” I said, grateful he’d dispelled the awkwardness. And his topic of discussion had been way better than mine, which was going to be about the weather and how crazy hot it still was in October.

“I’m doing the run with a couple of my buddies,” he said. “I might see

you there.”

“Yeah.” *Crap*. What did we talk about now? “Um...”

His eyes flicked to mine.

“Keelan said you have MMA training.” It was the first thing that popped into my head.

His brows inched up a little. “I do.”

“How long have you trained for?”

“My dad threw me into karate when I was eight. Since then, I’ve trained in judo, jiu-jitsu, and muay Thai.” He glanced toward the ceiling for a moment as though he was counting. “So thirteen years.”

“Impressive.”

He grinned. “Does that mean I’m qualified?”

My brow scrunched up. “For?”

His grin wavered a little. “To help train you in the next couple of weeks. Keelan asked me this morning.”

Keelan had worked quickly. “Right. I wasn’t asking to see if you were qualified. I figured I’d get to know you if we were going to be getting up close and personal soon.”

He chuckled. “Understandable.”

Knox returned with his gym bag hanging on his shoulder. He looked from Derek to me. “Ready?”

I nodded.

“Enjoy the rest of your day,” Derek said to us as we walked out.

Knox followed me to the store in his classic red Camaro and let me park my car in the closest spot available near the entrance. He parked four spots down from where I had. I waited for him by my car so we could walk in together. As he walked toward me, I couldn’t help but watch him. The giant, strong man took his time, walked with confidence. He had a grumpy, guarded exterior that was intimidating. Not to me, though. I understood that surly wall.

As he approached me, I held out my hand. It was such a simple request, yet I’d never felt more vulnerable. I’d held his hand before, but I hadn’t really given him a choice then. Now, I was.

Without pausing, his hand took mine and then I was walking by his side toward the store. I faced forward, happiness taking over my face.

“I’m just holding your hand,” he grumbled next to me.

I tucked whips of hair behind my ear, my wristlet smacking against my



forearm as I did. “Sometimes simple things like holding hands can have more meaning than, say, kisses.”

“Are you saying you’d rather hold hands than kiss?”

“Why can’t I have both?”

One side of his mouth stretched upward, showing me that he was teasing. “You can have both.”

Inside the store, as I began putting things into the cart, Knox quickly figured out what I was making for dinner. “Tacos?”

“And you were so worried,” I teased as I tossed corn tortillas into the cart. “I guess you came to the store for no reason.”

“I’ve never been worried about your cooking.”

My brows rose and I pushed the shopping cart down another aisle. “Oh, really?”

He shook his head. “I just like how cute you get when your feathers are ruffled.” A glint of mirth showed in his eyes at the *you’ve got to be kidding* look I was giving him. “And as for why I came to the store with you...I wanted to spend time with you.”

It was a task to hide the giddiness bubbling in my chest.

“I also wanted to talk to you about this morning,” he said.

I had a feeling I knew what he was referring to, but still asked, “What about this morning?”

Knox stopped walking, which made me stop, and we stood staring at each other in the middle of the aisle. He gave me a look that said he knew I was playing dumb. “Have I ever given you any indication that your age is an issue for me?”

*Oh, boy.* It was time to confront this. “No, but you didn’t deny it this morning, either.”

“Because I was a little blindsided and with how you kept looking at me, I knew the insecurity was directed at me.”

I didn’t deny it because it was.

His eyes narrowed. Not in an angry way, but in an assessing way. “You gonna tell me why that is?”

“It was something that Stephanie said—”

“Stephanie?”

Gathering my confidence, I squared my shoulders. “Look, I know I’m being stupid. The last thing I should be worrying about is if my gorgeous older boyfriend is bothered by my age, which is something I don’t have the

power to change. Nor would I. I am who I am.” Having said all that with one breath, I paused to take another and to figure out the best way to explain my point. “But at the same time, you make me happy, Knox. All four of you do, and you all have the power to take that happiness away.”

His face relaxed as he stared down at me. “My beautiful younger girlfriend has that power, too.”

My heart seemed to puppeteer the corners of my mouth, stretching them up. It was the first time he’d ever said I was beautiful. Knox was a man of bluntness and harsh words. But when he had a moment like this, where he was kind and wonderful, it was profound.

“Don’t act like you didn’t know you were beautiful,” he grumbled.

“Not as much as you just made me feel.”

He sighed as if exasperated and pulled the cart from my grasp, clearing the obstacle between us. He grabbed my wrist and drew me to him. When his hand went to the back of my neck, I instinctively pushed up on my tiptoes, tilting my head back and offering myself to him.

His lips descended on mine. At first his kiss was slow, but passionate, like he wanted to savor the moment and the taste of my lips. That was, until I tried to kiss him back—to savor him. He stilled the instant I tried and put his hands on my shoulders to pull away. It was such a sudden change in mood, from passionate to closed-off, I found myself stunned and wondering what had just happened. I did my best not to show my disappointment as I waited for him to explain.

But he didn’t. He stepped away from me and grabbed the cart. “Are we almost done here?” he asked over his shoulder, and it seemed as if he didn’t want to look at me.

Maybe it was because we were in the middle of the store. It wasn’t the ideal place to get carried away kissing.

When I didn’t answer him right away, he finally looked at me. I couldn’t read his face. It was too indifferent. “What else do we have to get for dinner?”

“Uh,” I stammered, making myself focus on what he was asking. I did a mental check of what was left on my grocery list. “Cheese, and I need to restock on cinnamon.”

“The spice aisle is next. You head there and I’ll go get the cheese and meet you at the checkout counters,” he suggested and left me with the cart.

I frowned at his back until he turned out of the aisle. *I should have asked*

*him what was wrong.*

In the middle of the next aisle, I stood before a wall of spices, scanning it for cinnamon. I spotted a small glass jar of it toward the top. Pushing up onto my tiptoes, I reached. Before I was able to grab it, a presence came up behind me and grabbed the jar of spice before I could. Flattening my feet, I turned. I noticed the person's brown hair first before my eyes dropped to their bruised face. I jerked back quickly. My back slammed into the wall of spices, knocking a handful of containers and jars to the floor.

A dimple appeared to the left of his mouth. A result of the menacing smile that slowly spread across Jacob's face. It had only been two days since he'd attacked me at the gym and his nose was still slightly swollen. Knox had clearly broken it. By the amount of bruising under his eyes, along his jaw and cheekbones, I'd say Knox had tried to break his whole face.

The fear surging through my veins made me itch to run. I ignored it, choosing to stay calm instead.

"Hello, Shiloh." He reached for me.

I leapt to the left and away from him. My arm banged into the grocery cart in the process. The pain that zinged up my arm was a good reminder that it was there. Without taking my eyes off Jacob, who was unmoving and watching me, I rolled the cart between us.

He held up the jar of spice. "Didn't you want this?"

"What do you want?" I forced out.

His hand, still holding the jar of spice, dropped to his side. His eyes began to roam over me, his smile never dropping. I held my breath as they lingered on my breasts, and as they wandered to other areas, I swore I could feel it. It was like dirty and cracked fingernails gliding along my skin.

"Did I mention at our last encounter how much I love your red hair?" he asked.

The flare of anger that hit me was somewhat startling. Not enough for it to show. Just enough to make me aware that it had overshadowed my fear. "And I love what you've done to your face." As if my anger had conjured her, it had been Shayla's voice that had come out of my mouth. Her strength. Her attitude.

His smile withered and his hand shot out, grabbing the other end of my cart.

As he yanked on it, I blurted, "Why?"

He ignored my question and scowled at me while trying to pull on the

cart.

“Why me?” I pushed, doing my best to hold the cart in place. “What the hell did I do to make you so obsessed with me?”

He gave me a pitying look. “Obsessed?” He looked up and down the aisle, seeing that we were alone. “Do you know how many girls I’ve fucked from that gym?” He chuckled arrogantly. “Some of my conquests have been willing. Some weren’t. Like you. It’s because you bitches think you’re too good for me, but you all sound the same when I’m inside you.”

“Disoriented?” I quipped. “Is that how you’ve gotten away with it all this time? The women you’ve raped have been too drugged to remember what you did to them?”

His hand holding the cart squeezed until his knuckles turned white. “I thought you wanted to know why I picked you?” he snarled. My silence was his cue to continue. “The day we met, I noticed the guy next to me stop in the middle of a rep to watch you. You were stretching, oblivious to the many eyes admiring you, including the owner of the gym, Knox Stone.”

I did my best not to react.

“The longer I watched you, the more I knew you’d be easy pickings. You had these sad eyes, begging anyone to come and save you. And when I spoke to you...” He closed his eyes, humming as if he tasted something delicious. “It was obvious you were innocent.” He opened his eyes and his menacing smile returned. “Untouched pussy ripe for the taking.”

I took a step back, unable to hide my disgust. He liked that. I could tell by the way his eyes lit up.

“Mmm,” he hummed, his gaze aimed toward the ceiling. “I’ve fantasized about your blood on my dick so many times.”

Not wanting to hear any more and taking advantage of him not looking, I backed away. Because Logan had taught me not to, I refused to give him my back. I only made it a handful of steps before I collided with a wall of muscle. From behind me, a giant hand wrapped around my middle and flattened on my stomach. I couldn’t bring myself to look away from Jacob to see who it was. Not that I needed to. I knew it was Knox.

When Jacob looked down from the ceiling and noticed Knox behind me, his expression hardened. He opened his mouth, but closed it as an elderly lady, pushing a cart, walked by. She eyed the three of us, reading the obvious tension, and began taking quicker steps. Seeing the woman, Jacob’s hardened features changed to what seemed like haughty arrogance.

Knox noticed the change in Jacob as well. “Being in public won’t protect you.” His tone was calm, yet there was a threatening undertone that made my skin break out in goosebumps.

“I’m guessing your girl didn’t tell you about my new friend the sheriff,” Jacob said, his eyes dropping to me. “Or is she your brother’s girl? I really can’t tell which of the two of you she’s spreading her legs for.”

I assumed he meant Colt. One of the times Jacob had tried to come on to me, Colt had showed up and I had kissed him, hoping Jacob would get the hint that I wasn’t interested.

Knox pushed me behind him and stalked toward Jacob. Jacob’s *can’t touch me* arrogance quickly dimmed. Knox tossed the block of cheese he’d left to go get into the cart before yanking it from Jacob’s grip easily and sending it rolling down the aisle behind us. “I don’t care whose cock you had to suck to get out of jail. They’re not here to stop me from breaking every fucking bone in your body.”

Jacob stumbled backward, refusing to let the space between them shrink.

Knox stopped walking. “I’d keep going.”

Jacob didn’t even slow down in putting distance between them. He just kept walking backward.

“I don’t think I need to tell you what will happen if you come near her again,” Knox said loud enough for Jacob to hear.

Almost to the end of the aisle, Jacob spun on his heel. His feet wobbled, almost causing him to fall, and he dropped the jar of cinnamon he had been holding.

It wasn’t until Jacob was out of sight that Knox turned and came to me. He brought his hand up to my cheek. “Are you all right?”

I nodded.

“Let’s go home,” he said, ushering me toward the cart.

I resisted and went back over to the spice wall. I finally got my own jar of cinnamon because I refused to pick up the one Jacob had dropped. Then we headed for the checkout counters.

THAT NIGHT, AFTER HAVING DINNER WITH THE GUYS, I RETURNED HOME. IT felt foreign climbing into my own bed and my house was too quiet. I had stayed with the guys for the past four nights. Ever since the awful dinner where Logan had found out the guys knew the truth about me.

Thinking about my uncle reminded me that I should call him. I needed to tell him about what had happened with Jacob today. I went to reach for my phone off my nightstand, steeling myself for what I knew was going to be an uncomfortable call.

The sound of my front door opening, followed by the alarm beeping, made me freeze.

Colt's voice carried through the house. "Just us, babe."

The tension in my body eased instantly. I should have known they'd follow me over here. It hadn't been talked about, but I knew the guys didn't want me staying at my house alone. After everything that had happened with the sheriff and then Logan, I didn't blame them, and it made me feel comfortable having them here as well. I was sure they'd prefer I spend every night at their place. I'd done it enough times that I had a drawer of clothes in each of Creed's and Colt's dressers, a few of my dresses were hanging in Keelan's closet, and I had a shelf for my toiletries in the twins' bathroom. I had things at their place that I needed, but those things were within their space. Not that I didn't want to be with them—it was just nice to be in *my* space, surrounded by *my* things that represented me, for once.

The alarm stopped beeping, an indication that they'd used the code to turn it off.

"Don't forget to rearm it," I said loudly.

“Already did,” Creed said as they both appeared in the hall, heading toward my room.

I scooted into the middle of the mattress as they stripped down to their boxers and climbed into bed on either side of me. As soon as they slipped under the blankets, Creed pulled me to him and spooned me from behind.

Lying on his side, facing me, Colt scooted closer. “Are you doing okay?”

I assumed he was talking about Jacob. “I’m okay.”

“You were quiet at dinner,” he said.

I thought back to dinner. As Knox had explained what had happened at the grocery store, I remembered feeling angry. Mostly with myself, because I had let myself contemplate what I could do differently so I wouldn’t attract monsters. Change what I wore? Shave my head? Figure out what *save me* eyes were and how to stop making them? Then I’d realized how wrong it was to think like that. I shouldn’t have to change.

“I was processing,” I said.

“Are you going to tell your uncle?” Creed asked with a hint of irritation.

“I was about to call him.” I let out a yawn. With the two of them here, lying next to me, the foreignness I’d been feeling began to ease and my body started to relax. The more relaxed I became, the more tired I felt. I hadn’t been looking forward to calling Logan to begin with. Just thinking about it now sounded exhausting. “I’ll just do it tomorrow after the mud run.”

“Can I ask you for something?” Creed’s words were hesitant.

“Of course.”

“If you meet with him again, can one of us be with you when you do? Or at least tell us that you’re meeting up with him?” There was worry in his voice.

“Okay,” I said and snuggled into the pillows. A chunk of hair curtained my face and I tried to blow it out of the way.

Colt brushed my hair behind my ear. His eyes were fixed on my head for a moment before he smiled. “I know what you should be for Halloween.”

Creed’s head lifted behind me so he could see his brother. “I can’t wait to hear this.”

“Remember you told us that *IT* used to be your favorite scary movie?” Colt asked.

I nodded. “My sister hated clowns.”

“I want you to dress up as Pennywise.”

Looked like I was dressing up as a scary clown for Halloween. If only

Shayla were around to see it. *The look on her face...*

The instant that thought entered my mind, I grimaced. Shayla didn't need to see my costume for me to know what she'd look like terrified.

"What's wrong?" Colt cupped my cheek. "If you don't want to dress up as Pennywise, you don't have to."

"A deal is a deal," I said.

"Forget the deal if it makes you uncomfortable," Creed said.

"I'm not uncomfortable with it."

Colt brushed his thumb along my cheekbone. "Then what is it?"

I was tempted to deflect. It was easier. Knowing them, though, they would see right through me, and I didn't want them to feel like I couldn't talk to them. If I was being honest with myself, I'd probably benefit from talking about what was weighing on me, as well. "There are times where I'm reminded of what I lost. Not just my family. I'm talking about what I lost about myself. The way I think or feel about things. My memories that were once happy are now tainted. I'm not the same anymore. It feels as though my soul is like a house hit by a tornado and every day since, I've been just standing in the aftermath overwhelmed with the damage. But now, I'm making myself sift through the rubble, trying to find things I can repair. It's hard because to find all the pieces for one thing I want to fix, I have to dig or lift the heavier broken things I don't want to deal with yet. But I don't have a choice and it's frustrating."

Both were quiet. Probably processing my rambling.

I yawned again. "Don't listen to me. I'm just tired and what happened with Jacob today is getting to me."

Creed's arms tightened around me. "Don't stop sharing stuff like that with us. We want to hear it."

I nodded.

Colt kissed my forehead. "All right. Time for bed."

I closed my eyes as Colt reached for the lamp on the nightstand. I vaguely heard it clicking off as I fell into a deep sleep.



I was woken by a kiss on my cheek and a body hugging me from behind. "It's time to wake up, babe."



I squinted my eyes open to a dark room. Smooshing the side of my face into the pillows, I mumbled, “Five more minutes.”

Creed grunted that he wanted the same.

Colt huffed a laugh before he kissed where my shoulder and neck met. I didn’t open my eyes, but I was definitely more awake. His hand, which I’d just realized was resting on my hip, moved up under my pajama top. His warm fingers slid slowly across my skin as his lips moved up my sensitive neck. My toes curled the moment his thumb brushed the underside of my breast.

Frustratingly, his hand stopped there.

I squirmed, hoping he’d move his hand up. He didn’t.

I whined into the pillow. I was not awake enough to be teased.

He rocked his pelvis against my butt, nestling what felt like a hard rod between my cheeks.

Nope. I was definitely not awake enough to endure his teasing.

I reached my hand behind me and slid it inside his boxers. My fingers wrapped around his shaft and began stroking it. That seemed to evaporate his teasing mood. He pulled his hand from my shirt and shoved my pajama shorts down until I was able to push them off completely with my feet.

I returned the favor by helping him remove his boxers. He grabbed the back of my leg, lifting it just high enough to slide himself along my slit. I was wet, which allowed him to glide easily against me. Reaching between my legs, my fingers cupped the tip of him and helped him slip deeper between the folds of my pussy.

He groaned into my neck and my breath hitched as the ridges of his cock rubbed over my clit.

There was something about being half awake while being intimate. Despite aching to get off, my whole body was relaxed, almost lazy. I had yet to open my eyes. So this whole moment was just about feeling.

I let Colt move back and forth two more times between my legs before pushing the tip of him inside me.

He stilled. “I’m not wearing a condom.” His voice was deep and strained. I couldn’t tell if he was as turned-on as I was or pissed off.

“I’m on birth control.” I tilted my hips, offering him a better angle to slide deeper.

My words seemed to put him at ease, and he pushed inside me until he bottomed out.

I sighed at the feeling of being connected. Colt dropped his forehead to my shoulder, cursing, and whispered, “You feel so good.”

His words made me squirm.

Colt began moving in and out of me at an unrushed pace. Reaching behind me, I snaked my fingers through his hair and steered his mouth to mine. The thrust of his hips picked up speed the moment I pushed my tongue past his lips and swirled it along his.

Just as I moaned into his mouth, the bedside lamp on Creed’s side flicked on. Colt and I froze. Creed was standing next to the bed, staring down at us, looking tired, and his hair was disheveled. “If the two of you are going to fuck next to me, I at least get to watch.” He grabbed the blankets on top of us and threw them back.

Yelping, I yanked my leg out of Colt’s grasp and slammed my legs together with him still inside me. Heat bloomed in my cheeks.

Creed gave me a lazy, tired grin. “I’ve licked every inch of your pussy, Shi. No need to hide it from me now.”

“Cheese and rice, Creed,” I gaped.

Colt’s body shook with silent laughter behind me.

“Laughing is just going to encourage him,” I shot over my shoulder.

“I get that you like to act appalled to save face,” Creed said, climbing back into the bed. Lying down in his spot, he laced his fingers behind his head. “But I know you love it when we talk dirty. I’ve felt it on my tongue, on my fingers, and on my dick. I bet you’re squeezing around my brother as we speak.”

Colt confirmed with a grunt.

Creed gave me a smug smile, then nodded to where Colt and I were joined, as if to tell us to proceed.

That smug smile did something to me. He had given it to me yesterday and it poked at something inside of me that made me a little crazy.

*He wants to watch? Fine.* I pulled away from Colt to sit on my knees. Colt slid out of me, still hard and standing at attention. I gave Creed a defiant look just before grabbing the bottom of my pajama top and taking it off. I pushed Colt onto his back. He rolled into position with zero resistance and grinned up at me as I climbed on top of him. His hands went to my hips as I aligned him with my entrance and sank down on him. He exhaled slowly through his mouth and his grip on my hips tightened as I began rolling them. With my hands on his chest, I quickly found the perfect rhythm.

I glanced at Creed. He was watching me, eyes bouncing all over my body. There was awe and desire in them as he took in every movement I made.

“Like what you see?” I asked with a breathy voice.

“You’re the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen,” he said, his gaze never leaving my body.

“Are you just going to watch?”

Creed’s smug grin broadened as his eyes met mine. “Are you wanting a little show of your own, Shi?”

“It would make things fair.”

He shook his head. “It’s a yes or no question, Shi.”

Why did it feel like he’d gained the upper hand? Stubbornly, I didn’t want to answer.

Creed must have realized that, because he crawled up next to us. My movements slowed as he put his fingers to my clit at the same time he pressed his mouth to my ear. “Tell me you want to see my cock,” he said as he began rubbing my sensitive bud of nerves in small circles.

I moaned and Colt hissed, drawing my attention down to him and how I was digging my nails into his chest.

“Come on, Shi,” Creed urged. “I know you want to see me come just from watching you.”

I did want to see. I wanted to see it so badly, I forgot why I was holding back. “Yes.”

“Say you want to see my cock,” Creed demanded.

“I want to see your cock.”

Colt groaned and Creed moved away to lie back down on his side of the bed. He shoved his boxers down to his thighs and his hard shaft sprang free. As if transfixed, I watched as he began to stroke himself.

“Arch back. I want to see those beautiful tits bounce,” Creed ordered.

I did and Colt let out a curse. The new angle made me take him deeper and hit all the right spots. I wanted to throw my head back and ride him until release, but I couldn’t look away from Creed.

“How’s that feel, Shi?” Creed asked as his fist moved around his cock in a harsh jerking motion.

“Good,” I panted. I wasn’t going to last much longer. Pressure in my core was increasing each time I came down on Colt.

Colt’s hands moved to my bouncing breasts, squeezing them before

pinching my nipples between his thumbs and fingers. That spurred my body to take over. Closing my eyes, I began chasing my release with abandon.

“She’s about to come.”

I didn’t know which one of them had said it, but they had been right. I exploded with intense and toe-curling contractions.

Before they subsided, Colt’s hands went back to my hips and he flipped us. I landed on my back with him still buried inside me.

“You two are going to be the death of me,” he growled as he slammed into me.

I let out a cry that was cut off with another hard thrust. Colt grabbed me by the backs of my knees and pushed them to my chest, all while relentlessly pounding into me.

“You came for my brother,” Colt grunted out. “Now you need to come for me.”

I only had a second to be surprised at the assertiveness and somewhat roughness he was displaying before he had me practically screaming in ecstasy. Without a doubt, I was going to come again, and it was happening fast.

Wracked with another slightly painful but amazing release, my legs shook against his tight grip. He held me in that position, panting as he came undone next, and I faintly felt a warm sensation bloom where we were connected.

“I can feel you coming inside me,” I blurted between breaths.

Colt’s gaze dropped between us, and he slowly pulled out. A stream of cum leaked from me the moment he completely withdrew.

With his eyes glued to the sight, Colt groaned. That prompted Creed to lean over and look as well.

“Stop staring!” I screeched as I tried to get away. All I ended up doing was lifting my vagina up higher because his grip on the backs of my knees was unbudging.

Colt smiled, laughter filling his eyes, and Creed chuckled.

“No need to be shy,” Creed said. “It’s hot as hell seeing cum leak from your—”

I interrupted him by letting out a frustrated noise. They both chuckled at that and Colt sat back on his haunches, releasing me.

I planted my feet on the bed on either side of him and snapped my knees shut.

“I have to agree with my brother. It’s a lot more appealing seeing it spill

out of you than a condom,” Colt said.

“So no more condoms, huh?” Creed asked.

“I’m on birth control,” I told him.

Creed looked at Colt. “How’d you like going bareback?”

Colt huffed a laugh and rubbed the back of his head. “It took a lot more effort to not come, and it didn’t help that you were driving her wild while she was riding me.”

Creed grinned with zero remorse.

“You’ve never done it without a condom before?” I asked Colt.

He nodded.

I smiled, feeling pleased. “So I was your first?”

He smiled back at me.

It was nice to get a first of something. They had pretty much taken all of mine.

“I haven’t gone without a condom, either,” Creed admitted as he climbed off the bed and grabbed some tissues from the box I had on my nightstand. I watched as he wiped his lower stomach, feeling disappointed.

“Why the long face?” Colt asked, his fingers brushing my cheek.

“I missed it,” I grumbled.

Knowing exactly what I meant, Creed laughed. “You closed your eyes.” His smugness returned. “I didn’t miss it when you came, though. Both times.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this,” I said, gesturing to all of him with a flippant wave of my hand.

Clearly confused, his brows rose.

“Your smugness,” I clarified and climbed out of bed. “It’s drawing out a crazy side I didn’t know I had.”

“I know,” he said with that dumb, smug smile. “Why do you think I do it?”

I did something that would have made my mother gasp with disapproval had she still been alive. I flipped him off with a crazy smile his arrogant butt had conjured.

They both burst into laughter that I didn’t appreciate. So I spun on my heel and headed for the bathroom.

“We’re sorry, babe!” Colt said while still laughing, which meant he wasn’t sorry at all.

Ignoring them, I shut the door to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

“Don’t be mad, Shi,” Creed said through the door.

I wasn’t mad. Not truly, but I was enjoying ruffling his feathers like he enjoyed ruffling mine. So I didn’t respond and climbed under the spray.

The bathroom door opened then, and Creed ripped open the curtain halfway. He was dressed in his basketball shorts. “That was adorable.”

I scoffed and grabbed my loofah. As I got it nice and soapy, an idea came to me. I began scrubbing all over, but I made sure to go slow over certain areas.

As expected, his eyes followed my movements. Seeing them darken with desire, it became my turn to feel smug. I made sure it showed when his gaze finally tore away from my body to meet mine.

He shook his head, smiling. “Tease.”

*Serves him right.*

THE LOCATION OF THE MUD RUN WAS ALMOST AN HOUR AWAY, IN THE MIDDLE of a vast stretch of desert filled with rocky hills, thorny bushes, and cacti. From a distance, I could see the large *Start* and *Finish* banners, and lined up in front of them were many differently sized and colored tents. Each tent must have belonged to those who sponsored the mud run. That meant Desert Stone's tent was among them.

Knox and Keelan had left hours before we had to finish helping set up, and we'd hit the road with Ethan and Isabelle a little after the sun had risen. The five of us had carpooled in Creed's truck, and I was glad we had when I saw the long line of cars waiting to park along the road we were supposed to turn onto to get to the entrance. To my surprise, Creed kept driving. He continued further down the main road until another turn appeared. He took it and we came upon a second gated entrance. A guy holding a clipboard was manning the gate; he saw us and approached Creed's window. Creed told him who he was. The guy searched for Creed's name on his clipboard and let us in.

We drove to a small dirt lot, and I spotted Keelan's Jeep right away.

"Employee parking?" Ethan asked from where he sat next to me in the backseat.

"Yup," Colt answered as Creed parked close to Keelan's Jeep.

Isabelle climbed out my door. Her green and black hair was in two bear-ear-looking buns on top of her head. I had my hair in two braids. Apart from the hair, she and I were dressed the same. She was wearing the racerback Desert Stone shirt I'd gotten yesterday and I was wearing the tank. I figured the more people who saw the name Desert Stone, the more might be inclined

to sign up. We were also wearing black athletic shorts. The guys also wore shorts and were wearing differently colored Desert Stone T-shirts. Colt's shirt was a dark red. Creed's was black. Ethan originally hadn't been wearing a Desert Stone shirt, but when he'd seen that the four of us were wearing them, he'd given us all a fake and overdone pout. Colt had run back into his house and grabbed an extra shirt he had that was a heather-gray color.

Isabelle hooked her arm through mine as we followed the guys. Walking toward the tents, I was a little taken aback by how many people were here. Some were standing by the start line, waiting for the run to begin, and others were checking out the different tents. I noticed a lot of groups of people dressed similarly. A group of about twenty women were all wearing pink tops. There was a group of what looked like friends who were all wearing red and black. A small group of elderly ladies were wearing neon yellow. Those were just the few that I had seen first, but there were many more color-coordinated groups.

Isabelle and I continued to walk behind the guys, heading for the Desert Stone tent that was closer to the *Finish* banner. Each time we had to go around people, the distance between us and the guys got bigger—not that the guys had noticed, because they seemed to be focused on talking and laughing amongst themselves. When a large group of college-aged men walked through the space between us, Isabelle and I had to stop and wait for them to pass. By the time we were able to proceed, the guys had disappeared out of sight.

“I can't believe they didn't notice we weren't behind them,” Isabelle grumbled.

“They seemed to be really engaged in something they were talking about.”

Isabelle humphed as she grabbed my hand and pulled me in the opposite direction from the Desert Stone tent.

“What are we doing?” I asked.

“Being petty,” she shot over her shoulder.

I snorted.

“Since they're more interested in their bromance, us girls are just going to have to have fun without them,” she explained.

“And make them come look for us,” I added.

“Exactly! We have a while before the race starts, anyway.”

I liked this side of her.



I followed Isabelle to a tent that was advertising energy drinks and handing out free samples. We each got a sample and moved to the next tent, which was advertising and selling athletic wear. That tent was bigger and one we could walk into to see the displays of different designs. Isabelle and I went inside and began browsing.

“I know this brand. I’ve seen it all over social media,” Isabelle commented as she drifted off to one side of the tent.

I veered in the other direction when I noticed white, high-waisted leggings and a matching sports bra on a hanging mannequin. It was the high-waisted leggings that really caught my eye. I still wasn’t comfortable with the scars on my stomach. They were harder scars to bare, and I probably would never be comfortable with others seeing them, apart from my guys. Seeing how high the waistband went on the mannequin, they would cover my stomach scars perfectly if I wanted to work out in a sports bra.

The leggings I currently owned were low-rise. I always bought that style because I’d never thought I’d see the day where I’d begin to feel comfortable baring my other scars. I’d assumed I’d always want to wear a shirt or a sweatshirt to keep everything covered and the idea of having an extra layer on my stomach hadn’t seemed appealing in this heat.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” a saleslady asked as she approached me.

“Uh...yes. I would like to get these.” I told her my size. She retrieved me a pair of leggings and a matching sports bra. She told me that they had other colors. Feeling impulsive, I got another set in black. The saleslady took my card and left to ring me up at the front.

I found Isabelle holding up a teal, gray, and purple tie-dye pair of leggings.

“I love the color of these,” I said.

“Same.” She sighed, folded them back up, and put them back on the display table.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I need to find a job,” she said sullenly. “The money I made from the one I had during the summer is running out quicker than I thought it would.”

So that was what yesterday at lunch was about. “Desert Stone is hiring. It’s a part-time front desk position.”

Her mood perked up. “Really?”

I nodded.

“I’m not going to get my hopes up, but that would be perfect. You work out there, right?”

“I do,” I confirmed as we made our way to the front.

The saleslady had my purchases bagged up and returned my card. I put my card in my wallet-slash-phone-case. I saw I didn’t have any missed calls or notifications before sliding it into the slim pocket of my shorts.

As we left the tent, Isabelle said, “Looks like they haven’t found us yet.”

I looked all around as we walked. “They haven’t even called or texted.”

“Reception is terrible out here.”

Instead of trying to search for the guys, I should have paid attention to where I was going.

“Shi, watch—” I heard Isabelle say as I walked right into someone.

I stumbled back a little before catching myself. “I’m so sorry.”

“If you wanted me, Shiloh, you could have just said. You don’t have to throw yourself at me,” a familiar voice said, and a few masculine laughs followed.

I looked up and my stomach sank. Gabe was here. Gabe, who’d shoved me during volleyball, tossed me into the school pool, helped destroy my car. Gabe, who was Cassy’s equally evil cousin.

*Why is he here?* I thought as I eyed him and his two friends, who I recognized as his teammates on our school’s baseball team, that flanked him. This was a Desert Stone-sponsored event. Gabe hated Colt and Creed. Unless he’d come to antagonize all of us.

Not wanting to give him the opportunity, I urged Isabelle to walk away with me. “Come on,” I said to her.

“Where are you going?” Gabe’s arm caught me around my waist, pulling me back to where I’d been standing in front of him. “I’m not done talking to you.” His arm moved from my waist to around my lower back and he stepped closer.

I pushed at his chest. “Let go of me.”

His hold on me was unrelenting. “Oh, come on. I just want to talk.”

“Hey!” Isabelle yelled as one of Gabe’s friends blocked her from getting closer.

Smirking at me, Gabe grabbed the end of one of my braids with his other hand and tugged on it just enough to make my head tilt slightly. “I want to see what is so special about you. I mean, you must have a magical cunt or something to satisfy both of the Stone brothers.”

His two friends snickered.

Pushing against his chest with one hand, I went to smack his hand away with my other. He caught me by my wrist before I could. Feeling the marred skin beneath his fingers, he looked down at my scar. An evil glint sparked in his eyes, and I just knew what he was going to imply next. “Or maybe it’s the kinky shit you’re into that keeps them entertained.” He leaned his face close to my ear and whispered, “Since you like being tied up so much, you might enjoy it when we put a noose around that pretty little neck.”

I tried to reel back, but couldn’t go far with him holding me.

“You better drop the charges,” he said in a low voice. “Your time is running out.”

Ripping my wrist from his grasp, I slapped his face and shoved him off me with all my strength. He fell back a step and violent anger darkened his eyes. Gabe’s friends went quiet and appeared stunned. In my peripheral vision, Isabelle took advantage of that and slipped past the guy who was blocking her.

I sensed it in my gut before I saw Gabe’s reach for me. He grabbed the front of my tank with one hand and swung with the other. He was going to backhand me. I blocked the hit by bringing my arm up. Isabelle screamed like a banshee and jumped on Gabe’s back. She began smacking and punching at his head and face.

To defend himself, he let go of me and tossed Isabelle off of him. I reached out to catch her, forgetting I had zero upper-body strength. The impact of her body made me stumble backward until my back collided with a chest. Failing to stay on my feet, I began to slide down the person behind me. Their hands caught me by my ribs and lifted, helping me back to my feet, and I helped Isabelle to hers.

“Did you just put your hands on my girlfriend, Harris?” Ethan snarled as he stormed by and put himself between us and Gabe and his friends. Then Creed appeared and went to stand next to Ethan.

“Are you all right, babe?” Colt’s voice filled my ear. I sagged against him a little.

Gabe slicked back his hair, which was the same tawny shade as Cassy’s, with his fingers. Isabelle had successfully messed up his hair and managed to scratch his cheek. I was calling it a win. “She was attacking me,” Gabe snarled.

“He was going to hit Shiloh,” Isabelle said with a tremor in her voice.

That information didn't even need a second to sink in for Creed before he shoved Gabe hard. Gabe stumbled backward and his friends moved away as if they didn't want to get involved. It was at that point I noticed a crowd forming around us.

Creed closed the space between him and Gabe and fisted the front of Gabe's shirt.

"Hey!" Keelan appeared and got between them. With his good arm, he pushed Creed back, then turned to face Gabe.

Lost in his rage, Gabe tried to shove Keelan out of the way. Keelan angled to the side and caught Gabe by his arm, twisting it behind his back. Gabe struggled against Keelan's hold, making Keelan wince. It was then that I noticed he wasn't wearing his sling.

I was moving before I thought to and rushed around Ethan and Creed. By the time I made it to Keelan, he had knocked Gabe's feet from under him and had him pinned, face-down on the ground.

Knox pushed through the crowd then, security right behind him. He took one look at Keelan restraining Gabe and told security to escort Gabe out. He then told everyone who had been standing around watching to move on and informed them that the run was about to start.

As soon as Keelan was standing, I went to touch him, but stopped myself. Clenching my hands into fists, afraid I'd hurt him if I touched him, I asked, "Are you all right?"

He covered my fists with his hands and smiled down at me. "I'm fine."

"You could have hurt yourself more," I grumbled.

He pulled me closer and wrapped his arms around me. "I saw you run over. Were you coming to save me?"

I looked up at him, frowning. "Are you teasing me?"

He chuckled. "Not at all. I'm quite touched that I have a protective girlfriend."

"Is someone going to explain what happened?" Knox said as he came to stand next to us.

Colt and Creed walked over next, forming a circle around me. The four of them listened as I told them what had happened. By the time I was done, all four of them were scowling.

Knox looked at Creed and Colt. "Don't lose her again."

Colt and Creed stared at me, looking remorseful.

Deciding to take a page from Isabelle's book, I folded my arms across my

chest. “Yes, it’s not very nice being forgotten by my boyfriends.”

Creed’s eyes narrowed and he mimicked me by folding his arms. “We didn’t forget you.”

I had to fight not to smile. “How long did it take for you to notice I wasn’t behind you?”

Creed didn’t answer and Colt looked so guilty, I was beginning to feel bad for teasing.

“Not until they made it to the tent and I asked where you were,” Keelan said.

“I’m sorry, babe,” Colt said.

Creed studied me with a frown. “Are you really upset?”

“Can’t you tell?” I asked.

“Normally I can,” he said.

I finally let myself smile. “I supposed this means I’ve improved my lying.”

Keelan snorted at the same time Colt sighed.

Trying not to smile, Creed shook his head and pulled me to him. “That is not something to be proud of,” he said, and did the unimaginable. He started tickling me.

I squealed and tried to get away, but it was no use. He had one arm locked around me while he used the other to tickle me on my sides and stomach. “Creeeed...st—stop!” I tried to protest in between laughs. “Make him stop,” I begged the others.

Knox stayed rooted where he was, but he was smiling as he watched us. Colt and Keelan laughed, refusing to save me from Creed’s torture.

It wasn’t until I threatened to pee on him that Creed stopped and held my limp form as I recovered. Grabbing the back of my head, he made me look up at him and he kissed me sweetly. “I’m sorry I didn’t realize you weren’t behind us,” he said in a low voice.

“It’s all right. Isabelle and I went exploring,” I said. Speaking of that, I realized I didn’t have my bag with my purchases. I must have dropped it when I’d walked into Gabe. I pulled out of Creed’s arms and began looking around.

“Looking for this?” Isabelle asked, holding up my bag. She and Ethan were standing a few feet away, watching us.

I took the bag. “Thanks.” I turned around to go back to the guys and found Keelan right behind me.

“The run is about to start,” Keelan said, taking the bag from my hands. “I’ll hold on to this until you’re done.”

I handed over my phone-slash-wallet to him as well. I didn’t have reception, anyway. So there wasn’t a reason to risk it getting wet and muddy.

He kissed the top of my head. “See you when you’re done.”

That hurt my heart a little. He was the one who was supposed to do this with me.

He must have seen something on my face, because he said, “All I care about is if you have fun.”

I nodded.

He leaned in close. “If you want, we can create our own game of endurance at home later. It won’t involve mud, but it’ll definitely be wet.”

The feverish heat that hit me had nothing to do with the temperature outside. Keelan winked at me and walked away with Knox, leaving me standing there gaping at nothing because all I could see were the dirty visuals racing through my head.

“Shiloh?”

I blinked back to reality. Creed and Colt were standing in front of me.

“What’s got you all flushed?” Creed asked.

I opened my mouth and shut it. I didn’t want to answer that.

Colt tilted his head slightly, studying my face.

“The run is about to start,” I blurted, grasping at anything to deflect, and began heading toward the *Start* banner. “What are the stakes if I win?”

It seemed to work, because the guys walked with me and were quiet as they pondered. Isabelle and Ethan followed behind us, talking amongst themselves, while holding hands. After what had just happened, Ethan was also determined to not get separated from his girlfriend again.

“Winner picks dinner tonight?” Creed suggested.

“Knox and Keelan might not agree to that,” Colt said.

“Winner gets to take a shower with me, and I’ll help you wash all the mud off,” I offered. I was going to blame Keelan for the dirty mood he’d left me in.

Their brows tried to reach their hairlines as they both gaped at me.

“I think we’ve unlocked a new side of Shiloh,” Creed said to his twin.

“Like in a video game where if you collect enough coins, you level up?” Colt asked.

Creed nodded. “Instead of coins, it’s orgasms, and poof, a sexy and bold

level of Shi appears.”

Not wanting to be left out of the conversation, I said, “I wonder how many orgasms you’ll have to give me to reach the next level?”

Colt groaned and grabbed for me, but I stepped out of reach with an impish smile.

“What if we both win?” Creed asked.

I shrugged. “My shower is big enough for three.”

Colt sighed. “Let’s get this run over quick.” They both started walking a little faster.

I stayed at a normal pace. “Um, what if I win?”

They slowed.

“You’re not going to win,” Creed said over his shoulder.

Taking bigger steps, I caught up quickly. “That’s rude. I could win.”

“Fine,” Colt said. “If you win, I’ll lick you clean in the shower, which I plan on doing regardless when I win.”

“You mean if we win,” Creed corrected Colt.

“If I win, since these stakes are dirty, I—” I started to say.

“You’re the one who made them dirty, Shi,” Creed pointed out with a grin. “No complaints, though.”

“Definitely no complaints,” Colt agreed, also grinning.

“I want to try something new in the bedroom,” I finished.

They both stumbled.

“What is it that you want to try?” Colt asked.

“If I win, you’ll find out,” I said.

Creed frowned at first, but as he pondered, his face relaxed and his head tilted to the side. “As long as you’ll be naked, I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

I giggled. “I’ll be naked.”

“Now I don’t know if I want to win,” Colt said to Creed.

THE RUN HAD BEGUN. SOME PEOPLE RACED THROUGH THE *START* BANNER AND down the dirt path. Others were still visiting the tents. I wouldn't say we raced toward the first obstacle, but we weren't that far behind the ones who did.

The first obstacle was called The Pits. At least, that's what the sign next to it said. The sign also gave a brief description. The Pits consisted of steep, muddy hills with ice-cold swamps in between them that contained hidden sinkholes. We stared down at the first swamp we had to climb into, whose water was a murky pale tan.

"No work-up to getting dirty, I see," Isabelle commented.

Ethan gave her a taunting smirk. "Want to skip it?"

She glared at him. "No." She caught me watching the two of them. Leaning close, she whispered to me, "We got a dirty bet going on, too." She giggled at the shock that must have shown on my face. "We overheard you."

*Clearly.* I shouldn't have been surprised. They had been walking behind us.

The guys didn't hesitate in slowly climbing down the steep, slippery slope to get into the first pit of muddy water. Ethan was the first one in. I didn't know why I'd thought the water would be shallow at first and gradually get deeper, but the moment Ethen got in, it was an instant drop. Isabelle and I held back, listening to the guys hiss as they sank up to their chests.

Isabelle looked at me and held out her hand. "I say we just rip the Band-Aid off and get it over with."

I smiled and took her hand.



Seeing what we intended to do, the guys made room, and Isabelle and I leapt. We dropped into the pit feet-first. The freezing water bit at my skin as I went completely under.

I gasped as I resurfaced.

So did Isabelle. "It's colder than I thought."

Yes, it was. "Can you reach the bottom?" I asked as I struggled to kick my feet with shoes on. Colt's arm wrapped around me and he pulled me through the water until my feet touched the bottom.

When we reached the other side, we were faced with climbing up a tall, muddy hill. The guys insisted Isabelle and I go first. I dug my shoes and fingers into the mud, doing my best to gain purchase as I climbed. Many times, my fingers slid through the mud like butter. I almost fell back into the water when hands caught me by the back of my thighs. "You got it, Shi," Creed encouraged as he gave me a little push.

Isabelle and I reached the top of the hill at the same time and eyed the next pit. This swamp was longer. Bigger than the guys' pool in their backyard.

Isabelle and I scaled down into the water as the guys climbed their way out of the first pit. I didn't bother standing as I climbed my way down. The mud was too slippery, and I knew I'd fall. Instead, I scooted down, coating my butt and thighs in a thick layer of mud. When my shoes touched the water, I dropped down the rest of the way. I was expecting a deep plunge, but the water only went up to my waist. Isabelle dropped in next to me and the two of us moved ahead, wading our way across the pit. The guys caught up to us when we were halfway across.

"I feel like I already have mud in unmentionable places," Isabelle playfully whined.

I laughed. "Same."

Just as I said that, my foot sank into a sinkhole, and I almost went under. Colt and Creed dove for me and lifted me up. I had been fine, but was touched they still looked out for me.

Once we were out of The Pits, we were all covered in mud. My arms felt a little weak from having to climb. Not that I cared about any of it, because I was having a blast.

There was a long dirt path that led over a giant desert hill before we reached the next obstacle, which helped our skin warm up and dry a little.

I stared up at the tall, wooden wall we were supposed to scale for the

second obstacle. Two guys ahead of us had run toward the wall. They'd both leapt, grabbed the top of the wall, and easily pulled themselves up and over at an impressive speed.

Creed did the same. He ran ahead of us and easily scaled the wall. Instead of jumping down the other side, he stayed on top of the wall and held out his hand. "Get a running start, Shi."

I did as he said and ran toward the wall. My wet shoes slid down the wall as I tried to run up it. My fingers barely brushed against his before I dropped back down to the ground.

"Try again, Shi," Isabelle said.

I took a few steps back before running toward the wall again. As soon as I leapt, I knew I wasn't going to make it. My fingers brushed Creed's again, but as I dropped back down, hands caught me by my hips. "You got this, babe," I heard Colt say below me. He hoisted me up until I was able to take Creed's hand. As Creed pulled me up, Colt's hands jumped to my butt to lift me higher. Once I was high enough, I threw my leg over the top and pulled myself the rest of the way up.

Creed jumped down from the wall and I reached out my hand to Isabelle. Isabelle ran for the wall and jumped. She was able to get high enough to grab my hand. Then she started to drop back down, pulling me with her. I let out a yelp, not wanting to let go but scared of falling. Creed grabbed my ankle that was dangling on the other side of the wall before I could. Ethan and Colt caught Isabelle and pushed her up.

Isabelle climbed over the top and gave me an apologetic look. "That could have been bad."

"It seems I have a bad habit of overestimating my upper-body strength," I said as I threw my other leg over the wall and prepared to jump down.

Creed held his hands out to me, and I dropped into his arms. "If you're going to act like Wonder Woman and keep catching Isabelle, you're going to need to start working out with Knox," he said as he set me on my feet and then reached out to help Isabelle down.

"I know," I grumbled.

The next obstacle was a giant ice bath.

"Well, at least we'll get somewhat clean," Isabelle said.

"Until the next muddy obstacle," I said and chuckled. "But I like your positivity."

Smiling, Isabelle looked at me. "Band-Aid?"

I nodded and we jumped in. This time the guys watched us go first and laughed when we yelped and huffed as the biting-cold water swallowed us up to our waists.

We conquered each obstacle after those first three in the same manner. We didn't rush through them. We took our time and just enjoyed each challenge.

In between the obstacles, though, we raced. We were getting close to the end of the run and the others were lagging behind as I made my way up a pretty big desert hill. Running was where I excelled. Which was why I had no problem running up the final, biggest hill and feeling smug about it.

Laughing, I glanced back at Isabelle and the guys as I was reaching the top. Karma decided to get back at me for being smug at that moment. My foot caught on a rock and my body lurched forward. I heard everyone call out to me as I collided with someone and we both went down. The top of the hill wasn't level and we—the person I'd taken to the ground and I—rolled down the other side. It had to be nine or ten feet of rolling before my back hit flat ground and the other person, a guy I quickly realized, landed on top of me. I grunted at the impact of his weight.

"Shit," he cursed into my ear before he pushed up onto his hands to look down at me.

I took in his ginger hair, his wide eyes, and realized I knew him. I had run into, knocked over, and now was lying beneath Derek.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

I didn't get to answer because a tight voice said, "Why don't you get off our girlfriend so we can find out?" It was Creed's voice.

Derek quickly pushed off of me and sat on the ground a few feet away, looking like he was still trying to get his bearings.

Colt immediately took Derek's place above me. Grabbing me under my arms, he picked me up off the ground. I threw my arms and legs around him. "Hold on, babe." His hands moved to my butt and lower back as he carefully carried me down the rest of the hill. Creed, Isabelle, and Ethan climbed down behind him, their concerned gazes bouncing back and forth from me to the steep terrain.

Once at the bottom, Colt carried me over to the side of the trail and sat me down on a large rock. Creed came up next to his brother and they immediately started looking me over.

"I'm all right," I said. "That's the second time today I ran into someone

because I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I can't believe I've been so inattentive."

"You're bleeding," Isabelle said with a scrunched-up brow.

"I am?" I said, looking down. Sure enough, my right knee was scuffed up pretty bad. My pain sensors seemed to click on then. My knee began to sting and then my right shoulder, followed by my left elbow. I checked each location and saw they were all scratched up and bleeding.

"Does anything feel broken?" Colt asked, anger tightly woven into his words.

"I'm all right," I repeated.

"There's a first aid tent. Maybe you should take her there."

Everyone turned, revealing Derek standing behind them.

"Why were you just standing there?" Creed asked him.

"It's not his fault," I said. "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, *again*." Although I had a sinking suspicion Gabe had purposely walked into me so he could have an excuse to threaten me.

"I was waiting for my buddy to catch up," Derek explained, even though he didn't have to. "He got talking to this girl at the last obstacle."

"I'm really sorry, Derek. Are you hurt?" I asked.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm good. You took the brunt of the fall."

At least there was that. I would have felt really guilty if he'd gotten hurt.

"Race is over, Shi," Creed said.

"There's only one more obstacle. I want to finish." I pushed off the rock and began walking. All my cuts stung with the movement. My knee felt weak, which caused me to hobble.

"Shi..." Isabelle was getting ready to argue.

I didn't stop walking toward the last obstacle. "I'm fine. I got this."

"Shiloh." Colt's voice was stern, but not full-on Hulk. It still made me stop.

I whirled around, staring him down. "I'm *fine*."

Ethan grabbed Isabelle's hand. "Let's give them a moment," he whispered to her, and they continued down the trail.

Creed eyed Derek, who was watching us, or more specifically me. "Why don't you go find your buddy, Derek?" Creed was clearly annoyed with him for some reason, which annoyed me because he hadn't done anything to be treated that way.

Derek blinked as if he had broken free from a trance. “Yeah. Sorry,” he mumbled and headed back up the hill.

Once he was gone, Creed looked at me. “What’s going on?”

“Just because I have a few scrapes doesn’t mean I’m broken. I can finish the run,” I answered.

“We don’t think you’re broken,” Creed said.

“I’ve been hurt worse than this,” I argued.

Colt exhaled as if to calm himself down. “We know you’re strong, babe. You don’t have to prove that to us.”

“Maybe I’m trying to prove it to myself.” I hadn’t meant to say that. It was as though the words refused to be just a thought or a secret insecurity. They needed to escape—to be heard—so they didn’t continue tearing me up from the inside.

All I felt all the time was weak. I’d almost let myself give up. I’d let my grief consume me because it was easier. Sure, I was in therapy now and was doing my best to stay determined, but there was always the temptation to give up. The uphill battle of healing was a constant dance of one step forward and five steps back. The progress was slow, disheartening more times than not, and draining, both mentally and emotionally. Strength in the physical sense was easier for me. When I got tired, I could push myself to run one more mile, one more hour, or not stop until I dropped. Physical strength was nothing but progress and that was reassuring in a way. I knew I could finish this run even though I’d had this setback. I knew I was strong enough to push on, and to not made me feel like a failure in the one aspect of my life where I felt like I wasn’t.

“Talk to us, babe,” Colt pleaded softly.

Realizing my issues, I made myself breathe in deeply and exhale slowly. “I’m being too hard on myself, and I was having a moment.” Healing wasn’t a race. I really wished it were, because I’d outrun the world to win if I had to. I glanced at the cut on my elbow. “The next obstacle is another water one. It isn’t a good idea to be fully submerged in disgusting water with a bunch of cuts, so it’s best I skip it.”

They both glanced at each other. Probably surprised at my quick turn of mood.

Colt took my hand. “Do you need me to carry you?”

I shook my head and we continued on toward the finish line.

We caught up to Ethan and Isabelle, who were waiting for us by the last

obstacle. When Creed informed them that we were skipping this one, Isabelle's shoulders sagged. "Me, too. I'm beat."

"What about your bet?" I whispered.

She just smiled and looked at the guys. "I can walk with her if you want to go do the obstacle."

"We're good," Colt and Creed said at the same time.

"I'm beat, too," Ethan said.

I stared at all of them and had to resist the urge to cry. I had people. Of course, I knew I had the guys, but there was something about this moment that really showed me what I had. Isabelle had gone up against Gabe for me. Ethan, who was extremely competitive, had forfeited the bet he had with Isabelle. There was a saying that you didn't realize what you had until it was gone. That was painfully true. But no one really talked about how, after you'd lost everything, it was overwhelmingly wonderful to regain something, or in this case...people who cared about you.

Once we crossed the finish line, we were each handed a goody bag. Inside, there was a T-shirt, a water bottle, a headband, a pen, and stickers. Each item was merch from all the different businesses that had sponsored the mud run.

Colt grabbed my bag to carry. "Let's get you cleaned up."

I caught Isabelle and Ethan looking around at all the tents. It was clear they wanted to explore.

"Why don't you guys go look around and we'll catch up later?" I suggested.

"Are you sure?" Isabelle asked, looking torn.

I waved my hand flippantly. "Yeah. I just need a couple of Band-Aids and there's no need for all of us to go."

Isabelle relented and we went our separate ways. Colt and Creed led the way to the first aid tent. I was still hobbling and the cuts on my knee throbbed and stung with each step.

Creed held out his goody bag to Colt and reached for me.

"I can walk," I insisted.

"No." Such a small word, yet it said so much. He wasn't going to let me walk. He gave me his back and crouched a little. "Hop on, Shi."

*My boyfriends want to take care of me.* I'd promised them I'd work on this particular flaw, and I kept my promises.

I climbed onto Creed's back. As he carried me, I rested my head against

his shoulder. I noticed Colt kept eyeing me, his surprise evident in the way his brows tried to reach his hairline.

“I’m trying.” I didn’t have to explain.

Colt rubbed my lower back as he walked next to us. “I’m proud of you.”

We would have to pass the Desert Stone tent to get to the first aid tent. As we began to pass the large navy-colored tent with Desert Stone Fitness written across the front, I saw Knox, Keelan, and a few personal trainers inside, sitting behind a long table helping a decent amount of people, hopefully signing up for memberships.

Keelan spotted us. He took in Creed carrying me and then said something to the two mud-covered girls he had been helping before standing from the table.

I tapped Creed’s shoulder and told him and Colt that Keelan was coming. The two of them stopped and glanced at the Desert Stone tent. We watched as Keelan walked over to where Knox was seated and leaned down to say something in his ear. Knox looked around the line of people in front of him, his eyes searching, and when they landed on me, he said something over his shoulder to Keelan before returning his attention to the guy he was helping. Keelan made his way out of their tent.

Creed let me down as Keelan approached us. Keelan's eyes dropped to my bleeding knee. “What happened?” he asked and grabbed my arm gently to look over the cut on my elbow.

“She fell,” Colt said.

“She tripped, collided with Derek, and they both went tumbling down the last hill before the end of the run,” Creed explained.

Keelan’s hand went to my chin next, turning it to the side. Was he staring at my ear? I reached up and gently touched the shell of my ear. It was wet and stung at my touch. I brought my hand down and saw that my fingers were bloody. The blood was fresh enough that a drop of it rolled down my index finger toward my palm. Panic began to rise within me. I stepped out of Keelan’s reach, needing space, and rubbed my bloody fingers vigorously on my shorts. I focused on the sound of people around me. The smell of mud clinging to my body. I grasped hold of the thought of taking a long, hot shower when I got home as though I had sharp claws.

“Shiloh,” Keelan started to say.

“I’m all right,” I said as I mentally battled with myself.

Colt grabbed my wrist, and it was then that I realized I hadn’t stopped

rubbing my finger on my shorts.

“The blood is gone,” he assured me and brought my hand up to my face. He was right. Apart from the mud, my fingers were clean.

I was able to relax a little. “I can’t wait to take a shower,” I said, because I was still holding onto that thought.

“You’ll have to take it alone,” Creed said.

Colt glanced at his brother. “Yeah, it’s too bad we lost the race.” He didn’t sound disappointed at all.

I looked from one to the other, frowning. “What?”

Creed shrugged. “You crossed the finish line first. You won the bet.”

“Yeah, we tied in second place, or would it be last place?” Colt asked Creed.

I put my hand on my hips. “You let me win, didn’t you?”

They both did a terrible job at pretending to be shocked at my accusation, but they didn’t deny it.

“What did you three bet on?” Keelan asked.

I went to answer and suddenly there was a hand over my mouth. “Sexual favors,” Creed answered.

Technically, that was the truth. But why did Creed feel the need to stop me from answering?

I realized why when Keelan sighed and said, “Fine, don’t tell me.”

Colt coughed. It was obvious he was covering up a laugh.

Was it really that hard to believe I’d agree to a game of dirty stakes? Or that I was the one who’d suggested them? I knew I came off as innocent, and I was, or had been in some ways, but I wouldn’t be that way forever.

“I’m only letting it go because you successfully got Shi to calm down,” Keelan said.

Now that he mentioned it...

“Was that an episode?” Creed asked and dropped his hand from my mouth. He and Colt hadn’t witnessed me have one. Only Knox and Keelan had.

Keelan studied me. “I’m not sure.”

“I was able to stop it before it could happen,” I said. “But the anxiety still builds up and it takes a while to bounce back from. Talking about sexual favors, though, seems to speed up the process.”

Creed grinned.

“Dr. Bolton has been really helping,” Keelan said, sounding pleased.



It was reassuring they could see results. It validated the steps I had taken so far, even if they were small.

Creed gave me his back again. “All right, Shi, let’s get you bandaged up and then head home.”

I climbed on his back again. This time without hesitating.

*A NOISE CAUSED ME TO JERK AWAKE AND I FOUND MYSELF SURROUNDED BY darkness. I sat up and felt around. Had I fallen asleep on the couch? That seemed to jog my memory of watching a movie with the guys after we'd returned home from the mud run. Relieved to know where I was, I yawned and rubbed my tired eyes.*

*The light in the hallway that led to Colt's and Creed's rooms flicked on and it lit up the living room a little, especially the area behind the couch. I looked at the other end of the couch, finding it empty.*

*I thought it odd that any of my boyfriends would leave me to sleep on the couch instead of carrying me to one of their rooms and even odder that they'd left me to sleep out here alone.*

*Maybe whoever was staying out here with me had gone to the bathroom and that was what had woken me?*

*My thoughts were interrupted when the light coming from the hall was obstructed. I glanced back in that direction, expecting to see Colt or Creed returning from the bathroom.*

*Who I saw was neither.*

*Who I saw had me jumping to my feet, backing away, rounding the coffee table as I did, until I bumped into the TV.*

*There was a man standing in the lit hallway, a step away from entering the living room. It was dark, but I knew him. It was my gut that was screaming at me that just knew. The fear pumping through my veins was paralyzing. My ears filled with pounding beats of my heart and my lungs burned, desperate for air I was too scared to give.*

*His head turned toward me slowly. Light lit up half of his face and a*

*whimper sounded in the back of my throat. I had no choice but to breathe then. It was either breathe or faint and be at his mercy. My chest rose and fell with loud ragged breaths that didn't completely satisfy my body's needs no matter how deeply I inhaled.*

*Trembling, I watched as he lifted a large knife up to his face. He pressed the dull side of the blade to his lips like a finger. "Shhh."*

*The light reflected off the blade, showing that it was covered in a dark substance.*

***Whose blood is that?** That thought invoked a new level of terror within me and I let out a strangled noise.*

*He looked forward and stalked into the living room. Unable to move, my eyes tracked him as he walked, unrushed, across the living room toward Keelan and Knox's side of the house.*

*The fear in me shifted. It didn't go away, but it was pushed back as something else took over.*

*"No," I forced out. I tried to move, but I couldn't get my legs to work.*

*"No!" I tried to move again, this time throwing my whole body forward, and I fell to the ground on my hands and knees.*

*Mr. X was steps away from reaching the hall to Keelan's and Knox's rooms. I smacked the carpeted floor. "I'm right here! Take me!"*

*He seemed to ignore me as he reached the hall and continued until I couldn't see him anymore.*

*I screamed then. I screamed with so much desperation and fear. "Keelan! Knox!"*



Hands grabbed me. "Shiloh!"

My eyes flew open to Keelan shaking me awake.

Seeing him made my body shudder with relief. The feeling was brief, though. I glanced around for the others. Colt and Creed were standing near, worry on their faces. More relief washed over me.

"Knox," I breathed.

*Where is Knox?*

I shoved Keelan away as I sat up from the couch, searching frantically. The guys were blocking me from standing up, so I went to climb over the top

of the couch. My tired and sore body tripped me up and I fell over the back to the floor.

The guys called out to me, asking if I was okay. I scrambled to my feet. “Knox!” Terror rattled through my voice as I screamed for him. I ran down the hall to his room. “Knox!” I screamed again as I shoved open his door and barreled my way into his room. His bed was empty. I searched his bathroom next. Empty.

The guys called for me from the hall, their voices getting closer. I didn’t have time to answer them. I needed to make sure Knox was all right. I ran back into the hall and slammed into Colt. I collided with him so hard, he grunted and I bounced backward. He tried to catch me and failed. I slammed against Knox’s bedroom’s doorframe hard enough that I knew I’d have a nasty bruise on my shoulder later.

Colt grabbed for me. “Shit! Are you all right?”

All I had time for was to wince at the hurt before pushing forward. I shrugged off Colt’s hands to walk away. I didn’t make it far. Keelan and Creed blocked me in the hall.

I was prepared to shove them out of the way when I heard, “Shiloh.” The deep, beautiful voice made me pause.

I looked past Keelan and Creed and saw Knox standing at the other end of the hall. Tears slipped from my eyes. I had to put a hand on the wall to keep from crumpling to the floor. My other hand went to my chest, trying to soothe the pain of my pounding heart. I looked down as a body-shaking sob barreled its way out of me. “He was here,” I cried, sounding broken. “He was going to kill you and I couldn’t stop it.”

Colt, who was behind me, grabbed my shoulders. I felt, because my sight was blurry, one of them move to stand right in front of me. Colt’s hands dropped from my shoulders the moment giant hands grabbed me by my hips and lifted me. I cried into Knox’s shoulder as he carried me somewhere.

Knox set me on a flat surface that felt like a countertop. My face slid from his shoulder to his chest. He stroked the back of my head as I continued to cry. “Can one of you go get the food off the grill?” Knox asked.

“I’ll go,” Keelan said.

“Watch your step out there,” Knox warned. “I dropped my beer when I heard her screaming for me.”

“I’ll go clean it up,” Creed said.

I heard the back door open and close. With how close it sounded, I knew

we were in the kitchen.

“Nightmare?” Knox said.

“Yeah,” Colt replied.

Knox sighed. “I’m guessing the pills Dr. Bolton prescribed aren’t working anymore.”

“They work when she takes them,” Colt explained.

Of course, I hadn’t taken one in the middle of the day. They were strictly for bedtime. I hadn’t planned on falling asleep on the couch when Colt, Creed, and I had sat down to watch a movie this afternoon, waiting for Knox and Keelan to get home. Although I wasn’t surprised. I’d been so worn out and exhausted when we’d returned home, I’d had to sit down in the shower to get clean.

“She reopened the cut on her knee,” Knox said.

I pulled back from his chest to get a look. The bandage I had on was hanging by a thread and there was a line of blood making its way down my shin. It must have happened when I had fallen off the back of the couch.

“I’ll get her another bandage,” Colt said and left.

I looked up at Knox, finding him already staring down at me. The helplessness I felt...I couldn’t stand it. “You have a gun,” I said. “Do you know how to use it?”

His eyes narrowed. “I wouldn’t own it if I didn’t.”

“What about them?” I glanced at the back door, wishing Keelan and Creed would come back inside. It made me more and more anxious the longer they were gone. “Do they know how?”

“Look at me.”

I didn’t. I looked toward the hall leading to the twins’ side of the house for Colt instead. The vision of Mr. X standing there popped into my head, making me flinch.

“Shiloh.” Knox’s hand went to the back of my neck and forced me to face him. “You are safe.” His tone was assuring and unrelenting. “We are safe. X doesn’t know where you are.”

“I have a bad feeling.”

“It was just a nightmare.”

“It was the second one I’ve had.” I didn’t know why, but it felt like a warning.

“What do you mean?” Knox asked as I heard the back door open. Knox shot a look over my shoulder before returning his focus to me.

“I normally dream about my family or that night,” I explained. “This is the second time I’ve dreamt of the four of you.”

Knox’s hand began kneading the back of my neck. “Are you able to talk about it?”

“The last nightmare I had, he cut their throats while they were sleeping next to me. Their blood was everywhere. All over the bed, my hands. I couldn’t wake them up. He killed them just like he did Shayla.” Every part of me shook, even my voice.

“Colt and Creed?” Knox said.

I gave him a weak nod. “This dream...” I went on. “It felt like a continuation. It was the middle of the night. He was walking from the twins’ side of the house. I knew they were already dead and how. I had already dreamt it. He looked right at me and didn’t even attempt to come for me. It was as if he knew I couldn’t do anything to stop him—that I would just stand there frozen in fear. It’s what I did that night. I just stood there, even though Shayla told me to run. I watched him cut her throat. I hid as he stabbed my mother over and over and over.” My eyes became blurry with tears again. “When he started walking toward yours and Keelan’s rooms, I couldn’t just stand there. I was scared, but I was more scared of losing you.” I covered my face, crying and overcome with self-loathing. I’d die fighting Mr. X if it meant the four of them would live. I knew it in my bones. How come I hadn’t done the same for my family? “I should have fought for them. I was a coward.”

Knox pulled my hands away from my face. “It’s easy to look back and wish you’d done something different. You’re older and know how to defend yourself now. You’re going over your memories with experience and knowledge that a sixteen-year-old you didn’t have.”

That may have helped ease some of the guilt I had, but it didn’t erase the feeling I had in the pit of my stomach.

I held Knox’s eyes and fisted the front of his shirt. “What am I doing, Knox?”

“Shi—”

“He’ll kill you,” I cut him off as panic took hold of me. “If he finds me, he will kill all of you. You and your brothers. Your family, Knox. You were right. I’m a threat. Because of me, everything you fought to hold together after everything you four have been through will be destroyed. I can’t do this to you. I can’t let this happen.”

He captured the sides of my face. “Take a deep breath.”

I couldn’t.

The clock was ticking.

I was running out of time.

I grabbed his wrists and squeezed. “I can’t do this. I can’t be here. He’s going to find me.” I tried to pull my face away to no avail.

“Shiloh—”

“I have to protect you,” I cut him off again. My whole body shook, and I felt like if I didn’t run away right then and there, Mr. X would see me with them.

“Shiloh!” Knox shouted.

Startled, my whole body jerked against him.

“Take a deep breath,” he ordered again.

Stunned, I did as he said.

“Again. This time in through your nose and out through your mouth.”

I did. He had me breathe like that over and over until the need to run away and the feeling of time running out began to fade. As I calmed, I realized what had happened. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

His thumbs brushed my wet cheeks. “Listen to me very carefully,” he said. “We take the possibility of X finding you very seriously. The four of us have talked about it extensively. And some of those conversations were not easy. Right after you told us you were in witness protection, the four of us had the biggest fight I think we’ve ever had. I wanted my brothers to pause things with you until we all got a better understanding of the risks.”

“Don’t take all the blame, Knox. I was the one who suggested it,” Keelan said from behind me.

Knox released my face so I could look over my shoulder. Colt, Creed, and Keelan were all standing where the kitchen transitioned into the dining room. All of them looked sullen.

Creed had his arms folded over his chest, his face downcast. “I told them to fuck off.”

“We both did,” Colt said, looking from Creed to me. “It hadn’t changed anything for us. Knowing. It had been a shock, sure. But I remember feeling we had finally gained your missing piece. The one that made all the other pieces of you make sense.”

“We had finally gotten all of you, and we weren’t going to give you up,” Creed said.

“Because of that, we argued all day that day,” Keelan said. “Until we came up with a compromise. You would continue to be in our lives, but we would take the risk of X seriously, learn as much as we could about him, and talk about our concerns.”

“One of those concerns, which required many discussions, was what we would do if X found you,” Knox said, drawing my attention back to him. “There isn’t a sure way of how to handle it if he does, but we came up with a few game plans and we’ve been doing our best to be prepared if he does.”

“Prepared how?” I asked.

“Run or fight, Shi,” Creed said, reminding me of what he’d made me promise.

I looked at all of them. “You’d run with me?”

“I wouldn’t have promised that if I hadn’t meant it,” Creed said, finally looking at me. He was mad and rightfully so.

I moved to get down from the counter and Knox stepped aside. I walked over to stand in front of Creed. “If Mr. X ever shows up, I have exit plans. I’ll tell you guys all of them. I have two safe houses to run to. The closest is in Colorado. The other is in Alaska. Both are secluded. I’ll tell you exactly where they are. I have multiple passports and IDs with different names on them. I’ll show them to you.” I told all of them this, but I never stopped staring at Creed. I’d tried to break our promise. Twice. A simple *I’m sorry, I won’t do it again* wasn’t enough. “If we have no choice but to run and we get separated, you will know how to find me.”

Creed stared at me for the longest time and I was beginning to think I might have to grovel. Without saying a word, he unfolded his arms and hooked one around my lower back, pulling me to him. His other arm went across my shoulders, and he hugged me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered into his neck.

His response was to hug me tighter.



Later that night, we settled down watching the Food Network. A few of the shows we watched were cooking competition shows where you had to take random and odd ingredients and make a delicious meal out of them. The guys made me laugh as they really got into it.



As it got late, Knox was the first to stand from the couch and announce that he was headed for bed. I perked up, expectant of a hug or a kiss or pretty much anything extra beyond an announcement. Colt, Creed, and Keelan always kissed me somehow, be it on my mouth or forehead, when they went off to bed. Knox didn't even spare me a glance.

I relaxed back against the couch, feeling disappointed.

"If you want to spend the night with him, you're going to have to march in there and tell him," Colt said. I looked at him and found him watching me.

I hadn't slept in Knox's room since the night he'd picked me up off my closet floor. That next morning, I'd given him my first hand job and he'd ruined it by telling me it had been a mistake.

"I don't think he would be comfortable with that," I said and tried to focus on the TV. I could feel all three of them staring at me, so it was hard.

"Knox is a fucking idiot," Creed muttered as he stood from the couch. He grabbed my chin, made me look up at him, and kissed me. "I'm going to bed."

Colt got up from the couch, too, and kissed me on the head. "Goodnight, babe."

"Goodnight," I said to both of them.

As they went to bed, Keelan laced his fingers through mine. "Did something happen?"

*Great question.* Ever since what had happened at the store yesterday and the way Knox had abruptly ended our kiss, it had felt like he was avoiding me.

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

Keelan gently bumped his shoulder with mine. "The only way you'll know for sure is if you talk to him."

He was right. I knew I had to. I supposed now was the time.

I gave Keelan a quick kiss and made my way toward Knox's room. I tapped on his closed door.

"Yeah?" he said from the other side.

I walked in. He was already in bed, but sitting up against the pillows with his phone in hand. I closed the door and leaned against it.

Just seeing him, doubt started to sink in.

What if what I was feeling was all in my head? Was I just being insecure again? Or needy? I didn't want him to see me that way. I had enough things working against me already.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I...uh...will you kiss me goodnight?” Heat quickly spread across my cheeks after I blurted that.

He set down his phone on the nightstand. “Come here.”

When I was standing next to the bed, I expected I’d have to lean over to kiss him, that it would be quick and awkward.

Knox grabbed me by my hips and pulled me down across his lap. I was sure I was a sight, overcome with surprise, especially when he cupped the back of my neck as he leaned in and kissed me. I let him have this moment. Even though I wanted to kiss him back and deepen the kiss, I let him set the pace.

Knox pulled away, his eyes dancing all over my face. There was heat in his gaze that made me want to touch him, but I kept my hands in my lap. He combed his fingers through my hair and pushed it back behind my shoulder. I squeezed my hands into fists as he leaned forward and pressed his mouth to my collarbone. Then he pulled the strap of my pajama tank off and began kissing the entire length of my shoulder.

With each kiss, my resolve to hold back became more and more undone. His mouth traveled south until he reached the top of my breast, over my heart. My top was barely covering that breast. It was one deep breath from exposing my nipple.

“Knox,” I whispered. To beg him? To let out my frustration? I wasn’t sure.

His hand slid up my back and his mouth hovered over mine. “You’re shaking.”

“You’re doing that to me,” I said against his lips.

“I know,” he said and kissed me.

His lips moved over mine in such a devouring and needy way that my resolve finally snapped. My hands slid over his shoulders and I pressed closer to him. I reciprocated his kiss with equal neediness and the eagerness to be devoured.

He pushed me down on the bed without removing his mouth from mine. His hands began roaming all over me. Up my bare thigh until he reached the bottom of my shorts, down my sides, over my shirt, over my hips. As a hand slid up my body, it got caught under my shirt. At the feel of my bare stomach, he stiffened. I felt him shutting down and he broke our kiss. “We should stop,” he said in a detached voice as he sat up.

His hand pulled out from under my shirt. It was then that I realized he had been touching my scars.

I sat up and scooted away. “Was it my scars?”

He appeared taken aback. “No.”

This wasn’t all in my head. “Are you wanting to take things slow?”

“No. That’s not it.”

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked, letting my insecurities show, but what choice did I have? This was the second time he’d shut down and pulled away with me. Something had to be going on.

“No,” he replied quickly. “It’s just been a long day.”

Why did that feel like a lie?

“All right.” I clambered off the bed. Disappointment burrowed deep in my chest as I went to the door. “Goodnight,” I said, glancing back at him.

*Ask me to stay.*

He was running his fingers roughly through his hair as he frowned down at the bed. “Goodnight.”

I ran into Keelan in the hall. Smiling, he said, “Hey—” His smile dropped slowly as he looked from me to Knox’s door behind me. “What happened?”

I shook my head. “He’s tired.”

Keelan glared at Knox’s door. “Creed’s right,” he mumbled as he put an arm around my shoulders and ushered me into his room. “Let’s go to bed.”

I EXHALED SLOWLY TO EXPEL ANY REMAINING NERVES I HAD AS I SET MY alarm before leaving the house. I was wearing the new white leggings and sports bra I'd gotten at the mud run. There was only a three-inch gap of skin showing between where the sports bra ended and where the top of my leggings began. My stomach scars were covered.

At Desert Stone, it was Derek's day off and Creed was covering the front desk. The moment I walked through the door, he spotted me. Creed smiled until his eyes dropped to my sports bra. He stood abruptly, frowning deeper and deeper the longer he stared at my chest and the sliver of skin I had exposed. "I love you," he practically growled.

My head canted to the side slightly. "I love you, too?"

He sighed through flared nostrils. "Because I love you, it's going to take a lot of fucking effort not to kick every guy's ass in here."

"Why is that?"

He gave me a look. One that told me he wasn't buying my ignorance.

I held back a grin as I glanced down at my outfit. "Don't you like it?"

"Oh, I like it. I've thought of five different ways I want to take it off you since you walked in."

My grin broke loose, and I began to make my way around the desk. "I'm going to take that as a compliment."

The phone rang and before he answered it, he grumbled something under his breath about getting into a fight.

Hiking the strap of my gym bag further up my shoulder before it slipped off, I made my way toward Keelan's and Knox's offices. I checked on Keelan first to see how he was doing and to make sure he wasn't pushing

himself. His office was dark and empty.

“I made him go home. You missed him by ten minutes.”

I turned and saw Knox working at his desk in his office directly across the hall.

“Is he all right?” I asked as I stood in his doorway.

“His head was hurting.” Before I could react, he added, “He was pushing himself being here and I had a talk with him. He’s going to take the next couple of days off and give his body time to heal.”

I squeezed the strap of my gym bag. I couldn’t change what had happened to Keelan, but I could help make up for it. Making life a little bit easier for him was a good way to start. One way I knew how to do that was to cook. Comfort food always made me feel better when I was under the weather. I could even make some meals that were easy to reheat for when Knox was at work and the rest of us were at school.

Looked like I was heading to the store again. Not that I minded. I loved grocery shopping. The idea of Jacob lurking about, though, made me nervous.

As soon as that unease tried to overwhelm me, I fought it back. I couldn’t do that to myself again. I would not cower in my home, too afraid to leave. I had to live my life. I didn’t want to see it pass me by because of someone else anymore. I had my ankle tracker on. I had a gun under the seat in my car. I could defend myself. I would not relinquish any aspect or moment of my life to Jacob. If I did, he’d win, and I was tired of bad people winning.

“Did you need something?” Knox asked as he worked at his computer.

After last night, I wholeheartedly felt he was bothered by something and he wasn’t being honest with me about it. It was why I was tempted to say no and just go for my run. I wasn’t going to, though. I needed to be patient and hope that whatever was going on would resolve itself or he’d eventually talk to me. I stepped inside his office and shut the door.

At the sound of the door closing, he paused in the middle of typing and tracked me with his eyes. As he did, I caught him taking in my outfit with a similar frown to the one Creed had given me.

I dropped my gym bag in one of the chairs in front of his desk as I made my way behind it. He pushed his chair back a little and swiveled to face me.

I leaned against the edge of his desk and bumped my knee into his lightly. “I wanted to check on Keelan and ask you something.”

He sat silently, waiting for me to continue.

“It’s been mentioned a few times that I need to work on strengthening my upper body,” I said. “It’s also been mentioned that I should ask you for help with that. I would also prefer that it was you helping me, but I also understand that you’re super busy. So if you are unable, maybe you can recommend one of your trainers and—”

“I will help you.”

A smile overtook my face. “You will?”

His gaze bounced all over my face.

“What?” I asked, resisting the urge to touch my face. Was there something on it?

“Nothing.”

“Knox, what is it?” I said a little firmly.

“You asked for help with something, and you looked so happy,” he answered.

“I’ve asked for help before.”

He scoffed. “If you’ve ever asked any of us for help, it has been out of desperation.”

“I like to do things on my own,” I grumbled.

“We know. How’s that new swing of yours coming along?” he asked.

That was harsh, but point made. “You know why it’s hard for me.”

“I know.”

“I’m working on it.”

“I know,” he repeated, grabbing my hips and pulling me to stand between his legs.

I tried not to act surprised or awkward. I put my hands on the back of his neck and the tips of my fingers were poked by the tips of his buzzed hair.

Because he’d initiated this closeness, I decided to take a risk. I raked my fingers through his blond hair. He closed his eyes as I trailed my nails over his scalp, and I began massaging his head. “Will you help me build my swing?” I asked.

His eyes snapped open, locking with mine. “I can do that.”

As he leaned into my touch, his hands squeezed my hips a little and pulled me even closer.

“Since you’re in such a giving mood, can I ask for one more thing?” I asked.

He rested his head against my stomach. “You can ask me for anything.”

Warmth bloomed in my chest at those words. I almost stopped massaging

his head to savor the feeling. Almost. He seemed to be really enjoying what I was doing, and I found that far more satisfying. “Actually, it’s not a request, more of a heads-up. My friend Isabelle is looking for a part-time job and I told her about the front desk position.”

All I got in response was a grunt, which was perfect. I had no expectations of him. Desert Stone was the guys’ and it wasn’t my place to sway their decisions. But Isabelle was my friend and I wanted to at least say she’d apply. Knox could do what he wanted with that information.

His grasp moved up from my hips. I gasped at the feel of his warm hands as they slid over my exposed skin. His thumb rubbed over my ribs from the top of my leggings to the bottom of my sports bra.

An unbearable heat burned through me. “Knox.” I tugged on his hair a little, forcing his head back. He stared up at me with hooded eyes. I wanted to kiss him.

I released his hair instead.

He captured my wrist as I went to drop my hands at my sides, and he pulled me down.

The moment his mouth was on mine, I challenged him by trying to control the kiss. Every fiber of my being wanted this man and that was how I kissed him. I showed him how much I wanted him with my lips and tongue.

He let me. He didn’t pull away or shut down.

So I allowed myself to let go and just feel with him. I straddled his lap. My fingers returned to his hair as my mouth broke from his and traveled down his neck. Needing to taste him, I swiped my tongue along his skin.

I felt him shudder as my mouth trailed over the spot a few inches down from his ear. I paused there and ran my teeth over that sensitive area. His breath hitched as I nipped at that spot harder, then licked away the sting.

He let out a throaty growl and his patience for letting me have my way evaporated. He fisted my ponytail, forcing my mouth from his neck, and his mouth claimed mine. He kissed me that way, too. Like he was claiming me, and his tongue was what he used to brand me.

His arms hugged me and he stood. I didn’t have time to hook my legs around him before he set me on the desk. He gently pushed me to lie back and he followed without breaking our kiss. We knocked things over, crinkled papers. He didn’t seem to care. Instead, he shoved most of what was on his desk off of it as we made our descent. He leaned over me, standing in between my legs. I locked them around him, nestling him tightly against my

core.

His hands smoothed over my sports bra before he squeezed. I arched into his touch like an offering. With one hand he shoved my sports bra toward my neck and broke away from my mouth to take in my breasts. The cold air conditioning assaulted my nipples, making them peak. But it was his gaze that made them ache to be touched.

His warm hands pushed my boobs together before he nuzzled his face between them. The feel of the scruff along his jaw scraping against my sensitive mounds made me shiver. He ran his nose toward one of my nipples before sucking it into his hot mouth. He made me writhe beneath him as his tongue and teeth took turns torturing me. My legs tightened around his hips and I bumped against his hard shaft in his pants. We both groaned and he rocked his hips, grinding himself against me. The feel of him behind the roughness of his slacks against the thin material of my leggings was like stoking the flames of a fire. It made me hotter and hotter.

“Knox,” I moaned, so close to coming.

He stilled.

*Oh, no.*

It was as if the sound of my voice had the same effect as a bucket of ice water on him. He removed his mouth from my breast and flattened his hands on the desk by my upper arms. He stared down at me for a long moment, eyes taking in my exposed breasts, my flushed skin, my labored breathing. “Shiloh—” he started to say.

*No. No. No. No.*

Dread hit me. “Knox, please,” I pleaded.

The papers on his desk crinkled as his hands fisted. “We should stop.”

“Why?” I didn’t ask to pressure him. I asked to understand.

Before he could answer, Knox’s office phone began ringing. A red light blinked in sync with the ringing next to a button that said *Front Desk*.

Knox let out an exasperated sigh and hit the button. “Yeah?” His tone was curt, but held a lot less annoyance than I was currently feeling.

“Did I interrupt something?” I could hear the smile in Creed’s voice.

“Yes,” I answered at the same time Knox said, “What do you want?”

Creed laughed. “Sorry, Shi. Knox will have to make it up to you later.”

*No, he won’t do that.* That bitter thought clanged through me, hammering the feeling of rejection around the walls of my heart.

Knox stood straight, giving his full attention to Creed. I let out a very,



very frustrated sigh.

“Your next interview is here.” Creed continued to talk to Knox as I worked to calm my body down.

“Which one is it?” Knox asked.

Creed laughed again. “It’s hard to think when all the blood has left your brain and gone straight to your di—”

“Creed!” Knox barked, which made Creed laugh some more.

“What are you laughing about?” I heard Colt ask distantly through the phone.

“Nothing,” Creed responded to Colt. With his laughter gone, but mirth still riding his voice, Creed finally answered Knox. “Katrina Mills. She’s interviewing for assistant manager.”

Knox’s eyes lit up with recognition. “All right. I’ll be out in a couple of minutes,” Knox said and hung up.

Knox helped me sit up and watched intently as I put my boobs back into my sports bra. “You’re hiring an assistant manager?” I asked, ignoring the whiplash he was giving me.

He nodded. “It’s very hard for all four of us to have a day off together and when we do, I constantly get calls or messages from staff covering us that day. It’s even worse when we take a vacation.”

I did notice Knox on his phone a lot. “You’re hiring one in case Mr. X shows up, too, aren’t you?”

“We’ve wanted to hire one for a while, but the possibility of X did incentivize us to do it sooner rather than later.”

I retightened my ponytail that he had tugged on, and I hopped off his desk. My whole body was still buzzing from what we’d done—or hadn’t finished. I was going to have to take my sexual frustration out on my run. That, or take a really cold shower.

Knox stuffed his hands into his pockets as he watched me dig through my gym bag for my earbuds and water bottle.

“I’ll come up with a schedule to start working on strength training,” he said, as if what we’d just done hadn’t happened.

I nodded and headed for the door.



I pushed myself hard for the hour that I ran. Sweat slid down my neck and back, soaking my sports bra. I tried to cool down with one last walk around the track. A few runners passed me as I did.

By the time I made it to where I'd left my water bottle in the cubbies by the stairs, I wasn't panting as hard and the air conditioning blowing on my sweat caused my skin to break out in goosebumps.

As I began to chug my water, I caught a male runner, passing by on the track, doing a double take at me. I didn't think much of it until two women running by did the same.

Frowning, I glanced down, and quickly covered my boobs with my arm. "You have got to be kidding me," I snapped. My soaked sports bra was see-through. What made it worse was that the air conditioning was making my nipples hard.

Freaking out, I looked down at my leggings. The front was fine. I spun in a circle trying to look at my butt. I couldn't tell. They weren't as soaked as my bra, but that didn't reassure me. Feeling self-conscious, I held my water bottle over my butt as I rushed through the gym.

Both Colt and Creed were hanging out at the front desk. Creed was seated and swiveling the desk chair side to side as he talked with Colt, who was standing with his back to me.

Creed saw me and frowned at the distress I was obviously showing. "What is it?" he asked as I approached.

Not in the mood to explain here, I removed my arm from my chest to show him. Colt turned around at that moment, drinking from a water bottle as he did. His eyes met mine for a millisecond before dropping to my chest. Once he saw my predicament, water sprayed from his mouth. Both of them gaped at my chest—Colt wiping his chin as he did.

Letting out a frustrated grunt, I quickly covered my chest and dashed for Knox's office. As I barreled down the hall, Colt right on my heels, I heard Creed yell for someone to cover the front desk for him. I stormed into Knox's office, relieved his interview was over. Still holding my arm over my breasts and covering my butt with my bottle, I beelined for my gym bag.

My frustration skyrocketed when I didn't find it in the chair where I had left it. I spun around searching, not seeing it anywhere. I looked at Knox. "Where is my bag?"

He was giving me a strange look. "What's wrong?"

Creed walked in at that moment and went to stand next to Colt, who was

giving me a sympathetic look.

I dropped my arm from my chest again. There was no sense in covering up. Everyone in the room had been up close and intimate with my boobs.

Knox's brows rose and leaned back in his chair. "Not the first time I've seen white athletic wear do that."

"I own other white athletic wear and they aren't see-through." Which meant that the people who'd made the one I was wearing used poor materials. I let out another frustrated noise that teetered on the edge of a whine. "I just flashed a bunch of people on the track, and who knows how many saw my butt if it's see-through there, too."

"Turn around and we'll see," Creed said.

I did as he said and moved my bottle out of the way.

"It doesn't look like they are," Colt said.

"Bend over and touch your toes," Creed ordered. "They might be with the fabric stretched out."

Again, I did as told and I touched my toes.

The room went silent for a few breaths.

"Well, it's a beautiful view," Creed said.

Slamming my hands over my butt, I straightened and whirled around to face them.

"Since when do you wear a thong?" Creed asked.

My cheeks were flaming hot. "I wear them when my leggings aren't dark enough or are too thin to hide panty lines."

"Mmm," Creed hummed. "Is there any chance you will model them for me later?"

When I didn't think I could get any redder, they loved to prove me wrong.

"Creed," Colt chastised halfheartedly as he fought not to smile.

That didn't deter Creed's teasing. "Or you can take off your clothes now and show me. It's not like they're covering much, anyway."

"Creed." That time it was Knox and it was far from halfhearted.

"And how would I model them?" I blurted, rebelling against Knox. I knew I needed to be patient, but I'd have been lying if I'd said I wasn't a tiny bit mad at him. I had done something that bothered him, or it was something about me that did. Either way, it was me and he refused to talk to me about it. "Would you like me to strut like I'm on a runway? Or would you like me to dance and really show them off at every angle?" I was proud of how serious

my voice sounded.

Stunned and silent. That was what they were as they gaped at me for a good minute.

Creed recovered first with a smirk that threatened to turn the dirty teasing around on me. "I vote for the dirty dancing."

"I didn't say it would be dirty. I'm sure I can dance tastefully," I said, refusing to back down from this flirting game we were playing.

Creed didn't back down, either. "It doesn't matter what type of dance you do. You'll still be in nothing but a little white thong and I'll still want to rip it off of you when you're done."

Knox muttered something under his breath. I couldn't hear it, but I knew Creed heard. I could tell by the way the laughter in his eyes dimmed.

"Even the robot?" I asked.

They all smiled at that.

Though Creed was grinning, it didn't reach his eyes anymore. "Any dance, Shi, and I'll still want you," he assured and then his expression turned serious. "But I'm not your only boyfriend here. So unless you're ready to dance with three of us, we should save the modeling for another time."

Knox plopped something on his desk, drawing all of our attention. It was my gym bag.

I scooped it up and hung it on my shoulder. I was going to let it go and head to the bathroom, but my feet didn't move. I wasn't ready to back down just yet. And I wasn't referring to Creed. I squeezed the strap on my gym bag. "What if I am ready?"

"You're not," Knox said with a firm tone.

Colt and Creed stayed quiet, which made me assume that they agreed with Knox.

"I don't know how else I can say this to make any of you understand." It was difficult to hide my irritation. "It is *my* responsibility to set boundaries on what I am or am not comfortable with and let you know what those boundaries are. It is *not* for any of you to assume or decide what those boundaries are for me," I said, staring at Knox. "I know I come off as innocent and I've been through something tragic, but I'm not too ignorant or fragile to make decisions for myself. If any of you aren't comfortable with something, then own it. Don't pull back and say it's for my benefit."

Leaving them, mostly Knox, to hopefully process and understand my words, I stalked to the bathroom. I shut the door calmly even though I wanted

to slam it.

“Creed.” I heard Knox’s muffled voice through the door. I leaned close, practically holding my breath so I could hear everything that they were saying.

“Don’t start,” Creed snapped. “You don’t get to call the shots. Each of our relationships with Shi and what happens between us is our business. I’m done listening to you. Stop trying to dictate the pace of my relationship and stop saying it’s what’s best for her. I love her and I trust her to know what she can handle. Can you say the same? You may not love her yet, but do you trust her?”

The room was quiet behind the door.

“You’re the one with the issues, Knox,” Creed said. “And after what she just said, it’s safe to say she can see it, too. I recommend you deal with it. Talk to her, because I know my girlfriend well enough to know that she didn’t humor the idea of modeling in her thong wholly for my benefit. She did it to challenge you.”

“You don’t have time to go in there, Creed. You’re covering the front desk,” Colt said.

“I’m taking my lunch break,” Creed said, his voice getting closer.

I barely stepped back in time before the door swung open and he walked in. I folded my arms across my chest. “Have you heard of knocking?”

He shut the door behind him. “I have a feeling you knew I was coming.”

My lack of response was his answer and he grinned knowingly.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

His eyes dropped to my chest. I had caught a glimpse in the mirror and my sports bra was still see-through. “I came to apologize.”

I arched a brow. “Oh, really?”

“Yup.” He took a step closer. “I figured I could either tell you how sorry I am, or I could show you.”

He was so close, his stomach brushed against my folded arms. “Show me how?”

He traced the tip of his finger along the scooped neckline of my sports bra, faintly touching the tops of my breasts. “I could start by taking this off.”

My toes curled in my shoes. “Is this one of the five ways you imagined taking my clothes off?”

“How I got you alone didn’t align with any of my ideas, but how I’m about to strip you...I think I’ll go with my third idea.”

“And that is?”

His eyes locked with mine as he knelt. “Quickly,” he said as he lifted my ankle to remove my shoe. “The faster I get you naked, the faster I can have you squeezing around my cock as I fuck you against the shower wall.”

His words sent a pulse between my legs. “H—how does that prove you're sorry?”

He removed my other shoe, his gaze still locked with mine. “I won't hold back anymore, Shi.”

OUR CLOTHES WERE STRIPPED AWAY IN THAT FRANTIC AND NEEDY WAY. CREED paused when I was standing before him in only my thong and he before me in all his naked glory. The grin that took over his face as he slid his hands down my hips and over my bare butt cheeks was pure sin.

“Turn around,” he ordered after giving my butt a good squeeze.

I did as he said, and when he told me to bend over, I was having déjà vu. Again, I did as he asked. “My underwear isn’t see-through,” I said as I grasped my ankles.

“I’m not trying to see if it’s see-through, Shi.” The deepness and low tone of his voice made me shiver.

“Then what are you hoping to see?”

I felt him step closer before his finger hooked around the back of my thong where my tailbone was. He tugged on it, making the fabric pull tight along my slit. “I wanted to see how well this tiny strip covered you.” He tugged on it again, making the thong rub against me.

I squirmed a little. “And does it?”

His other hand grabbed me by my hip. “It covers all the places I want to lick.”

I squirmed again, rocking my hips and bumping against his hard shaft.

He chuckled. “Feeling eager, Shi?”

“How long are you going to keep me like this?” I was beginning to feel frustrated, and he had barely touched me yet.

“You look so sexy bent in half I’m debating fucking you like this.” His hand at my hip lifted and came down on my butt cheek in a loud, slightly stinging slap. The sound echoed in the small, tiled room.

“I was promised shower sex—”

Before I could finish speaking, Creed tugged on my thong hard enough to rip it off.

“Creed!” I gasped and went to stand straight.

I didn’t even make it halfway before his hand slid up my spine, stopping me. “Let me have you like this first and we’ll finish off in the shower.”

Complying, I bent back down and grasped my ankles.

Holding me by the hip with one hand, he aligned himself with my entrance with the other. I let out a gasp as the tip of him entered me. Letting go of himself to grab my other hip, he began easing his way inside me. Once he bottomed out, I let out a sigh.

“Are you relieved to have me inside you?” He withdrew almost all the way.

“I’m not feeding your already-big ego.”

With a tight grip on my hips, he thrust back in, making me cry out. He withdrew again slowly. “Come on, Shi. Tell me you love it when I’m inside you.”

When I didn’t, he began sliding just the tip of his cock in and out of me. It felt good, but drove me crazy at the same time.

“Creed,” I grumbled.

“Shiloh,” he challenged.

I tried to rock back to take more of him in, but his hold on me held me still.

He chuckled. “Why must you be stubborn?” His hand came down on my butt in another loud slap. “If I don’t hold back, you don’t hold back.”

I yelped. “Fine! I love it when you’re inside me. Now please fuck me!”

Creed slammed into me, and I swore I saw stars. It was either from that or from being bent over for too long. I quickly began to not care as he continued to thrust into me.

The sounds of us slapping together and our heavy breathing filled the small room. Listening to it slowed down the moment and made it more erotic.

His strong grip around my hips kept me from falling forward, but the pleasure that was building inside me was causing my legs to shake and my knees to buckle. “Creed,” I whimpered.

He pulled out of me and manhandled me to face him. The world spun from me being righted so quickly and it didn’t stop spinning until I was lifted into his arms by the backs of my thighs. I barely got my arms and legs locked



around him before he was back inside me, thrusting. My legs tightened around his waist and I began meeting him halfway in a bouncing motion.

He let out a groan. “You bouncing on my cock is the sexiest fucking thing.”

His words spurred me on, and I took over, riding him as he walked us into the shower. He turned the nozzles and cold water rained down on us. I froze and was mid-gasp when his lips captured mine. His tongue took advantage of my open mouth and began plundering in a way that heated me up from the inside out. I barely noticed as my back met the cold tiled wall. All I could concentrate on was his tongue and the way it stroked mine and the feel of his cock moving in and out.

With the support of the wall, one of his hands began to roam. He slid it up my wet body to my breast. He squeezed and kneaded the heavy-feeling mound that fit perfectly in his warm hand. His attention moved to my nipple. I moaned as he tweaked it between his fingers.

Then his hand moved down and around to my butt. My breath hitched as it slid between my butt cheeks and his finger began rubbing my back entrance.

He broke our kiss to stare at me. His eyes bored into mine, searching for any objection as he pushed his finger inside. I arched at the sensation of being stretched there. Stopping him never crossed my mind. We had done this before. I knew it would feel good. I also knew this was his way of easing my fears of being taken this way. In this regard, I could understand taking things slow. But there was a difference between taking things slow due to my inexperience versus withholding because they thought I might break. No one liked to be treated like they were fragile. At least, I didn't, because I was terrified I'd start to believe it.

Creed understood that and it made me love him even more than I already had.

Once his finger was all the way in, my body arched and I dug my nails into his shoulders. I became a little delirious when he started moving that finger in sync with his cock.

“I'm going to come.” Just as the words left my mouth, I shattered. Eyes squeezed shut and my head resting on the tile wall, I rode the waves of my orgasm.

Creed never stopped moving inside me. Instead, he amped up his speed, which didn't give me any time to recover before another orgasm began to

build.

I tensed up when I felt more stretching at my back entrance.

“Relax, Shi. You can take one more finger.”

I forced myself to relax and just feel. Of course, it felt good. Better, even. I was so gone on the pleasure I started to beg him to make me come. “Please, Creed! Please!”

He did this scissoring motion with his fingers. That, combined with the way his cock ravaged my pussy, made me detonate.

I came screaming, which Creed quickly smothered with a kiss. His thrusts turned shallow as I clamped around him. Slamming into me one last time, he grunted against my lips as his own release shuddered through him.

Panting, he fell against me, pressing me harder into the wall. He cursed. “I came so hard, my legs almost gave out.”

I snorted and I unlocked my legs from around his waist to stand.

“You have no room to laugh,” he said with a quick peck on my lips.

“All my blood was rushing to my head.”

He chuckled. “Same. It just went to the lower one.”

“Creed!” I tried to chastise, but I couldn’t stop myself from laughing.



One of the biggest things Logan had taught me was to never let my guard down. I couldn’t afford to with Mr. X still out there. Before the guys had come into my life and planted roots, I’d been sure that would never happen. I hadn’t been able to fathom that I’d ever feel anything other than fear of him appearing at any minute, or that I’d forget the pain of what I had lost for even a moment. But my guys had changed all that. They had brought happiness back into my life.

Unfairly, time slowed with bad moments and sped up with the good. That was one of life’s many harsh lessons I’d learned time and time again. I needed to cherish the moments I felt happy, no matter how short-lived they seemed to be.

Which was why I was smiling, enjoying the lightness in my normally heavy soul as I walked through my front door. My time with Creed in the shower had been playing on repeat in my mind during my entire trip to the grocery store and all the way home.

As soon as I was through the door, I set all the grocery bags I'd decided to lug in one trip so I wouldn't have to go back out to the car on the coffee table and then went over to the alarm. It was at that instant my short-lived happiness evaporated.

The alarm wasn't beeping. I always set the alarm. I specifically remembered doing it before I'd headed to the gym.

Panic surged through me as I realized the danger I'd allowed myself to walk into.

I held my breath as I strained to listen for any sign that someone was in the house and pulled my phone from my pocket. I texted Logan. I was tempted to text the guys, but stopped myself. Keelan was the only one home and he was already hurt.

What if it was nothing? What if I hadn't set the alarm properly? I didn't want to interrupt their lives any more than I had, especially if this was a false alarm. But what if it wasn't? I squeezed my phone, torn. I had texted Logan. *He'll have to be enough*, I thought as I slid my phone into my pocket.

*I need to leave.* The door was right behind me. However, my feet stayed planted. Stupidly, I wanted to see. I needed to know for sure if it was a false alarm or if *he* had found me. I'd never be able to sleep in this house again if I walked out the door right now without knowing for sure.

It was stupid.

Beyond stupid.

But for my sanity, I stayed. As quietly as I could, I crept to the coffee table. Reaching under, my fingers brushed along the underside. My panic increased as I slid my hand from one end of the table to the other, not finding my gun. Quickly, I went over to the TV and found the gun I had hidden there also missing. My heart in my chest was pounding so hard, it felt like it was trying to rip its way out of my chest.

*Never mind.*

I couldn't brave this unarmed.

Trying not to breathe, I took a step back toward the door. Then another. A handful of steps and I would reach it.

Shattering my nearly silent attempt at escape, the shrill of a phone ringing went off in my pocket. I didn't even think of silencing it. What would be the point? I spun on my heel and ran for the door.

I didn't hear or sense anyone chasing me as I grabbed the door handle. Ripping it open, I felt relieved. That was, until Sheriff McAllister stepped

into view, blocking the way out.

“You have a lot of guns for a girl still in high school,” he said, taking a step inside. Like all the times I’d seen him before, he was wearing his crisp uniform.

I had no choice but to retreat backward, further inside my living room and further away from my chance at safety. “What are you doing in my house?”

My stomach sank as he closed the front door behind him. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly as he stalked across the room toward the couch and took a seat. The predatory confidence he exuded caused my stomach to drop. “I figured we could have that conversation,” he said, draping an arm across the back of the couch.

I fisted my hands at my sides. “You don’t want to have a conversation. You’re here to threaten me again.”

“Seeing how you haven’t dropped the charges against my daughter, I’m assuming I wasn’t clear enough on what would happen to you—”

“Your threat was perfectly clear,” I cut him off. “Hang me from the nearest tree, wasn’t it? Oh, and you got the man who drugged and tried to rape me out of jail. I know you have power and the lengths you’d go to protect your own. My lack of action isn’t due to naivete.”

“Then what is?”

“You’re a bully like your daughter. Or I should say that your daughter is just like you.” I stood confidently, refusing to give this man the satisfaction of seeing me intimidated.

His hand resting on the back of the couch fisted until his knuckles turned white. It was the only sign of his anger. “I did some digging on you.”

I fought to keep my face schooled as panic wreaked havoc inside me.

“I found your school records, birth certificate, and your previous addresses. What I found intriguing was the lack of any social media. What teenager in this day and age doesn’t have a Facebook? I also couldn’t find a single picture of you other than the one on your Arizona driver’s license. Did you not drive before moving here?”

“I had extremely protective parents,” I lied.

“Speaking of those parents...they died in a car accident?”

“Is there a reason you’re telling me my life history?” I deflected.

“That’s the thing about your history. It’s too perfect.”

“We all have to excel somewhere,” I quipped.

He stood from the couch, and I dashed for the front door. Quickly, I

turned the knob and got it open before he could get close enough to touch. Refusing to give him my back, I went out on my front porch.

He stopped walking on the threshold and smiled up at the camera pointed at the front door. “There are too many things about you that beg questioning,” he said as he continued to stare up at the camera. Then he looked back at me. “If you don’t drop the charges, I might be tempted to dig a little further to find out why.”

He walked out of my house, and I pivoted to the side as he passed me. I watched until he walked across the street to an unmarked red truck. After he drove away, I went back inside.

I found my bedroom ransacked. My mattress was flipped and flung to the side and the drawers in my nightstands and dresser were ripped open. Clothes and my underwear were spilled on the floor. All the cabinets in the bathrooms were open. The spare bedroom looked like my room. The door to my panic room had a dent in it, like someone had thrown their shoulder into it trying to break the door down. I went inside and it didn’t look like he’d gotten in. The only other room that seemed untouched was the living room and I had a feeling that had been done purposely. It was to give me a false sense of safety to keep me in the house long enough for him to cut me off at the front door.

All the cabinets were ripped open in the kitchen as well and I found all the guns that had been hidden around the house lying lined up in rows on my kitchen island.

I gripped the edge of that island, eyes staring down at my guns without really seeing them, as what had happened sank in. It was another home—another place I was supposed to feel safe in—taken away. Violated.

What if it had been Mr. X?

I’d known.

*I. Had. Known.*

It didn’t matter how many guns and cameras I had.

It didn’t matter where I went.

Nowhere would be safe.

I would never be safe.

The confidence and quick wit that made me my lawyer father’s daughter were withering. Now fear and panic were taking over, crushing and overwhelming me to the point I couldn’t breathe.

My chest rose and fell rapidly, but the air still didn’t seem to fill my

lungs. My heart boomed in my ears as I eased down to the floor. I was going to pass out soon if I didn't find a way to breathe.

*Keelan.*

Keelan was home.

I pulled my phone from my pocket at the same time a voice said, "Shiloh."

Startled, I dropped my phone on the floor.

"Christ, Shiloh!" Shoes pounded on the floor until Logan knelt next to where I was on the ground on all fours. "What happened?" He put a hand on my back.

Like a knee-jerk reaction, I shrugged his hand off and, in the process, I knocked my phone a few feet away. "I can't breathe," I forced out as I started to crawl for my phone.

Logan grabbed me by the elbow, stopping me. "Shi—"

"Don't touch me!" I snapped, yanking myself free from his grasp. I didn't trust him. I didn't trust that he wouldn't take advantage of me in this state. I couldn't fight back. Not when I was moments away from clawing at my throat, hoping it would produce an airway.

He put his hands up, glaring at me as I dove for my phone. Tears blurred my vision as I dialed Keelan's number.

The moment his cheery voice answered, "Hello, gorgeous," I was finally able to suck in air.

Expelling a sob, I rested my forehead on the ground. Hateful tears dripped from my eyes as I thought, *One step forward, five steps back*. That was what it was. Every. Fucking. Day. I hated myself at that moment. I hated how weak the five steps back made me feel. I hated how hard it was to stay determined in the face of very little progress. I hated that Logan was witnessing it all. Because it would be all he saw. Because it was what everyone saw. The weak, broken parts. And I would be treated differently for it. I didn't need to be coddled or handled like cracked glass. What I needed right now was for someone to scream at me to get up. But it was an unreasonable expectation to have of others. I had to find it in me to do it myself.

"Shiloh?" Keelan said, his tone turning serious.

"Please come over," I said numbly.

Keelan hung up after saying he was on his way. I let my phone clatter onto the wood floor and sat up. My whole body trembled and felt weak.

“Shi,” Logan said.

Slowly, I looked in his direction. He was still kneeling in the same spot a handful of feet away. He studied me with an expression that approached a glare. Did my lack of trust piss him off? Did he expect me to forgive *and* forget that he had drugged me? Regardless of the reasons, what he’d done had consequences.

I wiped away the last of the tears I’d let fall down my cheeks. “The sheriff paid me a visit.”

“Did he hurt you?” he asked in a detached way. I couldn’t tell if he was asking only out of obligation or if he was having such difficulty talking to me, he had to dissociate.

I shook my head.

Keelan walked in then and took in the room quickly. When his eyes landed on me, I saw a flicker of relief in them. Logan stood and a not-so-friendly look was exchanged between them as Keelan passed him to come to me. For only a second did he stare at the guns laid out on the island before he knelt next to me. He cupped the sides of my face. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Strength returned to my voice with that one word. Pushing up on my knees, I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face in his shoulder. I breathed him in deeply before exhaling slowly, and as I did, I tried to let go of some of my hate.

I’d gotten up. I’d done it on my own. It was one step forward and I had to believe it was significant. My mother had.

SITTING AT THE DINING ROOM TABLE, I TOLD LOGAN EVERYTHING. I TOLD HIM about Jacob and how he had approached me at the grocery store, about Gabe and how he had threatened me at the mud run, and lastly, everything the sheriff had said. Keelan asked how the sheriff had gotten in with the alarm set in the first place. Logan's assumption was that the sheriff had had the security company disarm it, intercepted the call from the alarm company after he'd set it off, or snuck into the house in the time I'd disarmed the alarm and rearmed it.

“There’s no way to prove the latter to be true because all the cameras around the house were covered with pieces of duct tape. And I won’t know if the alarm went off until I call the alarm company,” Logan said tightly as he glared at the table.

After that, he didn’t say anything for the longest time. Not that he needed to. He may have been silent, but the irritation that radiated off of him said enough. With the way Keelan squeezed my hand under the table, he must have sensed it, too.

Abruptly, Logan scooted his chair back and made his way over to the guns lined up on my kitchen island. “When is your next session with Dr. Bolton?” he asked as he picked up one, released the magazine, studied it as if to see if it was full or had been tampered with. When he didn’t find anything amiss, he reloaded the gun and moved on to the next one.

“Tomorrow,” I answered.

“Good. You can tell her how you still get panic attacks.”

My stomach sank. I was unsure why he felt the need to announce that, but I was sure I was about to find out.



Logan's eyes flicked to Keelan. "You know she has those, right? I know you know about the nightmares. What about the PTSD? Have you witnessed that yet? One minute, she'll be standing there talking to you and the next, a noise or something you say will trigger an episode. She won't see you. She won't hear you, and don't think about trying to pull her out of it. She'll think you're X and things could get violent."

Keelan eyed Logan in an assessing way. "Is there a reason you're telling me this?"

For a moment, I wondered why he hadn't admitted he knew about the PTSD or that he'd helped me through multiple episodes. Then I saw Logan's reaction. Something flickered in his eyes. Triumph? Glee? Arrogance? All three? "It's not easy taking care of someone with PTSD."

I looked down at the table to hide the hurt I knew was showing in my eyes.

Keelan squeezed my hand again. "When you love someone, you are there for them, even when things aren't easy."

I glanced at Keelan. *Did he just admit he loves me?*

Without taking his eyes off of Logan, he brushed his thumb over the back of my hand.

"That sentiment right there is what makes you naive. Until you realize how much you'll constantly need to be there for her and how it interrupts your life, you will never understand."

"So what you're saying is that being there for Shiloh is inconvenient?" Keelan asked with a tight voice.

The triumph in Logan dimmed a little. "What I'm saying is that being there for someone with PTSD is hard."

"Is that why you turned a blind eye to it?" Keelan questioned. "Shi's trauma was too hard for you, so you ignored the fact that she was self-destructing?"

Logan's nostrils flared as he exhaled. "Don't twist what I'm saying. You have no idea—"

"No idea of what?" Keelan snapped. "No idea how to be there for someone I love? Or how about being there for someone while I'm suffering, too?" Keelan's chest rose and fell rapidly as his anger started to show. "I watched my mom die slowly when I was eleven. I held her hand in the last hours of her life as she fought to breathe. She died in pain and scared and unable to take in enough air to say the last words she wanted to say to us. My

family's world was shattered with her loss. My older brother withdrew and was hell-bent on self-destructing. My father shut down for years, and in that time, I was left with taking care of my little brothers who didn't fully understand that their mom was gone or that Dad was too grief-stricken to be there for them. At eleven, I set myself and my pain aside so I could be what they needed. Then I did it again when my dad died."

I squeezed his hand this time—a silent way to tell him I was here.

"I'm not saying you're a bad person for failing to step up because you were suffering, too—"

Logan slammed his hands down on the counter. "I did the best I could!"

"And what about now?!" Keelan yelled back. "Are you doing your best for her now? Or what's best for yourself?" Fuming, Keelan continued before Logan could speak. "Tell me this: If you got your way right now and you relocated her, how long before you abandoned her again to satisfy your need for revenge?"

Logan glared at Keelan with venomous rage and Keelan stared right back at him, calm and looking unimpressed.

"You don't want to relocate her because you think my brothers and I will compromise her safety," Keelan said. "You want to do it because it's an easier and faster solution than dealing with the sheriff. But Shiloh won't leave because of me and my brothers. So that's where you're focusing most of your attention. You're grasping at fucking straws trying to tear us apart so you can get what you want. It's why you brought up her PTSD."

"I was trying to get you to understand the hardships you'll face by being with my niece," Logan ground out.

"No. You weren't," Keelan seethed. "You were using Shiloh's PTSD to manipulate me into leaving her. And that tells me that the deal you made with me didn't mean a thing. It wasn't a test to see if I could protect Shiloh. You made that deal with me because you didn't think I could beat you."

He was talking about the fight between them. Logan had said I could stay if Keelan could beat him, and Keelan had beaten him.

"Everyone handles grief differently, which is why I understand your need to hunt down X no matter what. At the same time, you're hurting Shiloh, and that's not okay. Your actions cause ripples," Keelan explained. "Did you know that anytime we try to help or be there for Shiloh, she thinks of herself as a burden? After hearing you refer to PTSD as inconvenient and hard, I now know why she thinks that way."

Logan straightened his stance. And just by looking at him, I knew Keelan's words had fallen on deaf ears. "You don't get to sit there and lecture me, boy. You have no idea the danger you and your brothers are inserting yourselves into. And for what? Pussy? You'd be better off finding a nice, normal girl. Better yet, you could find one you don't have to share."

All I could do was gape at Logan. I had no words. Just feelings. The hurt and betrayed kind. And even if I did say something at that moment, to him it wouldn't matter. He'd only listen to respond, not listen to understand. Logan was so consumed with desperation—the desperation to keep me safe and the desperation to hunt down Mr. X. And right now, one interfered with the other.

Slowly, Keelan pushed back his chair and stood. "Let's go," he said, staring down at me.

Nothing was said as we walked around the table or as we passed Logan until Keelan paused just before exiting the room. He glanced back at my uncle. "To answer your question, we know about the PTSD. We've witnessed it." He seemed like he was going to part ways with that, but the muscle in his jaw clenched. "If you ever make my girlfriend's trauma seem like a burden again or refer to her as just pussy, you won't walk out of the hospital next time we spar. I'll make sure you have to be wheeled out."

For a split second, I thought I saw guilt flicker in Logan's eyes before he looked away.



Keelan helped me carry the groceries that had been forgotten on my coffee table over to his house and then helped me unpack and put them away. Right away, I tried to lose myself in the task of preparing reheatable meals I'd planned for Keelan and a hearty dinner for tonight. Unfortunately, it didn't work. My mind raced as I collected ingredients, then began chopping vegetables and herbs. What had happened with Logan had been too shocking—too ugly to ignore.

Keelan sat at the island, quietly watching my every move. "I'm here when you're ready," he said with a gentleness that nearly shattered my fragile will to stay strong.

I paused in my chopping, knife mid-slice through an onion. "I could take

the awful things Logan said to heart. I could let it feed into my already-heavy guilt. But I'm not going to." I continued chopping. "Grief can be a catastrophic thing. You can let it destroy either you or those around you. I know I'm making it sound like a choice. It is and it's not. Like all things in life, how grief is handled is based on choices. What no one prepares you for is how cruel and manipulative a bastard grief can be or how it uses your pain to beat you down again and again. Grief clouds the roads laid before you and it's so easy to get lost."

With a heavy sigh, I set down my knife. My eyes kept blurring and I didn't want to chop off a finger. I glanced up at the ceiling to regain my composure. "I can choose to be mad and hurt right now or I can set those feelings aside and understand that Logan is lost in his grief. I knew he was hurting. I just...I just didn't know how badly until today."

"Grief doesn't excuse hurting others," he said. "And you're allowed to feel hurt by him, because he will hurt you again and again, and every time he will rationalize doing so."

"Because he's desperate to get back to hunting Mr. X."

Keelan nodded. "You're allowed to reach that moment where enough is enough and not tolerate anymore. But when you reach that moment is up to you."

I sniffled. "I can't give up on him."

"Explaining to him that you're done being hurt by him isn't giving up on him."

"What if he doesn't respect that?" I asked.

He gave me a sad look. "I don't know. But whatever happens, you won't have to face it alone."

I nodded.

"What are you cooking?" he asked.

I told him what I had planned to do for him to make life a little bit easier while he healed.

"You're doing this all for me?"

Giving him my back, I started adding ingredients to a pot. "Isn't that what you do for someone you love? Be there for them, or in this case, offer comfort the best way you know how in a difficult time?"

I heard his chair move before I felt his presence behind me. With an arm around my waist, he spun me to face him and held me against his chest. His eyes held mine. "You love me?"

I swallowed loudly as I did my best to find courage. “Yes.”

He gave me the happiest smile before leaning down to kiss me. It was such a loving kiss. Unhurried in a way that ensured every moment of it would be sown into my memory. The feel of his lips, his taste, the way he held me.

His arm moved down from my waist and under my butt before lifting me up. When he began carrying me out of the kitchen, I realized he wasn't supposed to be doing that. I ripped my mouth from his. “Keelan! Put me down.” Even though he was carrying me with his good arm, he still had a concussion, and I didn't want him straining himself by lifting me.

“I'm fine,” he argued as he walked us into the dining room.

“Put me down,” I said firmly.

With a sigh, he pulled out a chair from the table, spun it around, and sat with me straddling his lap. His hands roamed up and down my back before settling on my hips. “I'd planned on taking you to my room, where I intended to make love to you, but seeing you like this...” He rocked my hips with his hands, grinding me against his already-hard cock. “I'd rather you ride me in this chair.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck and nipped his lips. “Oh, really?”

His fingers latched onto the bottom of my top. I assisted him in removing it by lifting my arms. He dropped my shirt on the dining room floor and my bra followed in the same manner.

Keelan pressed his lips to the hollow of my throat and licked his way down to the top of one of my breasts. His teeth came into play there, biting lightly as he made his way to my nipple. When he reached it, his tongue lapped over the hardened tip, making me shiver, before he sucked it into his mouth.

“Have I told you how much I love your breasts?” he asked as he cupped my other boob in his hand.

Sliding my fingers through his hair, I huffed a laugh. “I believe you have. But if you'd like to tell me again, I'm all ears.”

He tugged on my nipple with his teeth, making me hiss and arch my back. His tongue licked away the sting and then he pulled away, his hand taking over for his mouth. He weighed my heavy-feeling breasts in his hands before pushing them together. “I love them so much that one of these days, I hope you let me fuck them.”

Fighting a smile, I said, “Sounds messy.”

He gave me a dirty grin. “Oh, baby girl, I plan to make a mess all over

these.”

I put my hands on top of his. “Are my boobs the only thing that you love?”

He grabbed my hands and brought one to his mouth. He kissed my palm. “I love your hands. Especially when they’re wrapped around my—”

Snorting, I yanked my hand away from his mouth. “Dirty Stone boy.”

His grin broadened and he recaptured my hand. He brought my wrist to his mouth and pressed his lips over the scarred flesh. “I love this,” he said. Then he brought my other scarred wrist to his mouth. He kissed me there, too. “I love this.” His mouth traveled up my inner forearm, right over the long, jagged scar that went from the crease of my elbow down to my wrist. He kissed me there and a breath shuddered out of me. “I love this,” he said again, and I had to blink away the burn in my eyes.

He kissed me on my shoulder, my collarbone, my neck, each of my cheeks, and my nose. Each time saying, “I love this.” The last place he kissed was over my heart. “I love this most of all,” he said as he pulled away to level his gaze with mine. “I love all of you, Shiloh.”

I sat there unable to speak because I was doing my darnedest not to cry.

He brushed my cheek. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to cry topless,” I said with a wobbly voice.

Laughter filled his eyes. “We wouldn’t want that.”

“Don’t laugh,” I said. “You’re supposed to look sexy topless, not a booger-y mess.”

Keelan snorted.

“Keelan,” I chastised.

He closed his eyes and cleared his throat. “I’m not laughing.”

“Yes, you are,” I said, and my shoulders involuntarily shook.

His eyes shot open. “If I can’t laugh, you can’t laugh.”

“I didn’t laugh.”

“I felt you laugh.”

I bit my lip, but as I stared at him, I cracked, and I started laughing.

Smiling, Keelan’s eyes dropped to my chest. “I take it back. You can laugh as much as you want.”

I threw my arms over my shaking breasts.

He pouted like a child who’d gotten his favorite toy taken away.

Rolling my eyes, I leaned forward and kissed him. “I love all of you, too. Even your obsession with my boobs.”

He kissed me back and things quickly went from sweet and tender to hot and aching.

“You have two options,” he said. “We can take this to the bedroom and there, I’ll make love to you. Or I’ll fuck you on this chair, and though I’ll do it with love, it will be filthy, and it will be rough.”

Smiling, I answered with, “I’ve never had sex on a chair.”

He smiled back. “Stand up.”

I climbed off his lap, and he wasted no time unbuttoning my jean shorts. He pulled them, along with my underwear, down my legs slowly, revealing my sex to himself like a present. He sure stared at it as if it was a gift he always wanted.

I helped him out of his shirt, careful of his shoulder as I did. Lifting his hips, he shimmied out of his pants and boxers. Our clothes littered the floor around us.

I stood in front of him and let him stare at me. “What are you thinking about?” I asked.

“All the things I want to do to you.”

“What things?”

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

I nodded and stepped toward him, intending to climb onto his lap.

He caught me by my hips. “Turn around.”

I did, giving him my back. Guiding me by my hips, he pulled me into his lap, my wet core landing right on top of his hard length. He groaned, grinding his shaft against me. “Already soaked for me.” His hands glided over the tops of my thighs until he reached my knees. “Open your legs.” I let him spread me open wide. “Lie back.”

As soon as I rested my head on his good shoulder, his hands began running all over me—my stomach, my ribs, along my sternum between my breasts. He guided my arms over my head and around his neck, then ran the backs of his hands along the undersides of my upper arms and down the sides of my breasts. He touched me everywhere but the places I wanted him to touch me most.

“Look at you,” he said. With me lying against him, he had a direct view down the front of my body.

His fingers began to draw circles on my stomach, moving lower and lower before veering off toward my thigh.

Squirming, I begged, “Touch me.”

He chuckled as he ran one finger across my pelvis, inches from where I was pulsing, to the top of my other thigh. “So impatient.”

“You’re teasing me. Why?”

His lips trailed along my neck, his tongue tasting my skin as he did. “Because I love watching you squirm for me.” His fingers did agonizingly slow swirls back toward my center of my pelvis. “Because I want your pussy aching for me.”

My hips bucked when his fingers stopped centimeters above my pulsing clit.

I felt his lips stretch into a smile against my jaw. “Because I love it when you beg for me.”

“Please, please touch me,” I begged, giving him what he wanted and hoping in return he’d give me what I wanted.

“Good girl,” he whispered, and his fingers dove between my legs.

My body arched as he found my clit. He rubbed it gently and slowly. The worst combination when it came to that little spot.

“More, Keelan,” I breathed.

His other hand went to one of my breasts and began tweaking the sensitive peak of my nipple between a thumb and finger.

That wasn’t exactly what I wanted more of, and he knew it, too.

Then the pressure and movement disappeared from my clit as his fingers stopped moving.

I let out a frustrated growl and my hand shot down on top of his. With my fingers guiding his, I added the pressure and movement needed.

His chest bounced beneath me as he laughed silently. “You going to show me how it’s done, baby?” His husky voice filled my ear.

“I wouldn’t have to if you would stop teasing me.”

He sucked the lobe of my ear between his teeth before he whispered, “Then show me how you make yourself come.” He moved our hands, swapping their places, and now his were on top of mine, guiding my fingers to my clit. “Show me.”

I gave myself a heartbeat to let what he was asking sink in before I began working my clit in the way I knew how to get myself off.

“That’s it,” he encouraged as his fingers left mine and moved lower. He plunged two fingers inside of me, making my breath hitch. He curled his fingers inside me, and he began rubbing a spot that made my legs squeeze around his. An intense and warm pressure built—one that I wasn’t used to



feeling when trying to find release.

“Keelan, what—”

“Don’t stop. Keep rubbing that little clit and relax,” he ordered as he dropped his other hand from my breast to wrap his arm around my ribcage, holding me to him.

I didn’t understand why he’d done that until his fingers inside picked up speed. I cried out and my hips bucked up. I wanted to get away and beg him not to stop at the same time. Through the delirium, I remembered the arm he had around me was his hurt one and I forced my body to settle as I felt the peak coming. The moment I reached it, the most intense and wonderful contractions rippled inside of me at the same time I felt a gush of wetness hit my inner thighs.

“What—” In a panic, I tried to sit up. Keelan’s arm around me held me still.

“Relax, Shi,” he said and pulled his fingers from me.

“Why does it feel like I peed?”

“You didn’t. I made you squirt. That’s why everything feels wet.”

“Why?” was all I could think of to say. I knew what squirting was and never thought it would happen to me, which was why I still wasn’t sure if I should be embarrassed or not.

“Because I wanted to make you feel good and because it was hot as fuck,” he replied as he brought his drenched hand to his mouth. He gave his fingers a quick lick and closed his eyes. “You taste so sweet. Next time we do that, I’m going to bury my face in that pussy and lick every inch of you clean.”

And just like that, any hint of embarrassment vanished, and I was ready to go again. Only this time I wanted him inside of me. I tapped the arm around me so he would let me sit up. “Well, so far you’ve delivered on the filthy part,” I said over my shoulder.

He gave me a cocky smirk. “I’m not done with you yet.”

TUESDAY MORNING, ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL, COLT WAS QUIET AS HE DROVE. Actually, he had been quiet since he'd come home from swim practice last night. At dinner, he had seemed lost in his thoughts as he'd pushed around his food.

I had put my hand on his knee under the table. When that had gotten his attention and while his brothers had been engaged in a discussion, I asked him in a low voice, "Are you all right?"

He had perked up a little. "I'm worn out from practice. I think I might just go to bed," he had said before pushing back his chair to get up from the table.

After Colt had retreated to his room, I had noticed the table had gone quiet. I'd glanced at Colt's brothers and seen them exchange looks.

Seeing the question written on my face, Knox had been the one to answer. "Colt can be very hard on himself."

"He doesn't like to let down those he cares about," Keelan had added, and I had found that neither of what they had said made sense.

"It's not going to let anyone down to quit," Creed had said.

"You felt the same not that long ago," Knox had pointed out. "He needs time, like you did."

"It's different for him and you know it," Creed had argued. "He'll stay on the team no matter how much he hates it. He needs to drop the golden-boy act and just be who he wants to be instead of what others expect him to be—or if we're being transparent, what Dad wanted him to be."

"Creed," Keelan had chastised.

"You know it's true," Creed had snapped. "For as long as I can remember, he has bent over backward to please Dad. He was afraid Dad

would check out again like he did after Mom died if he disappointed him. To an extent, I was guilty of that, too, because I also had that fear, but in the end, it didn't matter. Dad's gone. Yet Colt still acts that way. It's like he's been doing it for so long, he doesn't know any other way to act. And it's eating him up on the inside."

As they had volleyed back and forth, I'd sat there silently, piecing together the information.

After we parked in the school parking lot, I overheard Creed mumble to Colt as I climbed out of the car, "If you want to quit, then quit. No one is—"

"Don't," Colt snapped. After he climbed out, he slammed the car door shut and stormed for the school's entrance without us.

Frowning, I glanced at Creed as I rounded the car. He rolled his eyes at his twin and held out his hand to me. "Let's go."

Once inside, Creed veered off toward his locker and I caught up with Colt by ours. His body was stiff as he pulled the textbooks out for our first class. Feeling unsure, I reached out to touch his back, and as my fingers brushed his lower spine, someone behind me coughed, "Whore." Laughter echoed off the hall walls.

I spun around to find Cassy, Amber, their friend Sam, Gabe, and a few of his teammates standing in a group a few meters away. All of them were staring in my direction.

Colt wrapped an arm around my middle and his chest pressed against my back. "Ignore them."

Creed joined us, with Ethan and Isabelle right behind him. Creed's stare was indifferent as he eyed Cassy and the rest of them.

"It is way too early to be dealing with their shit," Ethan said, blocking my view of them.

Isabelle came to stand next to Ethan, also blocking my view. "They're miserable and have to make everyone else miserable as well."

I looked from Creed to Ethan to Isabelle and realized that they had formed a wall between me and Cassy's clique. I smiled, despite the uncomfortable situation that stood on the other side of them, because I truly had amazing friends.



We were ordering food tonight. Knox was working late. Apparently, a good number of people had applied for the front desk position, and he had scheduled a bunch of them to come in and interview today, Isabelle included. So it was just four of us eating together tonight. Keelan had put in an order to the diner after Colt had texted, telling us that he was on his way home from practice.

Creed, Keelan, and I were sitting in the living room when Colt walked through the door. Right away, I could tell he was upset, and it was more so than he had been after practice yesterday. “Hi,” I greeted with a hint of hesitation.

Colt dropped his keys in the bowl by the door. “Hey,” he said in a sullen tone.

“Food will be here soon,” I said as I watched him head toward his and Creed’s side of the house.

“I’m going to go change,” was his response. With how detached his voice was, I could tell he was fighting to sound calm. I wasn’t the only one who noticed, either; the guys were eyeing their brother, too.

Colt didn’t utter another word as he disappeared down the hall toward his room. The sound of Colt’s door shutting was loud. Not like he slammed it in a fit of rage, but it sounded like there was a little bit of force behind it.

Creed and I stood at the same time.

“Let me go,” I insisted, and Creed sat back down.

When I came to Colt’s door, I tapped lightly, “Colt?”

“You can come in, babe.”

I went inside, shut the door behind me, and leaned against it.

Colt was in the middle of changing out of the clothes he’d worn to school. He was standing before his dresser in only his jeans. Without looking at me, he pulled out gray basketball shorts and a white shirt.

The temperature in the room rose very quickly as he unbuttoned his jeans and shoved them down his legs. He caught me watching and a tiny smile softened his tight expression. In nothing but his briefs, he walked across the room and tossed his jeans in the laundry basket. “Did you come to watch me?”

I’d seen him naked, yet there was something about seeing him or any of my guys in their underwear. Maybe boxer briefs were to me as lingerie was to a man. I cleared my throat. I had a reason for being here. “I came to see if you wanted to talk.”

Instead of returning to where he'd left his clothes on top of the dresser, he moved for me with angry heat in his eyes. "There's nothing to talk about," he said tightly as he reached for the doorknob.

When I heard the click of the lock being turned, my stomach did a little dip. Grabbing me by my hips, he captured my mouth with his.

How did I get him to talk to me? He was barely containing his anger, as if the Hulk side was scratching just beneath the surface. I could tell by the way his tongue barreled its way into my mouth, dominating mine, and the rough touch of his hands that moved from my hips to my butt. He gave it a squeeze before he lifted me up.

I wrapped my legs around him as he carried me over to the bed. He fell to the mattress with me landing on my back and him on top of me. His mouth moved to my neck and his hips rocked, grinding his hard cock against my center.

Gone was my gentle, caring boyfriend. The person on top of me felt like a stranger, but still had the ability to set my body on fire. Before I melted, I put my hands on his shoulders. "Colt—" I tried to protest, not because I wanted him to stop, but because he was angry. I wanted to comfort him. I wanted to destroy the reason that upset him. I wanted to make it all better.

He pulled my hands from his shoulders and pinned them to the bed. He lifted enough to stare down at me. "I don't want to talk about it."

The irritation behind his voice ignited my own. I easily got my hands free, not that he was using much strength to pin them, and with perfect technique I rolled us, putting him on his back with me straddling his waist. I pinned his hands to the mattress. Staring down in anger, I debated what to do.

Lying there with zero resistance, he grumbled, "It was a bad day at practice."

*Lies.*

My first instinct was to rip him a new one. He had been trying to use sex to deflect.

Colt closed his eyes and sighed through his nose. "I'm sorry if I was rough. I—I shouldn't treat you that way."

After listening to Creed last night, I was beginning to think what he had said was right. I'd always thought Colt had two sides. One side of him was good, gentle, patient, selfless, and stood up for those he cared about. Honestly, he could be too perfect at times. Then there was his Hulk side. It was full of rage and defiance, itching to fight. Both sides were extreme. I

wondered if one was who he strove to be and the other existed out of resentment.

Assuming that was all true, I got the feeling that I was wrong about the deflecting. Maybe Colt needed an outlet. Maybe he needed a moment to not be so perfect and really embrace that Hulk side.

“Do you want to be rough with me?” I asked.

His eyes shot open, and a panic took over him. “No, I—”

“More lies,” I cut him off. “If you don’t want to be gentle with me, then don’t. I’ll let you take me any way you want. You know why? Because I trust you. But if you tell me one more lie, you will ruin that trust. You suffer, I suffer, remember?”

As I threw his words back at him, his eyes widened a little.

“So I’m going to tell you what I’ve picked up on over the past couple of days and you’re not going to deny any of it.”

He clenched his jaw as if to physically stop himself from objecting.

“You hate being on the swim team.”

That statement brought his anger to the surface. It showed in the lowering of his brows.

“But you won’t quit, because like Creed, you don’t want to disappoint your dad. But it’s not just your dad, is it? You feel like you can’t quit because you have always been viewed as the reliable one—the good twin. You know others’ expectations of you are higher than they are for Creed.”

“Stop,” he snapped.

“Why? Because you don’t like facing the truth?” I challenged.

He didn’t deny it. He didn’t deny anything that I had said. Instead, he pulled his hands out from under mine and sat up with me still straddling him.

He refused to meet my eyes. I cupped his face. Making him look at me brought our faces inches apart. “It’s just you and me in here. You don’t have to hide what you’re feeling. You don’t have to be perfect with me. Because I’m not going anywhere. You have me, Colt. Be selfish. Be angry. Take what you want, be who you want.”

He grabbed me by the back of my head and brought my mouth to his.

The way he kissed me was uncontrolled and untethered. He did not pause to see if I was all right or if I was sure about this. It was like he stopped letting his thoughts rule him. He was being in this moment with me completely. He was giving me the same amount of trust I gave him.

His hands grabbed the hem of my shirt and his lips broke away from mine

to yank it off. I reached for the back of my bra to unfasten it and he pulled the straps down my arms.

Grabbing me around my waist, he rolled us, putting me on my back long enough to rip off my shorts and underwear. Then he flipped me onto my stomach and yanked my hips up. The way he manhandled me revealed something about myself. I liked it, deliriously so. I didn't know what to expect, but I was excited for it nonetheless.

Colt stopped touching me just to shove off his boxers. There wasn't any foreplay. No warning. Colt aligned himself with my entrance and shoved inside of me. I groaned into the mattress.

Barely giving me time to adjust, he withdrew and slammed back in. His fingers dimpled my skin as he yanked me backward to meet each of his harsh thrusts. My toes curled at the slight pain and how it enhanced the pleasure.

He was unrelenting as he pounded into me. I made sure to muffle my loud moans into the mattress.

"I'm sorry, babe." His words were at odds with the way his body angrily slammed into mine.

I pushed up onto my hands and rocked backward, making him hiss. "Shut up, Colt," I groaned and rocked backward again. I knew he was having a moment, or he was saying what he thought he should say. Either way, I couldn't let his moment take root. "Shut up and fuck me." It was as much of an order as it was a plea.

He let out a frustrated noise and flipped me onto my back. Fluidly, he was back inside me. "You feel so good," he forced out.

My whole body rocked with each thrust, and he hit my clit every time he bottomed out. I arched, biting my lip to stifle my need to cry out.

His attention was captured by my bouncing breasts, and he grabbed one. "Do you like this? Do you like it when I fuck you this way?" His words could have been perceived as dirty talk, but I knew it was another moment of doubt. He kneaded my breast before his fingers went to my nipple. Tugging on it, he made me clench around him.

I reached up, snaking my fingers into his hair. "I love this. I love this so much," I whimpered and fisted his pretty blond locks. I was going to come. The more the feeling built and built, the more my body tightened up. "Don't stop."

Colt groaned as I tightened around his cock and his hand slipped up from my breast. The tips of his fingers grazed my neck. My eyes flicked to Colt's,

finding his fixated on the hand that was slowly inching up higher until his thumb reached the hollow of my throat. As his thumb pushed into it, a euphoric look took over him. His thrusts became shallower, harder, and they made me come undone.

As I shuddered and tried to muffle my moaning with my hand, Colt's release hit him.

For a moment, all that could be heard was our heavy breathing. Colt hadn't moved from where he held himself on top of me. His eyes didn't leave mine and I saw shame and regret fill them.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. "You and I are the same, Colt," I said to him. "I know what it's like to be the good twin. I couldn't bear the thought of disappointing my parents because I saw how Shayla's rebellious behavior upset them. That fear of disappointment spread to other areas of my life, when it came to school and friends. It's what made me shy and quiet, because if I wasn't outgoing or outspoken, then there were fewer chances to mess up. The pressure of always acting a certain way, always staying inside the lines, was too much. I loved my sister, but I resented her. I resented her freedom and her ability to not care about the consequences and to go about life with zero regrets. It wasn't until I lost everything that I realized what I had been doing was unfair to myself. Moving here, starting this new life, I realized I was given a chance to live it differently." I moved my hands to his cheeks. "You don't get a restart, but that doesn't mean you can't make a change. Life is fragile, short, and you only get one. So if you want to quit the swim team, then quit. Your brothers will understand, I will understand, and more importantly, your dad would understand if he were here."

His eyes became watery, and I knew my words were reaching him.

I smiled. "And if you want to have rough and wild sex again," I said, making him smile, too, "I won't love you any less. In fact, you might make me love you more."

His smile dropped and my heart sank.

Sliding his arms underneath me, he scooped me up as he sat up onto his knees. With my legs still locked around his waist, he buried his face in my neck and hugged me tightly. "You weren't supposed to say it first."

My shoulders slumped a little and I moved my fingers to his hair to massage his scalp. "And why is that?"

"Because I was planning on saying it. I had this whole speech thing I



wanted to say to you,” he said, pulling away from my neck to face me.

“We can pretend I didn’t say anything.”

The corners of his mouth lifted. “I don’t want to.”

“But I want to hear your declaration of love,” I said with a fake pout.

He snorted. “I wanted to say that the best thing to ever happen to me was when you moved in next door. When I brought over your mail after the first time we met, you answered the door and you had flour all over your face, and I realized right then that I was going to fall for you and there was nothing I could do about it. I think I started falling for you when you came to our swim meet dressed as a cheerleader with our name on the back of your shirt. And I knew for certain that I had completely fallen at Ethan’s party. You smiled so much that night. You seemed so happy and carefree, and it was beautiful to see. The best part about that night was that you had ended it by calling me a cockblock.” He chuckled as if he was remembering it.

“I didn’t actually call you that,” I grumbled.

“It was heavily implied, my little ballbuster,” he said, with an adoring smile. “I love you, Shiloh.”

I bit my lip to keep myself from crying. “I love you, too.”

He kissed me and we just held each other for a while.

As we got dressed, in a low voice, Colt said, “My dad really wanted us to go to college. It’s why he pushed us all into sports. He hoped we’d be good enough to get scholarships because even though his business was successful, it was still a lot to send four kids to college. He and my mom had been saving for us to go originally, but then she got sick, and my dad had to use that money for all the medical expenses.

“Creed had been the one to pick swimming and I figured, why not? It beat getting tackled over a ball or being stuck out in the heat, and turns out I was good at it. We both were. Creed was passionate when it came to the sport, but I’ve always looked at it as another responsibility because it made my dad proud.” He looked up at his trophies he had displayed on a shelf. “I needed him to be proud. Because I thought if he was proud, then he was happy, and if he was happy, he couldn’t be sad. After my mom died, he became this walking shell for almost two years. When he would look at us, there was just nothing in his eyes. No emotion. I know it sounds stupid, but I was scared that if he ever got sad again, he would turn back into that shell. So if Dad wanted me to play a sport, I’d play a sport. If he wanted me to get straight As, then I got straight As. If he wanted me to go to college, I’d go to college.

If he needed me to keep an eye on Creed or make sure Creed doesn't do this or say that or get into trouble, then I'd do it. I did everything he expected of me."

"Then he died," I said as gently as I could.

Colt nodded. "There was a moment after he died where I asked myself, what was the point? Why was I continuing to work this hard or strive for a goal that wasn't mine to begin with? I felt really lost for a time. I didn't leave the team because I didn't want to disappoint Creed. After the gym was up and running and started bringing in money, I overheard Knox and Keelan talking one evening. They had created college funds for Creed and me and they were talking over how much they could afford to pay into them each month. Then I overheard them say that if Creed and I got scholarships from swimming, then by the time we graduated, they'd have enough saved for us to go to college without worry."

He sat on the edge of the bed and took my hand. "I don't give a shit about other people or if I disappoint them. It's the ones I care about. You and my brothers. You are the ones I don't want to disappoint."

I squeezed his hand. "Your brothers love you and want you to be happy. I'm sure they created that college fund for you because they thought that was your goal and they were trying to do whatever they could to help you reach that goal. If you're honest with them and tell them that it isn't your goal, I know they will understand. Or if you do want to go to college, but hate being on the swim team, we'll figure something else out. And by we, I mean me, too. I'll help you look into other options to help pay for school." I stepped closer and wrapped my arms around his waist. "I can confidently say that none of us want you to continue doing something you hate because you don't want to disappoint us. Imagine if our roles were reversed. How would you feel about that?"

He tucked my hair behind my ear and gave me a sweet kiss. "Thank you."

THE NEXT DAY, AFTER SCHOOL, I WENT SHOPPING WITH ISABELLE. I WANTED to give the guys some time alone. Last night before bed, Colt had announced that he wanted to have a talk with his brothers. Without hesitation, they had agreed. Keelan had suggested that they go out and do something. Creed had come up with some ideas, like paintballing and going to dinner. Knox had rescheduled things workwise, so that he only had to work a half-day and would be present by the time the twins got out of school. I loved how they prioritized being there for Colt, and I hoped he saw that and it made talking to them a lot easier for him.

“How’d the interview go yesterday?” I asked Isabelle as we walked through a costume shop.

Isabelle frowned. “I don’t know. Knox is a hard person to read.”

I huffed a laugh as I flipped through the rack of clown costumes. “I’m sure it went great.”

“Is he always so intense?” she asked as she looked through mermaid and siren costumes. She was making her own costume for the party, but she had told me it was missing something, an element, and wanted to look around for inspiration.

“He’s like that with everyone. The more you get to know him, though, you learn to see past it.”

Isabelle glanced over at me, and I saw the questions written all over her face.

Smiling, I focused back on my search. “Just ask.”

“Are you—I know you’re with Colt and Creed, and no way am I judging you—” she rambled and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “But I

saw how you were at Keelan's birthday party with Knox and at the mud run with Keelan. Are you dating them, too?"

"Yes."

"Wow," was all she said for a moment. Then she blurted, "I bet you have amazing sex."

Instantly, my cheeks burned.

Isabelle laughed. "Sorry. I'm kind of jealous, but at the same time, I know I'd be overwhelmed with so many penises in the bedroom."

"Isabelle!" I gaped.

She giggled. "If our roles were reversed, you mean to tell me you wouldn't be curious?"

She had a point.

"Soooo," she drawled with a grin. "Are you going to give me some spicy tidbits? I'll share some I've had with Ethan."

"You want to talk about our sex lives?"

"That's what friends do. We share details." She wiggled her eyebrows up and down.

Trying not to smile, I said, "You and Ethan really are perfect for each other."

She sighed. "That man is my match, especially when we're naked."

I glanced around, hoping no one could hear us.

"You're blushing like you've never gotten naked with your guys," she said as she eyed me.

"I have," I whispered. "Well, not with all of them."

Her brows rose with intrigue. "Oh really? Who's the one holding out?"

"Knox," I blurted and winced. Maybe I shouldn't have said that. Was it a betrayal to Knox to vent my frustration to someone else? Or would it be a good idea to get an outside perspective?

"Why do you think that is?" she asked, moving closer.

"I'm not exactly sure. I know he wants me as much as I want him, but something is clearly bothering him. I have a feeling that when he looks at me, he sees a broken, fragile girl. Maybe I am or was. I lost my family and up until recently, I wasn't handling it the right way. But I am now. I'm working as hard as I can and what I need from them is to treat me normally—like I'm not broken and fragile, because if they can't see me like that, then how will I?"

With sad eyes, she put her hand on my upper arm. "Do they all treat you

like that? Have you tried talking to them?"

I nodded. "The other three have gotten better. Knox, though, I don't know. He won't talk to me. I've asked him if he wanted to take things slow and he said no, but the last couple of times we've kissed, things got heated and he got me so worked up, I just...I wanted..."

"You wished he'd bend you over and fuck you until you don't know your own name?" Isabelle offered.

"Yes! And each time he pulls away, I'm left feeling like a sex-crazed teenager."

"You have plenty of other guys to curb the horny hormones, so don't let his rejection make you feel insecure," she said. "And if he's not ready to be intimate with you, then he shouldn't lead you on like that."

"When we're in the moment, it's as if he can't help it. Like he so badly wants to forget what's holding him back. He manages to until something jars his focus from me and he's reminded."

"Hmm," she hummed as she appeared to ponder. "There are two ways you can handle this. You can continue to try and talk it out and hope you get through to him. Or, if you're brave enough, seduce the stubborn bastard. Show him you can handle everything he's got, because, Shi, you don't need him or any of your guys to think you're unbroken and strong to be that way. As long as you know it, that's all that matters. And maybe if you believe it, then he will, too."

I was a little taken aback as her words sank in. She was right. I shouldn't need the guys to treat me normally to feel normal. It sure helped. But I shouldn't have to look to them to gauge what I felt. I had to do it on my own.

"How would I seduce him?" I asked.

A big grin spread across her face. "What's his favorite color?"

Before I could answer, my phone started ringing. "One sec," I said to her, and she went back to sifting through the racks of costumes. I pulled my phone from my purse. The screen read *Unknown*. I still answered, thinking it might be Logan or Ian. "Hello?"

The line was quiet.

"Hello?" I said again, and when there still wasn't an answer, I hung up.

Before I could put my phone back in my purse, it rang again.

"Hello?" I answered. When all I got back was silence, I hung up, put my phone on vibrate, and tossed it back in my purse.

Trying not to feel unnerved, I continued to go through the clown

costumes. When I finally found Pennywise, I noticed they had multiple variations. Picking the two I liked best, I held them up for Isabelle to see. “Which one?”

She eyed the costumes. “Colt picked Pennywise as your costume?”

“*IT* was my favorite scary movie once upon a time.”

“Not anymore?”

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen it.” It was the best thing I could come up with without lying.

“You should watch it again. Oh! We can have a horror movie night. You can sleep over at my house or I can stay at yours. I’m free this Friday.”

The more she talked, the more excited she got, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her no. My throat became tight. “We can do it at my house.”

She clapped her hands excitedly. “Yay for girls’ night!”

It would be all right. The only way to get back things I’d lost was to take them back. Or was I being stupid? Had I just set us both up to be traumatized on Friday? I didn’t want to do that to Isabelle. Maybe my doubt was my fear talking? Would I feel like this the day of the party? Was I all talk and no action when it came to taking back my life?

I could do it.

I had to try.

I couldn’t let my determination be overpowered by fear.

If I flashed back to that night because of what I saw, then so be it. I had to face it. I had to face what had happened that night. I couldn’t avoid it any longer.

My eyes moved to the scars on my wrists and my memories tried to rise to the surface. I pushed them back down. *You don’t have to face them right now*, I scolded myself.

I found that since I’d stopped running until I dropped, it was harder to keep my memories from slipping to the forefront of my mind. And even though I was able to push back the memories, the feelings associated with them still rocked me to my core.

“I’m going to go try these on,” I said tightly and headed for the dressing room. As soon as I shut the door to the tiny room behind me, I released a heavy sigh. I hung up the costumes on a hook and stared at myself in the full-length mirror.

*Just for a minute*, I told myself as I touched the scars around my wrists. The skin was bumpy and discolored. The memories of waking up to rope tied

around them flashed behind my eyes, along with the feelings of terror and desperation. I rubbed my hands down my face as I remembered the urgency and need to get free—all of it had pushed me to tear away my skin. There hadn't been any pain. Being terrified of Mr. X returning had blocked it out. Too bad the terror hadn't blocked out the pain of my broken heart every time my eyes had been drawn to the tips of Shayla's shoes in the hall. It had been the only part of her body I'd been able to see from where Mr. X had tied me to my bed.

*Enough.*

Gritting my teeth, I pushed back the memories to where I kept them locked up. My whole body was shaking, and my eyes welled up.

"You're all right," I whispered to myself in the mirror. With trembling hands, I began changing.

I distracted myself with modeling the IT costumes for Isabelle.

"I'd go with the dress instead of the bulky bodysuit," Isabelle said. "You'll still look terrifying, but if we get you some white, lacy thigh-highs and some heels, you'll give your guys some twisted sexual fantasies."

I laughed and returned to the dressing room to get dressed.



Isabelle and I had gone to a handful of stores to get everything we would need for the party, as well as a few other things, like my secret weapon to seduce Knox, as Isabelle called it. As we headed for the exit of a store, I pulled out my phone to check if I had any messages from the guys. I had a couple of texts from them, but I also had six missed calls from that unknown number.

Again, I did my best to not let it unnerve me, because it could be a scammer for all I knew. As I read through the messages from the guys, Isabelle held the door open for me to exit. Once outside, I glanced up just in time to see Cassy and Amber a few feet away.

"There goes our nice afternoon," Isabelle grumbled.

Cassy gave me an evil smile as she approached. "It's a surprise that you have time for shopping."

When I refused to acknowledge her and her comment, Amber urged her on. "And why is that?"

“Well, I assumed sucking four cocks daily could be quite time-consuming,” Cassy said.

Still refusing to engage, I went to walk around them. I guessed I didn’t put enough distance between us, because Amber still rammed her shoulder into mine. My purse fell to the ground and some of its contents spilled out. Among them was my nightmare medication Dr. Bolton prescribed and my birth control.

Isabelle and I knelt at the same time, and she quickly helped me pick it all up as Cassy and Amber snickered.

“At least the whore is practicing safe sex,” Cassy said.

“The pill is just to prevent babies. The medicine in the bottle is probably for gonorrhea,” Amber said as they both walked into the store.

I grabbed my birth control at the same time Isabelle grabbed my nightmare meds. She didn’t even attempt to read the label as she handed them to me, but I still found myself babbling, “I get really bad nightmares and my doctor prescribed these to help me sleep. The only reason they and my birth control are in my purse is I never know if I’m staying at the guys’ or my place and I don’t want to forget to take them.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself, Shi,” she assured me. “I take birth control, too. For the most part, I keep it at home, but the few times I’ve been able to spend the night at Ethan’s, I’ve taken it with me.” Isabelle glared back at the store. “Is it wrong that I wish the worst upon them?”

“Nope. I’m waiting for karma to rain down on them.”



I STARED LONG AND HARD AT THE RED CAMARO NEXT DOOR. KNOX'S Camaro.

Tonight should have been Colt's swim meet, but with his brother's support, he'd quit. So he and Creed were working this evening. Keelan was also at work. It was his first day back after taking time off to rest. Having gone in early that morning, Knox was home by the time I got out of school. Which meant, if I wanted to, I could go be alone with Knox right now. In fact, he had already invited me through text, simply saying, "I'm home if you want to come over."

In the time that I stared at Knox's Camaro, I went back and forth on using the secret weapon Isabelle had suggested. He wouldn't talk to me, and I couldn't help but think his issues had to do with me. From things he'd said to his brothers about not wanting to rush me or insisting that I wasn't ready for certain things, maybe I was too innocent to him, or maybe he couldn't get past how damaged I was. If either of those were true, then Isabelle might be right. But did going over there in nothing but lingerie really prove anything? It definitely wasn't something a blushing, innocent girl would do.

I let out a frustrated noise and stomped to my room. This was it. This was the last time I'd put myself out there. Fuming and feeling determined, I stripped.

*What's the worst that could happen?* I thought as I put on the dark red lacy lingerie—a bra that pushed my breasts up to new heights and hip-hugging underwear that only covered the top halves of my butt cheeks.

*Being turned down in lingerie.* That was what could happen. My stomach sank a little. If this did blow up in my face, I hoped it'd at least get him to

talk to me. I knew this whole idea was far-fetched, but...

I straightened my shoulders. I needed to be confident.

*What do I have to lose?* I repeated that in my mind until I was standing outside the guys' house in a black peacoat that covered me to my knees and black heels.

*Go in the house, you coward.*

I walked in, head held high. "It's me."

Knox was sitting at the dining room table with his back to me. He was so engrossed in doing something on his laptop that all he did was raise his hand slightly above his shoulder in acknowledgment.

I silently made my way over to him. "What are you up to?"

"Just finishing up this email," he said as he typed away on the keys.

I came to stand next to him. "When you're done, I need your opinion about my outfit."

Nodding, he glanced in my direction for only a second. When his attention returned to the screen of his computer, his fingers paused over the keyboard. He looked fully at me, eyeing my coat and heels with a frown.

Like ripping off a Band-Aid, I unbuttoned my coat, revealing myself like a present, and let it drop to the floor.

I watched and felt his gaze glide down my body. It would have felt erotic if he hadn't done it with a scowl. No desire or heat, but a scowl—anger.

I felt the intense urge to cover myself. But I didn't want him to see me cower. I wanted him to see me as strong and confident. So I pushed past the rejection and embarrassment and dove into the constant, simmering pool of anger I had inside of me. I let myself sink into it and it surrounded me like armor. Putting my hands on my hips, I said, "You getting pissed off was the last thing I imagined happening when I found the nerve to come over here in nothing but red lingerie I bought to wear for you. Possible rejection or laughter, yes. But I never thought you'd look at me like that. Tell me, is it my body that offends you or is it that I've inconvenienced you with my attempt to seduce you?"

The scowl on his face disappeared instantly and was replaced with something that looked like guilt.

"Think quickly, Knox," I said. "Think of a new lie to turn me away and avoid talking to me."

"Why are you doing this?" was his response.

I was speechless as his words cut at my heart. He didn't know? This

wasn't supposed to be like this. Couples were supposed to communicate. Couples weren't supposed to lead each other on and then pull away. "Why are you with me, Knox?" I asked. "Clearly, you have some hang-ups you can't get past when it comes to me."

He had the audacity to look taken aback.

I stepped out of my heels. Why burden myself with the way they hurt my feet for someone who didn't give a damn? "All I'll ever be to you is that pathetic girl in her closet, won't I?"

He didn't deny it, but I wanted the words. I wanted confirmation that I'd be nothing more than a sad, traumatized girl in his eyes who he had to tiptoe around or handle like cracked glass. I wanted a boyfriend who saw me as strong, knew that I wasn't defined by what I'd gone through or how I'd almost let it destroy me. And it wasn't that I needed him to see me as strong to feel strong myself. I was getting there on my own. But the lack of trust he had in me was making me regret I'd ever let him see me vulnerable at all.

"Say something," I begged.

"I don't know what to say."

"What do you feel?!" I yelled.

His hands fisted so tightly his knuckles turned white. "I don't know."

I didn't believe him.

Feeling defeated, I picked up my coat. As I put it on, I said, "When you're ready to talk to me, you know where to find me." I scooped up my heels, and as I was about to storm out, I paused to say, "Until then, don't touch me, don't kiss me, don't do anything that will lead me on. I'm so tired of you pulling away from me. I thought you would stop when we got together. Apparently, I was wrong."

I stormed out after that, and as expected, he didn't come after me.



I told the guys I wanted to be alone tonight. A tiny part of me regretted that decision as I lay in bed, waiting for sleep to take me. I shouldn't push them away for what was going on with me and Knox. At the same time, I needed space to think.

Had I been wrong?

Was I overreacting?

Did I misunderstand something?

Why wouldn't he talk to me?

I didn't know when I fell asleep. One moment I was stressing about Knox and the next I was forcing my eyes open when I felt the bed dip. It was too dark to see much. But as a bulky body lay down in the bed next to me, I knew who it was.

Knox.

Too tired to care that I was mad at him, I snuggled closer and closed my heavy eyelids. He wrapped his arms around me, and I let myself drift back to sleep.

I woke again to hands touching all over my body. They squeezed and prodded. My shirt was shoved up and his warm hands groped both of my breasts. I felt too drowsy to enjoy it, my body too heavy to move, even when he trailed kisses down my stomach and stopped over one of my scars. He licked me there. Then the other one.

"I'm too tired," I mumbled as I felt myself being pulled back to sleep.

My legs were pushed open, bringing me back to semiconsciousness. I opened my eyes again as he buried his face between my legs. His nose rubbed against my clit through my pajama shorts as he breathed in deeply.

I weakly touched the one hand that he still had squeezing one of my breasts. "Please," I pleaded, sounding drowsy. "Let's do this tomorrow."

He stilled for a moment before returning to lie next to me. I fell back to sleep to him brushing hair away from my face.



"Babe." I woke to Colt shaking me.

I opened heavy eyes. He and Creed were both hovering over me. What were they doing here?

"Nope," Colt said, shaking me again and making me realize I had closed my eyes. "You gotta wake up."

"I'm tired," I mumbled.

"You need to get ready for school, Shi," Creed said. "You're already running late."

My whole body felt ice-cold and I curled up on my side. "Why is it so cold?"

“The temp finally dropped a little last night,” Colt answered.

“And all of your blankets are hanging off the end of the bed,” Creed added.

My eyelids felt like sandpaper against my eyes. Feeling more exhausted than I’d ever felt, even when I’d forgone sleep to avoid having nightmares, I tried to sit up.

I swayed a little just sitting there and Colt grabbed me by my shoulders to steady me. “Are you feeling all right?”

Hearing the worry in his voice, I tried to perk up. “I need coffee.”

“I’ll go brew some,” Creed said and left for the kitchen.

I scooted to the edge of the bed slowly, weakly. Colt stepped back for me to get up. I stood and began walking toward my dresser. My feet dragged and my vision filled with black spots until that was all I could see. Then I felt myself falling.

“Babe!” Colt yelled, barely catching me before I hit the floor.

The sound of shoes slapping on the hardwood floor got louder and louder. “What happened?” Creed asked frantically.

“I don’t know.” Colt scooped me up bridal-style. “She collapsed.”

“I’m okay,” I said as my vision cleared.

“Maybe we should take you to the doctor?” Creed suggested.

“I don’t want to go to the doctor.” I laid my head on Colt’s shoulder. “I just want to go back to sleep.”

“We’re going to take you back to our place, all right?” Colt said and began walking.

I closed my eyes. “All right.” Instantly, sleep grabbed hold of me again.



“Shiloh.”

I woke to the sound of Knox’s voice. He was sitting on the edge of the bed next to me. Right away, I recognized that I was in his room. I sat up, relieved I felt more awake than I had this morning.

“What time is it?” I asked, rubbing the back of my stiff neck. It felt like I’d slept so hard, I hadn’t moved at all.

“Almost three in the afternoon,” he said, watching me.

I’d climbed into bed last night around ten-thirty. I couldn’t remember

when I'd dozed off, but it couldn't have been longer than a half hour later. *Cheese and rice*, that meant I'd slept almost sixteen hours.

Looking away from Knox, I asked, "Why am I here?"

"Colt and Creed brought you over. They said you collapsed. I stayed home with you."

I threw off the blankets. "No, Knox. Why am I in your room? Did you think I forgave you last night?"

He frowned. "Last night?"

I frowned right back. "Yeah. You climbed into bed with me in the middle of the night and slept over."

"I didn't come over."

I stilled. Had it been Keelan? There was no way it had been Colt or Creed. Maybe I had been dreaming? *Fantastic*. I crawled off the opposite side of the bed because Knox was blocking the way on the other side.

"I made you a doctor's appointment," he said as I got to my feet, this time with zero dizziness.

"I feel fine. I was just exhausted," I grumbled, heading for the door.

"Are you not sleeping again?" he questioned.

"I've been sleeping fine," I snapped, hating his worry—the same worry he couldn't get over and that kept him from just being my boyfriend.

"You should still go and—"

I whirled around. "Stop it, Knox."

He stood from the bed and slid his hands into his pockets.

"I don't want to be someone you just take care of," I said.

"You're not," he said gently.

I wished I believed that. "I won't break. I won't let myself. I never want to see that girl in the closet again. I refuse to give someone the power to do that to me again. Not Mr. X. Not you."

His calm demeanor crumbled and as his agitation began to take over, he rubbed his hands down his face. "Shiloh—"

"I want more, Knox," I cut him off. "I want you to see me as more. Past the fractured parts."

He dropped his hands and his shoulders slumped. "I do. I wouldn't be with you if I didn't."

"Then what's going on?"

"I don't want to hurt you," he said.

Had he not heard a *damn* thing I'd just said? "Wow, your cock must be so

powerful,” I quipped, choosing the petty road. Why not, right? It was not like everything I had done up until now had worked.

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Really?”

I shrugged. “I’ve explained that you can’t break me in the emotional sense, yet you’re still worried. So I have to assume you meant in the physical sense.” I reached for the doorknob. “And just so you know, you couldn’t break my vagina. All those screams and moans I’m sure you’ve heard me make should attest to that, or you could just ask one of your brothers.” It was a low blow, but I wanted him angry.

His entire face hardened and he stormed toward me. I quickly ripped open his door and took off down the hall.

“Get back here, Shiloh,” he growled. I didn’t have to look back to know he was coming for me.

I turned sharply into the living room. It was empty, which made me assume everyone else was at work or school. I paused at the bowl by the front door, digging through it to find my keys. They weren’t there. *Crap!*

Spotting my house key with Knox’s keys, I snatched his up just as he entered the living room. I stepped toward the door and stopped after seeing that it was locked with the bolt and the chain. There was no way I’d get it unlocked before Knox caught me. So I dashed further into the living room and put the coffee table between us.

Knox looked pissed as he stood across from me on the other side of the coffee table.

“What’s wrong, Knox? Did I push you too far?” I taunted. “It’s not fun when people do it to you to get answers, is it?”

“You’re being a brat,” he said.

I smirked. “If only you’d allow yourself to spank me.”

Heat flared in Knox’s eyes, and it danced with the anger. “Why would I do something you might like too much?”

“Have you been talking to Creed?” I shot back.

“Are you trying to make me jealous?” he growled.

“Jealous?” I huffed a laugh. “You can’t bring yourself to have sex with me. So why would I ever think you would feel jealous over me?”

“If I fuck you right now, would that make this all better?” he asked as he rounded the table.

I moved quickly, keeping him across from me. “You’d have to be able to get it up first.”

“All I have to do is think about you and my cock gets hard.”

It was difficult to not let how his words affected me show. The way he confidently admitted that made my cheeks threaten to blush and my breathing almost hitch. “Could have fooled me,” I said, unwilling to lose the upper hand.

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “When I get my hands on you, it’ll either make us or break us.”

“Sounds ominous.” I did my best to sound unimpressed. “Tell me, do you plan to punish me or fuck me *if* you catch me?”

“Both.”

“And you think I’d let you? After everything?”

“You wouldn’t be trying so hard to piss me off if you weren’t going to.”

He moved to the same side, and I jumped in the other direction. Surprising me, he pushed the table against the couch and toward me with his foot. He assumed I’d jump to the side. Instead, I hopped onto the couch.

Losing his patience, he stepped onto the coffee table and lunged for me. I jerked backward and the backs of my thighs hit the top of the couch. Knowing I was going to fall, I let out a yelp. Knox tried to grab for me, but I ended up saving myself. Dropping Knox’s keys, I grabbed the top of the couch as the lower half of my body fell down the back of it. I landed not-so-gracefully on my knees.

Without missing a beat, I crawled until I was out of his reach and climbed to my feet. I dashed into the dining room as Knox leapt over the couch. I had nowhere to go other than the kitchen. Before heading there, I knocked over one of the table’s chairs, hoping to slow him down. It didn’t work. I barely made it into the kitchen when Knox’s arm caught me around my waist.

“Got you,” he said.

I instantly went limp in his arms, hoping he’d drop me. He didn’t. Instead, he lifted me and backed up into the dining room. I struggled against him, finding it no use, not unless I wanted to hurt him to get free.

Kicking the chair I’d knocked over out of the way, Knox set me on my feet and pinned me between him and the table. His hand pushed me between the shoulder blades and down. Before he could get me fully bent over, I slammed my hands down on the top of the table. When I refused to let him push me any further, he moved his hand up to my hair. Yanking my head back, he ground his hard cock between my butt cheeks. He was ready for me. He wanted me. But I refused to submit to my desire for him. We’d been here



before and he always pulled away.

His mouth came down on my neck. I felt his lips and tongue kiss to taste my skin before he bit down. I whimpered.

He loosened his arm around my waist and his hand found its way under my top. His fingers trailed across my stomach, slipping under the waistbands of my shorts and underwear.

He paused with just the tips of his fingers inside my shorts and kissed his way up my neck until he reached my ear. “Shiloh?”

My stomach fell and disappointment seeped in. I supposed it didn't matter whether or not I submitted to him. Hope had wormed its way in. “Backing down already?” I said angrily.

He tugged on my hair at the same time his hand dove into my underwear. Sliding his fingers between my legs, he cupped my sex. His lips grazed the shell of my ear as he said, “I’m not backing down, Shiloh. I was getting your consent. Because despite the threats I made about fucking you or punishing you, you say no and this stops.”

I was hesitant to respond. There was still so much unsettled between us. What if he pulled away at the last possible minute? “Please don’t stop, Knox.” It was a plea as much as it was a leap of faith.

The tips of his fingers curled toward my already-wet core. “So angry, yet so wet for me,” he said as he slowly pushed a finger inside of me.

My nails tried to claw at the table when he withdrew that large finger and added a second as he pushed in again.

Pumping those big fingers inside me, he let out a guttural noise. “I was afraid.”

I stiffened. “What?”

“I’ve wanted you for so long that I knew you’d make me snap,” he growled and pulled his fingers from me. He yanked my shorts and underwear down and I stepped out of them. Then he spun me to face him and knelt before me. Grabbing one of my legs by the back of the knee, he threw it over his shoulder and buried his face between my legs.

I set my hands on the table behind me to help hold me up, because the first lap of his tongue went from my center to my clit and almost made my legs give out. It had been slow and savoring. “Wh—why are you afraid?” I asked with a trembling voice.

His lips moved against me, and I felt the vibration of every word. “Because I want to own this pussy.” He sucked on my clit and the erotic

noises that came from him when he did drove me to new heights of arousal. I'd known I was wet before, but now, I could feel it sliding down my inner thigh and his chin.

He pushed his fingers back inside me and fucked me with them as he ate at me like I was his last meal. My head fell back with a long and loud moan.

"You make me feel like a bastard. I want to ruin you for them. I don't want to let you walk away from me without feeling me between your legs. I want you to feel me when they fuck you. That is why I held off. I'm afraid of how jealous I'll be after I have you."

His tongue began doing a flicking motion and I lost it. As I spasmed and shuddered, he licked me clean. It was as if every bit of my arousal he conjured was his and he wouldn't stop until he had every last drop.

Once I recovered, I registered what he had just said. Knox stood and leaned down to kiss me. I put my hand on his chest, stopping him. Searching his eyes, I asked, "Let me get this straight...you're afraid to sleep with me because you're afraid it will make you jealous of your brothers. That's what this has all been about?"

He straightened, the heat in his eyes dimming. "Yes."

"Have you felt any jealousy up until this point?" I asked.

"When we weren't together, yes," he answered honestly, which was a relief.

"Since we've been together?"

He pondered for a moment. "No."

"And you think sex will make you jealous again?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Sex is a big step, one that could change things."

"What we just did was a form of sex. Do you feel differently?"

"I don't know."

I scooped up my shorts and underwear and put them on. "I'm happy you're being honest with me. I just wished you had done it sooner." I folded my arms across my chest. "I thought..."

"I know what you thought and I'm sorry for letting you think that," he said and I could hear the remorse in his voice. "Yesterday blindsided me. I wanted you so badly, it was torture. That's why I was angry."

"What about the other times you've shut down?"

He sighed through his nose slowly. "Moments of weakness," he said. "Don't ever doubt that I want you. I've wanted you since the first moment I

laid eyes on you, and since then, that feeling has only grown. But I care for you too much to give in to that want. If we take the next step and I learn I can't stand the idea of sharing you, it could ruin everything, and I can't hurt you like that."

"So what are you hoping will happen while we abstain? What will convince you that sex won't change you?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I've been trying to figure that out."

ISABELLE WOULD BE ON HER WAY OVER SOON. TONIGHT, WE WERE GOING TO watch *IT* and she was going to sleep over. I was excited as I was nervous. Nope, I was more nervous, and I had almost lied about not feeling well when Isabelle had texted me to see if I was all right after she'd learned I wasn't at school today.

To distract me from my nerves as the hours ticked by, I'd decided to bake. I'd figured dessert would be fun to have during the movie. That, and of course popcorn.

I had all the fixings in my kitchen to make pie or cookies. I had made enough of both with my mom growing up that I could probably make either of them in my sleep. So I had decided to experiment a little. Do something different.

So far, I had made homemade cinnamon-flavored ice cream with apple chunks and it was chilling in the freezer. Currently, I was scooping large balls of blondie cookie dough with buttery pie-crust pieces that I had crumbled into the batter onto a tray. I was going to make apple pie ice cream sandwiches, and from what I'd sampled so far, they were going to be delicious.

I'd have to save some for the guys to try tomorrow. They weren't invited tonight. It was strictly a girls' night. That was what I had told them and that was it. I hadn't told them what we were going to be watching. It wasn't that I wanted to lie to them, but I wanted to do this alone. I needed to see if I could do this alone. My trauma was my battle to fight. The support I got from my guys was wonderful, but if I kept relying on them...

I froze mid-scoop as I realized what I had been doing. Sighing, I set down

the spoon back in the mixing bowl and reached for my phone.

I had another missed call from that unknown number. Why couldn't Cassy and Amber just leave me alone? I wasn't going to answer. So why did they keep calling? They probably thought if they bugged me enough, I'd drop the charges.

As I scrolled through my previous calls, Colt's name came up first and I clicked on it. The line rang a couple of times before he picked up.

"Hi," he answered.

"I need to tell you something," I said, getting right to the point.

"Okay," he drawled.

"The reason Isabelle is coming over is so we can watch the movie *IT*."

He was quiet for a moment. "I'm going to trust that you considered what could happen and get right to the question as to why you felt you couldn't tell us."

"Well, I have a nasty habit of wanting to do things on my own. I have this fear that one day I will lose you, and if I know I can do things on my own, then it won't be like when I lost my family—it won't hurt as much. I won't go every day discovering things I need you for because I've never had to do them on my own."

"So why are you telling me the truth now?" he asked without a hint of anger.

"Well, I just realized what I was doing," I said as I drew lines in some spilled flour on the counter. "I still plan to do this on my own, but...but if I find out that I can't, will you come over and help me take this back or hold me if it ends up being a complete disaster?"

"Of course I will."

I smiled. "Okay."

"Babe?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm proud of you," he said. "I know you don't see the progress that you've made, but we do, and I wanted you to know that we can see it."

My eyes burned. I hadn't realized how badly I'd needed to hear that until right then. "Thank you."



The doorbell rang as I was pulling the cookies from the oven.

“Coming!” I set the hot cookie tray down on top of a trivet and went to answer the door. Making sure it was Isabelle through the peephole first, I opened the door with a smile. “I love your hair,” I greeted.

She flicked her newly colored teal hair off her shoulder. “Me, too! It’s going to look perfect with my costume,” she said, smiling.

I stepped aside for her to come in.

She walked in with a large bag hanging off her shoulder. She took in my living room quickly, then spun to face me. “I ran to Maranda’s salon after Knox called offering me the front desk position. I start Monday!”

“He did?” I gaped as I shut the front door. “Congratulations!”

Beaming, she pulled a bottle of vodka and a bottle of cranberry juice from her bag. “Want to add a little celebration to our girls’ night?”

“Sure.” I took the vodka and juice from her. Heading to the kitchen, I jiggled the vodka. “How’d you get this?”

Following me, she said, “My cousin got it for me.”

I put the vodka in the freezer and juice in the fridge. “Maranda?”

“No. I have another cousin who turned twenty-one a couple months ago. She needed help sewing a tear in her costume for some college party she’s going to this weekend, and in exchange, I had her buy the vodka.”

“Speaking of sewing and costumes, how’s yours coming along?”

“I finished it and Ethan’s today.”

I went back to the cookies and began transferring them from the tray to a cooling rack. “Mermaids, right?”

She smiled. “I’m going as an evil siren version of Ariel, and instead of falling in love with the prince, I drown him.”

I chuckled. “Let me guess, Ethan is the prince you drown?”

“Duh,” she said, and we both laughed. “What are the guys going as?”

I shrugged. “They wouldn’t tell me. They want it to be a surprise.”

She scrunched her nose. “Lame.”

Thunder boomed outside.

“It looked like it was going to rain when I was driving over here,” Isabelle said, sounding excited, and rushed to look out the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. “I love it when it rains.”

“It rarely happens here.”

“That’s why it’s exciting, and the rain makes everything smell good, too.” She put her hand up to the glass and took in my backyard. “If it ever rains

during the day, you could sit on that swing with a good book and just relax to the sounds and smells.”

“I need to finish putting it together first.”

“What do you mean? It’s already built.”

I walked over to the glass door and looked out at my patio. Sure enough, it was assembled. I flipped on the outside light before unlocking the door and stepping out onto the patio. It wasn’t raining yet, but the wind was picking up and another clack of thunder rumbled.

I took a seat on the swing and smiled as it swayed perfectly.

Isabelle took a seat next to me. “I take it that you didn’t put it together.”

I shook my head. “I’m pretty sure Knox did, with the help of one or all of his brothers.”

“What if I make us some cocktails and we swing for a little bit until the rain comes?”

I nodded. I liked that idea. The cookies needed a little more time to cool and I wasn’t ready to walk away from what I felt swinging in my new swing.



We moved my coffee table off to the side and made a picnic with blankets and pillows on the floor in front of the TV.

“I think we need a few more pillows and another blanket,” I said.

“I think so, too,” she agreed as she assessed our work so far.

“Be right back,” I shot over my shoulder as I headed down the hall.

Flicking on the light in the spare bedroom, I grabbed two of the sham pillows and the throw blanket hanging off the end of the bed. The sound of whistling made me pause before leaving the room. I glanced at the window, realizing the sound was coming from there. Walking over to it, I saw right away that water was pooling on the windowsill.

I tossed the pillows and blankets back on the bed and ran out of the room to get a towel from the linen closet. When I came back, I wiped up the water. Standing there, the whistling was louder. At first, I thought it was due to the leak, but after further inspection I found the window unlocked and not closed all the way.

I pushed it closed and slid the lock into place. Instantly, the whistling stopped.

Fear bloomed in my chest.

*Why is it open?*

*Why isn't it locked?*

“Shi, your phone is ringing,” Isabelle yelled from the living room.

*Did Logan open it? I wondered.*

*Did the sheriff when he broke in?*

*When is the last time I checked this window?*

“Shi?” Isabelle said, her voice sounding closer, and I turned around just in time for her to come into the room. She spotted me.

“Sorry, my window was open, and water leaked all over the sill. I was cleaning it up,” I said, doing my best to shove down my fear.

“Do you need help cleaning it up?” she asked, but before I could respond, my phone started ringing again. “This is the second time this unknown number is calling you.”

“Just ignore it. I think it’s Cassy or Amber trying to mess with me. They’ve been doing it for days.”

Isabelle glared down at the phone as it rang. She accepted the call and put the phone to her ear before I could protest. “Don’t you miserable cunts have something better to do?”

I stood there wide-eyed and made a note to never piss off Isabelle.

Isabelle suddenly gasped. “I’m so sorry, sir. I thought you were someone else.” She paused as she listened to whoever was on the line. “No, you have the wrong number. Uh-huh. No worries. I’m sorry again about that. You, too. Bye.” She hung up the phone, grimacing. “I suppose that was karma’s way of reminding me not to be a bitch.”

“Who was it?” I asked, reaching out for my phone.

She handed it to me. “Some guy looking for an Annabell Weston.”

I was surprised at the relief I felt. I had done my best to pretend that it hadn’t bothered me this whole time, but as each day had passed and the phone calls had continued, it had become easier for fear to seep in and doubt to fester. Like a nagging thought in the back of my head, I’d begun to humor the possibility that it might have been Mr. X. That he might have found me. I knew as long as he was out there searching for me, there would always be a chance he could find me. But the odds of that happening were slim. I needed to take comfort in that, or I’d go insane.

My thoughts went back to the window. It was unlikely Mr. X was the culprit. But something in my gut would not settle. Maybe the sheriff had



planned to sneak in through that window while I was sleeping and hang me from a tree out back? Last night would have been the perfect opportunity. I had been alone and so tired. But why go through the window? And what about my alarm? I still didn't know how he'd gotten past it the last time and Logan hadn't told me what the alarm company had said.

There was a good chance I could be freaking about the window for no reason. Logan could have left it open by accident. It hadn't been open enough to trigger the alarm, so there was a chance he'd thought he had closed it but forgotten to lock it?

It was locked now. The best thing I could do was go through the house and make sure everything was locked. I also needed to set my alarm. I had disarmed it when Isabelle had texted that she was on her way.

"Shi, you okay?" Isabelle asked as she came closer. "You look pale."

"I'm fine. Why don't we finish setting up?" I deflected.

Isabelle pointed at the pillows and blanket I'd tossed back on the bed. "Are these what we need?"

I nodded. Isabelle grabbed the pillows while I grabbed the throw, and we headed back to the living room.

"Would you mind finishing here while I make sure all my windows are closed?" I asked her.

"Sure, and I'll make us a new round of drinks," she said and took off toward the kitchen.

While she did that, I went to every window and door that opened and made sure they were locked. Lastly, I set my alarm.

Isabelle and I finished our tasks at the same time and got settled on the floor. She handed me my drink and I chugged it.

Isabelle chuckled as she watched me. "Want me to bring the bottle?"

I set the glass down after I swallowed every drop. "I'm nervous," I admitted.

"About the movie?"

"I don't know how I'm going to react to it. I haven't watched a scary movie in a long time, and I live alone..." I trailed off, trying to figure out how to be honest without telling her everything.

"And you have nightmares, right? That's why you take medication?" she said.

"Yeah."

"We don't have to watch this, Shi. I'd be fine watching anything. I know

*IT* was the reason we're having this girls' night, but I'm just happy to hang out."

My shoulders slumped as the pressure to do this eased and I was left feeling lighter. "We can still watch it."

"Don't push yourself. If you have to push yourself, you aren't ready," she said. "Let's watch something else and save the scary movies for when we have the guys around. That way they can hold us during the scary parts, or we can send them to check behind the shower curtains for us if we have to pee."

I laughed and she giggled along with me. "All right." She was right. With the window thing, I was already on edge. *This isn't a failure*, I tried to convince myself.

We debated over movies for a minute and decided on a romantic comedy. My phone beeped and I saw that Colt had texted.

**Colt: Doing okay?**

**Me: Having a blast. Decided to watch a romantic comedy instead.**

**Colt: That's perfectly okay. Just because you didn't watch it tonight doesn't mean you can't try again later. There's no rush.**

I would definitely try again. But during a bright sunny day and after all shower curtains had been pushed back.

TODAY WAS HALLOWEEN AND TONIGHT WAS THE PARTY. AFTER LAST NIGHT'S failure to watch *IT*, I took a moment to reevaluate. I felt good. It was a party with my friends. Yes, there would be costumes, but the guys had assured me the music wouldn't be ominous and the decorations would be tame.

*I got this!*

I was packing everything I would need to stay the night at the cabin, which was a good hour away. I packed clothes, my costume, shoes, everything to do my hair and makeup. The last things I needed to grab were toiletries. Going into my bathroom from my bedroom, I grabbed my toothbrush from the holder next to the faucet and began going through the drawers and opening the medicine cabinet, grabbing everything else that I would need. As I went to shut the cabinet, I heard the floorboards creak in the hallway right outside my room.

"I'm almost ready," I yelled out, assuming it was Keelan. He, Knox, and I were driving up together. Colt and Creed were already at the cabin getting things ready for the party. I was trying my best not to think about how awkward the car ride might be with Knox. After learning the truth about what was bothering him, things weren't really resolved, and we were at a standstill.

There wasn't a response from Keelan.

"Did you hear me?" I asked as I went back in my bedroom, expecting him to be sitting or lounging on my bed waiting for me. The bed was empty. I glanced down the hall. It was also empty. Standing in the doorway, I said loudly, "Keelan?"

The house was quiet.

The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Had I been hearing things?

Was I being paranoid?

My alarm wasn't set, but I knew all the doors and windows were locked because I had checked last night. The only door I had unlocked was the front door and that was when Isabelle had left, but I knew I'd locked it as soon as I'd closed it.

It was Halloween. It made everything about today spooky.

I continued to stare down the hall, straining my ears.

Fear was taking hold of me because I knew I'd heard what I'd heard. I backed away from the doorway, further into my room. Without looking away from the hall, I set my toiletries on my bag, then reached for my nightstand drawer. I pulled it open and grabbed the 9mm I had stashed there.

I clicked the safety off and held it out in front of me. Pushing on even though I was shaking and my heart was starting to pound, I walked into the hallway. Not two steps into the hall, the wood floor creaked underfoot.

My hands began shaking badly. I'd heard this. I knew I had.

Someone was in my house.

I checked the hall bathroom first.

*Clear.*

I checked the hall's linen closet.

*Clear.*

I jiggled the handle to my panic room. It was locked. I doubted anyone could be in there, but I still entered the code on the lock and looked inside.

*Clear.*

Back in the hall, I made sure the panic room shut behind me and the lock clicked into place. Then I moved down the hall toward the spare bedroom. The door was halfway open, as I had left it this morning after returning the pillows and blanket I'd taken.

I slowly pushed the door open until it hit the wall. Nothing inside seemed amiss. Trying to keep my breathing normal and failing, I entered the room and walked over to the closet. I slid open the closet door and peeked inside.

*Clear.*

I returned to the hallway and made my way to the living room. Though I did my best to keep my steps quiet as I entered the dining room, the floor creaked again, making me grimace.

I was going to rip out these darn wood floors. I swore I was.

I searched the kitchen.

*Clear.*

I lowered my gun and rubbed my forehead. The house was empty.

As I was heading back to my bedroom, the front door unlocked and both Keelan and Knox walked in. I froze.

Keelan spotted me first and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey,” I said back.

I watched as both of their gazes dropped to my hand hanging at my side. Or more specifically, the gun I was holding.

“Did something happen?” Knox asked, stepping ahead of his brother as if intending to come to me. Then he caught himself and stopped walking. Yup. Things were awkward between us.

“I—” I glanced down at my gun. “I think I might be going crazy.”



I finished the last of my makeup by coloring in the two red lines I had going from my forehead down over my eyes to the corners of my mouth. I had made my face a little paler than I was, but not as pale as Pennywise’s face. My nose and lips were blood red. I had put on false lashes and my eye makeup was black and highlighted in red. My gray eyes stood out significantly, which I liked. It was a terrifying yet sort of alluring look that went perfectly with my low red pigtails and solid white costume that had three golf-ball-sized red pom-poms lined up from my sternum down.

My costume was a short dress with cap sleeves and a poofy tutu skirt. There would be no bending over allowed or I’d flash everyone the white lacy underwear I had underneath. The dress had a sweetheart neckline and bared a lot of cleavage. Around my neck was a ruffled collar that I had splattered with blood-red dye to make it more horrific. My legs were covered by white thigh-high tights that were visibly being held up by white satin garters with a little white bow on top of each clip.

Staring at myself in the mirror, I was proud of the final result. There had been a quick moment of panic where I’d had to remind myself that the illusion of blood on my collar wasn’t real, no matter how realistic I’d made it look. Blood was a trigger and so far, I was still in control. I was in the moment.

My black Mary Jane pumps with a single strap each clacked on the tile

floor in the bathroom as I went to leave. As soon as I had the door open, my ears filled with the sound of loud gunfire from Keelan and Knox's video game they were playing.

Their eyes flicked in my direction when I entered Knox's room, where they were planning on locking themselves in all night. They were sitting in front of the large TV on Knox's dresser, Keelan on the foot of the bed and Knox in a leather desk chair, both with controllers in their hands.

Keelan's brows rose and Knox paused their game, as if needing full focus to take me in.

I stopped walking a few feet from them and did a turn. "What do you think?"

"Amazing," Keelan said and looked to his brother. "Would it be weird to develop a clown fetish?" Then he gestured to me with his hand. "Because I'm into this."

I snorted.

"You just have a Shiloh fetish," Knox said. "If she came out dressed like a nun, you'd be into that, too."

Keelan appeared to ponder that. "Are we talking about a naughty nun or a full-fledged nun?"

"Would it matter?" Knox asked, his gaze never leaving me. The way his eyes drank me in made me think it wouldn't have mattered to him.

"I suppose it wouldn't." Keelan gave me a naughty grin. "I'd be going to hell either way, because I don't think I could let her leave this room until I had her praying to God. Loudly."

Knox rolled his eyes and I had to fight not to squeeze my thighs together. I shouldn't egg him on because I really didn't want to start the party with wet panties and I was wearing the only lacy white pair I'd brought, but the words left my mouth before I could stop them. "Is my clown costume not tempting enough to make me pray? Or is it the idea of corruption that snaps your control?"

Keelan's grin shifted into a smirk that made me want to throw myself at him just as much as it made me want to run from the room. "You are a temptation all on your own. I'm holding myself back because I know you're looking forward to the party. But if you push my buttons enough, baby girl, you'll be late for that party and Knox will get a front-row seat as I have my way with that gorgeous red mouth of yours."

That red mouth stretched and lifted. "Just my mouth?"

Keelan stood and I yelped, dashing for the door. I could have sworn I heard Knox chuckling as I exited the room.

Music was playing and it grew louder as I made my way down the hall that led past the door to the garage and into the kitchen. Before entering the kitchen, I had to duck under caution tape and a sign that said “Area Off-Limits” pinned across the hall’s entrance. I paused as I entered the kitchen to take in the room. The rest of the cabin was an open floor plan. From the kitchen, I had an unobscured view of the living room, dining nook, and most of upstairs. The living room ceiling was vaulted, and one wall was completely windows with a view of a large wooden deck and the forest beyond it. The second floor was balconied off and curved around the living room like an L. From downstairs, you could see four doors. Three doors led to Keelan’s, Colt’s, and Creed’s rooms and the fourth led to a guest bathroom.

The guys had pushed the living-room furniture up against the walls, leaving the center of the room empty for dancing. They’d decorated lightly. A few fake cobwebs here and there, hanging bats, and a bunch of jack-o’-lanterns. In the corner there was a fog machine and a strobe light that filled and lit up the dance floor in the living room.

There were already some people here as I made my way toward the outside deck that the living room’s folding glass doors opened to. Standing around a lit fire pit in the center of the deck with their backs to me, Colt and Creed were wearing matching yellow raincoats and rain boots like Georgie had worn in the movie *IT*. They were currently in the middle of talking with Ethan and Isabelle, which was probably why they didn’t realize I was behind them, even when Isabelle spotted me first and smiled.

“Did you two make matching paper sailboats for me to steal from you, as well?” I asked.

Colt and Creed turned at the same time. Both were smiling until their eyes landed on me. Their gazes danced all over me, taking in my costume.

“I didn’t think a clown could look creepy and hot at the same time,” Creed said.

Colt nodded in agreement.

Isabelle giggled and I glanced at her. She was in a strapless, skintight, full-length mermaid-style dress. The bodice had metallic-looking black, bluish-gray, and teal scales sewn all over it until where the bottom poofed out with black tulle. On top of her head, she wore a matte black, spiked crown.

She had crimped waves in her teal hair and her makeup was dark. Even her lips were done in black. Ethan dressed as Isabelle had said he would, as a drowned prince, but his outfit matched hers perfectly. His black billowy tunic, which was collared and cuffed with black lace, was torn in some places. Fake seaweed was tied and hanging from one of his wrists, his belt, and his neck. He was wearing makeup to make his skin look pale and grayish and his lips look purple. And he wore a crown that matched hers.

“You two look amazing,” I gushed and moved closer to Isabelle. “I can’t believe you made this dress. Well, I can. I’m just blown away. It’s gorgeous!”

“Thank you,” Isabelle beamed. “It took a lot of work, but it was so worth it.”

It definitely was.

Loud voices came from inside as more people arrived. From a glance, it was some of Ethan’s football buddies and their girlfriends or dates. Creed and Ethan separated from us to go greet them, while Colt stayed by my side.

“Drinks?” Isabelle asked me.

I nodded. “Yes, please.”

“The kitchen is stocked with everything, and if we run out of anything, we have another fridge stocked in the garage,” Colt said before Isabelle left.

Colt took my hand in his. I smiled up at him, but found him staring at his friends that Creed and Ethan were talking to inside.

“If you want to go talk to them, I’ll be all right,” I said.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a paper boat, and held it out to me. “I’m good here.”

I laughed as I took it. “Now I kind of wish I had sucked it up and watched the movie.”

“You will watch it one day.”

I nodded.

“How are you feeling right now?”

“I feel good. A little nervous, but mostly, I’m looking forward to having fun,” I explained in a low voice. “The best way to differentiate scary movies and this party is that the movies depict fear and death a little too well and it’s harder to ignore. There shouldn’t be any killing at this party.”

He huffed a laugh. “Let’s hope not.”

Tonight, I expected dancing and drinking and fun, with a little bit of spookiness woven in. Scary movies weren’t going anywhere. But these



experiences would pass me by if I let them. If I came across a trigger...well, I'd get to test out some of the exercises Dr. Bolton had taught me.

Ethan and Creed returned with one of Ethan's football buddies and his date. He was dressed like Freddy Krueger, without the burned-face mask. He had on the striped sweater and the glove that had the finger blades attached to it. The moment my eyes landed on his date, I stiffened. She was dressed like a zombie with bite marks on her arms and cheek. The costume makeup was very realistic, especially how she made her throat look ripped out with all her blood spilling down her chest.

I couldn't look away as memories of Shayla's blood rolling down her neck and chest tried to overwhelm me. I squeezed Colt's and Creed's hands and I worked to calm myself down. I focused on the sound of my breathing as I made myself inhale deeply and exhale slowly through my nose.

"Babe?" Colt said at the same time Creed said, "Shi?"

Suddenly, a hand went over my eyes, and I was picked up.

"Where are you guys going?" I heard Isabelle say.

"Guys?" I said as they carried me somewhere that was dark and a little bit quieter.

When I was set down, my eyes were uncovered, and I realized we were in the hall leading to Knox's room.

"You okay?" Colt asked. Both him and Creed stared at me, worry etched around their eyes.

I nodded. "Yeah. I had it under control, but you whisking me away was... effective. I was caught off guard a little. I was expecting costumes, but I hadn't been expecting *that*."

"She might not be the only one who shows up like that," Creed said.

"Now that I know to expect that, I should be all right," I said.

They looked like they weren't so sure.

I grabbed their hands. "If it becomes too much for me, I'll go hang out with Knox and Keelan for the rest of the night."

"Okay, babe." Colt said and the three of us headed back to the party.

I noticed some of the caution tape had been ripped down as we left it. Rushing to get me somewhere else, they must have yanked it out of the way. Creed bent to pick up the pieces of caution tape off the ground and proceeded to put them back up.

Isabelle was waiting in the kitchen with two mixed drinks in each of her hands. She held one out to me. Her gaze traveled over us. "Everything

okay?”

I took the drink. “Yes.”

*I can do this.*

AS THE NIGHT CONTINUED ON, MORE AND MORE PEOPLE SHOWED UP, AND some of them were just as creative with their costume makeup as the girl with the ripped-out throat.

I made sure I looked at them all. I didn't want to, but I knew that I had to. So I made a game of it. Take in their bloody costume, keep my breathing deep and slow, while trying to figure out if I recognized who they were from school. Did I have a class with them? I took in their smiles and laughter as they interacted with others. I made myself see that they were alive. As I did this, the more times I crossed paths with someone dressed horrifically, the easier it became to detach from the fear—from what seeing the fake blood and gore reminded me of.

During all this, Colt and Creed never left my side. Recognizing that I was fighting to win something tonight, Isabelle always made sure I had a drink in my hand. It was as if she knew I needed an advantage. An unhealthy one, but an advantage nonetheless. Feeling the warm buzz of alcohol did help ease some of my anxiety.

Now that the party was in full swing, I was a tad bit tipsy and, honestly, feeling triumphant. Tonight felt like a huge step forward. After my failure last night, I hadn't wanted to admit that I'd had doubts about tonight. I was proud of myself for pushing through that doubt. Some of this could be the booze talking, but I was happy. Probably the happiest I'd been in a long time. Not only that, I was optimistic. I could do this. I was on the right path and maybe for once, after being so lost for so long, I could allow myself to envision a future.

Isabelle and I had claimed a spot to dance in the living room and hadn't

left that spot for a handful of songs. I was smiling and laughing and just enjoying having fun with her.

“I think you’re becoming my best friend,” I shouted over the music.

Isabelle grabbed my hands and together we moved to the beat of “Don’t Start Now” by Dua Lipa. “I think you’re becoming my best friend, too,” she shouted back and spun me.

I laughed and spun her next. As the song ended, another began and I was ready for another drink. “I’m going to get a beer. Do you want one?”

She shook her head as she danced. I started weaving through the crowd of dancing bodies. I spotted Colt and Creed by the opened deck doors, their eyes following me as they talked to their friends. I gestured that I was getting a drink with my hand by my mouth.

Colt moved to come with me, but I waved him off and shook my head. “I’m fine,” I mouthed, and he nodded.

I squeezed past people to get into the kitchen and over to the fridge. I didn’t have the patience to make a mixed drink and it was probably best to switch to beer anyway. I was a little past the point of being buzzed and I didn’t want to ruin tonight by getting trashed.

Opening the fridge, I pulled out a beer. I stood there for a moment, sipping it and letting myself cool off a little. It got hot dancing.

I people-watched. I was happy to not see Cassy, Amber, or Gabe here. They hadn’t been invited, but I wouldn’t have put it past them to crash.

My gaze drifted to the hall that led to Knox’s room and I began wondering about him and Keelan. Taking my beer with me, I ducked under the caution tape and went down the hall to the door that led to his room.

I walked in without knocking and both looked in my direction, ready to yell at me like I was an intruder. Neither of them had moved from the spots I’d last seen them in. Which reminded me of our conversation we’d had before. Keelan wanted me and he would have taken me in front of Knox if I’d let him.

“You doing all right?” Knox asked.

I closed the door and leaned against it. “I’m hot.”

One side of Keelan’s mouth lifted. “Yeah, you are.”

I smiled and pushed off the door. I set my beer down on the dresser as I made my way across the room. I came to stand in front of Keelan, very aware of Knox watching. Keelan stared up at me and the look on my face must have given away my intentions, because he smirked knowingly. I brought my knee

up on the bed beside his hip, then climbed onto his lap, straddling him.

He dropped his controller, without caring that it clattered on the floor and probably broke, to grab me by my hips. “What are you thinking, baby girl?”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “You know exactly what I’m thinking,” I said against his lips before I kissed him.

He accepted my kiss and tried to deepen it with his tongue demanding entry into my mouth. I let him have a little taste and parted my lips long enough to lap my tongue along his before pulling away. His hands slid up my back in protest, wanting me to stay close enough to devour. I tilted my head back as he tried to reclaim my mouth. His lips pressed to my neck, and he trailed them up at the same time his hands moved up my back, past my shoulders, until they reached the back of my neck. He made me look at him. “How much have you had to drink?”

I shoved him backward until he was lying beneath me. “I’m sober enough to consent.” I crawled over him, and he let me pin his arms above his head. I brushed my nose along his ear. “I’m in the mood to pray,” I whispered and ran my tongue up his neck.

He let out a groan and I pulled away to stare down at him. His eyes were hooded and hungry. “I’m a bastard enough to believe you.”

“Keelan,” Knox said. I’d been wondering when he’d finally break his silence.

I rocked my hips against Keelan’s hardening cock as I smiled over my shoulder. “Don’t be such a cockblock, Knox. It’s ruining the moment.”

Keelan’s body shook beneath me as he laughed.

I returned my attention to him. “Don’t turn me down.” I pressed my lips to his with a quick kiss.

He freed his hand from under mine and brought it to my cheek. “You want me to fuck you, baby girl?”

I gave him the best puppy-dog eyes I could muster. “Please.”

“So fucking adorable,” he groaned, and in an instant, I was pinned beneath him. “I want to see more of this sexy minx side of you. Show me her again. Tell me how badly you want me to fuck you.”

I smiled. Maybe it was because Knox was in the room, but I wanted to rebel a little. “All you have to do is reach into my panties and you’ll see for yourself.”

Knox let out a slew of vulgar words from where he sat.

Keelan just grinned down at me. “You aren’t getting what you want until

I get what I want.”

I pouted and he shook his head.

“I know you got it in you,” he said, bringing his mouth to my breast and biting my hard nipple through my costume.

I hissed and my body arched, seeking more.

He released my nipple with a smug look. “Tell me, baby. I know the naughty words are on the tip of your tongue.”

“I want you to fuck me so badly all I can think about is coming on your cock, screaming.”

“How do you want me to fuck you?” he asked.

“On my hands and knees. Don’t be gentle.”

“What about Knox?”

I tilted my head to the side and looked past Keelan to see him. Knox was already staring at me with a hard expression. “He’s welcome to watch.”

Keelan grinned down at me like he knew exactly what I was up to. “What a naughty girl. You want me to show him what he’s missing?”

“Yes.”

He gave me a quick, rewarding kiss on the lips before climbing off of me.

I rolled and got on all fours facing Knox. “Try not to ruin my makeup,” I said without taking my eyes off of Knox.

“No promises.” Keelan lifted my poofy skirt and pulled my underwear down. Lifting my knees, I helped him remove them completely. “Hold on to these, will ya?” Keelan said before tossing my lacy panties at Knox.

They hit Knox in the chest and fell to his lap. He picked them and fisted them in his hand.

Keelan trailed his hand up the back of my thigh. He flicked the strap of the garter before continuing up to my butt cheek. His hand pulled away and came down in a loud smack. “Hottest Pennywise I’ve ever seen.” His other hand smoothed over my other butt cheek, and he used his thumbs to spread me open. “My naughty little clown is already wet for me.” He brought his hand between my legs and ran a finger from my clit to my center, back and forth. “Which do I play with first?”

“Keelan,” I grumbled.

“Or the better question is...which will make you moan louder?” Keelan asked and began rubbing my clit. “This one?”

My thighs quivered as he worked that spot with vigor. I started moaning as I felt an orgasm start to build.

“Or this one?” he said, removing his fingers from my clit and pushing two inside my pussy.

“Stop teasing,” I gritted out as I rocked back on his fingers, aching to come.

Knox didn't take his eyes off of me.

Keelan chuckled. “Should I stop teasing her?”

Knox's gaze drifted up to look at his brother, but he didn't answer.

That didn't deter Keelan. He removed his fingers from me, and I felt him shift behind me. Then I heard the sound of his zipper. My breath hitched as I felt Keelan align himself with me. The small sound pulled Knox's focus back to me.

“So fucking tight,” Keelan gritted as he slowly sheathed himself completely inside me. “And warm and wet. So fucking perfect.”

I realized then that his filthy words weren't just for my benefit, but for Knox's. With the way Knox's hand squeezed around the armrest of the chair, I could tell they were affecting him.

Keelan, I'd just learned, was my partner in this risky act we were performing for Knox. This would either set off his jealousy or ease his fears. The fact that he hadn't left the room yet was reassuring.

Keelan withdrew from me and slammed back in, making me whimper and fist the blanket beneath my hands. Knox was fixated on me as Keelan began to pound into me. I didn't think he ever blinked. As if not wanting to miss a single reaction I might have or the slightest facial contortion. I did my best to not look away from his intense stare, either. But it was difficult. As much as I wanted to watch Knox, I so badly wanted to close my eyes or bury my face in the bed, savoring every thrust of Keelan's cock and the sounds of us slapping together. I felt torn. I wanted to enjoy Keelan, but my worry for Knox was getting in the way.

“Please,” I pleaded.

Keelan grabbed my pigtails and pulled on them, forcing my head backward some. “Are you really going to deny our girl?” he asked his brother. “You haven't left the room and you have yet to take her from me as I've fucked her in front of you. That should tell you something.”

Knox's eyes flicked back and forth between Keelan and me. So much emotion showed on his face as he did. Anger. Worry. Hunger. By the large bulge in his pants, it was obvious which type of hunger it was.

“Knox,” I pleaded. It would be the last time. If nothing came of it, then

I'd give myself to Keelan in this moment fully.

Keelan slowed his movement behind me when Knox stood. Even though Keelan now moved in me at a languid pace, we both were waiting to see what Knox would do.

Knox shoved my panties in his back pocket and came to stand before me. He cupped my chin and rubbed his thumb across my bottom lip, smearing my red lipstick. "I guess I'll be having my way with this red mouth."

"There won't be any saving your makeup now, Shi," Keelan said.

I was too stunned to do or say anything. Especially when Knox began unbuttoning his pants with his other hand. He squeezed my chin and my eyes shot up to his. "Yes or no?" he said.

"Yes," I said barely above a whisper.

Knox released my chin and shoved down his pants and briefs enough to pull out his cock. I watched as he stroked his long, hard length.

"Do you want this?" he asked.

I nodded.

He stepped closer and I parted my lips slightly as he brought himself to my mouth. He tapped the tip of his cock against my bottom lip. I stared up at him as he dragged it across like he had done with his thumb. I swiped my tongue out, getting a quick taste of him. His breath hitched.

Keelan chose that moment to let go of my hair. At being able to move my head, the corner of my mouth twitched. I was going to enjoy taking control.

As Knox dragged the tip back across my lip again, I tilted my head down and took him into my mouth. He released his grip on his shaft and put that hand behind my head. With a slight push, he urged me to take more of him.

*Oh, no, no, no.*

It was my turn to tease someone.

*Sorry, Knox.*

With one hand, I reached up and fisted his shaft. I gave him a few hard strokes that I knew he would like, then began exploring him with my tongue.

"Fuck," he hissed.

Keelan chuckled and began thrusting a little harder.

Knox glanced at his brother. "Now I understand why Creed wants to kick your ass."

Keelan chuckled again. "That's all her. I just showed her how to deep throat."

Knox let out another curse, which I interrupted when I took him into my



mouth and showed him just how far I could take him. He groaned. “She does that exceptionally well.”

Keelan moved his hand down and around my hip until his fingers found my clit. “You going to let him fuck your mouth while I fuck this pussy?”

At the way his fingers played with me, I released Knox from my mouth and cried, “Yes.” I wanted to tease someone, but his idea was better.

Keelan didn’t let up on my clit and I felt myself quickly reaching my peak. “Tell Knox you want him to fuck your mouth,” Keelan said.

“I want you—I’m going to come,” I said with breathy words.

Keelan’s fingers stilled.

“Keelan!” I growled.

“Shiloh,” he said back with laughter in his voice.

I glanced up at Knox. “I want you to fuck my mouth.”

“Good girl,” Keelan praised and returned to strumming my clit.

In the middle of my groan, Knox pushed his cock back into my mouth, cutting it off. He let me have my way with him, licking and sucking at my pace until Keelan made me come undone. It was as I was moaning around Knox’s cock that he began thrusting into my mouth. He didn’t go far at first, as if giving me a moment to recover from my release and to prepare myself for what was coming.

As if on the same wavelength, they thrust into me deeper and harder at the same time. Knox only did it a handful of times before returning to being gentle and letting me do what I wanted to him. Keelan kept up the amazing pace that was sure to make me come again. For that moment, though, when they’d both been having their way with me, using me in a way that may have been degrading, I’d found it to be the hottest thing. Maybe it was the lack of control for all three of us and just chasing our delirious needs. I hadn’t been surprised that Knox hadn’t been able to let go for long. He was too controlled of a person to let that happen.

As Keelan worked to get us both off, I worked on Knox. I sucked hard and grazed my teeth along his shaft, knowing he liked it rough.

“That’s it,” he said as his hand on the back of my head urged me to bob faster.

I did as guided, even though my focus was split by the growing pressure between my legs.

Knox cursed and jets of cum hit the back of my throat. I worked quickly to swallow it all because I was coming. Failing, I released him from my

mouth and cried out as I shattered to pieces. Keelan's thrusts turned jerky, and I felt him begin to fill me with his release.

The only thing I could hear for a moment was my pounding heart and ragged breathing. Then, slowly, I began to hear muffled music from the party.

With his thumb, Knox wiped the corner of my mouth, and as he did, the music from the party became unmuffled and Colt's voice filled the room. "Have you guys seen Shi—"

Colt had one foot in the room and stared at us like a deer caught in headlights. When he recovered, he looked like he was trying not to laugh. "Never mind," he said and went to leave. Before closing the door completely behind him, he reached around and grabbed the doorknob. "I'm just going to lock this." After twisting the lock, he shut the door.

I looked up at Knox and Knox looked from me to Keelan. A heartbeat passed and the three of us laughed.

AS I WAS COMING DOWN THE HALL, ISABELLE WAS DUCKING UNDER THE caution tape. When she noticed me, she opened her mouth to say something and paused. Her eyes bounced all over me, grinning. “Looks like you snuck off to a private party,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Is it that obvious?” I thought I had done a good job at fixing my hair and makeup.

“You have that *just been thoroughly fucked* glow.”

Well, there wasn’t much I could do to hide that, not that I would want to.

Isabelle snorted. “I’m going to need details when I get back.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I was going to make us some drinks, but we’re out of ice. I was going to check to see if there was some more in the garage.”

“I’m pretty sure there is. I’ll go get it,” I said.

“Are you sure?”

I backed up and turned the knob on the garage door. “Yeah. I could use another minute to cool down.”

Isabelle giggled. “Details, Shi. I’m going to need the details.”

Smiling, I shook my head. “Yeah, yeah. Be right back,” I said, walking into the dark garage.

Feeling around on the wall, I found the light switch and flicked it. The garage lit up, revealing Keelan’s Jeep and Colt’s Charger. There were steps that led down, five to be exact. Keeping my hand on the rail, I made my way down, my heels clacking on the cement steps. As I walked across the garage to where the fridge and reach-in freezer were, I took in what the guys had stored in here. Hanging from the roof was a green canoe. They had fishing

poles, flashlights, and some tools hanging from hooks on the wall above the freezer. What looked like camping gear was organized neatly in the corner by the steps.

Opening the freezer, I pulled out two bags of ice. As I shoved the freezer door closed, the lights went out. Startled, I dropped the ice and backed into the freezer. "Hello?" I said into the darkness.

I heard something that sounded like a shoe scuffing the floor. My heart tried to lurch into my throat. I wasn't alone.

Remembering there were flashlights hanging on the wall above the freezer, I turned and reached for the wall. Blindly, I felt around. My palms touched cool metal tools and wiry fishing lines before I felt the metal body of a flashlight. I ripped it off the wall and clicked it on. I pointed the light at the steps and my stomach hollowed out. Someone wearing a Jason ski mask was standing on the steps, staring right at me.

"Wasn't it Ghostface who killed the girl in the garage?" I didn't know why I'd asked that, but it did help keep my panic at bay as I tried to think.

I heard scuffing again. This time to my left. I whipped the flashlight in that direction and in between Colt and Keelan's cars stood someone wearing a Ghostface mask. "There he is."

The sound of boots coming down the steps urged me to shine my flashlight in that direction again. Sure enough, Jason was off the steps and heading my way. Shoes slapping the ground drew me to shine the light at Ghostface just in time to see their fist coming for my face. I ducked and shot my own fist out, hitting them in the center of their rubber mask.

They let out a masculine grunt. When I went to hit them again, something hard slammed into the back of my head.

I hadn't known I had fallen to the ground until I forced my eyes open. When had I closed them? The flashlight I had been holding was on the ground, too, far away and shining on me.

My vision came and went. And when I could see, all I saw was booted feet. Multiple pairs, or I was seeing double. Or was it triple?

"I think the bitch broke my nose," a muffled male voice said.

"Suck it up and help me carry her."

I recognized that voice. *Cassy*.

Hands lifted me by my legs and underarms. In the distance, I thought I could hear the garage opening.

"Hurry up and help me, Amber," *Cassy* hissed.

A new set of hands grasped my right leg.

“Gabe was supposed to carry her,” Amber grunted.

“She hit me,” Gabe grumbled.

The change in the air told me they had carried me out of the garage, and with the sound of twigs snapping underfoot, I knew they were taking me into the woods.

I tried to shake my head to clear it, but all I ended up doing was making myself realize how bad it hurt. Next, I tried to kick my legs free.

“She’s coming to,” Amber said.

“Just a little bit farther. We don’t want them to hear her scream,” Cassy said.

My adrenaline kicked in at hearing that and I began to struggle against their hold.

The three of them either grunted or cursed and the next thing I knew, I was being tossed. My back hit the ground first, knocking the air out of me a little. Before I could recover, someone in a Michael Myers mask climbed on top of me and then pressed something sharp and cold against my throat. I watched as they pulled off their mask. Cassy’s tawny hair was what I saw first, then her cruel eyes.

She stared down at me with such anger. “Your time is up.”

Feeling a knife up at my throat was something I’d hoped to never feel again. It still was terrifying, but not the same as it had been last time. There was reassurance in that. “And?”

My response was clearly not the one she’d expected, by the flicker of surprise followed by the intensifying anger that showed all over her face.

My mouth stretched into a menacing smile. “Do you plan to cut my throat? Or do you have rope stashed out here for you to hang me with?”

She increased the pressure of the knife against my neck. “You don’t think I’ll do it?”

“It’s what Daddy expects of you,” I said as I tried to feel around on the ground. “To clean up your mess that is making him look bad.”

My words set her eyes ablaze. “At least I have a dad.”

I chuckled. “At least mine was kind and showed me love.”

“Shut up,” she gritted.

“To answer your question...no. I don’t think you will cut my throat.” As I said that, my hand brushed over a rock. “Now Gabe, on the other hand, would do it. Maybe even Amber. Both of them just act without much thought

and they allow their emotions to rule their actions. But you...you're a coward. It's why you always have others do the dirty work for you. You're too afraid of what Daddy might do."

"Shut up," she growled out again, her anger building and building.

"Cassy," Amber said.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Cassy snapped.

My smile grew at how easy she was making this. "You're just a miserable little girl with a fucked-up home life and the only way you know how to deal with it is to take it out on others."

"I said shut up!" she roared as she lifted the knife in the air, intending to bring it down on me.

But I was ready for her. I caught the wrist of her knife hand as it was coming toward me, and with a rock in hand, I swung, hitting her right in the temple. Cassy flew off of me, crying out.

I rolled and got to my hands and knees. I took a moment to assess where Gabe and Amber were. Stunned, they just stood there, staring at Cassy writhing on the ground. Taking advantage of their shocked states, I got to my feet.

Gabe, in his Ghostface mask, glanced in my direction as I took off running.

"Get her!" Amber yelled.

It was very dark. I tripped many times in my heels, which resulted in me scraping my knee and rolling my ankle. The only light I could see was coming from the cabin. It shone between the trees like stars. I ran in that direction, desperate to get help. I could hear Gabe and Amber gaining on me. With their boots and knowing exactly what direction I was heading, they'd undoubtedly catch up to me.

Logan's voice popped into my head. "*Never take the obvious road.*"

I changed direction. I began running further from the cabin.

"Where'd she go?" I heard Amber say and I ducked behind a tree.

"I don't know. She was just here," Gabe said, his voice echoing through the trees.

I did my best to keep my breathing quiet. I was thanking the universe I'd picked up running or else I'd be winded right now.

"She's in a white fucking costume, Gabe. How did you lose her?" Amber snapped.

"Don't put that shit on me. You lost her, too."

As they bickered, I worked quietly to undo the straps of my heels and take them off.

Amber let out a frustrated growl. “We need to split up. I’ll go check the cabin and make sure she didn’t somehow make it back there and you look around here.”

Gabe didn’t respond, but I knew they had gone their separate ways. The forest became quiet, and I couldn’t gauge where Gabe had gone.

*Look or run?* I debated.

“Shiloh!”

“Shi!”

“Shiloh!”

I heard my guys shout for me. They sounded so far away, and I couldn’t yell back. Not without leading Gabe right to me.

Something snapping sounded near me. My debate was over. I ran. I ran further from my guys.

Pine needles, twigs, and rocks stabbed the bottoms of my feet, but I didn’t let the pain slow me down. The pounding of boots and heavy breathing was right behind me.

*Don’t stop!*

*You can outrun him!*

For a moment, I thought I could, until my foot caught on the root of a large tree. Before I could catch myself, I was tackled to the ground.

I screamed. I screamed as loud and as long as I could, praying my guys would hear me. But my scream was cut off when Gabe slammed his hand over my mouth as he climbed on top of me, straddling my hips.

I easily knocked his hand away and clawed at his mask, knocking it off.

He snarled down at me, baring his teeth, and he smacked me across my face. I smacked him back, making sure to hit his bloody and swollen nose.

“You stupid bitch!” he roared and caught my wrists, pinning them to the ground on either side of my head with a bruising grip.

“You’re the stupid bitch,” I said and thrust my hips upward, slamming them into his butt and propelling him forward. He could either let go of my wrists or nosedive into the ground above my head. He let go to catch himself. With my arms free, I slammed my elbow down where his arm bent, captured that arm between mine and my ribs, and rolled us. It was stupidly easy to gain the upper hand and once I had him pinned beneath me, I jabbed my elbow into his face. He went limp and I quickly climbed off of him.

As I backed away, he let out a groan and sluggishly touched his face. I didn't stick around after that.

"Shiloh!" I heard Keelan yell, his voice close enough for me to know it was him.

"Keelan!" I yelled as I ran toward his voice.

"Shi!" Creed yelled and a light turned in my direction, illuminating my way.

I ran through a cluster of trees, and as they cleared, a large figure pointing a light at me appeared. "Knox!" I cried, knowing it was him. Tears filling my eyes, I ran faster.

He met me halfway and caught me as I leapt for him. "I got her!" he shouted as he hiked me up higher in his arms.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I buried my face in his shoulder and cried.

"Is she all right?"

"What happened?"

I heard Colt and Creed, sounding close.

"She's hurt," Keelan said. "Back of her head."

"Do we call the police?" Creed asked.

"No," I said weakly. My adrenaline was crashing fast and every injury I had begun to hurt. "It was Cassy, Gabe, and Amber. They attacked me in the garage and hit me over the head with something. Then they dragged me out to the woods. I fought them off. If we call the police, I wouldn't put it past the sheriff to twist things and make it seem like I attacked them. Then he'll go after you for having a party and serving alcohol to those under drinking age."

"Then what do we do?" Colt asked.

"We take her to the hospital," Knox said.

"And we call her uncle," Keelan added.

Creed let out a curse.

"The rest of us aren't happy about it, either, but he's the only one that can help," Keelan said.

Decision made, Knox started moving, carrying me back toward the cabin.

As we approached the house, I spotted Ethan and Isabelle standing in front of the open garage. Both looked visibly worried and when Isabelle saw me, her shoulders slumped.

"Shit," Colt snapped. "Our cars are blocked in."



We all glanced at the long dirt driveway that led up to the cabin and it was full of cars.

Keelan looked at Colt and Creed. “Clear out the party, right now.”

Colt and Creed didn’t argue and ran ahead of us, pausing for only a moment to say something to Ethan. Ethan nodded at whatever they said to him and the three of them ran inside.

Isabelle came up to us. “Are you all right?”

I didn’t get to answer her because Knox stormed right past her and went into the house through the garage. The music was off by the time we got inside, and Colt and Creed were telling everyone the party was over.

Knox carried me to his room and laid me on the bed. Kneeling by the bedside, he began looking me over. My once-white costume was now smudged with dirt, blood, and pine needles. My stockings were ripped and bloody.

“The back of her head,” Keelan reminded Knox from where he hovered behind him.

“Roll over, Shiloh,” Knox ordered and gently helped me.

Both hissed. “There’s a first aid kit under the kitchen sink,” Knox said, and I heard Keelan rush out of the room.

“Can I do something to help?” I heard Isabelle say with trembling words.

“You can come hold my hand,” I said, wanting to comfort my friend.

The sound of Isabelle’s dress swishing got louder as she got closer. In her beautiful, elegant mermaid dress, she climbed onto the bed next to me and took my hand.

Her eyes were watery. “When you didn’t come back, I went looking for you. I found the ice on the ground in the garage and drops of blood. I went and got Colt and Creed right away.”

I squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

Keelan returned with the first aid kit and Knox got to work collecting things and ripping them open. “It’s going to be a little bit before everyone clears out of here. Until then, I’m going to clean this and bandage you up to stop the bleeding,” Knox explained calmly. “Did you lose consciousness when they hit you?”

“Yes, for a moment,” I answered honestly.

“She could have a concussion,” Keelan said with a tight voice.

Gently, Knox began to clean my wound. “From the beginning, can you tell us everything that happened?”

I squeezed Isabelle's hand again and, in detail, told them everything that had happened.

WE DIDN'T GET HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL UNTIL MORNING, AND WE SPENT most of Sunday resting. I hadn't ended up having a concussion, but I had gotten stitches. Logan had shown up as I'd been getting sewn up. After waiting for the hospital staff to leave the room, I had told him everything that had happened.

To all of our surprise, Logan had been calm and hadn't done anything untoward the entire time. I didn't know if it had been because he'd had somewhat good news to share or he'd felt guilty for the things he had said the last time I had seen him. Or it could have been a combination of both.

"Should we call the police?" Knox had asked.

Logan had shaken his head. "It was planned too carefully. By throwing a Halloween party, you created the perfect opportunity for them to slip in without being seen and thus, not having any witnesses to attest that they were even there. Which means they could have killed you in those woods and we'd have no way to prove it."

"And it also means there's no point in reporting what happened to the police," I had said.

"It'd be your word against theirs, and with the sheriff orchestrating this, he's already planned on you calling the police and will twist everything up to make things look really bad for you."

"They won't stop coming after her unless she drops the charges," Creed had said.

"Which I don't understand," Keelan had said. "Shi can say she doesn't want to proceed, but the case is in the prosecutor's hands now."

"That is true. What Ian and I have come up with is that the sheriff has a

lot of friends and the prosecution is one of them, and maybe even the judge. Because there's substantial evidence, the prosecution has no choice but to proceed with the case. But if the sheriff got Shi to back out, he could convince everyone that things were settled amicably and get his daughter and her friends off with a warning or a lesser sentence," Logan had explained.

Colt, who had been holding my hand the entire time, had asked, "Are you any closer to finding a way to deal with the sheriff?"

Logan had looked at me. "Yeah, we are."

Logan hadn't told us much. Just that the sheriff would be taken care of next week and to stay vigilant until then.

It was now Monday and Colt, Creed, and I were walking into school.

"It's kind of chilly out today," I said, feeling grateful. I had my hair down to hide my stitches, and heavy hair and heat were a miserable combination.

"It's chilly now, but it'll be right back to being hot in the afternoon," Colt said as we walked up to our lockers.

"It's November. It should be cold out," I grumbled.

Creed smiled. "Are you missing that Alaskan weather?"

"No. Maryland weather. I'm used to having all four seasons. Fall has been completely skipped here."

"I can't do anything about the weather, but we can pick you up a pumpkin spice latte on the way home if that will make you feel better," Creed suggested.

Colt laughed into his locker as if that would hide the fact that he was.

"You two are terrible," I grumbled even though I was teasing.

Colt whipped his head in my direction. "What did I do?"

I turned up my nose and started walking toward class. I didn't make it far before Creed caught me from behind. With his arm around my stomach, he pulled me against his chest. "Is that a yes or no on the latte, you little tormentor?"

I smiled. "You started it."

"And I regret nothing," he said.

Colt came to stand next to us. "Why are the police here?" he asked as he stared down the hall.

I looked in that direction. Outside our first class were two police officers. Not a second later, the sheriff walked out of our class with the school's principal. His eyes scanned the crowded hall of students until they landed on me. I knew he was here for me. That gut feeling was confirmed when he, the

other police officers, and the principal started walking toward us.

I pulled my phone from the back pocket of my jeans and slipped it into the front pocket of Creed's shorts.

"What are you doing, Shi?" he asked.

"If anything happens, call Logan," I said in a low voice as the sheriff approached.

"Shiloh Pierce, we're going to need you to come with us," one of the police officers said.



They said Gabe and Amber were missing. Whether or not that was true, I wasn't one hundred percent certain.

The sheriff and his lackeys had brought me to the police station and held me in a locked interrogation room all day.

As soon as I'd been brought in here, I had been questioned by a Detective Miller, who was an older man with graying hair and a large mustache, and Sheriff McAllister.

They had asked me where I'd been on Halloween night. I had been honest, but not completely. I had told them that I'd been with my boyfriends all night and a few of our friends had come over to celebrate the holiday. The *boyfriends* comment had gotten me a strange look from the detective, but the sheriff hadn't looked surprised. Next, they had asked me what I had done all night and I had vaguely said we had listened to music, eaten some candy, hung out.

Toward the end of the interrogation, they had begun to ask me about Gabe and Amber and if I had seen them that night. I had looked right at the sheriff when I had answered. "No."

His eyes had narrowed. "My daughter said she saw you speaking with them that night."

*Speaking? What a load of bull.*

"I don't know why she would say that, because Cassy was not at my boyfriends' cabin Saturday night. Neither was Gabe or Amber. If you don't believe me, you can ask everyone else who was there if they saw them," I had said.

Sheriff McAllister had glared at me, and I would have allowed myself to

look smug if the detective hadn't been in the room.

Finding it strange there was such a focus on Gabe and Amber, I had asked, "Why are you asking me about Gabe and Amber?"

"Because Gabriel Harris and Amber Thorn didn't return home Halloween night," the detective had said.

I'd looked from the detective to the sheriff and my stomach had felt like it had dropped from a ten-story building. "Like I said. I didn't see them that night."

"You're lying?" Sheriff McAllister had snarled.

"I would like to leave," I had said.

"You're not going anywhere," he had said, standing from the interrogation table.

"Are you detaining me?" I had asked, standing as well. "If so, what for?"

The sheriff had ignored me, and he and the detective had headed for the door.

"I want to call my lawyer," I had said to their backs.

The detective had looked to the sheriff nervously, but neither had said anything else as they'd left the room.

That had been what felt like hours ago. No one had returned since. I had to pee and I was thirsty and freezing. I swore they had the air conditioning turned on full blast and, because I had nothing else to do but listen, I knew it had been flowing through the vents nonstop. All I was wearing were jean shorts and a thin top, which did very little to keep me warm. I tried pacing the small room for a while to warm up. It didn't really work.

Shivering, I sat curled up with my knees tucked to my chest in a chair and I did the only thing I could do. Wait.

My eyes felt as though they had just closed when I heard the door open. Sheriff McAllister walked in and shut the door behind him. Just seeing him put me on edge, but as I watched him move through the room over to the camera up in the corner, fear shot through me like lightning, spreading far and wide. He reached up behind it and pushed it to face the wall.

I stood stiffly, kicking the chair back in the process. My mind raced. I could see what he intended. It was written all over his face—the rage, the need for violence. I was trapped in a room with a man twice my size who was going to hurt me.

He moved toward me, and I ran for the door, screaming. Of course, it was locked. I continued to scream, pounding on it, knowing he was coming.

Seeing him in my peripheral vision, I stopped what I already knew would be a useless attempt to get someone to help me and spun, throwing my leg out. I caught him off guard as planned and kicked him right in the stomach.

He grunted as he hunched over. I went to run past him, intending to run to the other side of the room to plan my next move. His hand shot out and caught me by my arm. I grabbed his hand that held me and kicked him again, this time in his knee. It buckled, bringing him down to my height. Twirling into his hold, I rammed my elbow down where his shoulder and neck met.

His fingers slipped from my arm as he let out a roar. I took that opportunity to run. I made it one step before I was slowed by my shirt. He had managed to catch the bottom of it. I tried to keep going. The thin material ripped all the way up the back to the collar as I put a little bit of distance between us. Not that it did any good. He leapt for me, tackling me. Instead of us going down to the floor, which was what I would have preferred, he propelled me toward the wall. I slammed into it first and his whole body barreled into me next. My cheek smacked and ground against the cold brick wall and all the air was knocked out of my lungs when he crushed me.

Because I'd cushioned his fall, he recovered quicker and grabbed me by my wrist and hair. He twisted my arm behind my back, making me scream. He pulled me from the wall, dragged me to the table, and bent me over it. I tried to catch myself with my free hand to lessen the impact of my face and chest on the interrogation table, but my weak arm was nothing compared to his strength. I slammed into the table with enough force my lips split against my teeth.

"Fucking little bitch!" he yelled. His tight grip on my hair disappeared and pain exploded through my back. He'd punched me in the kidneys. I gasped and my bloody spit sprayed the table. "Because of you, everything is fucked." He twisted my arm higher up my back and I screamed myself hoarse.

"Where are they?" he demanded. "Where is my nephew and Amber?"

"I don't know," I said as tears filled my eyes.

"Don't play dumb. I know they chased you through the woods. My daughter told me. They went after you and never came back. You did something to them. You did or he did."

"I didn't do anything to them."

"What the hell is going on in here?" an authoritative voice said.

The sheriff pushed away from me quickly. "Attorney General."

Without him pinning me to the table, my weak body slid to the floor. Lying there on the cold ground, I felt too stunned and too hurt to move.

“Jesus, Shiloh!” I heard Ian say, followed by shoes slapping on the floor. Hands grabbed me and I was rolled over to face him. Ian was kneeling next to me, his eyes wide. “What did you do to her?” he demanded and looked up at Sheriff McAllister.

“She attacked me.” The sheriff only had eyes for the man in an expensive suit who was holding the interrogation room door open. He was a short man, but that didn’t take away from the importance he gave off.

“She’s a third of your size, Steven,” the man said, clearly not believing a word. He looked toward Ian and me. “There’s a hospital next door. Is she well enough to walk there or do I need to call EMS?”

Ian looked back at me. “Can you sit up?”

I nodded and sat up, then got to my feet with Ian’s help. I had to hold my shirt up to keep it from falling off. During the struggle, the rest of it must have ripped. My entire back was exposed, along with the lime green and black Riddler bra I had on.

Ian kept his hands on my shoulders and steered me out of the room.

“After I deal with this, I’ll meet you next door,” the man said to Ian and shut the interrogation room door.

Ian led and walked with me slowly through the precinct. I tried to hold my head up high as I passed police officer after police officer.

“Could you hear me screaming?” I asked Ian.

“No. We couldn’t until we opened the door,” he answered.

“Who was that man?”

“He’s Arizona’s attorney general.”

“The sheriff’s boss?”

“You could say that,” Ian said.

“Where is Logan?”

“In the lobby. Because of his relationship with you, he wasn’t allowed back. The attorney general didn’t want an incident to occur.”

“One still did,” I said numbly.

“Yes, and it probably just sealed the sheriff’s fate,” Ian said.

My feet tripped and Ian caught me. “Do we need to call EMS?” he asked.

“I just want to get out of here,” I said, my tone pleading.

“All right,” he said and kept an arm around me as we continued walking.

We had to pass metal detectors and go through a large bulletproof door to



reach the lobby. I spotted Logan standing near the door we walked through. He took me in, and his eyes widened. Then he looked to Ian.

“We need to take her to the hospital,” Ian said to him.

“Shi.” I heard Creed’s voice, and I looked past Logan. Knox, Keelan, Colt, and Creed were standing on the other side of the lobby, where there was a sitting area. Their eyes were just as wide as Logan’s, and they began rushing over.

Seeing them released a tightness in my chest and I finally felt like it was all right to breathe. Relief hit me quickly and as I moved to meet them halfway, I made it two steps and then everything gave out on me. I was falling. I saw Logan’s face staring down at me before everything went black.

I REALLY HATED HOSPITALS. THEY ATE AWAY TIME AND I HAD LOST ANOTHER full night in one. Because I had fainted, they ran a bunch of tests on me. Everything came back normal. Apart from the cuts, swelling, and bruising, I didn't have anything life-threatening going on. The doctors assumed I had fainted due to stress, and I was released.

In the middle of all the testing, the attorney general had shown up with a high-ranked, gentlemanly police officer and another official-looking guy in a suit. Both were very kind. They had taken my statement of what had happened in the interrogation room. As I'd spoken, I'd felt detached, factual. It had been easier to tell it that way. Everyone around me had been quiet as they'd listened. My guys, even more so.

After I'd told them what had happened today, they'd had me go over my previous interactions with the sheriff, which had led to everything that I'd been dealing with from Cassy and her friends. It had been a long night.

Yet again, it was almost morning by the time we returned to the guys' house.

"Can we get you anything?" Keelan asked.

"I just want to take a shower," I said and left them to go to the twins' bathroom.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror for the longest time. I felt like Two-Face from Batman. One side of my face looked normal, but the other was purple and puffy. There was a cut across my cheekbone and along my jaw. Both my top and bottom lips were split from being smashed against my teeth.

I had gotten my butt kicked.

There was a knock on the bathroom door before Colt poked his head in. “Can I come in?”

I nodded.

He stepped inside and shut the door. We stared at each other without saying anything for a moment and then he reached into the shower and turned it on.

When he pulled off his shirt, I asked, “What are you doing?”

He toed off his shoes and yanked off his socks. “You have the same look in your eyes as you did when we first met. You’re barely holding yourself together. You’re fighting so damn hard to stay strong, you’re not letting yourself feel what happened.”

I looked down. “Someone once told me, to survive something terrible you have to bury how it makes you feel. And after you get through it, when it’s safe, you can allow yourself to feel. The thing is, she didn’t survive to show me how to dig it back up.” I hadn’t thought about those words in a long time. It was one of the last things Shayla had said to me.

A finger came under my chin and made me look up. Colt had closed the distance between us, and his eyes bored into mine. “I can show you.” He grabbed the bottom of the Desert Stone T-shirt I was wearing that Keelan had luckily had in his Jeep. I lifted my arms and Colt removed the shirt. He helped strip me and finished taking off the rest of his clothes. We climbed into the shower together. I washed the smell of that interrogation room off of my skin and Colt helped me wash my hair, being careful of my stitches.

When I was clean, he pulled me to his chest, and we stood under the hot spray. Like I’d always done, I tried to bury my face in his chest. Right away, I learned that was a mistake when I put pressure on my hurt cheek. I had to settle with resting my forehead on him. His hand ran up and down my spine.

“You got through it, babe. You are safe,” he said. “I want you to take in a deep breath, and when you let it go, you stop holding everything back. Don’t be afraid of what’s going to rush to the surface. Just let it come. Whatever it is, I’ll be right here holding you. And even though it will be unbearable at first, know that it will ease. I promise, it will.”

Not trusting my voice, I nodded.

“Ready?” he asked.

He took that deep and long breath with me. When it was time to exhale, I almost didn’t. I was too afraid. Then I realized he was holding his breath, too.

I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him tightly as we exhaled

together. Before the last of the air left my lungs, I mentally made myself let go. As Colt had said, it all rushed to the surface. Everything that had happened in that interrogation room, the terror of knowing what the sheriff had been about to do to me, the pain of him hurting me, the fear of what would happen next, the realization that I'd had no way out of that room, and the loss of hope that anyone would come to save me.

My eyes welled up and my tears mixed with the water pouring down on us. My body shuddered as I began to sob. Colt stopped rubbing my back to just hold me.

Letting myself feel all that had been like opening a gateway, because the next thing to consume me was everything that I'd endured on Halloween, then when the sheriff had ransacked my house, and when Gabe had attacked me at the mud run. Every bad thing that had happened back to when Jacob had drugged me came to the surface. I faced it. I faced it all because I trusted Colt when he said it would eventually get better and I knew he would hold me until it did.



I slept all day and didn't drag myself out of Colt's bed until around dinnertime. I was making my way down the hall, toward the living room, when I heard something strange.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Colt said.

"You need to know." Was that Logan?

"I'd prefer to wait until our girlfriend is ready to tell us," Keelan said.

"She'd probably prefer it this way," Logan said. "It will take the pressure off of her."

There was a clicking sound and I could hear Ian's voice, but it was recorded.

*"Interview of Shiloh McConnell—sole survivor—"*

Panic surged through me and I rushed toward the sound of the recording. I stepped out from the hall and found my guys and Logan all sitting around the dining-room table. Logan was seated in the chair I usually sat in and placed in front of him on top of a tan folder was a voice recorder.

I went to stand behind the chair next to Keelan that was normally vacant and directly across from where Logan sat. "What are you doing?" My

question was for all of them, but my full focus was on Logan. Hearing my voice come on the recorder, I lunged for it.

Logan scooped it up before I even got close to touching it and paused it. “They deserve to know.”

*How dare he?*

“I know,” I snarled. “But dammit, Logan! Why can’t I tell them in my own time? When I’m ready? I’m in therapy. I’m doing the work to do it. Why can’t I do it on my terms? What happened...what I went through—” My voice broke.

Logan shook his head. “They need to know. I understand it’s hard—”

“You don’t understand,” I barked. “You saw the aftermath. I had to live through it. I had to watch him kill them. I had to hear their screams and see their fear. I had to watch the life leave their eyes. I was stabbed, cut, beaten, and almost raped. I disfigured myself to get free.” I held up my wrists. “I fought to stay alive all while enduring the lowest level of hell. It broke me in a way where I will never be glued back together the same. So do not say you understand. You don’t. You want this for you. To get your way, and who cares what the cost is to me, right?” I shook my head. “What you’re doing won’t work, Logan. You need to realize that.”

His jaw clenched. “If it were me, I’d want to know what was on the line before deeper feelings developed.”

“I love them, Logan. There are already deeper feelings,” I snapped. Knox and I hadn’t said those words to each other yet, but I did love him. I had been in love with him for a while. “You’re acting like they don’t know anything. Like I downplayed the seriousness. I haven’t. I’ve told them pretty much everything and they’ve done their own research,” I argued. “Them not knowing the details from that night isn’t going to make a difference.”

“Details matter.” He shoved his chair back and stood. Grabbing the tan file that had been lying untouched in front of him, he flipped it open, and he dropped a piece of paper on the table for all of us to see. The guys either hissed or cursed before looking away from what Logan laid out. The moment my eyes landed on the blood, I realized it wasn’t a piece of paper, but an eight-by-ten photograph of a brutally murdered girl. A brunette girl, around my age, with many, many stab wounds and bruises, and a picture of my face stapled to hers. She was lying on her stomach, head turned to the side, on what appeared to be a bed. The picture was from her waist up, but it was obvious she was naked. There was so much blood on her skin and around her

on the bed. Before the need to blink hit me, I saw rope still tied around her wrists.

I closed my eyes and didn't open them right away. I didn't know why I thought closing them would hide the image of the girl or ease the feeling of the room closing in on me. It didn't. The picture of the dead girl Mr. X had killed because he couldn't find who he truly wanted was carved into my brain.

"Olivia Berns," my uncle said, and my eyes shot open. I watched as he pulled another picture from the file and tossed it on the table. "Jessica Rivers." It was another brunette girl with my picture stapled to her face, killed in the same manner. Logan tossed down picture after picture of girls, saying their names that would haunt me for the rest of my life.

"Jonathan McConnell," he said with a strained voice and before I could finish processing my father's name, he tossed down the picture.

Tears fell from my eyes without warning, or maybe I was just too shocked to realize they'd started, as I stared unblinking at the image of my father lying on the couch, gray eyes open, blood everywhere from his nose down, his insides on the outside. Seeing it seemed to sharpen the memory I had of finding him that way.

Logan's voice broke with the next name he said. "Heather Mc—McConnell." Like the girls Mr. X killed, my mom had been killed by multiple stab wounds.

She was fully clothed, though.

I didn't know why that thought popped into my head.

Maybe I thought it would lessen the brutality of her death and thus help me feel slightly better.

It didn't.

Logan held one more photo in his hand. His hesitation in tossing it down drew my eyes up to his. He was staring at me, his expression schooled. "Shayla McConnell," he said, dropping my sister's picture on the table. My gaze dropped with it.

Colt looked away. "All I see is Shiloh."

The others were quiet. I didn't know if they looked away like Colt had or couldn't look away from the photo like me.

I felt dead inside as I took in my sister's pale pink hair, her vacant gray eyes. Blood had crusted the corners of her mouth. Her skin was ghostly. The blood all around her neck made it more apparent.

Numbly, I pulled out the chair in front of me and sat. I stared across the table at my uncle with tear-streaked cheeks. Colt reached for my hand at the same time Keelan grabbed my knee. They both squeezed a little, a silent way to ask if I was all right. I didn't give any indication that I was.

Logan wouldn't stop. He was so convinced that the details of that night would be the push that the guys needed to leave me. Them still sitting here after seeing horrific pictures of murdered girls and my butchered family was evidence enough that they wouldn't.

*Details matter*, Logan had said. I couldn't be more detailed than a photograph. Yet he still stared at me, waiting.

"Play the recording." I tried to sound confident, spiteful, as if I couldn't wait to prove him wrong. But my words came out defeated and weak. I had no fight left. Just forced acceptance.

"No," Knox said. "If you are not ready, I will not take that from you. None of us will."

Logan didn't seem to care about that and pressed play on the recorder. My voice poured from the small device.

*"I can't do this," I cried.*

*"Yes, you can, Shi," Logan said firmly.*

*"Please, Logan, tell me it wasn't real. This isn't real. I'm dreaming! I'm dreaming! I need my mom. I need her! Mommy!" I wailed.*

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" I yelled frantically, slamming my hands down on the table. "I'll do it! I'll tell them! Just please turn it off!"

Creed snatched up the recorder before Logan could and turned it off.

I couldn't sit here and listen to that. The pain. The despair. The voice of a broken girl who had lost everyone she'd loved, whose life had been completely destroyed. Even though it was me, a moment captured from my past, it was the rawness of it I couldn't take. Like the first sting after a cut. The hurt would never be as painful as it had been then. To sit here and listen to it...it felt like a violation. That girl didn't deserve to have that horrible moment where no amount of begging and pleading would change what had happened broadcast like this. I didn't deserve this. Maybe one day, I'd let the guys listen to that recording, but it wasn't today.

Glaring at Logan, I steeled myself for what I was about to do.





## THAT NIGHT

I PULLED UP THE LONG DRIVEWAY TO MY HOUSE AND I TURNED OFF MY CAR. It had been a long but fun day. I needed to thank my mom for the pep talk that had encouraged me to go hang out at Liz's house after school today. And also for the second pep talk, which she'd given me when Liz had suggested we go see a movie after we ate dinner with her parents.

"This will be one of the last times you might see her," my mom had told me. "Don't think about him. He will be a bad memory soon."

We were moving. Not that I knew when. We hadn't packed a single thing. I did have a small hunch my parents were waiting until school to break for the summer in a few days, and like they had done with our trip to Texas to see Logan, they were going to wake us up in the dead of night and tell us it was time to go. I didn't have much to go on, just that yesterday I'd seen my dad bring down all our suitcases from the attic. Then I'd overheard him on a work call this morning before school. He'd mentioned his last day at the firm would be my and Shayla's last day of school. My mom had already sold her restaurant in record time to an old friend from culinary school.

I'd made it a point to not tell any of this to Shayla. She wasn't happy about leaving, and if she knew we weren't bringing much with us when we left, she'd throw a hissy fit. Shayla was very materialistic. I, on the other hand, could leave it all behind. I craved to be anonymous in a faraway place. I didn't want to cause heads to turn every time I entered a classroom. I didn't want to be referred to as the McConnell twin who'd almost been raped by one of the old English teachers. I wanted a fresh start—a do-over at life.

I locked up my car and headed for the front door.

"I'm home," I said as I walked in. I wasn't surprised I didn't get a

response back. Our house was very large, and voices got muffled. What I did find surprising after I shut the door behind me was that all the lights were off and it was quiet. Too quiet.

“Mom! Dad!” I yelled into the dark house. There wasn’t an answer and the hair on the back of my neck rose.

For a moment, I questioned whether or not anyone was home, but then I saw light flicker in the living room to the left of the foyer. The TV was on, but muted. As I stepped into the sunken living room, the wood floor creaked under my foot and a coppery smell filled my nose. With the little light from the TV, I spotted my dad lying on the couch. I opened my mouth to call out to him again when I saw the shadow on his chest. Not a shadow, but a stain on his white shirt.

I moved toward the lamp next to one of the couches. The toe of my shoe caught on the large area rug as I did. I flicked it on, and a scream ripped its way up my throat. I clamped my hand over my mouth to keep from letting it out. Unable to blink, unable to look away, tears filled my eyes as I took in the blood. So much blood.

His arm was hanging off the side of the couch and his eyes were open. They were staring vacantly at the TV. My entire body shook violently as my gaze traveled lower. His abdomen was ripped open, and his insides were pulled out.

I didn’t want to believe what I was seeing.

*It’s not real.* I backed away with that thought. With each step, I worked harder to convince myself that what I was seeing wasn’t true, until someone grabbed my shoulder.

The scream I had been holding in escaped, piercing through the silent house.

Another hand slammed down on my mouth. “It’s me,” a voice similar to mine said.

*Shayla.*

I whirled around to face her. Her cheeks were streaked with tears. There was so much fear in her eyes. “We need to leave,” she whispered. “He’s in the house.”

*He.*

She didn’t need to tell me who *he* was.

So many questions filled my head.

Why?

How?

Where was Mom?

Was she dead?

I didn't ask them. The fear and firmness in Shayla's voice kept me from asking. I nodded frantically and Shayla grabbed my hand.

As we took a step to leave, a crash came from the other side of the house, followed by our mother's scream. It sent a trembling wave of terror through every bone in my body. Shayla's grip on my hand tightened as we listened to the sound of running on the hardwood floor echo through the house. The running got closer and closer.

Shayla pushed me back, further into the living room, past our dad's body. Then she pulled me down to the floor behind the couch he lay dead on. Not even a second later, the wood floor creaked underfoot and panting breaths filled the room.

The floor creaked again.

Shayla and I both flinched as our mom let out a pain-filled yell, followed by the sound of wrestling.

The lamp I'd turned on was knocked over, but didn't break. Our mom cried out before a thud vibrated through the floor.

I knew I was putting Shayla and myself at risk, but I had to look. I peeked around the side of the couch. My mom was on the ground, crying as she stared up at Mr. X, who was straddling her. He had her pinned with a large, bloody knife at her throat.

A gasp escaped me.

My mom's eyes locked with mine. It was for only a moment before she forced herself to look back at Mr. X. In that brief moment we'd stared at each other, so much had been conveyed. Her surprise. Her worry. Her fear.

"Where is she?" he growled above her.

The terror that overwhelmed her gave way to what looked like determination. Her expression hardened as she stared up at Mr. X.

He noticed the change in her, too, and roared in her face, "Where is she?!"

"Go to hell!" she wailed as she thrashed at him.

Mr. X lifted the knife from her neck and raised it high above his head.

*No! No! No!* I screamed in my head, sitting there frozen and helpless as he brought down his knife.

My mom's breath hitched, her eyes wide as the blade plunged into her

chest.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to roar. But my fear squeezed my throat, blocking any sound from getting out.

When Mr. X withdrew his knife and brought it down again and again, stabbing her over and over, I went to crawl out from behind the couch. I wanted to stop him. I wanted to save her.

I barely made it an inch when Shayla grabbed me with more strength than she should have had and yanked me back behind the couch. Startled, I let out a tiny, strangled noise to keep myself from screaming. She quickly covered my mouth and bound her other arm around me so tight, I knew she was afraid of what I might do.

She held me like that as we listened to Mr. X grunting each time he stabbed our mom. Shayla's tears dripped on my shoulder. It was then that I noticed I could feel her whole body shaking and hear her heart pounding in her chest.

I put my arm over the one she had around me and squeezed her wrist. It was the only way I could hug her and offer her comfort.

Mr. X let out a roar that made us both jump. We both held our breath, waiting, listening. His feet shuffled on the floor as he moved around the room.

"Shiloh!" he yelled.

Shayla's fingers dug into my ribs as she crushed me against her.

"Come out! Come out, wherever you are!"

The need to breathe began to burn in my chest as I strained to listen, to pick up any hint that would tell me where he was in the room.

The floor creaked and I knew.

"Shiii...looh." His voice sounded distant and not in the living room.

Shayla's hold on me relaxed and we both took in air as quietly as we could.

A scraping noise traveled in from the foyer. It sounded like he was dragging the tip of his knife along the wall as he got further and further away.

I climbed out from behind the couch and started for my mom. Shayla grabbed at my hand, but I yanked it away from her.

"Shi," I barely heard Shayla whisper.

I knew there was nothing we could do, but I still needed to...I didn't know. Touch her? I had to feel that she was gone, because if she wasn't, I didn't think I could leave her.

Her head was tilted to the side, eyes unblinking. Blood was spreading around her on the floor. I knelt where the blood had yet to reach and hovered shaky hands over her, not knowing where I could touch without causing her more pain. “Mom,” I breathed as tears poured from my eyes and dripped off my chin.

How could I fix this?

What was I supposed to do?

I grabbed her hand that was resting on the floor in her blood and there was nothing, not a flicker in her eyes to indicate that she felt me.

I brought the back of her hand up to my cheek. It was cold. “Mommy?” I whispered as more tears clouded my vision.

Shayla fisted the back of my shirt. “Please, Shi,” I barely heard her beg. “She’s dead. We have to go.”

I didn’t want to let go. If I let go, I had to accept that she was gone. I wasn’t ready.

Shayla yanked me to my feet by my shirt and dragged me back through the living room, past our dad’s body and toward his office.

Once inside, she shut the door as quietly as she could. The room became pitch black, but she found me. She put her hands on my shoulders. “I need you to listen to me,” she whispered.

A silent sob rocked through me, and she put her hands on my cheeks. Her grip was firm. “I need you to pull yourself together. If you don’t, you will get us killed.”

“How?” was all I could get out. How was she not falling apart right now?

“You have to bury it. Everything that you are feeling—what just happened. You have to bury it deep so we can survive. And after we get through this, when it’s safe, you can let yourself feel it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I sniffled. “Bury it to survive.”

“Yes.” Her whole body shook, and I knew she was nodding. “So take a deep breath and bury it all.”

I inhaled deeply. Burying didn’t work for me, but pushing did. I pushed the agony I felt at losing our parents, the images of Mr. X stabbing our mom and the fear in her eyes. I pushed them back until it became easier to focus. The thought of needing to get out of here and get help took their place in the forefront of my mind.

“Okay,” I whispered. “What do we do?”

I TRAILED OFF, FEELING MENTALLY DEPLETED. FOR SO LONG, I'D HAD THAT night buried in the furthest corner of my mind. For almost a year and a half, I'd built wall after wall to keep it there. For me to continue telling them what had happened next, I would have to tear down another wall, and the next one was the biggest and strongest of them all.

I wasn't strong enough to do it. Not yet, anyway.

"Keep going, Shi," Logan urged.

"No," I said. I was done. I'd had enough. I glanced at my guys. "Can you give us a minute?"

They didn't hesitate in getting up from the table and the four of them went out into the backyard.

After the door closed behind them, I looked at Logan. "What is going on, Logan? What are you trying to achieve with all of this?"

"They deserve to know," he said again.

I shook my head, and I picked up Shayla's picture. "They do know. This..." I held up the picture. "This shows them what happened and seeing it does a way better job than hearing it. So I'm going to ask again...what do you wish to achieve? Because they're not going anywhere."

"They need to know what you went through."

"They will. When I'm ready, and when that is isn't up to you to decide," I said.

That set him off and he stood from the table angrily, almost knocking his chair over as he did. "You're being stupid, Shiloh. So unbelievably stupid. You have fucked everything up by telling them."

"How did I fuck up?" I snarled, standing from my chair. "How?!"

“Because you put yourself at risk.”

“Bullshit, Logan! Stop throwing that bullshit at me, because we both know that’s not true.” I fisted my hands at my sides, willing myself to continue calmly. “I don’t regret that I told them. Instead of continuing on with a life that was lonely and full of despair with no end in sight, I chose to grab hold of something that gave me reason to fight. Since they came into my life, I know what it is to be happy again and to feel hope, and with that, I am no longer living day by day. I look forward to things and I allow myself to envision a future.”

“And what happens when X rips it all away? Will you be able to survive losing this new little family you have all over again?” he questioned.

“Is that what this has all been about? You’d rather I be miserable and alone instead of happy with the possibility of losing that happiness again?”

He didn’t respond.

“Every day I ask myself, *What if Mr. X finds me?* The scenarios that play in my head are crippling. What I’ve learned is that I can’t watch life pass me by anymore because I’m too scared to live it. I cannot control *what if*. All I can do is prepare the best I can for it, which I have done and will continue to do. But I am done being crippled by *what if*. I am done letting Mr. X rule my life.”

“When X kills them, you will not survive it and I will lose you,” he said as if he hadn’t listened to a single word that had come out of my mouth.

His fear broke my heart as much as it angered me. “So you would rather I was alone and miserable, because it would appease your fear.” A tear leaked from my eye, and I quickly wiped it away as it rolled down my cheek.

He didn’t deny it.

“You’re not saying anything because you know how wrong that is.”

He looked away from me.

“I think you should consider therapy,” I said. “Or sit in on a session with me with Dr. Bolton.”

He scoffed like that was the most absurd thing I had ever said to him. “Just because you go to therapy doesn’t mean everyone needs to.”

*How do you help someone who doesn’t want to be helped?*

I grabbed the chair I’d been sitting in and pushed it in. “I’m sorry, Logan, but I can’t give you what you want.”

Logan opened his mouth to argue, but I cut him off. “I’m not relocating. Not unless there is a legitimate risk of Mr. X finding me, and not what you

think is a risk, either. I think it's best to leave the risk assessment up to Ian from here on out."

He began shaking his head, a snarl curling his lips.

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"What do you mean, when do I leave?" he snapped.

"I assume now that the sheriff has been handled, you want to get back to hunting down Mr. X." It was the one thing he desired more than being here for me.

He stared at me with a scathing look. "That's it, huh? You used me to battle the big bad sheriff, but now that's dealt with, I get kicked to the curb?"

I squeezed the top of the chair. "If you feel that way, why don't you stay, get a house of your own nearby, and let Ian and the thousands of police officers out there hunt down Mr. X? That way we can work this out. This pain between us." I gestured from him to me.

The muscle in his jaw clenched.

He wouldn't stay. I bet his flight out of Arizona was already booked. I couldn't even feel smug because it hurt too much. "That's what I thought." My voice wobbled and I had to look away from him or I'd start crying again.

I hated grief. We were both fighting to survive in an ocean of it. Revenge was his lifeline, and my guys were mine. Neither of us would let go and risk drowning. I couldn't risk it because I knew he'd drag me back to where I'd started, in the middle of that dark, depthless water, and leave me again. I held onto my lifeline tightly because I knew he wouldn't let go of his, and he would look away *again* as grief pulled me beneath the surface. So, no, I wouldn't drown for Logan, not when my lifeline was helping me get closer to shore.



"It's Ethan's birthday Saturday," Colt announced.

It had been a few hours since Logan had stormed out of here, abruptly, pissed off and without saying goodbye. After that, we'd ordered food in. Now we were settling down watching a cooking competition show on the Food Network.

I jerked up. "It is?" I wished I'd known sooner. I had no idea what I was going to get him, and I only had three days to figure it out.



“Yeah. He’s throwing a party at his house that night,” Creed said and then looked at Knox and Keelan. “Anyway, we can go in late on Sunday, or do you need us to open?”

“Another party?” I said and regretted it the moment I did. It was Ethan’s day, and he could spend it however he wanted, and as his friend I’d support that. “Ignore me,” I told them.

“We don’t have to go if you’re not comfortable with it,” Colt said. “Ethan would understand given what’s just happened.”

“It’s my friend’s birthday and I want to be there for him,” I said, and that seemed to convince Colt.

“We all get to go in late on Sunday,” Knox said, responding to Creed’s earlier question. “The new assistant manager started yesterday and should be fully trained by then. I have her opening that day.”

“Her first day must have been a baptism by fire with me being detained yesterday,” I said.

“She stepped up to the task,” Keelan said. “She has many years of experience as an assistant manager at another gym in town. The only reason she stopped working there was because the owner died and the kids who inherited the gym sold it.”

“Isabelle started working yesterday, too,” Colt announced.

I knew that already. I had a million texts from her, which I had responded to while we’d waited for dinner to arrive. Most of her texts were full of worry for me. She had heard rumors around school that I had been arrested. I explained to her what had really happened. She was happy karma was raining down on the sheriff. I believed her exact words had been, ‘Karma is my favorite bitch.’ Then she went on to tell me about her first day and how Derek had trained her. “She told me she likes it so far.”

“That’s good. She’s—” Keelan was interrupted by the sound of ringing. All our phones were on the coffee table. Mine was the only one lighting up.

I reached for it and saw that it was the unknown number. I sent it to voicemail and set my phone back on the table.

“That guy is still calling you?” Creed asked.

“Yeah. I figured after Isabelle talked to him, he’d stop calling, but he hasn’t. He calls at least six times a day,” I explained.

“What did he say to Isabelle?” Colt asked.

“He was wanting to speak to an Annabell Weston. She told him he had the wrong number and he hung up,” I answered, omitting the fact that

Isabelle had gone off on him first.

I felt them all go still, and I looked from the TV to them. They were all staring at me and appeared stricken.

Keelan leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “What name did you just say?”

“Annabell Weston,” I repeated, and I watched as they paled. “Do you know her?”

“That’s our mother’s name,” Knox said.

“Weston was her maiden name,” Keelan added.

“I—” Before I could say more, my phone rang again.

The five of us stared at it for a few rings. On the screen in big letters, it said *Unknown*. By the fourth ring, the four of them lunged for the phone.

Knox got to it first and answered it. “Hello?” he said, sitting ramrod straight on the couch. “Hello?” he repeated. “I can hear you breathing, ass—” Knox pulled the phone away from his ear to look at it. “He hung up.”

“Do you think it’s the sheriff?” Colt asked.

“Or Gabe?” Creed said.

“He’s missing,” I said.

Creed gave me a look like he didn’t believe it. “Do you really think he is, or Amber for that matter? Don’t you find it odd that they both went missing at the same time and the sheriff was trying to pin it on you?” Creed took my phone from Knox and held it up. “They are all in a lot of trouble and this is them grasping at fucking straws to get to you and us.” He tossed my phone on the coffee table and leaned back against the couch. “We’re changing your number tomorrow.”

With a small smile, I relaxed back against the couch, too. “Sir, yes, sir.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I thought I told you to only call me that in the bedroom.”

I gawked at him. “No, you haven’t.”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Would you like to?”

Knox snorted and that set Colt and Keelan laughing.

*Dirty Stone boys*. Blushing, I grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

IT WAS FRIDAY AND THE DISAPPEARANCE OF GABE AND AMBER WAS BEING reported repeatedly on the local news more and more as each day passed. Because Cassy had said the twins' party was the last place Amber and Gabe had been seen, a good chunk of students who'd attended the party had been interviewed by the police, and all had said they hadn't seen them there.

According to the rumor mill, Cassy had quickly changed her story after everyone else's had made her look like a liar and now it was being reported that Gabe and Amber had been last seen leaving Cassy's house, which was also the sheriff's house, and the news was going crazy over it.

Currently, I was pulling up to Desert Stone. I had just gotten done at the doctor, who'd removed my stitches, and I wasn't in the mood to be home alone. I didn't know why, but I felt on edge. I couldn't relax at home. Every little noise made me jump. I'd had a session with Dr. Bolton yesterday and she believed I was still dealing with being attacked on Halloween and by the sheriff.

As I walked into the gym, I smiled. Isabelle was behind the front desk.

"Hey, you," she greeted me, returning my smile. "What are you doing here?"

I rounded the desk, heading for the hall. "I've come to hang out with you all."

"Oh," she said and gave me a sly look. "I can put you to work."

I laughed. "Sounds good. I'm going to go bug the guys for a bit first."

"Okay. See you in a bit," she said.

Both Knox's and Keelan's offices were empty. I went into Knox's and took a seat behind his big desk. Pulling out my phone, which had a new

number now, I clicked on the camera app and took a selfie of me smiling with as much of Knox's office as I could get in the background. I sent it to the guys in our group chat and captioned it, *Boss lady*. I got quick replies from all four of them.

**Knox: Are you in my office?**

**Me: Maybe :)**

**Keelan: Adorable.**

**Colt: Beautiful.**

**Creed: A sexy boss lady.**

I was grinning down at my phone, getting ready to send another text, when there was a knock. I looked up and there was a gorgeous brunette woman, who had to be in her early thirties, standing just outside Knox's office. I knew who she was the moment I saw her navy Desert Stone polo and dress slacks.

"Um, hello," she said as she walked inside.

"You must be Katrina," I said and reached across the desk.

She took my hand with a frown.

"I'm Shiloh."

There was zero recognition on her face. "Hi, Shiloh. Should you be back here?" she asked.

"You have no idea who I am, do you?"

"I'm sorry, no," Katrina said.

"She's my girlfriend," Knox said as he walked in.

I went to stand from his chair as he came behind his desk. He put his hand on my shoulder, gently pushing me to sit back down.

"Oh, I apologize," Katrina said to both of us. "I didn't know who she was or if she was supposed to be in here."

"She is. You might see her around quite a bit," Knox said.

"Okay," Katrina said. "I better get back to work. It was nice meeting you, Shiloh."

"It was nice meeting you," I said to her before she left. My stare lingered on the door after she walked out. "She was nice and professional."

"She was," he agreed with a hint of a question in his voice.

"And she clearly doesn't find you attractive, and for that, she passes with flying colors."

“I didn’t know you were the jealous type,” he said, sounding surprised.

I swiveled the chair to the side to face him. “It’s a shock to me, too.”

He smiled down at me in a way that was open and adoring.

“What about you?” I asked. “Are you the jealous type?” We hadn’t had a chance to talk about what had gone down with him, me, and Keelan on Halloween or how it had made him feel.

His beautiful smile dropped, and an intensity and seriousness took over his whole face. I knew he knew what I was asking. “I am the jealous type.”

Everything in me sank.

“But not with my brothers,” he added.

I couldn’t have stopped the happiness I felt from showing even if I’d tried and I got to my feet. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my cheek against his chest.

He put one arm around me and began to stroke my hair with the other, then froze. “How was the doctor?”

“Good. I no longer look like Frankenstein’s monster.”

His body shook as he laughed silently. “Did you need something from me?”

It took me a second to understand he was asking why I was here. I shook my head. “Can I hang out here until you guys get off of work?”

“Is everything all right?”

“I’m scared to be home alone,” I admitted. “I’m so unsettled I feel like I’m being watched and like someone is going to pop out around every corner. Every noise I hear makes me think someone is in the house. And it’s not just mine. I feel like that at your house, too. Dr. Bolton says that it’s because of the attacks, but I don’t think of Cassy or the sheriff when I’m feeling all this. I think it’s Mr. X. It’s like my mind defaults to him or something.”

He put his hands on my shoulders and stepped back to look down at me. “I think Dr. Bolton is right. You’ve been through a lot recently and that’s going to take a toll on you.” He leaned down and kissed my head. “You can stay, but you might be bored.”

“I figured I’d help Isabelle at the front desk, if that’s okay?”

He nodded and I headed for the door.

“Can I ask you for something?” he said before I left.

I glanced back at him. “Of course.”

He hadn’t moved from where I’d left him, and he had his hands stuffed in his pockets. “Will you spend the night with me tonight?”

I wished I looked confident when I replied and didn't assume that by saying *spend the night*, he had meant something more than sleep. Blushing, I answered, "Yes."



I followed the guys home from Desert Stone in my 4Runner and we all pulled up to our houses at the same time. "I'm going to change really quick and then I'll be over," I announced as we all climbed out of our cars. I was out of clean pajamas at their house. Doing a load of laundry was on my list to do before bed tonight.

Colt and Creed headed for me instead of walking toward their house. "We'll come with you," Colt said, and I had the impression that Knox had told his brothers I was having a difficult time being alone.

We walked up the steps to my porch together and they waited as I unlocked the door.

"What are we eating for dinner?" Creed asked.

"I have a chicken recipe I want to try," I answered as I opened up the door. The smell of pennies filled my nose the moment I stepped inside. When I saw why, I froze.

"Why isn't the alarm beeping?" I barely heard Creed say over the pounding of my heart in my ears.

There was someone sitting on my couch.

Not "someone."

Jacob.

He was sitting smack-dab in the middle of my purple Joker couch. That Joker couch was now covered in his blood. His wrists were slit. Yet he was sitting upright, like he was a doll someone had placed there. There was a knife in his limp, bloody hand and a note pinned to the front of his shirt. Scribbled in Sharpie, the note read, *I should not touch what is not mine. I'm sorry.*

I didn't know I was screaming until a hand covered my eyes and I was being dragged away.

MY HOUSE WAS A CRIME SCENE. THE POLICE KEPT SAYING THE WORD *SUICIDE* amongst themselves as they walked in and out of my house. Jacob's body had already been taken away and things seemed to be finishing up.

The guys and I had already given our statements hours ago. Colt, Creed, and I were sitting on the curb trying to stay out of the way. Knox and Keelan were standing in front of us, watching what was happening.

"How did he get past the alarm?" Keelan asked.

"They say he entered the code," Colt answered.

He and Creed were handling finding Jacob well. All four of them were. Me, on the other hand...seeing Jacob had been a shock. My body had locked up. I hadn't been able to look away. Colt had covered my eyes and gotten me out of the house. The moment we'd been on my front lawn, the shock had worn off. I had jerked out of Colt's arms, bent over, and vomited everything that had been in my stomach.

"How did he know it?" Knox asked.

They talked amongst themselves, and I sat there lost in my thoughts.

*I should not touch what is not mine.*

*I should not touch what is not mine.*

*I should not touch what is not mine.*

Those words...

I knew what my gut was screaming at me.

But there was no certainty. No proof.

Then why did I feel this way?

"Looks like they're done," Creed said, pulling me from my thoughts.

The remaining cop car was driving away from the curb as I looked up.

“Why don’t we head in?” Keelan said and looked at me. “You have everything you need at our house, right? Or do you need me to go get you some stuff?”

“I’m out of clean pajamas,” I said.

“I’ll lend you a shirt to sleep in,” Knox said. “None of us need to go in that house tonight.”

“Okay,” I said, standing. “Give me a sec.” I walked to my car and unlocked it. Opening the driver’s door, I reached under the seat and grabbed my gun. I knew they saw as I tucked it into my purse. I was surprised none of them said anything after I locked up my 4Runner and we headed into their house.

“Why don’t you take your meds, Shi, and get ready for bed?” Knox suggested once inside and headed for his room.

“I’ll get you a glass of water,” Colt said, heading for the kitchen.

Keelan and Creed sat on the couch in the living room. Both let out similar exhausted sighs. I took a seat next to them and pulled my purse off my shoulder. Feeling around my gun, I searched my purse for my medicine bottle. I didn’t feel it. I took out my gun and set it on the coffee table. Creed and Keelan’s eyes seemed to zero in on the 9mm. I shook my purse. There wasn’t the rattle of pills inside a small plastic bottle. Panicked, I opened my purse wide and flipped it over. All of its contents spilled onto the coffee table. My phone, my burner, wallet, ChapStick, tampons, hair ties, a few pens, a receipt, and spare change.

“What’s wrong, Shi?” Creed asked as he looked from the mess I’d made on the coffee table to me.

“My birth control and my nightmare medication are gone,” I announced.

“Are you sure they’re not in your house?” Keelan asked. “I can go check.”

I shook my head. “I don’t take them out of my purse because I never know whether I’ll sleep here or at home and I don’t want to forget to take them. I never take them out of my purse.”

“Could they have fallen out?” Colt asked from behind us.

The three of us turned and he was standing behind the couch, holding a glass of water.

“They could have, but I find it odd that nothing else is missing,” I said.

Creed stood and started to walk away. “I’m going to go check your car just in case they might have fallen out there.”



“Don’t go alone!” I shouted, startling them.

Creed froze and spun. He stared at me with a concerned look.

“Please,” I said calmly. “Please don’t go out there alone.”

“What’s going on?” Knox asked as he returned. He was out of his work clothes and dressed in a T-shirt and basketball shorts.

Keelan took my purse from me and took my hands. “I know finding Jacob like that—”

“I don’t feel safe,” I blurted.

The four of them went quiet.

“I don’t want to be here.” I got up and started pacing in front of the TV. “Something isn’t right.”

“Babe, stop pacing and take a deep breath,” Colt said.

“I’m not having a panic attack,” I snapped. “It’s my gut—my instincts are telling me that things aren’t right.”

Creed stepped in front of me, blocking me from pacing, and put his hands on my shoulders. “What isn’t right, Shi? Talk to us.”

I began talking about the window in my spare bedroom, the noises in my house, the feeling of being watched, the strange way Jacob’s note was written. I brought up the weird phone calls, even though they knew about those, and now, my missing birth control and meds.

“Those can all be easily explained,” Keelan said gently.

“I know,” I said frustratedly. I’d been about to bring up the dream I’d had of Knox, which I now thought hadn’t been a dream and the man I’d seen hadn’t been Knox. “I know I sound crazy, and I know the likelihood that it’s Mr. X is slim because I have no idea how he would have found me, but everything in me, down to my bones, is screaming for me to run.”

“Why don’t we go stay at a hotel for the night?” Knox suggested.

I felt relieved, while the guys gaped at their brother.

Knox stared back at them. “Our girlfriend is scared and doesn’t feel safe. I think for at least tonight, we can do this for her.”

Keelan nodded. “Also, we might benefit from putting some distance between us and what happened next door.”

I knew they thought what I was feeling was due to finding Jacob dead in my house, but I wasn’t going to fight it. For tonight, I had a way to keep them safe.



We got a one-bedroom suite at the nicest and closest hotel. We were on the tenth floor and there was only one way in or out of the room. As soon as you walked into the suite, you were in a small hall that had a bathroom to the left. Coming down the small hall, you entered a little kitchen, and past the kitchen was a living area with a pull-out couch. Off the living space was a door that led to the bedroom, where there were two queen beds.

“I’ll sleep on the pull-out,” I offered. For one, we were staying here because of me. And two, I wanted to be able to keep an eye on the only way in here.

“You three take the bedroom. I’ll sleep on the pull-out with Shiloh,” Knox said.

No one argued and we all got ready to go to sleep. It was late and today had been another rough one. To say the least.

The door between our rooms was left wide open at my request. It made them feel closer in case anything happened.

After shutting off the lights, Knox climbed into bed next to me. The pull-out was surprisingly comfortable. I scooted closer to Knox until I was able to rest my head on his shoulder and drape my arm across his chest. His arm wrapped around my back, holding me close.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He kissed the top of my head. “I don’t like you being scared.”

“I hope I’m wrong. I hope I wake up tomorrow feeling stupid.”

“Have you thought about calling your uncle?”

“He accused me of using him.”

“I know, but if you really think X is here, you need to call him, no matter how upset you are with each other.”

I sighed. “I’ll call him tomorrow.”



“Shiloh.”

*I opened my eyes to the dark hotel-room ceiling. Seeing that it was still nighttime, I closed my eyes and tried to go back to sleep.*

*“Shiii...looh,” a voice whispered.*

*My eyes shot open and looked in the direction of the voice.*

*Standing at the foot of the bed was a dark outline of a man.*

*“I found you,” he whispered.*

*Quickly, I sat up and began shaking Knox, who was still asleep next to me. “Knox!”*



I jolted upright in the bed, breathing heavily. Knox sat up with me, his hand going right to my back to rub up and down in soothing strokes. I looked around the dark room frantically and found nothing amiss.

“Shh, it’s all right,” he said tiredly. “It was just a nightmare. You’re safe.”

I focused on breathing for a bit, taking air in through my nose and out through my mouth.

“That’s it. Let’s lie down,” he encouraged, and we both lay back. I lay on my side, facing him, unable to close my eyes. He brushed my hair back from my face and behind my shoulder. “You’re safe.”

“I don’t feel safe.” My voice trembled.

Hearing it, Knox ordered, “Roll over.”

I did, giving him my back, and he scooted close until he was pressed all the way against me. He slid one arm under my head, wrapped the other around me tightly, and whispered, “Right now, in my arms, you are safe. I will not let anything get you.”

I took his hand that was near my head in mine and laced our fingers.

“The only way in here is locked and all of us would hear if someone tried to get in. Just focus on the feeling of me around you and close your eyes.”

“Can you tell me about your day at work or something to distract me from my thoughts?” I whispered as I closed my eyes and tried to relax.

In a low voice, he began talking about how he’d started his day with a workout. Then went on to talk about scheduling issues and employee drama. When he was done going over his day, I had successfully relaxed to the sound of his voice, and I could feel sleep beckoning me.

“I love you,” I heard him whisper.

“I love you, too,” I said with a sleepy voice. He stiffened and I smiled. “Thought I was asleep, did ya?”

His body slowly relaxed and he kissed my head. “Go to sleep.”

My smile stayed as I began to drift.

THE NEXT DAY, I BEGAN TO FEEL THAT MAYBE I HAD BEEN OVERREACTING TO finding Jacob's body in my house. Or I really didn't want to believe Mr. X had found me. After we checked out of the hotel and returned to the guys' house, I still called Logan. He didn't answer.

Knox and Keelan went into work for a half day, while the twins and I stayed home and watched TV for most of the day. Around dinnertime, Ethan texted Colt and Creed, begging that they come over and help decorate. He managed to guilt Colt into doing it when he pulled the *it's my birthday* line.

*Cheese and rice*, that guilted me, too. No one should have to decorate for their own birthday. I offered to go help with Colt. I'd have to rush to get ready, but I'd go. Both he and Creed convinced me to ignore Ethan and to take my time getting ready.

As I was finishing up my makeup in the twins' bathroom later that evening, I realized that the gift I had gotten Ethan was at my house. My stomach twisted up at the idea of going over there. I closed my eyes and exhaled, calming my nerves.

As I left the bathroom, the heels of my nude wedges echoed off the tile floor. I wasn't dressed in anything special. Just dark jean shorts and a black top. I was wearing my GPS tracker around my wrist because it looked worse around my ankle.

Creed, Knox, and Keelan were sitting in the living room. Creed looked ready to go and I snorted when I saw what he was wearing. The three of them glanced in my direction as I rounded the couch.

"You and I are twins," I said to Creed.

He frowned and then he took in my outfit. He was wearing a skintight

black T-shirt with dark blue jeans. Creed smiled. “Think we’ll make Colt jealous?”

“No.” Smiling, I came to stand in front of him.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

My smile dropped. “The gift I got Ethan is in my room at my house.”

Knox sat up straighter. “Do you need us to go get it for you?”

I was tempted to accept that offer, but I didn’t want to be a coward. “No, but can someone come with me?”

Creed stood. “I’ll go. We can grab some more of your clothes while we’re there.”

“Tomorrow before we head into work, we’re going to throw out your couch,” Knox said.

I nodded and Creed and I headed next door. The alarm didn’t go off because it hadn’t been set. The smell of pennies was still present, but not as strong. Creed went inside first and turned on the lights. I tried not to look at my couch but failed.

Each purple cushion had large stains on it. Staring at the couch, I could still see Jacob sitting there. I quickly looked away and Creed followed me to my room. Creed flicked on the light next to my bed and I headed over to my dresser where Ethan’s present was sitting.

“I have a duffel bag in my closet. Will you grab it for me?” I asked Creed as I opened the top drawer of my dresser. I grabbed a few bras and began sifting through them looking for the matching panties. I couldn’t find them. What was strange was, I didn’t see any panties at all. I shut that drawer and pulled open the second one. I dug through more bras, but I could tell right away that there weren’t any panties in that drawer, either.

Panic surged through me and I began tossing all my bras out of the drawer onto the floor. I didn’t want to believe it. “No. No. No. No. No.” With each word, I sounded more scared.

“Shi?” Creed rushed out of my closet with my duffel in hand. “What’s wrong?”

I rushed to my nightstand and grabbed my gun.

“Shi?” Creed said, his voice full of worry.

I quickly shut my bedroom door and locked it. “All my underwear is gone,” I said as I crept into the bathroom slowly. Flipping on the light, I looked behind the shower curtain.

“What?” Creed said, confused.

I came out of the bathroom and held his eyes with mine. “Do you remember when I told you how Mr. X stalked me for years, and do you remember how he broke into my family’s home and stole all of my underwear?”

As I spoke, his eyes got wider.

I put my hand on his chest. “He could be in the house.”

“I need to warn my brothers,” he said and pulled out his phone. I didn’t know which brother he called, but all he said when they picked up was, “He’s here. It’s time to run.” Then he hung up.

“I need to get to my panic room,” I told him. “To do that, we have to pass the bathroom and the spare bedroom. There is a possibility he could be in either. So I’m going to give you the code to open the door so I can cover our backs.”

He nodded. “All right, what is it?” He sounded calm, ready, and determined and that helped me be the same.

I whispered the code, and before I unlocked the door, I said to him, “Stay behind me until we get there.”

He agreed and I opened the door. The hall was empty, and the house was quiet. As we stepped into the hall, the floor creaked and I knew then, without a doubt, Mr. X had been standing in my house that day and I had truly heard him.

Approaching the spare bathroom, I pointed my gun into the dark room as we passed. I did the same with the spare bedroom. Once at the panic-room door, Creed quickly entered the code and made me go in first before he slammed the door closed behind us.

I beelined for my large safe. I entered the code, and it clicked as it unlocked. Inside, I had larger guns—rifles—that I couldn’t easily hide throughout the house. In the bottom was a black duffel bag. I grabbed that, two rifles, and another handgun. I shut the safe and rushed over to the closet and pulled out two leather carrying cases for the rifles.

Creed watched as I put a rifle in each of the cases and hooked the straps of the cases over my shoulder. I held out the handgun I’d grabbed from the safe to him. “I don’t have time to teach you how to use it. Just point and squeeze the trigger, but only if you’re certain it’s Mr. X.”

“I know how to shoot it,” he said, taking it. “Knox took us to the gun range the day you went costume-shopping with Isabelle.”

A sad smile pulled at the corner of my mouth. I wished he’d never had to

learn to use a gun.

I picked up the duffel with a grunt and went to hang the strap on my other shoulder.

“Let me take it,” Creed said, taking the bag and hanging it on his shoulder.

We went to the door. With my gun aimed, I opened the door and slowly leaned out, checking both ends of the hall.

It was clear.

Creed was right behind me as we made it out of the hall and into the living room. We were almost to the front door when the porch squeaked outside.

Then the knob began to turn.

Creed put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me back from the door slowly. As the door opened, he put himself in front of me. A gun came into view first, followed by hands gripping it. A tennis shoe was next, and I recognized it.

“Knox?” I said.

The door pushed open, revealing both him and Keelan.

I sighed frustratedly. “You should have stayed home.”

“Like we’d let you be here alone with a possible serial killer inside,” Keelan said as he stepped aside for Creed and me to come out.

I locked the door out of habit. I noticed Knox and Keelan each had a backpack on.

“Do you have ours?” Creed asked them.

“Right here,” Keelan said, walking over to the porch steps where two other backpacks and my purse were. Keelan handed my purse to me, a backpack to Creed, and carried the other, which I assumed was for Colt.

“You guys really did prepare,” I said as I trotted down the steps to my car. I opened up the trunk and set the rifles inside.

Creed set my duffel and his backpack in there next. Knox and Keelan tossed their and Colt’s bags in last and we all climbed into my car.

“Call Colt,” I said as I drove down the road.

Knox, who was sitting shotgun, pulled out his phone. The rest of us were quiet as we waited for Colt to pick up.

Knox cursed, pulling the phone away from his ear. “He didn’t answer.”

“I’ll try,” Creed said from the backseat.

Again, we waited and there was no answer. Creed kept calling up until we

were pulling up to Ethan's big house. The party was in full swing.

"His car is here," Keelan said, pointing it out in Ethan's long driveway.

All four of us got out and made our way inside. The music was blaring, and the house was full of students from our school.

Ethan spotted Creed and me from where he was playing beer pong. He raised his hands in the air. "Hey, guys! You're finally here." His gaze drifted behind us where Knox and Keelan followed. "You all came. Awesome."

I forced a smile. "Happy birthday."

"Have you seen Colt?" Creed asked, getting right to the point.

Ethan frowned. "Uh...yeah. He said he had missed a call from you and went off somewhere quiet to call you back. That was a while ago, though."

"Do you know where?" Knox asked, pushing between Creed and me.

"I was in the middle of playing a game. So I didn't see," he said, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb at the beer pong table. "The only places he could have gone that are quiet are outside or upstairs."

Knox turned to look at me. "You and Keelan search upstairs, and Creed and I will look outside."

I nodded. He and Creed took off toward Ethan's backyard. Before Keelan and I could go, Ethan stopped me. "What's going on?"

"There's an emergency at the gym." It was the best lie I could come up with and Ethan didn't look like he believed it, either. Thankfully, he didn't call me out.

I went to leave again, but Ethan started talking again. "Isabelle went upstairs. If you see her, tell her to hurry up because we're about to play another game and she promised to be my partner."

"I will," I told him, and Keelan and I began weaving through the crowded party towards the stairs.

There were a few people hanging out at the top of the landing, but for the most part, the second floor was empty and somewhat quiet. You could still hear the music. The bass vibrated the carpeted floor beneath our feet as we made our way down a hall.

"Colt!" I called out for him as we poked our heads into rooms. We accidentally walked in on two people having sex in one of them. "Sorry!" I yelled at them and slammed the door closed. Keelan snorted and we continued to the next room.

As we got toward the end of the hall, where there was one last room to check, Keelan grabbed my arm. "Shi," he said as he stared down.



I looked down, too. In front of the last room, seeped into the beige carpet, was a large spot of blood. It was still wet.

“Damnit,” I growled, and I pulled my gun from where I had it tucked into the back of my shorts. With it held out in front of me, we moved closer, and the closer we got, the more blood we could see. It was a trail leading into the room. The door was slightly ajar and there was blood on the handle.

With the barrel of my gun, I pushed open the door. It was a large, dark bedroom and there was light coming through the cracked door of what I assumed was the en suite bathroom. As I went inside, I prayed.

*Please don't let Colt be in this room.*

*Please let him be all right.*

Once inside, we followed the bloody trail toward the en suite. I glanced ahead toward the cracked door and froze. There was a bloody handprint on the door.

“Call the police,” I said and pushed toward the bathroom.

*Please not Colt.*

*Please not Colt.*

I pushed the door open, careful not to touch the blood.

The first thing I saw on the floor was teal hair. Then I saw her face. There was blood on it. There was blood everywhere.

“No!” I screamed, dropping to the floor. “Isabelle!” I crawled to her. My knees slid in the blood that surrounded her. She had been stabbed and cut. I took in each area she was bleeding from and stopped counting after seven. There were too many—too many places where I needed to stop the bleeding. I cupped her face. “Isabelle! Isabelle, can you hear me?”

She jolted and sucked in a raspy, wet breath.

“Isabelle!” I cried, pushing her hair away from her face. “We’re getting you help. Just please, stay with me.”

She didn’t respond or move.

“Isabelle?” I shook her a little and got nothing. “No! Isabelle!”

I could hear Keelan talking to a 911 operator behind me, telling them about Isabelle. They weren’t going to make it in time. I needed to stop the bleeding. I looked around for a towel or something. Red writing on the mirror caught my attention. The red was blood, Isabelle’s blood, and what was written erased any bit of doubt that he had found me.

*You are mine. X.*

To be continued.

## COLT

I TRIED TO OPEN MY EYES, BUT THEY WERE COVERED.

I tried to speak, but there was something in my mouth.

I tried to move my body, but couldn't. From what I could tell, I was sitting in a chair. Metal cut into my wrists behind my back and my feet were bound together.

*How did I get like this?*

*How long have I been like this?*

I could smell chlorine and the air felt humid.

I thought back to the last thing I could remember. I had been at Ethan's, watching him play a game of beer pong, and I'd felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I'd had multiple missed calls from Knox and Creed. I had gone outside because it'd been quieter. As I had been about to call them back, my phone had started ringing. I'd seen that it was Creed again and had been about to answer it...everything was blank after that.

What sounded like a door opening caused a loud echo. That told me I was in a large room. Whoever had opened the door was making their way toward me. I could tell by the sound of their boots as they hit the ground. It was getting louder and louder the closer they got.

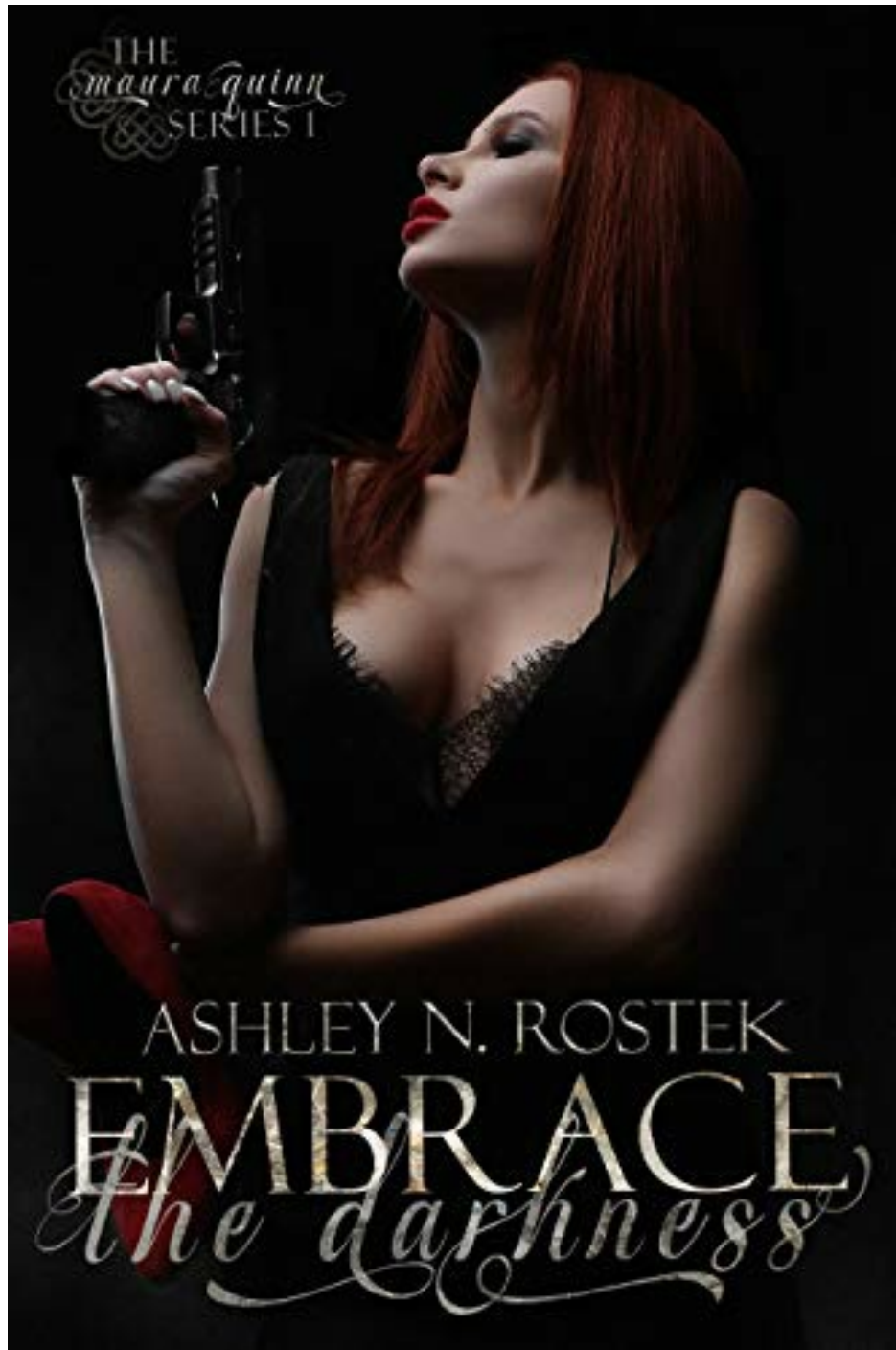
I pretended to still be asleep, hoping whoever it was would leave me alone and give me more time to figure out what to do.

The steps stopped. "You better call me back, you motherfucker. I know you have my daughter," the person growled. Sheriff McAllister? "If you hurt her, I'll kill your obsession. Don't doubt that I will. Your precious Shiloh is on her way to me right now."

*Shiloh!*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashley N. Rostek is a wife and mother by day and a writer by night. She survives on coffee, loves collecting offensive coffee mugs, and is an unashamed bibliophile.

To Ashley, there isn't a better pastime than letting your mind escape in a good book. Her favorite genre is romance and has the overflowing bookshelf to prove it. She is a lover of love. Be it a sweet YA or a dark and lusty novel, she must read it!

Ashley's passion is writing. She picked up the pen at seventeen and hasn't put it down. Her debut novel is *Embrace the Darkness*, the first book in the Maura Quinn series.

You can find out more about Ashley and her upcoming works on social media!

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