



THE BOYS OF BROOKE HOLLOW ACADEMY

# PHOENIX

CHARLIE JULES

STACY *Stone*

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BOOK FOUR

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**Charlie Jules & Stacy Stone**

**Phoenix: Boys of Brooke Hollow Academy 4**

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CHAPTER  
**ONE**

## PHOENIX

*Three days ago*

**B**lood spatters against the wall, thicker blobs of what I think is brain matter also part of the gore now covering the geometrically patterned wallpaper. Maverick charges forward like he doesn't even notice the carnage, his gun already aimed at his next target.

My heart is going nuts in my chest. He shouldn't be doing this, but he insisted. It's the battle for the Vegas Crown Jewel Hotel and Casino, and he refused to sit it out.

Front and center is a damn stupid place for him to be right now, but it's not like any of us could stop him. Once he made up his mind, a herd of wild horses backed by giant snapping turtles couldn't keep him from doing what he had decided to do.

And what he'd decided was to take point against the army of Riviera soldiers posted to the penthouse level of this hotel.

*Insanity, thy name is Maverick Jameson. That's for fucking sure.*

I sigh, my anxiety through the roof but the best thing I can do right now is my job. In the security suite, I'm surrounded by bodies. More Riviera men. We took these guys out with this sweet toxic agent I fed into the vents that lead only into this room.



It was designed to be self-sufficient against any number of disasters, but it turns out a mafia war wasn't one of them. No one saw this happening here. Not now. Not in this day and age.

Just a few floors below me, there are hundreds of people gambling, watching comedy shows on the main stage, checking into and out of the hotel, and visiting the bars and restaurants within these walls. None of those people have any idea about what's happening just below the rooftop and if I have anything to say about it, they never will.

I'm in control of the hotel security systems for now, and as Mav and his guys shoot and fight their way through the men upstairs, my job is to seal off that floor to any unsuspecting guests and to alert my crew of any unexpected surprises.

It's mayhem up there, and all my favorite people are involved. Even Skye, who insisted on being a part of the action instead of hanging down here with me.

As she and Colton wrestle with one of the assistant managers, I watch them on the screen, my heart in my throat as Colt grabs one of the man's wrists and rams it into the wall. Skye manages to grab hold of the other and she wrenches it around, twisting until they've got him at their mercy. She leans in, her features contorting as she says something to him I can't hear, and then he finally surrenders. *That's one down.*

Two more to go.

More blood sprays as Dylan slices a man's throat with a single slash of his blade, and I sigh. So far, this is going well for us but it's going to be one hell of a cleanup.

Deciding to be proactive about it, I pull my phone out of my pocket and fire off a text to a local cleaning crew and when I glance back up at the monitors, a sheen of sweat breaks out across my brow.

Skye is holding a knife to some guy's throat, and as I watch, she glances at Colton, then she sticks the knife all the way to the hilt into the man's neck. When she steps to the side, Colton puts a bullet in his brain.

Overkill, perhaps, but Skye turns and smirks at the camera, green eyes blazing with pride and satisfaction—clearly, she’s looking at the camera for my benefit.

*Yeah, I see you, mo cara. I always see you, but what I can’t see is your thoughts. I know you’re using all this violence to work out some of your anger issues, but why? What really happened in your bedroom with Tony and why aren’t you telling us everything there is to know about it?*

CHAPTER  
**TWO**

## SKYE

### *Now*

Phoenix collapses on the bed beside me, his cheeks flushed and his swollen lips parted. With a soft groan, he rolls over and pulls me into his side, warm breath feathering over my shoulder before he places a soft kiss there.

“That was awesome,” he murmurs, his heart racing against my back as he molds himself to me. “Have I told you how glad I am that you’re okay yet?”

“It’s been a week. You’ve only told me, oh, about a dozen times?” I tease lightly, nestling into his front and suppressing the shiver that wants to run through me at the reminder. “Can we drop it now, please?”

“No. We need to talk about it, *mo cara*. Run me through what happened again.”

My eyes slam shut as I shake my head. “Again?”

“Again,” he insists, sliding his arm around my waist and holding me tighter than before. “I’ll be right here, but we need to talk about it so we can figure out what the *fuck* he was doing there.”

Drawing in a deep breath through my nose, I cover his hand with my own and tangle our fingers together on my stomach. “I told you, he wanted us to spend more time together and to apologize for Genevieve’s behavior.”

“Tony Riviera doesn’t make surprise visits to the Academy before sunrise to set up a playdate, Skye. Run me through it again. There has to be another reason.”

My eyes remain closed as I think back to that morning. To walking into my bedroom in the suite I share with Ava to find my biological father waiting for me with a gun in his lap and another gun pressed to my head by one of his goons. It’s not my favorite memory, and reliving it isn’t my idea of a good time.

*Doesn’t make Nix wrong, though.* We still don’t really know what he was doing there or, more importantly, why he just...let me go.

As I stood there looking into his pitch-black eyes, I thought for sure he’d found out that I’d agreed to help Damian and that he was there to kill me. Or, best case scenario, to kidnap me. Again.

After Genevieve tried to have me raped last year, I wouldn’t have put it past the Riviera couple to have left their goon with the instruction to finish the job if I tried anything.

There was no way I was going to try to fight at that moment. I didn’t have a weapon, the gun was pressed to my head so tight that I think I might’ve triggered it if I sneezed, and I definitely didn’t see a way to get the upper hand, so I closed my eyes and by the time I opened them again, he was gone and the barrel had only left my skull seconds before I opened them.

Shame still washes through me at the memory, though. I should’ve at least *tried*.

“Skye?” Phoenix’s lips brush against my skin as he strokes a lock of hair off my neck. “There’s nothing to be ashamed of, my love. Only an idiot would’ve tried to fight their way out of that situation.”

“How did you know I was thinking about that?”

A dark chuckle rumbles out of him and I feel his answering shrug behind me. “Because I know you. When you’re thinking, your brow furrows and you lick your lips a

lot, but when you're thinking about him, you don't just lick them. You chew on them and you look pissed as hell. Besides, I know you've been giving yourself a hard time about it. I also know that it's not as easy as telling you to stop doing it, but you need to try. Maybe if he'd actually threatened you, it would've been different, but as it is, he told you he just wanted to talk, right?"

"Right."

"Exactly. Aggravating him when he explicitly told you he wasn't there to hurt you would've been dumb. I know it's counter-intuitive, but sometimes, you need to know when to do nothing."

"Yeah, maybe." I still froze though, and I've been doing everything I can to make up for it ever since.

In a way, I've learned more this last week than I have since I first met them. The incident with Tony drove me to be better prepared next time, and I feel like I already am.

"Okay, so I walked into my room and he was there. He told me who he was and that it was about time we talked."

As I speak, I mentally transport myself back to that morning just one week ago, finally realizing that I'm going to have to just tell him everything all over again. There's no getting it away from it.

*"Hello, Skye. I'm Tony Riviera. It's nice to finally meet you." He gives me a bone-chilling smile as he waves at the pile of Phoenix's letters I didn't notice before that are scattered around his feet. "I think it's time for you and I to have a little talk, don't you agree?"*

*I take a step forward, but the gun against my head moves with me and my breath catches in my throat, my heart beating so fast that it might just take off and zoom right out of my mouth. "It's a little difficult to have a father-daughter bonding moment when I'm about to get shot."*

*"Relax. No one is going to shoot you." Tony glances at whoever is behind me. "Unless he has to, of course. I just want to talk, Skye. I didn't come here to hurt you."*

*I stare into his shockingly black eyes. Maybe it's just because it's still so dark in here, but right now, they look like tar-pits to me. "Why are you here, then?"*

*"I just told you. I want to talk to my daughter." He lifts one of Nix's letters from his lap. "It seems we have a lot to catch up on."*

*"A whole lifetime." I keep my eyes on his and my chin held high, but my blood has been infused with icicles and my extremities have gone so cold, my toes and fingertips are aching. "They're going to be here any minute, you know." I incline my head toward the letter. "If I'm not back next door soon, they're going to come looking."*

*The corners of his lips curve into another confident, chilling smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Well, all the more reason to make this chat a quick one. If they do come, then so be it, but the Academy is supposed to be neutral territory. Cleaning up here would be tedious."*

*For just a moment, he looks almost bored but then he leans forward, those inky eyes boring into mine as they take on a sharper edge that makes him look more businesslike. "So, you're with the Triskele now. How did that happen?"*

*I press my mouth into a hard line and shrug. "How do you think it happened?"*

*"I know all about your mother's sham of an engagement to Damian, darling."*

*"It's not a sham." I force myself to keep looking into his eyes. "Why would you think it is?"*

*That gaze flickers with the coldest flames even as he shrugs. "It was funny that she insisted on protecting you from this life, my life, from the moment she found out she was pregnant with you, and then months after it's over between us, you're thrust right into the middle of it. What I'm interested in knowing is why you joined the Triskele when you could've come to me. Obviously, she finally told you the truth, so why them?"*

*“Oh, I don’t know. It might’ve had something to do with your wife,” I spit at him, fire burning away at the ice in my veins. “I will never join you, Tony.”*

*“Pity.” He sighs. “All this unpleasantness with Genevieve certainly seems to have gotten us off on the wrong foot. She’s always been so threatened by you and your mother.” He tuts his tongue, but then waves a hand like it doesn’t even matter. “She shouldn’t have done that, but she has nothing to do with you and I. You’re my blood. She’s...not.”*

*My eyebrows twitch, but I curl my hands into fists where I’m clutching the top of my towel and school my features. “What. Do. You. Want?”*

*“I want to get to know you,” he says like it should’ve been the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s unfortunate that Damian got to you before I could. Regardless, I want to offer you the opportunity to get away from him and his silly little gang. They’re going to lose this war, Skye, and I don’t want them taking you down with them. You and I may be able to help each other. Father and daughter together to protect our family name rather than having you with him.”*

Colton’s voice breaks into the memory and he groans when he realizes what we were talking about. “This again? Why? The only thing that matters is that Skye got out alive.”

I blink away the lingering image of my darkened room back at the Academy and focus on the bright Las Vegas hotel room we’re in. It’s all symmetry and sharp angles, Art Deco with geometrically patterned wallpaper and the pops of bright red and yellow set against black and white.

“Yes, this again,” Nix says while I focus on a sunburst mirror in an effort to come back to the here and now. It’s like every time I make myself go back there, the shadows that were in my bedroom that morning come out of the memory with me, clinging to my skin until I find a way to banish them.

Meanwhile, Nix and Colton are still bickering. Nix’s arm bands like steel around my waist and while I can’t see him, I can practically feel his glare. “We *need* to talk about it, Colt. We can’t just sweep it under the rug. Tony got into Skye’s



*bedroom* at the *Academy* despite all the added security, and then he managed to get *out* too without ever being seen. Call me crazy, but it's a real fucking concern, especially because we don't really know why he risked it to begin with."

"Sure, it's a concern, and I'm not suggesting we pretend it didn't happen. All I'm saying is that harping on about it isn't going to get us anywhere. We've got a job to do and we need to be focused on that."

"We *are* focused on that," Nix argues. "Mav and Dylan are with Fisher right now. We're not. That means we get to talk about other things while they take their shift."

Colton's grays latch on mine as he stalks to the bed, a smirk touching his lips as the mattress dips under his weight. "Yours is the only opinion I'm interested in hearing. What do you think, Skye? Do you want to keep talking about this?"

"No." I wind my arms around his neck when he flattens his body over mine. "Wait. What's happening with Fisher?"

Colton lowers his head to dot kisses on the column on my neck as he speaks. "Not much. He's still refusing to budge and Mav is getting all growly about it."

I arch my neck and push my fingers into his black hair, my eyes fluttering closed as his short beard tickles my skin and his lips work their magic to dispel those shadows. Phoenix groans at my side, his hand landing on my thigh under the covers and slowly making its way up.

"Again?" he murmurs as he presses a line of soft kisses from my shoulder to my collarbone, his mouth now only inches away from Colt's. "You feeling a little insatiable this morning, *mo cara*?"

"Not only this morning," I tease as I run my hands along the powerful ridges of Colton's back. He's still wearing his shirt and he's on top of the covers, but we'll fix that soon enough.

"I fucking love it," Colt says, lifting his torso to tug at the sheets between us until cool air brushes over my nipples, making them even harder. His mouth never leaves my skin, the

soft touch of his lips alternating with the sharp bites of his beard.

A moan slides out of me when I feel him growing between my legs, and I force myself to shove away the memories instead of letting them ruin this. I'm as uneasy as Nix about Tony's intentions that day, and I need him to force me to face those demons, but I also need Colt to help bring me back to the light.

Right now, that perfect balance between them is exactly what the doctor ordered, and I give myself over to it as Colton's head keeps moving down, his cheek pressed to Phoenix's at times as they ply me with love, one gentle, adoring kiss at a time.

CHAPTER  
**THREE**

## PHOENIX

**F**uck, she tastes amazing.

I don't think I'll ever get sick of this. Not even of having Colton with us. It adds an element I never knew I was missing in the before.

It's like a fucking addiction. The sexiest kind of depravity.

My pulse races and my mouth hungers for her. Every taste of Skye's skin is like sweet nectar, solidifying my addiction to her. I yearn to have this moment last forever, basking in the heat of our connection and exploring her body with every sensuous lick and kiss.

Yeah, I want to be inside her, but I also love her taste, her smell, and the small noises she makes when she just can't hold them back. The fact that I can lick her all over with Colton by my side, doing the same thing, is beyond hot.

As I kiss my way down Skye's body, I take a breath and reflect on the way I feel right now.

*Full.*

I don't just mean with desire or satisfaction. I mean a sense of completeness, of wholeness, like I'm finally where I'm supposed to be. If I thought I knew what that was before, I was wrong. I don't even know how to begin to describe what I'm feeling right now.

But I feel it and I know I don't want to let it go.

The air around us sizzles, crackling with electricity as I drift deeper into this erotic trance. Every touch is heightened,

vibrant and intense, like a thousand tiny explosions going off and speeding through my veins. A deep-seated hunger smolders inside me, begging to be filled with more of Skye.

I follow every kiss with teasing flicks of my tongue, keeping my eyes focused on her face as I memorize every nuance of her expression. Her parted lips. Furrowed brow. Arched neck.

I swipe my thumb across the wetness of her pussy as she spreads her legs, the scent of her arousal is a heady perfume that has my cock twitching in my pants.

“Fuck, you look so beautiful,” Colton grunts as he brushes his lips against Skye’s thigh.

She reaches for him, her hands wrapping around his thick biceps and her fingernails digging into his skin.

I lean down and press my lips against her clit. She trembles as she cries out. I suck her clit into my mouth, relishing that taste I can’t get enough of, and then I push my tongue inside her, my hands spreading her thighs wider.

I feel Colton watching me, and my cock swells more, throbbing as my hips beg to rock. To fuck. When I glance up at him, he’s in the same spot, his gray eyes smoldering as he watches me. I can’t tear my gaze away from that intense stare as I eat Skye’s pussy, wondering what’s going on in his head and how far he’s willing to take this.

My tongue flicks her clit over and over again, sucking it gently between my lips. Colton licks her other thigh, but his gaze doesn’t leave my face.

“Fuck yes...” Skye moans, her voice quivering as I spread her pussy lips. “Harder... please...”

I take one last glance at Colton before I start giving her what she wants, and in that moment, his eyes flash with something I’ve never seen before.

It’s a hunger. A desire to push the boundaries. I know him well enough to know it was always going to be him who wanted to try something new first. Something different to what we’ve been doing, together, but always apart.

As the thought races through my head, I know exactly what we can do. Try, if she's up to it. I want him inside her with me, and I know he'll be game if she lets it happen.

The decision doesn't stop me from taking my time and savoring the moment. My mouth closes in on her pussy, my tongue sliding over her slick folds.

"You're so wet, baby," I murmur against her after pulling back, but I'm still close enough that I know my breath is ghosting over her heated flesh.

Her fingers tighten on my shoulders, her moans getting more desperate and needy by the second. I circle her clit with my tongue before sucking it between my lips, and her wetness fills my mouth as her muscles tighten. *So close.*

Colton's hand slides over her stomach, his fingers moving down, down, down until he stops when he reaches her slick slit. His fingertips brush against my tongue before they reach past it, and I gave them a playful nip before adjusting to give him some space.

"Fucker," he mutters laughingly, moving up Skye's side to take her mouth in a deep kiss.

She's already so wet, her juices soaking the sheets, and I groan as his fingers slip into her. My face is right there, so close that his knuckles brush against my nose when I move back in.

She cries out when I push my tongue deeper inside her, around his fingers, my mouth covering her pussy and sucking her in as he fucks her. I feel his hand flex when he pushes deeper into her and she bucks against the bed.

"You're so fucking tight," he murmurs, his free hand cupping her tits, his thumb circling the hard bud of her nipple.

"Yes, yes, please..." Skye moans, bucking her hips forward as I suck her clit.

Her whole body starts to tremble and a moment later, she screams as she tumbles over the edge. Her orgasm crashes over her, her thighs shaking with wave after wave of pleasure and I keep licking her while she rides it out.

When she finally sags back against the mattress, I lift my head and Colton removes his fingers from her pussy, sits up and grabs the hem of his shirt, pulling it over his head before tossing it aside. As I watch, he drops his jeans, peeling his underwear off with them and then, he's as naked as I am. As Skye is.

I glance at him, catching his eye before I incline my head to the foot of the bed. Colton's cheeks are flushed, his lips swollen and his chest rising and falling fast. Curiosity flickers in those gray eyes, but he doesn't ask. He just moves with me, getting off the bed to stand in front of the bed.

"Where are you..." Skye trails off as her eyes open and widen.

She props herself up on her elbows, blinking herself out of the post-orgasmic haze as her gaze moves between us. I'm well past the point of giving a shit what any of my boys see while we're having sex, and with Colton, it's even easier not to care.

He sure as fuck doesn't. My hand moves to my cock as I take her in on the bed, watching us closely with her legs still spread, her pink pussy glistening and lids growing heavy as she focuses on my hand sliding up and down my shaft.

Colton grins, but when a low groan slides out of him, I realize he's focused on my hand too, his eyes locked on my cock and my fist swallowing it up. Without even pretending not to look or that he's not turned on by what he's seeing, he moves his hand to his own cock and mimics my movement, matching my speed.

Heat flares across my skin, and my breathing gets even more labored. This is one of the things I love most about him. He's my zero-fucks-to-give friend. He grabs his balls—literally, right now—and jumps in. He doesn't judge. Doesn't overthink.

His head drops back as he immerses himself in the moment, a moan falling from his lips before he bites them and spears Skye with a heated look. "Well, baby girl, are you going to make us beg, or are you going to crawl here and put those gorgeous lips on our dicks?"

Her eyes go big, but she doesn't hesitate to get on all fours and crawl over the sheet to the foot of the bed. She brings her hand to my shaft and strokes me, her fingers moving up and down my length gently at first. Her lips part and she lowers her head, kissing my tip before licking it.

More heat flashes through me at the feel of those soft, perfect lips. I groan, desperate for her to keep going, and press my hand against the back of her head, guiding her to take me into her mouth. She parts her lips and wraps them around the head, enveloping me in the wet heat before her tongue starts lapping at my cock.

My eyes meet Colton's where he's standing beside me. His jaw is clenched, his eyes wild with lust.

"Fuck yes," Colton groans, pushing his cock against her cheek, his heart pounding so hard I can see the hammering on his pulse.

Skye reaches out and takes his cock in the hand not on mine. She strokes it eagerly, not as gentle with him as she was with me. But she knows exactly what we like. What we *need*.

I push deeper into her mouth until my balls slap against her chin. She looks up at me with aching desire dilating her pupils so much that I can barely see a hint of green. Colton and I exchange a smoldering glance before I withdraw from her mouth.

I stroke the hair away from her face and my gaze traps hers. "Open wider, baby. You're going to take us both. Together."

Colton sucks in a sharp breath, but when he sees her nod with eager anticipation, he grins again. "Fuck, yes. Let's do this."

She smiles, but then lowers her gaze to our cocks, obviously trying to work out the best way of trying this. Reaching up slowly, she wraps her fingers around each of us at the root, bringing our dicks closer together before she moves her head forward and fits her mouth around us. It takes her a beat to work it out, her lips opening wide before she wraps



them around his thick shaft first before opening even wider to take me in too.

Colton's skin is tight against mine, so close that I feel him swell; throb. It's weird touching him like this for the first time, but I'm fucked if I don't like it. Being able to feel how turned on he is just makes me that much hotter. He grunts, his muscles bunched with restraint as he tries to give her a minute to adjust before he starts moving. It's weird to be this connected to him, but it's fucking good too.

"Shit," I groan, my fingers sinking into her hair on my side and my nails scraping against her scalp. She shivers, leaning into my touch.

Her hands start moving then, up and down, one stroking my cock while the other strokes Colton's. Her lips glide over our shafts with what quickly becomes practiced ease, and she keeps taking more and more into her mouth.

*This is fucking hot.*

She's so fucking eager; so fucking beautiful.

Colton and I both watch, our eyes locked on our cocks as they disappear into her mouth while she licks and sucks with abandon, her lips and tongue working in perfect harmony. Colton and I are shoulder to shoulder in front of the bed with her sitting on it, all of us pressed tight together to make this work. Her eyes dart between us as she moves her tongue from one to the other, her hair wild around her face.

With an intensity that seems almost animalistic, she keeps sucking until we're both close. Too close, if Colt's trembling thigh pushed up against mine means what I think it does. But this isn't where this new experience ends. Not if I've got any say in it.

I grip her hair firmly and pull her away from us. Colt groans, but drags in a deep breath, flexing his thighs as he tries to regain control. As my eyes lock on hers, her expression shifts from passion to pleading, begging me not to stop.

"You loved that, didn't you?" My voice is thick with arousal. She nods quickly and I turn to Colton with a smirk

tugging at one corner of my lips. “Let’s show her what the two of us can do together, shall we?”

Mild surprise flashes across his features, his lips parting as his eyebrows twitch up, but then he nods. “Yeah. Sure. I’m in if Skye is.”

“What do you say? Think we can take our pleasure from her together?”

I soften my gaze to look at her face, seeing the fear magnified in her wide eyes. Slowly, my thumb moves up to caress her cheek. “You trust us?” I whisper.

She barely nods, but I know what she wants. She craves being stretched by the both of us, taking her to new heights of pleasure. We’ve talked about this and sure, it was in passing, but I know she wants to try.

“Go ahead,” I urge her. “You won’t regret it. We’ll make sure you feel pleasure like never before and you know we’d never hurt you.”

My head turns toward Colton and I narrow my eyes. “Ready?”

The electricity in the air between us is palpable as he nods his head. “Hell yeah,” he replies with a growl of excitement in his voice and some of the tension in me eases. He definitely wants this too.

My hands tremble as I bend over to trail them over her smooth thighs, eliciting a shiver from her body. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?” I whisper into her ear, feeling the heat radiating from her skin.

A soft moan escapes her lips and she scoots closer to me, pulling me down for a deep, passionate kiss. Colton grabs the lube from the nightstand and lies down on the bed, squirting a generous amount of the slick liquid onto his dick while he watches us.

“Straddle him, baby,” I command, my voice low and hoarse with desire.

She crawls onto him and he grips his dick with one hand, placing it at her entrance. His eyes move up to connect with hers and when she nods, he thrusts into her with one powerful stroke. She lets out a throaty moan, her fingers digging into his chest as her eyes remain firmly on his.

“Fuck, you’re dripping wet,” Colton groans.

*Well, that’s my cue.*

The mattress dips when I climb on the bed with them, moving closer on my knees and positioning myself behind her. Colton wraps his hands around her shoulders and pulls her closer towards him while I grip my shaft and press the tip against her full entrance. Colt stops thrusting, his breathing hitching as I slowly push inside her.

“Ah, fuck. This is tight,” I grunt as pleasure races through me. My cock slides against his, every nerve-ending in my body alive and wanting as I sink into her. All my senses are heightened with the feeling of Colton’s dick pressed against mine and her wet warmth snug around us.

She’s always tight, but with two cocks filling her pussy... this is a *whole* new level.

It should feel weird, feeling Colton’s dick against mine, but this is without a doubt *the* most intense, erotic thing I’ve ever felt. At first, we were going to wait until we were all together for this, but it feels right now and besides, it’s Skye’s decision and she’s made it.

My breathing is ragged as I whisper into her ear, “Do you like us both inside of you, *mo cara*? Does it feel good?”

She trembles beneath me and tightens her grip on Colton’s chest. His eyes meet mine in a moment of silent understanding; we’ve never done this before, but we’re definitely going to be doing it again. And again.

Fitting my back against hers, I let my fingers trail over her arms as I speak against her ear again, “You like us taking you this way? You want us to claim you, make you ours?”

The words barely make it past my lips before she cries out in agreement. Her hands trail down our bodies as we urge her

on.

“Ride us, baby girl,” Colton commands, the passion building between us. “Work that tight little pussy around our cocks.”

With a moan in response, she starts to ride us with perfect rhythm, Colton underneath her and me behind. Skye’s body rocks back and forth, our cocks filling her up completely. I watch as her muscles tighten and she comes. After a few more thrusts, I can’t hold back any longer and chase that moment of complete pleasure, pounding into her until I come, spilling my seed deeply inside her body. Colton is right behind me, coming in her as well. I can feel his dick swelling against mine and shuddering as he loses it.

Skye collapses on top of him and we kiss her neck, our arms wrapped around her waist as we finish riding out our climax together, basking in our shared pleasure.

She moans softly as she turns to face me, one hand touching my cheek. “That was...” she begins, but can’t find the words.

“Amazing?” I finish for her.

She nods and lays her head against Colton’s chest.

I stay inside of her for a few more minutes as we all come down. Our movements are slower now, our bodies exhausted as we lie down in a tangled mess of limbs.

Colton pulls her against his chest, and I smile as I kiss her on the top of her head.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She turns back to look at me over her shoulder. “Yes,” she says, a soft smile on her lips.

“Good, then you’re ready for the next part.”

Her eyes go big and I grin, slowly pulling out of her. Colton grabs her by the hips and lifts her off of him, placing her on the mattress. She lies down, closing her legs, but I’m not having any of it.

Neither is Colton, who's on the same page as me, it seems. "Tsk, tsk, open those legs for us, Princess. I want to see our cum leaking from your hot pussy."

Her cheeks blush, but she does as she's told and opens her legs for us. Colton and I are sitting next to her, each on one side. "That's so hot. Spread your lips for us, Princess. We wanna see."

Her eyes are bright and playful as her hand dips between her legs. She spreads her lips open and I can't stop the groan from escaping. Going further, she dips her fingers into her pussy and when she pulls them out, she brings her hand to her mouth, licking our cum from her fingers.

We both groan loudly, and then Colton laughs as he shakes his head. "This woman is going to kill us."

I nod. "It's a death I'll welcome."

I bring my hand between her legs and push two fingers inside of her, the mix of cum now lubing her up for me to push them in and out of her. I search Colton's eyes as I speak, my desire to make her come just one last time clear.

"You know our princess loves it when you pinch her nipples." I give him a wink.

He grins wickedly in return, his fingers finding her nipples and pinching them gently, eliciting a gasp from her lips.

"Oh, yes," she breathes as he keeps toying with her.

I arch an eyebrow at him and whisper, "Wanna see how fast we can make her come this time?"

He tightens his grip on her sensitive nipples, pulling a low moan from her throat.

"Uh huh," he says before he pinches harder.

"Oh fuck, yes!" She cries out, and it's almost like I can see the pleasure rippling through every fiber of her body.

"You like that, don't you, Skyel?" I ask her.

"Uh huh," she whispers.

I look at Colton and he pinches her nipple just a little harder. “How about this?” he asks.

“Oh fuck, yes,” she cries out again.

A slow smile spread across my lips. *Not gonna lie, I’m fucking loving this.* “You want us to make you cum?”

“Yes,” she moans.

“You didn’t say please,” I smirk and pull my fingers back a little.

“Please! Please, I’m sorry,” she says quickly. “Please don’t stop.”

“That’s right, baby,” I murmur softly as I push my fingers back inside of her. “Keep fucking my fingers while he plays with your nipples.”

Circling her clit with my thumb, I coax her closer and closer to the edge until I feel her inner walls start to spasm around me.

“Good girl, that’s it, you’re so close. Just let go,” I coax, pounding my fingers into her, curling them a little to find that sweet spot inside of her until I feel her tight pussy start to spasm around me.

“Come for us, baby girl,” Colton says with me when I glance at him, and at our joint encouragement, her orgasm hits full force.

The moment I remove my fingers from her, she grabs my hand and raises it to her mouth, hungrily sucking them clean and savoring the lingering taste of herself on my hand. Colton and I embrace her, lying together as we wait for our heart rates to return to normal.

CHAPTER  
**FOUR**

## SKYE

**A**fter a fun-filled early morning with Phoenix and Colton, I head down the hall to the presidential suite. This entire floor was overrun by Tony's men when we first got here, but the last couple days, we've had it all to ourselves.

My footsteps are silent on the thick carpet and when I reach the door, I rap my knuckles over it in a double tap rhythm to let Mav and Dylan know it's one of us. *Juvenile, perhaps, but effective.*

With how on edge we all are about Tony sending more men once he realizes the others are gone, I do *not* want to walk in and catch my guys off guard. And the fact of the matter is that Tony *is* going to send more men—or come here himself—and we either need to be ready...or gone.

Personally, I'm hoping for the latter. We've already had one massacre this week. I'd rather not tempt fate with another.

At the thought, my gaze drifts down to the carpet I'm standing on. I have no idea how Nix's cleaning crew got almost all the blood out, but they did. Apart from a few darker patches where it stained, there's no evidence of what happened here just three nights ago.

The faint tinkle of the chain on the inside of the door followed by a flick of the lock makes me look up again, and then I'm looking at Maverick as he steps aside and motions me in. "Good morning, Sunshine. You look thoroughly fucked. I like it. They did a good job."



I roll my eyes as he slides an arm around my waist, tugging me toward him and bending over to seal his mouth over mine. The door slams shut as he kisses me hungrily, much too passionately for where we are.

But I don't care.

*One man's torture chamber can be another's sex dungeon, I suppose.*

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I step into him, tilting my head back and matching the ferocity of his kisses. For just a moment, I surrender to my psychopathic big guy with the heart of gold who loves so fiercely but shows it to so few people.

This past week has been hard for all of us, but it's probably been the hardest on him. Backed by an army of his men that came to Vegas once we saw what we were up against, Maverick was at the forefront of this particular battle. Still injured and by no means able to afford taking another hit, he led his men in the fight against Tony's to secure this floor.

Phoenix hacked and disabled the hotel's security system and scrambled all electronics while Colton, Dylan, and I worked to capture the manager and assistant managers who had turned on the Triskele.

It was my first time on the front lines of something like this, and it was brutal, but I didn't back down. I stayed out of their way when I had to, but I was right here with them. I even managed to take a few shots myself. My aim needs work, but I'm getting there.

Maverick, however, was something else entirely. I wouldn't say the corridors quite ran red with the blood of the men he took down, but there were puddles. Brain matter splattered on the walls. It was all kinds of gory.

As for me, at least I managed to help confine the people we needed to talk to. The assistant managers have done their part. Dylan and I barely walked into the room where we were holding the first one when he pissed himself and started talking. The second put up more of a fight, but it was a good

opportunity for me to try to find my inner rainbow-haired, girlfriend-to-the-psychos crazy chick.

I didn't even get to use the bat I took with me to channel my Criminal Queenpin of Gotham City vibe, but as soon as the guy realized no one was coming to save him, he broke. Both men had been loyal to the Triskele for a long time, and when we reminded them of their allegiance with thick files filled with information the cops would love to get their hands on, they were more than willing to come back on board.

Eventually, I'm sure they're going to get killed, but we don't have time to find people to replace them right now and the Triskele needs this income to win the war. We will, however, be leaving a few of Mav's guys behind to...*keep watch* over them for us when we leave.

Between that, the threat of real prison time if we turn over what we have, and the promise that we'll be back to finish the job if they so much as think of betraying us again, I think we're good.

The manager, however, is proving to be a tougher nut to crack. Mr. Fisher still seems to be waiting on the Dark Knights of Sin City to come save him, and I'm running out of patience. We need to get back to New York and at the moment, he's the only thing standing in our way.

Damian is still acting cagey and we still don't know why, though Liam's working on finding out. Phoenix is also making progress on some other plans of attack against the Rivas, but we can't do much else until this is taken care of.

"Where did your mind go, Sunshine?" Mav murmurs against my lips as he releases my hair and then pulls away, rising to his full height as those deep navy blues latch on mine. "I don't like you being distracted when I'm giving you a good morning kiss."

"I know. I'm sorry." I drag in a deep breath to clear my mind of the fog and take a step back before I decide to make it up to him. "We just need to get home, you know?"

“Yeah, I know. We’re trying,” he murmurs, raking his hands through his hair and blowing out a deep breath. “You okay, or did Nix go digging around in your head again?”

“He did, but he means well and he made it up to me. It’s not that this time. I don’t know. I just have this feeling that we need to get home.”

“We’ll get there soon enough.” He comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my hips, resting his chin on my shoulder. “Think of this war like a staircase we’re climbing and this is the first step. Without Vegas, we don’t have the money to keep ascending as fast or as easily as we want to. That’s all. I know you’re worried about what’s going on back home, but everything is fine. Dylan and I spoke to Damian about an hour ago. They’re holding down the fort.”

*Yeah, but for how long? Why is he so worried and why did Tony let me go?* There are just still so many questions without answers, and I’m not sure I’m going to be able to breathe properly until we start getting some.

Turning slowly in the circle of Mav’s arms, I take in the suite we’ve had control of for the last few days. Since it’s the fanciest one in the hotel, it’s much larger than the ones we’ve been staying in, but it’s done up in the same Art Deco style. Lots of black and white, pops of blood red and geometric, triangular patterns on the wallpaper.

Staring at it centers me.

I don’t really like the décor. It’s not my usual style, but focusing on it helps remind me of where we are and what we’re doing here. It helps keep me from retreating into my worries and the memories of a time when I was the one who was tied up.

My therapist suggested the technique, and it’s really working well for me. As soon as my thoughts become a little clearer again, I turn back to Mav and hold out a hand. “Have you got a knife for me?”

“Uh, sure?” A tiny crease appears between his dark brows as those eyes do a quick sweep of my face. “What kind of

knife are you after? Dylan's got his pouch and I've got a few in my toolkit, but if you're looking for a butter knife or something to use for food, we may need to call room service."

"Room service, huh?" I chuckle, putting my hands on my hips and squeezing to remain centered before I start toward the bedroom.

Fisher is tied to the bedposts, spreadeagled and wearing only dirty briefs. His skin is sallow, his face gaunt, and yet he still manages to flash me a smug, sneery smile when I walk in. "Oh, look. The bitch is back."

"Sticks and stones, old man," I say, staring back at him without bothering to finish the sentence.

His blonde hair has been shot through with silver, but his roots are mousy. Lines are etched into his face, deeper now than they were just a few days ago. He's not that old—maybe early forties—but somehow, he looks fake and haggard all at the same time.

Dylan was leaning over him when I came in, but now he's striding over to me, his eyes shiny with that reddish hue that betrays how little sleep he's been getting. Since we want Fisher back on our side, it's been a balancing act trying to get information out of him.

We can't hurt him too bad, and everything we have on him would lead back to Damian if we turn him over. It seemed prudent to simply try to win him back so things could normalize and we could leave, but now, I'm thinking a promotion may be in order for one of the other two.

"Hey, angel," Dylan says as he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me into his side. "What's up?"

"She wants a knife," Maverick volunteers helpfully as he follows me into the room. "I'm not sure what kind yet."

"The kind that can sever a dick." I look right into Fisher's muddy hazel eyes as I say it, releasing a deep breath and shaking my head as I move out of Dylan's tender hold.

I don't need to look like I need him to hold me up right now. I love it when he holds me, and I know he wasn't trying

to make it look like he was holding me up, but I need to stand on my own two feet. I need Fisher to believe every word I'm about to say, because I need him to know that I mean it.

“You have been loyal to the Triskele for over two decades, yet now, you're treating us like the enemy. It's time we start treating you the same way.” I glance at Dylan when he motions to the open pouch on the nightstand, then I walk to it slowly while studying the options on display. “No one is coming to help you, Fisher. If you were still with the Triskele, someone would've been here for you already but you're not, and they're not coming. The Rivas will be back, but it will be too late for you by then and they won't care.”

I stop in front of the nightstand, intently staring down at the blades. Each placed neatly in a protective leather sleeve. Reaching out, I run my fingertips along the flat edge of what appears to be a paring knife. “You seem to think you're indispensable to both organizations, but that's not true. Everyone is replaceable and anyone who thinks they're not suffers from delusions of grandeur.”

From what little I know about knives, the paring knife probably won't do the job I need it for. As if he heard the thought, Dylan comes up behind me and flicks a finger toward three different options.

“If you want to sever it cleanly, you're looking for something like a scalpel.” He points at the smallest blade tucked into a plastic sleeve inside the leather flap. “If you want pain and blood, you could use that.” I follow his finger to a serrated Swiss made knife. “Otherwise, there's always just trying them out and seeing which one works for you.”

Leaning into his front, I turn my head to place a soft kiss on his throat. Day-old stubble pricks my lips when I do, but I kind of like it. “Thank you.”

As my gaze moves from one side of the pouch to the other, I decide the scalpel will do. Unnecessary theatrics isn't my thing. If I'm going to threaten to do this, I'd better be willing to follow through and I want to be efficient about it.

We've wasted enough time.

My gut tells me Damian's strange, nervous behavior has something to do with my mother and I need to get back home so I can find out if I'm right. If she's in trouble... *I just need to get home.*

Sliding the scalpel carefully out of the leather pocket, I keep it in the plastic sleeve for now as I straighten up again and turn to an ashen-faced Fisher. His eyes are wider than I've ever seen them and his head is shaking.

"You wouldn't," he breathes, too terrified to find his voice, it seems. "I am a high-value—"

"Not anymore," I cut him off. "You're not of value to anyone where you are right now. Sparing your colleagues was a decision we didn't take lightly. They, however, saw reason and accepted our offer for protection for them and their families going forward."

"It's not protection. It's—"

"*Protection,*" I reiterate. "With a little splash of intimidation and perhaps a decent reminder that they're being watched, but protection nonetheless."

I feel Dylan and Maverick behind me, but neither of them interrupt. This is my show, and they're letting me run it.

So far, they really have been keeping their word on all the promises they made, and it's empowering to know they don't feel that same insane urge to protect me from everything at all costs anymore.

This darkness has been running in my veins all along, and now that I'm accepting it instead of fighting, I feel stronger than ever. I feel like I'm part of our group in a way I never have before.

Fisher narrows his eyes at me "I'd rather die than accept your *protection,*" he spits. "Tony will come for me. He promised. He—"

My brows arch as I take a pointed look around. "Where is he, then? There's no barricade at the door or in the lobby. We've got eyes on every inch of this hotel and there hasn't been a sign of him or any of his men. I don't doubt he made

you many promises, but I doubt he ever intended on keeping them. He's not like Damian."

*Can't believe I'm saying that, but it's true.*

The guys once told me that Damian's always taken care of his men. He believes in using honey instead of vinegar for the most part when it comes to earning loyalty and respect. It seems to have paid off for him quite well—until now.

Fisher loses the last little bit of color that had remained in his cheeks. "They're not here?"

"No."

"You're not keeping them out?"

I shake my head. "Can't keep out people who aren't trying to come in. There's no one out there for you."

He fixes his gaze on mine, moisture shimmering on his lids as he finally loses that smug bravado he's been clinging to all along. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm going to cut off your dick and then, I'm going to mail it to your wife so she can fuck herself with it when she misses you."

I cringe internally at that last part, but I've long since stopped considering anything as being off the table. We need to get this done so we can move on.

We've barely even joined this war and I'm ready for it to be over. *More so if my mom is in danger.*

Stepping forward toward the bed, my nose wrinkles as I reach for his underwear. He's pissed himself so many times that the stench of urine is stale and sickening this close, but it needs to be done.

Thankfully, the guys are still letting me do it instead of jumping in with offers to help. Once I've tucked the front of his briefs under his pathetically small testicles, I raise the scalpel and carefully remove it from the plastic sleeve.

Dylan's hand appears, but only to take the sleeve from me—which is help I'm willing to accept—and then he steps back

again.

“Right, Fisher. I’m not entirely sure how long it’s going to be before you lose consciousness once I do this, so I’ll lay it out for you now before I get started.”

I hold up the scalpel to inspect the spotless, shiny blade. “The Triskele is already back in control of the two hotels you used to manage. Your death is going to achieve nothing to stop that, but your family will probably be safe unless they try to avenge you in any way or run to Tony about us. Your colleagues have already told us that you spearheaded the campaign to switch sides, and although we’re curious, we don’t really need to know why you did it. I’m sure they won’t make the same mistake. Especially not after this.”

Slowly lowering the scalpel, I press it to the base of his shaft, doing my best to keep my expression stoic, but... *Gah, I wish I’d put gloves on before I have to touch that...thing.*

Even so, I persevere, sliding the fingers of my free hand under his short, stubby length before lifting it higher and experimenting with how hard to press the blade into his skin. The squishy flesh makes it a bit more difficult to find purchase than it might’ve been on something firm, but I’m not going there.

As I start an incision, Fisher shrieks and thrashes, yanking his tiny cock right out of my grasp as he begins sobbing, pleading for me to stop. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know! You’re right! You’re right. This achieves nothing! I’ll talk. Just stop!”

I sigh, rolling my eyes as I glance at my boys over my shoulder. “What is it with you men and your genitals? You’ve threatened almost every other part of his body and yet, the smallest blade in your arsenal pressed to his penis and he literally squeals like a pig.”

Maverick winces and moves his hand to protect his own junk. “Remind me never to piss you off again.”

Dylan, however, is firmly focused on the sobbing man on the bed, evidently believing his own genitals to be safe from



the scalpel I'm still holding. Which is fine. I love his dick. I wouldn't hurt it. Same goes for Mav's but clearly, he reacted on instinct.

"What did Tony promise you?" Dylan hisses as he walks up to my side. "What could he possibly provide that we can't?"

"Not everyone has the same, plain tastes as your Boss. He might not want to take advantage of all the opportunities that are available out there, but Tony does. He provides something for everyone."

As Fisher's eyes narrow, Dylan leans over him. "Be clear. What does he provide that we can't?"

"Younger whores," Fisher bites out, still fighting against his restraints even though I haven't touched him again yet. "Damian has always been clear. No minors. Tony caters for all tastes, which makes it easier for us to provide what our clients are looking for. He cuts me in for five hundred more per order and ten percent on any other product I procure from him."

Dylan goes stock still at my side. "You turned on us for five hundred dollars more per whore and a measly ten percent increase on drugs and whatever other shady shit you buy from him?"

Fisher nods wildly. "It all adds up, Blackthorne."

My stomach turns to lead. *Minors??*

I've learned while we've been here that Damian has deals with some of the prostitutes in town. Allegedly, it's all consensual and no one's being forced to do anything against their will, but I was going to put it on my to-do list as something to check out anyway. Before we leave here, I'm going to make sure that his allegations are true and that his sex workers have a choice.

This, however, is disgusting. I want to put on a strong front and stand on my own two feet, but nausea and dizziness descend as the implications of what he's saying sinks in. "You're done with minors," I seethe quietly, raising the scalpel

again. “I don’t care what your depraved clients ask for— that is *not* a service you provide.”

Dylan has grown pale and he looks a little green as he nods his agreement and moves to my side when I start swaying slightly on my feet. Meanwhile, Maverick’s features are tight with rage as he steps forward and starts laying down the law.

“From now on, you’re no longer in business with Rivieras. If you want to keep your dick attached to your body and your family safe, you’re coming back to the Triskele and you’re going to tell us who’s been doing Tony’s bidding here. We know it wasn’t the man himself, and we want a name.”

“Alan Dubrovnik,” he cries immediately, finally stopping his thrashing as he looks up at me with pleading eyes again. “Can I go now?”

“Almost,” I reply, since he seems to have decided that it’s up to me. “You will not say anything about where you’ve been these last couple days and you will remember that we know what you’ve been up to with the Rivieras. You’re a predator, and we will not hesitate to use that against you if you so much as breathe anywhere near the line again.”

“I’m not a—“

“Bringing minors here is as good as touching them yourself,” I spit. “You. Are. A. Predator.”

And as soon as we have time, I’m coming back here to kill him.

*Actually...*

“He doesn’t deserve to live,” I murmur to Maverick as I hand the scalpel back to Dylan. “What are we going to do about it?”

Dylan’s piercing blue eyes meet mine. “What do you want to do about it? If we kill him now, we need to stay until we know one of the others is equipped to step up.”

“You’re right, but we can afford a few more days.” Without overthinking it, I keep the fact that this man has

brought *children* here at the forefront of my mind when I reach for the gun tucked into Maverick's jeans.

The strangest sense of serenity settles over me when I take it off safety and aim it at the man whose screams I can no longer hear. My ears are ringing too loud and I'm sweating like I'm stuck in a fever dream, but my hands are steady and thankfully, so is my aim when I pull the trigger.

A red hole appears right at the center of his brow, Fisher's head drops back, and his body sags, the fight immediately gone. I stare at him, lying there on the soiled bedding, lifeless and oozing blood from his forehead, my heart hammering in my chest and my eyelids seemingly out of my control.

My ears are still ringing, but faintly, so I hear it when Dylan says to Mav, "Is it just me, or does it get you really hot when she's the psychopath in this relationship?"

CHAPTER  
**FIVE**

## COLTON

With Skye's first cold blooded, not-in-the-heat-of-battle kill under her belt, we came home after we took care of Tony's main man in Vegas. Dubrovnik won't be snaking anymore business from us and instead of having one manager overseeing both casinos with an assistant manager permanently stationed in each, we've given each of the assistants the role of manager in the casino they were stationed at before—with a few of our guys as backup.

We got into New York this morning, and since we're a big part of the shit show now, we couldn't go back to campus. So we're staying at our condos off Central Park for now. Skye's never been here before, but she seems to like the view and being so much closer to her mom, but me?

I've never loved these places. We bought them back when we wanted to move out but our dads still wanted to be able to keep an eye on us, and we've moved on from that. These apartments are not a home. Not where we'd like to make our lives. Our place upstate is under offer though, and it's no longer safe anyway.

Alistaire and a team we trust are packing everything up and I'm finding someplace they can move it to when they're ready. As I scroll through the listings of possible new homes that haven't gone on the open market yet, I wonder if our realtor listened at all when I told him what we were looking for.

It seems to me that all he did was to compile a list of the most expensive places he has and sent that to me. None of

these houses fulfill all our requirements. Not even close. We want privacy. Space. Possibly a view.

Releasing a heavy breath, I prop my head in my open palm and stretch my legs out on the bed, scrolling through unsuitable listing after unsuitable listing on my tablet.

*I mean, this one is a family home in a cul-de-sac with neighbors that would hear us whisper. How is that private?*

I'm closing out the tab when Nix's voice filters up from downstairs. "Colt? Boss? Meeting in the living room. Five minutes!"

I sigh. *So much for surprising them with a nice, new place to call home. Fuck.*

Being here is making me feel nervous. Unsettled. I don't like it. I've never had that sense of home here that we had at our old place—especially the last few months when we were there with Skye, and now that I've had a taste of it, I can't get it out of my head.

I need it back. Now. I want a home, not a short-term place to stash our stuff.

*Maybe I'll find what I'm looking for after the meeting. Maybe the realtor will pull his head out of his ass and send me a place that ticks any of the fucking boxes I asked for.*

After heaving out another sigh and pushing the tablet away, I get up and head downstairs without even bothering to put on a shirt. My black sweats are enough. It's just us here and yet, I shake my hands out at my sides as discomfort snakes through my gut.

Shoving it down, I take the stairs two at a time and get to the living room last, just a few seconds after Dylan. He drops down on the sofa facing the TV, and I glance at Nix as I head for the open spot next to Dylan.

"What's going on?" I ask before looking at Skye and Mav who are sprawled all over each other on the other sofa. *Lucky bastard. I should've gotten here first.*

Nix snaps me out of it when he turns his tablet to show us the screen. I frown, wondering what the fuck I'm looking at. It looks a little like one of those police crime boards I've seen on TV, with strings connecting one thing to another, but in this case, the strings are black lines he's drawn between the parts of some kind of diagram.

Dylan puts his elbows on his knees, leaning forward as he studies whatever the *hell* that is through narrowed eyes. "Okay, Nix. We're going to need some context here. Is this an economics assignment for school that we forgot about?"

"Uh, no. Damian got us deferred for the rest of the semester, remember?"

Dylan rolls his eyes as he sits back again and brings his ankle to his knee. "Yeah. It still seems like a waste to defer this far into it, but it is what it is. What are we looking at, then?"

"My thoughts exactly," I add as I get comfortable. "It looks like it should be from a textbook."

"It's not," Nix says before he hands the tablet to Mav. "Have a look and pass it around so everyone else can see it properly as well. I've emailed it to you, but I need to explain."

"Yeah, that's a good idea." Mav passes the tablet to Skye before he looks back at Phoenix. "It's your plan, isn't it?"

Nix nods. "It's a two-pronged approach that covers everything we need to do to win."

"Only two?" Skye frowns as she keeps staring at it. "Oh, right. Income and network?"

"Yep. Those are the prongs, but there are different facets to each of them."

I groan. "This feels like a lecture."

"It's a strategy meeting," he counters. "I've read over everything Damian has sent us on what's happened so far, but here's the thing. He's been focused on Skye and Elizabeth for years. They're central to his end-game, which is great, but he

and the others failed to properly consider how they would get to the actual fucking end-game.”

Dylan sighs. “They weren’t ready?”

“It’s not so much that they weren’t ready as it is that their contingencies were all hinged on ways to get Skye and Elizabeth to cooperate rather than going into much detail about anything else.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “Where does that leave us?”

“Well, that’s the other thing. In many ways, we’re playing catch-up to the Rivas. Damian thought that he was essentially kidnapping their Queen and that it would cause Tony to spiral. Instead, it’s done nothing more than to make him utterly focused on beating us once and for all. He’s known for months that Damian got to Liz and Skye, and while we’ve been focused on the Love of it all, he’s been setting things in motion to win.”

Skye’s chin comes up as she stares at her smartest boyfriend. “How do we get the upper hand?”

“That’s where this comes in.” He inclines his head toward the tablet now in Dylan’s hand. “I’ve done some research on the previous mafia wars, and—“

“That’s a real thing?” she asks with an edge of disbelief to her tone.

He nods. “As real as hundreds of people dead or imprisoned.”

“Okay.” She takes his word for it, leaning back into Maverick and resting her head against his shoulder. “What did you learn?”

“A lot, but specifically, I’ve looked into the pressure points of the wars that have come before ours, and my plan is based on what I *think* we need to get to where we want to be. The two main prongs are income and network. If we just go around killing a bunch of people, this will drag on for years and we’ll lose as many of our own as they will. We need to go for the jugular, which is continuing to tamper with their streams of



income and additionally, to dismantle the network within which they survive.”

He pauses for a beat as Dylan passes the tablet to me, but other than knowing I understand the words that are written there, it doesn't make much sense. “Money has won and lost many wars,” he explains. “Liam is back to work on everything drug related, which is one of the Rivas' main streams of income. Liam's had a few setbacks these last few months, but he's also been fixing what went wrong and it sounds like he's back on track.”

He drags in a deep breath, his eyes unfocused for a moment like he's ticking off a mental checklist. “My dad has left Ireland. The moms are fine. They're with Colt's dad, who's also trying to help out Ian with his problems on that side. They're hoping that if they can get somewhere with all the shit the leader of the Irish Triskele caused with the local gangs because of Liliana, the Organization will get its fucking backbone back.”

“Fair point,” I say as Skye bristles, sitting up a little straighter again.

“Part of him *helping out* on that side isn't reinstating your marriages, is it?” she asks. “I mean, Liliana was going to be Dylan's wife.”

Nix smiles. “It doesn't matter, *mo cara*. They can try, but we've made our position perfectly clear. I don't think they're going to waste their time on that, particularly not with the state that part of the organization is in.”

She cuddles back into Mav's side. “Yeah, I guess you're right. If the main purpose of your marriages was to strengthen your alliances with them, then I guess your dads don't win at all if they do that right now.”

“Exactly.” He picks up the tablet I set down on the coffee table. “As I was saying, my dad has left Ireland. After I told him about what Fisher said about the minors Tony has in his employ, he's looking into the prostitution and trafficking aspect of Tony's business with my mom and Alistaire. They've got some experience in locating and taking down

trafficking rings, and I suggest we leave them to it. We'll only slow them down if we try to help and there are enough other issues for us to focus on."

As one, we nod our agreement. Nix jots down a few notes on his screen, then he looks up again. "Right, that means drugs and prostitution as two major streams of income are being handled. The home front in Ireland is being defended just in case Tony tries to take this across the pond, and that leaves us with Damian."

Dylan snorts softly. "What's he doing? Pacing his office and feeling sorry for himself?"

"No," Nix says, but he grins as he says it. "He's put himself on the networking prong. Bottom to top in Tony's own ranks. It's the most difficult part of their network to dismantle, but he's working on recruiting from the Riviera organization. He's buying, winning, or simply taking the loyalty of key members of the Family."

"Sounds good," Skye says, reaching for her coffee on the table. "What are we supposed to do, then? It kind of sounds like they've got it covered."

"It sounds that way, but no. We've gotten our own casinos back and as you know, after we took Dubrovnik out, we installed our people in some of those hotels that used to be in silent partnerships with the Riviervas. But that's not the only gambling cookie jar they've got their fingers in."

"Illegal gambling operations," Dylan concludes on a deep sigh. "Let me guess, they moved in when we moved out?"

Phoenix's chin lowers in a nod. "They've got interests in horse and dog racing, everything from college sports to the Superbowl, cock and dog fighting, and, of course, the obligatory poker dens."

"Of course," Maverick grumbles before he lets out a loud sigh. "Let me guess. You want to tackle those operations next?"

"Yes, we're going to have to. As far as I can tell, it's not a major stream of income for them right now, but it's big enough

to matter. They're still making millions from it. The problem is that it can also grow as much and as fast as they need it to. Once we cut them off anywhere else, they can double down on this and make enough to survive if they have to."

"Okay, but it's not all about the bookie on the corner anymore," Dylan points out. "The bets are mostly placed online and there are always multiple layers of protection. It kind of feels like we'll be playing whack-a-mole."

"To an extent, we will be," Phoenix agrees. "Aaron has been able to track down the main sites they're using, though. He's going to help me take them down. Others will pop up, but as long as we can keep disrupting them, we should be able to keep them from making enough money for it to have any real impact in financing the organization."

"That's not sustainable," Dylan reasons as his knee starts bouncing. "It's going to tie up you *and* Aaron permanently until...when?"

"We're working on that. Aaron will be coming here as soon as he can to see what we can do about it in the long term."

"I'm finally going to get to meet the infamous Aaron?" Skye's eyes light up. "Yay. How long do I have to hear about the one other friend you guys seem to have before I finally get an introduction?"

Phoenix grunts, his nose wrinkling as he levels her with a serious look. "He's not a friend; he's a hacker. And at the moment, he's trying to help my parents and Alistaire with the trafficking ring they believe is being used to bring in these prostitutes for the Rivas."

She sighs, giving back as good as she gets. "A hacker who is also your friend, and I'm thankful he's helping with that, but I'm also still looking forward to meeting him. I've been hearing about him for a long time and it'll be nice to finally have a face to put with the name. Don't patronize me, Nix."

"I wasn't patr—"

“What about networking?” Maverick interrupts. “What’s that all about if Damian is already working on the Riviera organization itself?”

Phoenix blinks himself out of his staring contest with Skye, then he nods, shoots her an apologetic smile, and turns back to us. “Right. Well, it’s mostly about governmental support. Prosecutors, judges, politicians, and cops who are instrumental to the Family. If we can infiltrate their support network at that level, the organization will eventually collapse because there won’t be a way to get their people out when they’re captured.” He pauses to take a breath. “There’s also a task force assigned to Tony. They’ve been after him for a long time. If we can leak the names of those who have been helping him to the FBI, they’ll take some of the players off the board for us.”

“So our immediate focus is the gambling and governmental support?” Dylan clarifies.

Phoenix nods. “Another secondary stream of income we need to look at is the illegal cigarette trade, but one thing at a time.”

“I’ve got someone who may be able to help us with the governmental network,” Maverick says and extricates himself from Skye to stand up and slide his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll let you know what I find.”

Once he’s gone, I look around until my gaze settles on Skye. “I think that means class is over for today. Want to get dirty with me?”

“Depends,” she says with a small smile playing at the corners of her lips. “What have you got in mind?”

“Gardening.” I get up and hold out my hand when I reach her, chuckling at the mystified expression on her face. “I started a rooftop garden here back in the day and I haven’t had a chance to check on it since we got home. The building manager and his team have been taking care of it for me, but the work never stops. What do you say?”

She plants her hand firmly in mine before she rises. “I think that sounds like exactly the kind of therapeutic intervention I need right now.”

CHAPTER  
**SIX**

## SKYE

In the few days since we've been back in the city, I've tried to settle in at the guys' condos. They're nice places with interleading doors, high ceilings, and obviously, their signature walls of windows that this time, look out over Central Park and the iconic architecture of the Upper West Side buildings surrounding it.

I don't even want to know how much these places cost, but while they're definitely safe, they don't really feel like home. The furnishings and finishings are all modern and impersonal, looking like they've been picked out of a catalog as opposed to the homey feel of the stuff they had upstate. There's too much glass, metal, and leather as far as I'm concerned.

It's weirdly cold and quiet here. We've all been sleeping in Dylan's condo and making that our primary living space, but during the day, the guys disperse to work and the...emptiness of it creeps me right the hell out.

I've been doing whatever I can out of Dylan's study, but right now, I don't have the skills or the contacts to be of much help. Mostly, I'm keeping an eye on the situation in Vegas, but there are only so many calls I can make before I start making a nuisance of myself.

I'm trying my best to stay busy, though. Whenever I'm not, I start thinking about Fisher and the moment I put that bullet in his head. I took his life, and it was a little too easy. Fucker deserved it, which makes it easier to deal with, but still.

I put an end to his miserable existence, and that's not really something I can talk to my therapist about. It feels like something I should talk to him about, though. Like I should need to work through murdering someone, but at the same time, I feel weirdly numb about it.

As I wander down the stairs in Nix's condo, hoping he's got something for me to do, I hear the front door open and I frown.

In all the time we've been here, we haven't received any guests. My heart clenches and my palms get sweaty until I hear his voice, warmly greeting his friend.

"Aaron," he says. "It's good to see you, man. Thanks for coming."

"Of course," an unfamiliar, raspy voice replies. "I still don't understand why you couldn't come to my place."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I know you prefer to work from there, but it's best if we stick together right now. Come on in. Can I get you something to drink?"

Aaron murmurs something I can't hear, but then Phoenix chuckles. "Of course I've got coffee. The strong, dark, proper stuff. It's basically Skye's lifeblood. Speaking of, she's excited to meet you."

"Me? Why?"

Footsteps ring out on their way to the kitchen, but one set is more of a shuffle than the confident stride of the other. The latter is definitely Phoenix.

It makes me even more curious to meet the mysterious hacker who's helped us out of so many binds, and I know I shouldn't eavesdrop, but I *am* still moving down the stairs. I'm just doing it *slowly*.

Phoenix laughs, and I can practically hear the shrug in his voice when he says, "I don't know, but apparently she's looking forward to meeting the one other friend I have."

"*I'm* the one other friend you have?" Aaron sounds a little disbelieving. "That's sad, Nix. Really sad."



“I know, but what can I say? It’s difficult to make friends in this life.”

Aaron harrumphs, and I’m not sure if it’s in agreement or disagreement. When they get to the kitchen, I hear cabinets opening and closing and the telltale signs of mugs thudding on the countertop and pods being slotted into the machine.

There’s a brief pause. “How did it go with my parents?”

Aaron sighs. “It’s an uphill battle. The only real way to stem the tide is going to be to shut it off from the inside once you guys take over. Even then, we won’t be stopping the trafficking ring. We’ll only be stopping one of the organizations creating the demand.”

Revulsion fills my stomach and I slow my descent even more as he continues. “We got a few leads that Al is chasing down and your parents are reaching out to some of their old contacts, but prostitution and trafficking are tricky. Not all the people Tony uses have been trafficked and not all are there against their will. Some minors look like adults and we can’t exactly line ‘em up and ask for ID.”

As he speaks, I can hear the exasperation building inside him. I recognize the disgust and frustration in his voice because it matches how I’m feeling about all this. “There’s something else you should know, Nix.”

I’m right outside the kitchen when he says it and I stop moving. Stop even breathing. “Your parents are considering going to the FBI with this. The syndicates Tony uses don’t exclusively work for him. They operate globally and just the information we already have will help the authorities tremendously to apprehend fish that are much bigger than Tony.”

Phoenix is deathly quiet for a few long moments, and when he speaks again, his voice is hushed. “My parents’ are considering becoming informants for the Feds?”

“Yes,” Aaron says simply. “So am I. There are things that are much bigger than the Triskele/Riviera feud and we’ve stumbled right into the center of one of those things. I couldn’t

live with myself if we didn't help as much as we could. Trafficking is on the rise worldwide and—“

“You'd risk exposing yourself for this?”

“Yes,” he replies without hesitation. “Obviously, we intend to limit our cooperation only to what we learn about the syndicates Tony is involved with, but we're aware of the risks.”

“Have my parents spoken to Damian about it?”

As I peek around the corner, I see a hot, nerdy guy with curly, messy brown hair, wide-framed glasses perched on the tip of his nose, and a smattering of freckles across his cheeks. He's almost as tall as Phoenix, easily clearing six feet, and he's built too. Like he works out while he's behind his computer.

Wearing baggy jeans, a washed-out hoodie and scuffed sneakers on his feet, he looks like any other college kid, but as he nods and his jaw tightens, it's obvious that there's much more to him. “Damian agrees with us. As long as no one mentions the Triskele or our involvement with you, he's happy for us to approach the authorities with what we have.”

“No doubt because it will bring more heat down on Tony while you're at it,” Nix muses before he blows out a deep breath. “Whatever happens, I'm with you. I'll run it by the others, but I'm sure they'll agree to help however we can once we've taken down the Rivas.”

A relieved smile spreads on Aaron's face. “I knew we could count on you, and I get why that takes priority right now. Besides, we're doing everything we can in the meantime. This fight isn't going anywhere. Cut off one head, and four more pop up. So, illegal gambling?”

Phoenix nods, and since they're done with the part of the conversation I'm not sure Aaron would've wanted me to hear, I finally emerge around the corner and extend a hand. “Hi, Aaron. I'm Skye. It's nice to finally meet you.”

The guy's blue eyes nearly bug out of his face and he glances at my hand like he's afraid it's going to bite him

before he gives it a quick shake. “Hi. Yes. Nice to meet you too.”

He averts his gaze and steps back as soon as he releases my hand, eyes suddenly darting around all over the place as he wipes his hands on his thighs. It’s clear that he’s shy and that he’s anxious about being here, and I don’t think my presence is making him any more comfortable.

“Well, I just wanted to say hi. I’d offer to help you with the gambling sites, but my technological expertise is limited at best. I don’t even know how to use social media properly. My mom always drilled into me that it was too dangerous to post my face, location, and whatever else, so eventually, I just stopped using it completely.”

Nix grins as he wraps an arm around my waist and nuzzles my temple. “At least now you know why. She was trying to protect you from Tony... and us. You know, I was wondering about that back when we first met you. It was strange that you had almost no online presence at all.”

I lean into him, smiling as I press a soft kiss to the strong column of his throat. “Another mystery about me solved, then. I need to up my keep-you-guessing game, don’t I? There’s not much left now that you don’t know about.”

“Which is exactly how we like it,” he murmurs. “Technological expertise aside, you could come keep us company if you want.”

“Nah, I’d only be a distraction. You guys do your thing. I’ll go see if Maverick needs some help.”

Phoenix squeezes me before he lets go. “That’s a good idea. He’s been on the phone to ADA Stone so much, he hasn’t even had a chance to update us yet.”

“Let’s hope it’s because Stone has lots of interesting nuggets of information.”

Nix chuckles. “Fingers crossed.”

Turning back to Aaron, who’s watching us like he’s just spotted a unicorn hiding in a herd of rhinos, I nod and offer

him another smile. “Please make yourself at home while you’re here, and don’t let Phoenix forget to feed you.”

Aaron dips his chin in a dutiful, wide-eyed nod, and once I’m out of the kitchen, I hear him mutter, “I know you guys have been seeing her for awhile, but it only just got real to me. How’s that going?”

“It’s amazing,” Nix admits quietly, and I smile. “She’s made us better, happier. We’re just about human now.”

Aaron lets out a soft snort of laughter. “I’ve realized that. Do you know Dylan even asked me how I was when he called the other day? First time ever. Isn’t it weird, though? Dating her with your three best friends?”

“Nah, I honestly wouldn’t have it any other way. The five of us together works. I don’t know how to explain it, but it just does.” He pauses. “Coffee’s ready. Let me go show you where you can set up. I’ve also got the guest room next to my study ready for you, but if there’s anything else you need, just let me know.”

Hurrying upstairs when I realize I’m eavesdropping again, I head to the end of the corridor and open the door into Maverick’s condo. He’s on the phone when I walk into his study, but he waves me in and pulls the phone away from his ear to hit speaker.

Another voice suddenly fills the room. It’s crisp, masculine, and brisk. Less than a minute later, I’ve concluded that this isn’t a man who fucks around or wastes time. “I’ve got a list of names ready for you. Judges, prosecutors, and cops I suspect are on the Riviera payroll. I can’t confirm, but based on their track records in cases where anyone who’s allegedly part of that organization is involved, I’m fairly confident they’re worth investigating.”

“We’ll look into it,” Maverick promises. “All I need from you is a starting point.”

“Right.” The guy doesn’t hesitate before he starts rattling off names, and I launch myself at Mav’s desk to grab a

notepad and pen, scribbling furiously to keep up as he gives us an impressively long list of people to investigate.

I knew the Rivas would have to have a lot of people in their pockets, but this is ridiculous. Once he stops speaking, he ends the call without saying goodbye, and I'm reeling in the aftermath. Mav rolls his chair away from his desk and pats his lap, chuckling as he reaches for me.

"Stone has been working with us for years. He's loyal to the bone, but he knows I don't make small talk. Neither does he. That's why we work so well together."

"Riiiiight." I climb onto his lap and run my fingers into his thick hair, bringing my head down to rest my nose against his forehead. "That was a lot to take in so quickly. Does he always speak that fast?"

"In his world, time is money." Mav's arms circle my waist and he moves a hand up to start drawing lazy patterns on my back. "What's up, Sunshine? Did you need something?"

"No, I just wanted to see if I could help. Aaron is here, but he seems nervous of me so I didn't want to bother them. Dylan's gone to meet with Damian and Colton's dad sent over Ian's financial records. They're combing them to make sure they haven't been working against us all along."

"You didn't want to go to the meeting with Dylan?" he murmurs against my hair, and I shake my head as I get settled on his lap.

"Not today. Dylan's going to give him an update from our side, and then he's bringing Mom and Damian back with him to have dinner with us."

Maverick frowns against my cheek. "Why?"

I shrug. "My mom wanted to see where we're staying, so I invited her. Colton offered to cook, but since he's busy, I'm ordering in."

He tenses underneath me. "We're letting a stranger into the building?"

I roll my eyes. “A pizza delivery man. I’m sure we’ll be okay.”

“I’ll go meet him downstairs,” he says decisively. “We’re not letting him in.”

“Says the guy who just got the names of potentially corrupt public officials over the phone,” I tease. “Ordering pizza seems safer than that.”

“Nah, he’s probably got the most secure line in Manhattan outside of ours. We’ve had to take steps to ensure privacy for everything we’ve discussed over the years. Pizza is more risky under the circumstances.”

“Fine, go downstairs,” I agree eventually. “I’m open to other ideas for dinner, though. It doesn’t have to be pizza. That was just the first thing that came to mind. I don’t even know if Damian eats pizza. We’ve never had them over for dinner before, so—“

“He eats pizza,” Mav says with barely restrained laughter in his voice. “You seem stressed. Is it really just about dinner?”

“No,” I admit, releasing a deep sigh with my head swimming with everything that keeps happening; all the new information I keep learning. “I know we’re making headway, but being at war is stressful. As is having the parents over for the first time.”

Laughter rumbles out of him as he drops his hands to my thighs and pulls his head back to look into my eyes. “I have a few ideas to help you relax.”

“Not everything is about sex, you know?”

He laughs again, those navy blues alight with a carefree, humorous twinkle that makes him look like none of this bothers him at all. “Not everything, no, but it does happen to be a great way to relieve tension.”

“How are you so relaxed?”

He shrugs, leaning his head into my hand when I keep playing with his hair. “It feels good to finally be back in

action. Hell, to finally be *part* of the action. I feel like we've been preparing for this our whole fucking lives, and I'm glad the waiting is finally over."

"You thrive on this stuff?" I frown. "Really?"

He smiles. "Nah, I thrive on *you*, Sunshine. This is me being happy that shit is finally going down. We're already closer to the end of this fucking rivalry than we've ever been before, and when it's over, we get to settle down. With you."

"That sounds pretty damn good," I breathe as I lower my mouth to his. "I think I'll take that relaxation now. Thanks."

He smiles against my lips. "Your wish, my command and all that."

CHAPTER  
**SEVEN**



## MAVERICK

If my Sunshine wants out of her head, the least I can do is to oblige her. The only question is figuring out what she's in the mood for today, and how I can use it to my advantage to distract her.

As I slide my fingers into her hair, I decide to test the waters. Skye likes it on the rougher side sometimes, and I think this may just be one of those times. I tug her hair with an almost violent force, letting the loose, wavy curls wrap around my fingers like a silky glove as I press my lips to hers, devouring her mouth, my tongue firm and demanding until she is quivering against me. I dive in deep, exploring every part of her mouth as I give her ass a hard smack.

She sucks in a gasp and I smile. *Right, that's what we're going with today, then.*

Breaking the kiss abruptly and without the warning of slowing down first, I bite her lip and feel her body shudder against mine. She looks straight into my eyes, her own blazing with desire and anticipation. "What are you going to do to me, big bad wolf?" she teases.

I love it when she plays this game. It always ignites a fire inside of me that demands *more*. She tries to make herself believe she's in control here - but that's just her way of trying to ignore what we both know: that I'm the one who will always have the power here, especially between the two of us. She lets me have it, and I fucking love her so much more for trusting me enough to give it to me after everything she's been through.

My fingertips never leaving the I hold I have on her hair, I tug it slightly harder and whisper in her ear. “You really don’t want to play games with me today, Sunshine. I’m gonna make you beg for me to fuck you. You know I love hearing you beg.”

“You can try,” she says mischievously.

A smirk spreads across her face, but I don’t let it linger there for long. With an upward jerk of my fist in her hair, I bring her to her knees between my legs, keeping one hand tangled into locks while I undo my belt and zip open my jeans with the other. My hard cock springs free and I wrap my fist around it, giving a few quick strokes just inches away from her face.

She licks her lips and stares intently at my moving hand. Her breathing speeds up, a rosy flush spreading on her cheeks.

“What was that Sunshine? You don’t you want this enough to ask nicely for it?” I demand as I arch a brow at her.

Her lips part as though she wants to reply, but before she can utter a single word, I yank her head forward and she slides her lips around my shaft. I thrust into her and for a moment, she struggles against me, almost choking on my length.

“Suck it harder,” I order, my voice low and commanding.

I slide my cock out of her mouth, satisfied with the sounds of her moans mingling with coughs as she gasps for air.

“Was that it? Was that what you wanted?” I ask, twisting my hand in her hair.

“No,” she croaks, sounding hoarse from my rough fucking of her mouth. She licks her lips, panting slightly as she waits for me to continue.

I yank on her hair again and she rises quickly, forced to stand on her tiptoes. I release my hold, then spin her around with a powerful motion. Planting one hand between her shoulder blades, I push her onto the hard surface of my desk, her pretty ass sticking out towards me. I yank up her skirt until it’s wrapped around her waist and slide down her thong, letting it hang on her knees.

The air is electrified with her arousal, every inch of her quivering with anticipation as droplets of desire bead on her lips. *Shit, this really is what she wanted today.*

She's more than ready for me, and I think it's safe to say that she's out of her head now. But she's not getting it. Not until she begs, just like I told her she would. I lift my hand and pull back before letting it fly, landing it with a smack on her right ass cheek.

"Look at you, all ready to take me. You know what you have to do, Sunshine. You ready to beg for me yet?"

"Never," she says in a husky voice.

I look down at her face. Her cheek is pressed against the desktop, but I can still see her smirk. *Sigh. I guess we're holding off just a little bit longer.*

"What if I don't fuck you tonight?" I tease, running my hand through her hair. "What if I just leave you like this, with your wet pussy desperate for my cock?"

"You'd never do that." She turns her head to give me a sideways glare.

"Wouldn't I?" My gaze burns into hers, and I wonder what she'd do if I tried. We don't have a ton of time before dinner, but I do it anyway, leaving her ass bare and sliding my hand all the way to her inner thighs, but not touching her pussy once.

As I brush her soft flesh, I keep going, moving towards her knees and ankles, but I still don't really touch her. Dragging my fingers down and up, over and over before I bring it higher to meet her smooth, soft ass, which is still slightly pink from her punishment.

"Beg me," I whisper in her ear.

She flinches at my words but she keeps her defiant smile.

I quickly smack the tops of her cheeks with my hand, the sound echoing around the room. Her body jolts from the blows but she doesn't make a sound. She knows better than that. Even though she's facing away from me and she can't see

what I'm doing, I know she feels it when I stroke myself behind her, my cock so hard and needy that a breathy groan rips out of me.

As much as I want to pull her hair and yank her head back, I know now is not the time for more rough play. I needed to get her attention, and fast. I've done that. Yanked her right out of her head, but now, I need more.

Her ass is perfect for this task. Round, and soft, and just large enough to envelop my cock in its warm folds without squeezing it too tightly. I slide it between her cheeks, moaning at the heat of her skin around me. My short thrusts are slow but deep and hard enough to make me grunt every time my cock bottoms out between her sweet ass cheeks.

She's starting to tremble. We're still pretending she's not going to beg, but I know how desperate she is by now. I can feel the heat of her pussy radiating against my balls whenever I thrust against her and I see the shiny wetness on the insides of her thighs when I look down.

"Beg me, Sunshine," I say again as I stop moving and reach between her legs to caress her clit.

She gasps and then moans. "Will you fuck me there?" She says it so softly I almost missed it.

"What was that?"

"Please fuck my ass," she says, her voice shaky with desire.

"Good girl," I whisper as I rub her clit with my fingertips, my tongue flicking lightly against her ear. "I'm gonna fuck you so hard, Sunshine."

I spread her cheeks open again and this time, I spit on her hole before I spread it out with my finger and then place the tip of my cock against it. Pushing in a little, I feel her tightening around me already. When I stop, she moans loudly.

"You asked me so nicely, I want to hear you asking again, Sunshine."

She balls her hands into fists, clenching her teeth together, but she keeps playing her part and I fucking love it. *Makes me fucking hard as a rock.*

I push back in a little. “Come on, Sunshine, you know you want it.”

“Please fuck my ass,” she begs.

My cock slides inside her, filling her sweet ass until the pressure is so much, I almost lose it immediately. She claws at the desk, desperate to have something to hold onto as I begin thrusting into her, her breath coming faster and faster with every pump of my hips. I bend forward and place my hand between her legs again, teasing her clit with my fingertips, rubbing the wet nub harder than before.

“Please,” she begs, her whole body shaking. She’s really getting into this now, her voice hoarse as she pants. “Fuck me, please fuck my ass!”

I clasp my hands around her hips and thrust into her with savage abandon. I’m so deep inside of her that I can feel the tension in her body building. She’s losing control and I love it.

“Cum for me, Sunshine,” I say, my voice a feral growl of desire.

She cries out as she comes, her body shaking uncontrollably as I continue to drive myself deep inside of her. A deep groan escapes my lips as I hold her hips and slam my cock in and out of her desperate hole, her tight ass squeezing my shaft until I explode, cumming so hard that my ears ring in the aftermath.

Panting heavily, I hang my head between her shoulder blades, trying to catch my breath.

“I love you,” I whisper in her ear.

“I love you too,” she whispers back.

We’re still panting when the door suddenly opens and Dylan walks in, rolling his eyes when he sees what we’ve been doing in here. Heat dances in his gaze when he rakes it across Skye’s body, but then he swallows hard and shakes himself out

of it. “Elizabeth and my dad are here. Get dressed. We need you in the lounge.”

Skye groans softly. “They’re going to know what we were doing as soon as we walk into the room, aren’t they?”

“Do you care?”

“No, but she’s still my mom.” Her cheeks are still flushed and she gets up and starts pulling on her clothes. “No one *wants* to look their mother in the eye just after they’ve had sex. It’s weird.”

“It’s natural.” I smack her ass when she passes and she laughs, but then she stops at the door to look back at me.

“I’ll see you down there?”

“See you down there.”

Dylan takes her hand as they leave, smirking as he tugs her into his side. “You have a good time in there, step-sister? I won’t lie, I’m jealous as hell that I keep missing out.”

She scoffs, giggling as she nudges him with her hip. “They’re talking about the wedding again?”

“They are,” he confirms. “Thinks it’s going to be too weird to keep loving me after?”

I don’t hear her answer, but I’m pretty confident I know what it is. At this point, nothing is going to stop her from loving us—not even officially becoming his step-sibling. It’s not like they share blood or grew up together, so it doesn’t really make any difference.

After hurriedly getting dressed myself, I head downstairs and walk into the lounge to find Skye sitting between Dylan and Colton on one sofa and Damian and Liz perched on the other.

As I head to the armchair in the corner, Damian arches a brow at me. “Where’s Phoenix?”

“Working with Aaron. He won’t be joining us.” Dylan motions at his dad. “The floor is yours. You know what’s been

happening on our side. Have there been any developments on yours?"

"Everything is right on track," he says confidently. "Liam has gone back to the supplier he was negotiating with when Maverick got shot. He had to sweeten the deal a bit, but he got them back to the table and managed to turn them. They're no longer supplying the Rivas, and neither is anyone they're associated with."

"That's good news." Colton grins. "What about Hunt? Has he made any progress?"

Skye pales, and it looks like she wants to say something, but Damian doesn't seem to notice. "Hunt, Rosemary, and Alistaire have found out who Tony has been getting most of his girls from. It's just the middleman, but they're confident he'll lead them right to the source."

"They've found someone already? I heard Aaron telling Nix just an hour ago that Alistaire was still chasing down leads."

"Things are developing fast on that front, my dear," Damian says with a slight grimace. "You should also know that Alistaire, the Hunts, and Aaron are planning on offering their help to the authorities on apprehending the people behind the trafficking ring they've uncovered. So far, they may only have the middleman, but Aaron found some disturbing evidence that seems to suggest he's embedded deeper into the trafficking trade than they thought at first glance."

The room goes so quiet, I'd have been able to hear half a pin drop. My stomach turns ice cold, but Skye nods like she knew about this. "I'd like to help."

Damian's cool eyes latch on hers, his head tilting as he gives a curt nod. "I understand the impulse, Skye. Believe it or not, the human trade is far beyond the line even I have drawn for myself. Do you have any knowledge about the minors Tony was supplying in Vegas, where he got them from, or the syndicates behind the people he was working with?"

She shakes her head, and he gives her an understanding smile. “I thought that might be the case. If you should come across anything that would be useful to the authorities in this regard, we’ll revisit. For now, I’m only telling you so that you’re aware of their intentions.”

As the shock of the revelation wears off, I lean forward. “I think we’d all like to help if possible. After we’re done with the Rivas, of course.”

Damian sighs and runs the flat of his palm across his jaw, but then he slowly starts nodding. “Yes, I imagine you would like to help. We’re all uniquely positioned to gain information about this kind of thing that the authorities would usually have a hard time coming by, and most in our position turn a blind eye so as not to step on any toes.”

“We’re doing it,” Dylan says firmly as his spine straightens and he looks directly at his dad. “As soon as we can shift our focus away from the Rivas, we’ll help with this. We’re not asking for permission.”

Damian locks eyes with his son. “Nor do you need me to give it. Once Skye has access to Tony’s study and all his documentation, I think you’ll find more than enough to be of use to the investigation, but that also means that we need to get her in there first.”

“We will,” Dylan insists. “This is our long-term plan, though.”

“Yes, it seems to be part of everyone’s long term plan now that this bomb has gone off in our laps. I’ve even been contacted by HoH. They’re going to be working with the Hunts’ on this. It seems now that everyone has been reminded that it’s still happening right under our noses, there’s no shortage of takers willing to stop turning a blind eye.”

“What about you?” Dylan asks, his gaze still on his dad’s. “Are you willing to stop turning a blind eye?”

Damian sniffs. “I’ve never turned a blind eye. I got us out of that trade as soon as I took over and I’ve never gotten



involved with any organization who deals in humans. For God's sake, I'm not the monster you think I am."

"Why is this where you've drawn the line?" Colton asks curiously, his elbows on his knees as he sits forward. "Your father was in that trade, so why aren't we?"

"When my father came to America, he was determined to succeed. No matter what it took," he says bitterly. "Supply and demand was the name of the game, and he couldn't afford to be tripped up by something as insignificant as morals. Thanks to his hard work, we're no longer in that same position. We *can* afford to make decisions about what we're involved in."

Dylan glances at Colt before he turns back to Damian. "But why this?"

The man huffs out a heavy breath. "This is neither here nor there. It's not relevant to the war we're fighting, but if you must know, my grandmother was taken as a young teenager. She would've been sold at auction had my grandfather not intervened. It's a story I grew up with, and of the five girls who were taken from their rural village that day, she was the only one who was ever seen again."

His top lip curls. "It's safe to say that I don't want any part of that. If you all want to join Hand of Hope, the Hunts, Alistaire, and Aaron when the time comes to combat the trade, then fine. That's not the business we're here to discuss today, though. Where are we on identifying the Rivas' support network?"

Finally, I have something to add. Dylan looks like he's been punched, and he's definitely still recovering from the story Damian just told. Colton's blinking too much and too fast, but he'll be fine, and Skye is sitting between them, rubbing their backs while waiting for me to answer the Boss.

"I spoke to Stone earlier. Over the past few days, he and I have been in constant contact. I've told him what we need and what to be on the lookout for. He gave me a few names to look into right off the bat, and he's been combing their systems as discreetly as possible ever since. Earlier, he finally managed to

give me a list that he believes to be complete. For the State of New York, anyway. He's casting a wider net from now on."

Damian smiles at me. "That's a very good job, son. What do you plan on doing with this list? Phoenix assured me you would work on dismantling Tony's governmental network, but I'm not convinced I shouldn't step in."

"We don't need your help," Dylan says, but he's not being snide or stubborn. We've just talked about it and we've already got a plan. "We may need to borrow some of your men when the time comes, but we're going to pick off the low-hanging fruit first."

Damian's brow puckers, the lines in his forehead and around his blue eyes deepening. "Is that a good idea? As soon as Tony realizes some of his contacts are gone, he *will* secure those who operate on the higher levels. If you're going to insist on doing this by yourselves, you'll need to have it all mapped out before you make any moves."

"We've learned that much from your mistakes recently," Dylan says, and Damian rolls his eyes.

"Before we get into that, what's your plan?"

Dylan grinds his teeth, and I take over from him again. "We're going to start by doing our research into each and every name on that list. Some will have to be eliminated, I'm sure, but we can use the others to strengthen our existing network. Once we have what we need on the people we could use on our side, we'll rally the troops, and then we'll hit them all over a period of two to three days."

"I've named it Operation Triskele Blitz," Colt announces, and I groan.

"We haven't named it anything," I counter. "That's just what Colt is insisting on referring to it as."

"It's a stupid name," Damian says before he suddenly grins at Colt. "It works, though. Since it's coming from the man who took out Mazzotti for us, I'll take it."

"Wait, you're happy about that?" Skye asks, her brows climbing on her forehead. "What happened to it having been

premature and *fucking irresponsible*, to quote Liam?”

Damian leans back and slings an arm around Liz’s shoulders before he smirks. “I’m not Liam. It *was* premature, but Tony is currently fighting a war without an experienced Underboss. His children are of no help to him and even though you seem to think I’ve made some mistakes, he *is* losing control. It’s been remarkably easy to convince a number of those in his ranks that it may be time to switch allegiances.”

“So the tide is turning?” she asks, and I see the hope flickering in her eyes. She wants to get this over with, and I think she agrees with the rest of us that it doesn’t feel like it ever will be.

Damian’s smirk grows as he nods. “It’s turning. With his casinos under our control, Liam’s win with that supplier, and the Hunts’ tracking down where he’s been sourcing the prostitutes from, his empire is cracking. Without any meaningful help and the unease among his people, we only need to deliver a few more blows before it will crumble.”

“That was fast,” Skye comments lightly, glancing at her mother before turning back to him. “How?”

“It’s amazing what we can achieve when we all work together,” he replies easily. “That being said, don’t underestimate him. He’ll be feeling the pressure and that makes him more dangerous than ever.”

“Noted,” I say. “Should we order the pizza now?”

“One last thing.” Damian makes eye contact with each of us in turn. “The authorities have started noticing that there’s been an influx of bodies as of late. We need to be more careful from now on. Tell your cleaners that we need to stop dumping and start getting more creative. All of this is for nothing if we end up going down with Tony.”

A sense of foreboding trickles through me. We knew the authorities would eventually catch on to a war being waged on their streets, but now that we know the inevitable has happened, the stakes just got so much higher.

CHAPTER  
**EIGHT**

## SKYE

**A**s everyone files out to the dining room, my mom comes over and wraps me up in her arms. “I heard about Vegas,” she murmurs quietly against my ear, holding me tight. “I don’t like this path you’re on, Skye. It’s not what I wanted for you.”

“I’m okay,” I assure her and strangely, I’m not lying. I really am okay. “This is the world we live in now, Mom. It’s not what I want for the rest of my life either, but that’s why I did what I did and why we’re fighting this fight. It won’t be forever.”

She sags against me, sniffing softly as she strokes my hair. “I’m so sorry. I should’ve told you everything about Tony earlier. Did he really show up on campus?”

*Shit.* I should’ve known she’d hear about that. “He did, but he didn’t stay long. He just said that he wants to get to know me.”

“Of course, he does,” she hisses, releasing me abruptly and narrowing her eyes as she stares into mine. “Do *not* fall for it, Skye. It’s a ploy. As soon as he has you, nothing good will come of it. If nothing else, Genevieve will make sure she makes your life hell.”

I lift my hands to let them rest gently on her shoulders, squeezing and massaging softly until she stops trembling. “I’m not going to fall for it. I know exactly what he’s doing and why. The guys and I are already making plans for Genevieve.

I'm right here, Mom. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere."

"You should move into Blackthorne Manor with us," she says suddenly. "All of you. It's safer if we're all together."

As I look at her, I realize there's a frantic, almost wild panic brewing behind them. The green of her irises is too bright and pupils are dilated, like she's in a state of alertness that doesn't quite fit with where we are.

"Mom?" I squeeze her shoulders again before I use one hand to brush a lock of hair off her face. "What is it? What are you not telling me?"

Her nostrils flare and she trembles again. "Move in with us." Her voice is softer now, almost pleading. "I need to know you're safe, sweetheart. I can't do that from across town."

The idea isn't all-together horrible, but I know the guys won't do it unless I ask them to and frankly, I don't want to do that. This place may not feel like home, but it is *ours*. "Aaron is here to help us with the gambling websites. Even if we agree to come to the Manor, we'll only be able to go once he leaves. We're safe here, though. I promise."

Those panicked eyes move from one of mine to the other. "How much do you know about Deborah?"

I frown, my chest tightening as I think about Dylan's mom and what was done to her. "Yes, Mom. I do. I know what happened to her."

"*Tony* happened to her," she whispers, though I'm not sure why. Her green eyes are wide and filled with an almost wild panic "Never forget what he did to her. Never forget the kind of man he is. No matter what happens to me, you have to—"

It feels like a bolt of lightning strikes my spine as it snaps straight and my eyes widen on hers. "Why do you think something is going to happen to you? I won't forget who he is, Mom. But I also don't think that's what this is about."

She stares back at me for a silent minute, not saying anything before her shoulders slump and she shakes her head. "You're right. Nothing is going to happen to me. I'm just

being silly. Damian and I have been talking about Deborah so much that it got me thinking about the day my time comes, but you'll be fine. Of course. You're smart. Let's go get some pizza."

When she blinks again, that edge of wild panic is gone and a couple deep breaths later, she's so put together again that I wonder if I imagined it all. I know I didn't, but whatever *that* was, she doesn't want to talk about it."

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For the next few days, my mom's strange behavior eats at me. Maverick, Dylan, and I research the people who are part of Tony's network. Having Aaron in the house proves to be convenient, since he doesn't have time to help us right now but still works his magic on our laptops. *The guy is a wizard, I swear.*

I stood right behind him when he did whatever he did to my new computer—courtesy of Phoenix and one of his contacts who works in IT security—and it's like I've got the world at my fingertips. I have no idea what he did, but I've suddenly got access to all kinds of things I definitely should *not* have access to.

And I stood right there when he set it all up. It took him no more than a few minutes before he was getting up and hurrying away again, calling at me over his shoulder that I should be able to find what I need now.

*Odd duck, that one. A good guy, but very, very odd.*

On account of his superpowers, we've been able to collect all sorts of information on our targets and we've put tails on the more important ones. Almost every day, Stone calls us with another name or two, and it's staggering how much support Tony has on almost all levels of government.

It also means we've got our work cut out for us when we start going after them, but for now, our days consist of gathering information, making calls, and getting feedback from our men who are following Tony's contacts around.

Slowly, but surely, we're starting to get an idea of who we want on our side and how to get them there. On the other side of things, we're also starting to make a list of people who are buried too deep in Tony's shit and who will have to be taken care of.

I offered to help, but apparently I'm too important to "*go running around like a one-woman-hit-squad.*" Dylan's words, not mine.

All the while, however, that brief conversation I had with my mom has been swirling around in my head, and it's going to drive me crazy if I can't figure out what the hell is going on with her. Eventually, as I put down the phone after talking to another of Mav's contacts, I look over at him and Dylan on the other side of the dining room table.

"Do we know yet what happened to Damian?" I ask. "Do we know what scared him so much?"

Dylan glances up from the file he was reading through, a blond eyebrow arching as he holds my gaze. "No. Liam said he'd try to find out, but before he could, he had to get back to work. I tried asking my dad myself again when they were here for dinner, but he shuts down when I mention it. Except to say that I was imagining things. Why do you ask?"

My nose scrunches up a little. "I may have had a weird conversation with my mom the other night, and I haven't mentioned it yet because I wasn't sure there was anything to it, but I can't get it out of my head."

Maverick leans back in his chair and crosses his muscular arms over his chest. "Why was it weird?"

"She wants us to move into Blackthorne Manor." Before they can start arguing about it, I hold up my hand to show them I'm not quite done yet. "For some reason, she's convinced we'll all be safer there together and, well, I don't know. The look in her eyes... something is wrong."

Dylan's features sharpen as he smooths his brow and widens his eyes. "She didn't tell you what it was?"



“No. Just that I should remember who Tony is and not get lured in by him or something like that.” I reach for Dylan’s hand on the table and give it a gentle squeeze. “She said they’ve been talking about your mom a lot and that it made her wonder about what would happen to me if she’s not here anymore.”

He turns his hand under mine and seals our palm together, his expression suddenly much more serious. “If they’ve been talking about her so much, it must mean she’s got something to do with whatever is happening with them now. My dad hates even hearing a mention of her. The fact that he talked about her to me and he’s been doing the same with your mom means something. I know it does.”

“What, though?” Mav asks as he gets up and walks to the window, leaning his shoulder against the wall as he stares out at the city beyond. “Deborah’s been gone a long time. I agree that whatever is happening now appears to have something to do with her, but what?”

The blood drains from Dylan’s face as he focuses on me again. “Before Liam left, he mentioned my dad was getting mail. Mail delivered directly to his office by the guards stationed at the Manor’s front gates. What if...” he swallows. “What if someone is threatening to do the same to your mom that they did to mine?”

My heart rate skyrockets and the hairs on the back of my neck rear up. I’m instantly covered in a layer of sweat and it feels like I’m about to be sick. Because at this moment, I know he’s right. They haven’t told us yet, but that *is* what happened. I know it in my heart of hearts.

It fits *too* well. Damian’s sudden changes. My mom’s panic and her awareness of her mortality. The way they’ve been clinging to each other whenever we’ve seen them.

Someone took a shot at the house in Cork and grazed Maverick’s mom’s arm with the bullet, but it could’ve been much worse. And Damian knows it.

It’s likely he thought he was receiving empty threats until that happened, but when it did, he realized he could lose my

mother the same way.

It even makes sense why he showed Phoenix his fear so openly as soon as it came out that they weren't talking to their dads. It was a reminder that we were desperately out of the loop then and that if he didn't bring us back in, he, like Tony, would be in this alone.

With a son nearby who wasn't helping.

With a second in command who, in Damian's case, was so far away that he might as well have been as dead as Tony's.

With an organization on the brink of collapse and no support for the man behind the monster.

He knew he wouldn't survive going through that again and moreover, he knew I would never help him if anything happens to my mother. I'd still take Tony down, but I'd put a bullet in Damian's skull as well.

As all the pieces of the puzzle fall together in my head, nausea swirls through me. "We need to go. We need to get to them. She asked us to go stay there. If something happens to her and it's because we weren't there, I'll never forgive myself."

Dylan stands up and strides over to me, bringing his hands to my shoulders and ducking to look directly into my eyes as he keeps firm pressure on my skin. "Breathe, Skye. Just breathe. It's going to be okay. Blackthorne Manor is impenetrable. Trust us. We tried to get in there recently, remember? When you were staying there, we tried to get in undetected. A few times. It's not possible. She's safe there."

"Until she's not," I mutter, taking his advice and sucking in gulps of air until the blackness that was creeping in around the edges of my vision recedes and my pulse finally starts slowing down. "We need to move in with them. Just until this is over. We can help her. Protect her. I know it won't be fun, but—"

As I'm saying it, Phoenix walks into the room. He and Aaron have been locked away for days, working all night and sleeping in shifts during the day while the other keeps at it. His warm brown eyes are red and tired, his long hair messy and

hanging loose around his shoulders, but he spreads his arms out to his sides and gives us an exhausted smile.

“It’s done.” His brow furrows when his eyes land on mine. “Skye? Are you okay? What happened?”

Just like that, the exhaustion fades and his gaze suddenly seems more alert, his back straightening as he strides deeper into the room. Dylan lets go of me, and I move to Nix immediately, winding my arms around his neck and burrowing my face into his hair.

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper as my heart starts pounding again. “You can relax. Nothing happened. We just have a theory, is all.”

“Catch me up,” he says as he takes my hand and walks us over to the sofa, pulling me down on his lap and stroking my back as we sit down. “What’s the theory?”

Maverick starts telling him when Aaron walks into the room, laden down with a backpack with all kinds of wires coming out of it, a small duffel, and an overfull satchel. He pauses in the door when he sees us, then he gives an awkward wave.

“I need to get back. Apparently, Hand of Hope wants to get involved with all this trafficking stuff now. They’re sending someone over to meet with me in an hour. You don’t happen to know a Sterling who belongs to that club, right? Isn’t it a motorcycle club?”

“It is and we do.” I nod. “Well, we haven’t met him, but he’s a friend of a friend. Good luck with that.”

He flashes me a shy smile and nods. “Thank you. Phoenix and I have done what we can about the online platforms they use for the bets. They won’t stay down forever, but he knows what to do now and I’ve upgraded his software.”

“Thanks for your help,” Dylan says, getting up to shake his hand.

Aaron seems surprised, then scared, taking a few steps back until he realizes Dylan’s intention and sticks his hand out

in turn. He shakes with him quickly, then shakes with Maverick who also offers to walk him out.

“There’s some stuff we need to tell Nix. I’ll see you out,” he says. Nix nods at Aaron, who returns it, then he and Mav head to the door.

“So that’s it?” I ask. “No hug? After you spent days locked up together, it’s just a nod and he leaves?”

Nix smiles and nuzzles my shoulder as he shrugs. “That’s it. Besides, it’s not like we spent those days bonding. We hardly said a word to each other. Our computers just happened to be in the same room. Now, what’s been going on with you?”

CHAPTER  
**NINE**

## PHOENIX

“Let me get this straight,” I say, panic seeping from my chest to my stomach and further down to my toes. “While I was tapping away at my keyboard, you guys figured out that someone has been threatening to kill Liz? Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

“You were busy,” Dylan says before he glances at Colt. “Besides, he didn’t know either. I just went to get him, remember? What’s happening with Ian?”

Colt’s jaw hardens as he shakes his head at the Boss. “Nope. You first. I’m with Nix here. You should’ve told us sooner.”

“We literally figured it out just before you walked in the door,” Skye says, squeezing my hand and sending Colt a pleading look. “I promise. Dylan is right, though. You guys were both busy. Any news on the Ian front?”

Colton holds her gaze for a few long seconds, then he blows out a breath and pushes both hands into his hair. “They’re not working for Tony. Not unless they’re doing it for free. Best guess? Tony hired that guy of Ian’s to make it look like he’d won them over. Throw us off. Waste our time. It’s a dead end.”

“Well, at least that’s good news,” Skye replies, but her eyes are still too bright. She’s still too shocked. “When are we moving to Blackthorne Manor?”

“As soon as possible. It’s not up to me, but that’s my vote,” I say, looking around to make eye-contact with each of my

brothers in turn. “Liz is right. It’s the safest place we can be and it’s even safer if we’re all there together. This place isn’t home anyway and the security isn’t amazing. It’s good, but it could be better.”

Dylan groans. “That’s the last thing I want to do, but you’re right. If someone is threatening Liz, it’s only a matter of time until they figure out they can’t get to her there. God forbid they come after Skye next.”

He pales, and Skye gets off my lap to settle between Dylan and I, holding one of our hands in each of hers. “It’s settled, then. I’ll talk to them about it in the morning and we’ll move there for the time being.”

One by one, the guys and I nod, thinking that’s it for tonight. I’m beat, and I was desperately hoping for some action and an early night, but then Skye’s phone chimes. She pulls it out of her pocket, her face falling as soon as she looks at the screen.

Instantly, I’m on alert and everyone else is too. Dylan wraps his arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer while his gaze darts around like he’s looking for an unknown entity about to breach the room and he’s trying to protect her from it.

Colton jumps up and Maverick strides over to us, sinking down on his knees and taking her hand out of Dylan’s now he’s holding her. I scoot in closer, tightening my grip on her fingers as I wait for her to look at me. “What is it, *mo cara*? What happened now?”

“It’s a text,” she says in a shaky voice. “From Tony. He wants me to meet him at the pier tomorrow.”

“Fuck.” My hackles rise and my heartbeat turns erratic. “You’re not going to go, are you?”

“Of course not.” She scoffs, closing out the text and shaking her head. “I’m not fucking stupid. There’s no way I’m going to do anything other than ignore it. Is anyone else ready to go to bed?”

For the second time in as many minutes, I’m under the mistaken belief that we really are done for tonight. Getting up,

I hold Skye's hand in mine, planning on not stopping until she's in the shower with me.

This time, it's Maverick's phone that shatters my plan. Only, the call he gets isn't as easy to ignore as Skye's text. He frowns when it starts ringing, then he hits answer and immediately puts on speakerphone.

"Dad? We're all here."

"Good. That means I won't have to repeat this," he says fast, like he's running out of time. "I'm back in the city and I need your help."

"Sure. Anything." Mav shoves his fingers into his hair, anxiety tightening his features. "What do you need?"

"A fucking miracle." Liam's voice is crisp and clear, but too rushed. Too *urgent*. "Damian is pulling me away, but there's a plan already in the works to cause some damage to Tony's storage facility. We were also going to hit the house where he manufactures some of his own drugs. It needs to happen tonight, am I clear? Tonight."

Maverick nods. "Sure. What's the plan?"

"There are two ambulances in the parking lot on the corner of Albert and Adamson. Down by the water near the docks. You know it?"

"Yes."

"Good. In the backs of the ambulances, there are explosives. You remember how to use them?"

I sigh, realizing that my plans for tonight really are well and properly fucked now, but I nod anyway and so does Mav. "We do. You want us to lay the charges and blow it all up?"

"Yep. I'm going to send you the addresses. Split up and get it done. Tonight, you understand? We cannot have two ambulances with explosives just sitting there all day tomorrow."

"Of course." Maverick glances at his phone, and worry fills his eyes as he stares at the black screen. "Why is Damian pulling you off this? It's a big job."



“It’s also not mine anymore. Get it done.” With that, he hangs up and not a second later, Mav’s phone chimes with a text.

He checks it, then looks at Dylan. “Addresses. You ready for this?”

Dylan nods curtly, already walking backward out of the room. “You’re with Colton on the storage facility. Nix and I will go to the address where they’re manufacturing. Skye...”

She cocks her head at him when he still hasn’t said anything a few seconds after trailing off. “Yeah, Boss?”

“Any chance you’ll stay here?” he suggests hopefully. “Or you could go to the Manor and we’ll meet you there in the morning.”

She snorts. “Nah. I’ll come with you and Nix. Just, uh, be careful, okay?” Her gaze moves to Mav’s, and it’s dark with concern before she shares a look with Colton. “No crazy tactics.”

“Please.” He rolls his eyes and then winks at her. “It’s a storage facility. Security won’t be near as tight as where you’re going. You sure you don’t want to come with us instead?”

My insides revolt at the suggestion, my gut twisting at the prospect of her going on a job like this when I can’t keep an eye on her. But on the other hand, I know he’s right. The storage facility will have security, but an active meth lab or whatever the fuck they’re cooking...

“Maybe you should go with them,” I say, and Dylan’s eyes narrow before he takes a deep breath and nods his agreement.

“They’re right, but it’s your choice.”

“I said I was coming with you, so I’m coming with you. I doubt they’ll need an extra set of hands, but you probably will. There will be more people around where they’re working than where they’re storing.”

*Can’t argue with that.*

In the old days, I'd have told her to stick with Colt and Maverick for that very reason, but we're no longer making these decisions for her. She's hearing us out, assessing, and then making the call herself.

Plus, this conversation is definitely rubbing Mav the wrong way, which means we don't have time to argue with Skye unless we want to start arguing with him as well. Truth is, in those old days, Maverick would've been going to the more dangerous target with Dylan. The only reason he's not is because of his injuries, which are better, but not fully healed. We just can't risk it right now.

"Let's go," Dylan says, and it's a command even though it sounds more like a statement.

He's been better about not barking at us so often now that we're all with Skye, and it's good. It makes us function as an even more cohesive unit.

"We'll need a ride to the ambulances," he says as we're taking the steps in our building down two at a time. We're purposely avoiding the elevator when we go out these days. *Much easier to sabotage that than a stairwell.*

Maverick holds up his phone, his expression still hard and dark, but he's clearly accepting the order Dylan gave. "I asked Dwayne to come back here after he dropped Aaron off. I wanted to talk to him about surveillance on a judge, but he just got back. Texted to tell me he's on his way up. I'll tell him to meet us in the garage instead."

"Great. Thanks." Dylan gives him a small smile, but Maverick flips him off.

*Maybe not so accepting, then. Not arguing, but not accepting either. Resigned?*

Once we hit the garage, Dwayne is waiting, his thick arms crossed over his chest as he leans against his SUV. He straightens up when he sees us, clamping his hands behind his back and squaring his shoulders as we approach him.

"Parking lot at the corner of Albert and Adamson." Dylan barely acknowledges the man as he strides past him. "Step on

it.”

“Yes, sir.” Dylan opens the passenger door and waves Skye in before the rest of us pile into the back of the van.

*Thank fuck, he’s in a nine-seater today.*

Dwayne nods and gets in behind the wheel, not asking any questions as he gets us on the road. His crew cut hair is growing out some, but I guess none of us have had time to spend on personal appearance lately. As always, he’s dressed in black fatigues with no insignia on them, but he’s lost some weight.

“You okay?” I ask him as he eases into the traffic. “You look like you need a few days off.”

“Don’t we all?” he jokes, the lines around his mouth deep when he presses his lips together and exhales through his nostrils.

He’s only a few years older than we are and not even close to thirty yet, but these last few months are showing in the permanent crinkles around his eyes and mouth. I frown. “Are you sure that’s all it is?”

“Yes, sir,” he says firmly, but then draws in a deep breath and those deep brown eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. “I’m tired, but I’m also worried. I’ve been trying to get Jamie on the line for the last hour, but he’s not responding.”

Unease settles deep in my gut. Liam got pulled away from a plan that was already in motion and now Dwayne can’t get hold of Jamie, who is still stationed at the gates of the Manor. *Fuck.*

“I’m sure everything is fine,” I lie with a sidelong glance at Skye, whose brow is suddenly as furrowed as mine. “After you drop us off, why don’t you go to the Manor? Talk to Jamie and report back, okay?”

Dwayne looks at Mav—technically, I guess that *is* who he reports to, and Mav jerks his head in a nod. Dylan’s gaze sweeps across the faces of everyone in the car, and then he leans forward.

“Alright. That’s a good idea,” he says. “Dwayne will go check on Jamie and while you’re at it, see if you can find out why my dad pulled Liam away tonight.” He waits for Dwayne to nod before he looks back at us. “Tonight can be a gamechanger in this war, so we need our heads in the game. Liam has had the meetings. He’s convinced Tony’s suppliers to come over to our side and he’s made sure ours are staying with us.”

Meeting everyone’s eyes, he continues. “Hitting Tony’s storage facility will get rid of the stockpile he’s got, imported and local, and destroying where he manufactures the rest will be a giant nail in his coffin. We need to do this right and to do that, we need to stay focused.”

“Good pep talk, man.” Colton reaches out and slaps him on the shoulder. “How do we know this is his only storage facility, though?”

“We don’t, but it doesn’t matter right now. That address is for a factory near the docks. That’s a lot of space, which means a lot of drugs. If we can take it out, that’s a real blow either way. Also, before you ask, we don’t know that the whole factory is his, but on a balance of probabilities, I’d say it’s unlikely he’s sharing it with anyone. The risk of theft and exposure would be too high.”

A lot of what he’s saying is common sense, but right now, it helps to hear it. It helps me shove down the worry and the unease and to concentrate on what we’ve got to do. Skye twisted in her seat as soon as he started talking, but she finally speaks now that he’s clearly done.

“Why ambulances?”

“Cops don’t really stop them when they’ve got the sirens on,” I reply. “We’ve used them before when we need to move something fast and with the least amount of risk possible, but they’re a bitch to get hold of.”

“We get caught in a roadblock or see a police car, we hit the siren and it’s like getting a literal get-out-of-jail-free card,” Colton says, smirking before he sighs. “Unless they pull you

over anyway. Then it's a never-get-out-jail again card. Still worth the risk."

Skye nods, turning to face forward again and staying that way for the rest of the drive. In my mind, I'm wondering what kind of explosives we'll be using and turning over what I remember about each. Blowing up a meth lab in an urban area would've been stupid, but this particular house is out of town. I saw the address when Maverick forwarded Liam's text to us, and it's not urban. It's rural, which should mitigate the damage to a certain extent.

*We just need to be far, far away before we detonate the charges, is all.*

As we turn into the parking lot where Dwayne is dropping us, I see why Liam chose to stash the ambulances here for us. It's dark, abandoned, and there's not a security camera in sight.

*Probably all got stolen. Or they never bothered putting them here to begin with.*

A blindspot is a rare thing in this city. They're there if you know where to look, but it's harder than anyone might imagine to find a real one. Relief pours through me until I realize that this is where we say goodbye.

After leaving the car with just a few *see you later*s to Dwayne, we're quiet as we wait for him to disappear before Skye marches up to Maverick and pokes him in the chest, her eyes slits on his. "You do not get hurt again, you hear me? Stay out of sight and don't go looking for trouble."

"Yes, ma'am." He snakes an arm around her waist and pulls her in for a deep kiss. When he releases her, he bends over to touch his forehead to hers. "When I hear from Dwayne, I'll text on the group chat so everyone gets the update, but do *not* let it distract you. He has to get all the way to the Manor, then talk to Jamie, then find out where my dad is, and only once he has all that information will we be hearing from him."

"I know," she says quietly before turning to Colt. "You're not allowed to get hurt either. I meant it when I said no crazy

antics. I'm done with hospitals for a long time, so stay. The fuck. Out. Of. Trouble."

"Anything for you," he promises with a confident smirk before he smashes his mouth to hers and I wince.

It looks painful to me, but if it is, she seems to like it. Winding her arms around his neck, she kisses him back just as deeply, then the kiss turns playful when he nips her lower lip before he lets her go.

With a smack on her ass, he salutes her and then turns and marches to the ambulance. Mav and Dylan exchange a meaningful look, and I've known them both long enough to know what it's about. Her safety and a promise to update Dylan first if whatever is going on at the Manor is as bad as it seems to be.

Jamie doesn't like us much these days, not after everything that happened while we were trying to get to Skye back when she was staying there at the beginning of the year, but he and Dwayne joined the Triskele together years ago.

I'm not sure if they had any history together before that, but I know they're close. Jamie wouldn't ignore calls from him just because Dwayne was on a job for us. He works for Maverick, after all, so it wouldn't make any sense for Dwayne to be worried about it if our bad blood with his friend has been affecting his relationship with him at all.

All these thoughts fly through my head, and Dylan swats my arm just as Colton turns over their ambulance's engine. "Are we going or what?"

"We're going." I take Skye's hand, leading her to our ambulance with me. "You're riding up front with the Boss. I need to see what we're working with and study the schematics of the house we're headed to."

"You have those?" she asks, and I shrug, patting my phone in my back pocket.

"Not yet, but thanks to Aaron, I'll have them soon. I'll send the others the schematics for the factory as well. Should help if we're not going in blind."

“Ya think?” she teases, or at least, she tries to, but she can’t keep the worry out of her voice. She thinks it over for a minute before she shakes her head. “What could be happening that’s big enough to pull Liam away from this at the last minute? The narcotics stream of income has been his sole focus since before I even met you guys.”

Dylan shrugs as he waits for her to climb into the passenger seat. “This is the end game. An end game that was always meant to be ours. Sure, he’s been in meetings upon meetings upon meetings, but this is the finale. Or it could even be a test. Who knows? Let’s just do our jobs.”

Her gaze hooks on his as she gets in and turns to face him, her teeth sinking into the inside of her cheek before she nods. “Yeah, let’s just do our jobs. But Dylan?”

“Yes?”

“Our parents live where Jamie works. If he’s not answering Dwayne’s calls, it’s likely there’s something happening there. I’m not suggesting we blow this off to go there instead, but if you hear from your dad at any point tonight, you need to let me know. Deal?”

“Deal.” He seals it with a quick kiss, then closes the back door behind me after I get in.

As he turns over the engine, I can’t get rid of those stabs of unease that keep prickling my gut.

Because Skye is right.

Something *is* going on there. We just don’t know what it is yet, but there’s no doubt in my mind that it is definitely something.

Something big.

Something with the potential to turn our lives inside out and upside all over again.

CHAPTER  
TEN



## SKYE

There are defining moments in life.

Some are big. Others are small.

Moments when we look at something, smile, and realize, “*Hey, that flower blooming makes me happy.*”

But then there are the other moments. The huge ones when you know that for the rest of your days, you will measure something about your life in relation to this moment.

Maverick getting shot was one of those moments for me. The moment I realized how dangerous this life is and the moment I realized I needed to stop fighting it if I was going to survive.

And then, there’s this moment right here. This moment when I’m watching two of the men I love expertly laying explosive charges around a farmhouse we didn’t even know existed a couple hours ago.

We were right about the amount of people around. There are a lot, but the house is huge and all the lights inside are on. People are coming in and out to have a smoke, take a call, or just stand in the door, staring at the dark fence on the perimeter like they can actually see what’s going on out there.

I know with absolute certainty that they can’t.

We were there just a few minutes ago, at the perimeter fence, and while the place inside is lit up like the fourth of July, the roads leading here and the entry gate are dark as hell. Maybe it’s because they don’t want to draw any attention to

the place, but if my phone hadn't dinged with the GPS's "*You have reached your destination,*" announcement, I sure wouldn't have known there was a house behind the thick treeline surrounding the property.

*All this darkness is a rare stroke of luck for us, really.*

Since I can't do much but hold what they need me to hold and put the black-taped bricks of Semtex down where they tell me to, I'm also acting as the lookout. So far though, we seem to have gone undetected.

I'm not going to start counting my chickens, but it seems like a good sign that no alarms have sounded yet. No one has rushed toward us and we haven't had any guns pointed at us just yet either.

I have a heavy gun of my own in my hand—a Glock—and I'm ready to use it if I need to. Which brings me back to my point.

*Defining moments.*

Here I am, holding a gun I'm relatively certain I'll be able to use, and my heartbeat is steady. My mouth isn't dry, and I'm basically just waiting for the enemy to realize we've infiltrated what they think is a safezone.

Two of my guys are laying the charges in a way Phoenix has determined will do maximum damage, and I haven't flinched once. I'm not second-guessing what we're doing and I'm not even the least bit nervous.

This is the moment when I realize that I was always going to end up here. About to blow up a farmhouse where my biological father is making a killing off creating these substances that have the power to destroy lives.

I'm no angel—*obviously*—but I'm happy to be involved in this. Happy to be part of what keeps Tony's dirty drugs off the streets, even if it is just for now. Because his drugs *are* dirty. Laced with all sorts of horrible things like rat poison, sulfuric acid, and iodine. Even the good drugs kill people. I know that, and I realize my boyfriends deal in the same stuff, albeit clean,

but what this is really about is Tony making money to run his dangerous, threatening empire.

I've done my research on him. After he showed up in my room, I realized I couldn't just keep learning things as I went along. I realized that Nix's *knowledge is power* motto was a smart one to adopt, and so I did.

It felt necessary to know more about him in order to win the war and now, we're about to get one step closer to doing just that. And eliminating some competition and getting some of the dirtiest drugs off the street too.

The farmhouse will be destroyed, as will his people inside, but I know he could have more than one of these. I also know that if he doesn't, it's just a matter of time before he has a new one.

But for now, this is where we are, moving quickly, quietly, and carefully around the house.

Phoenix checks each of the charges as we go, then he points his index and middle finger forward and we move on. We've almost made our way around the house when it happens. A guy comes out to take a piss, and as he turns to head back in, he sees us.

"Hey, yo—" I lift my hand and take aim, hoping that no one inside heard the guy. And that no one inside hears the muted pop of my gun as I squeeze the trigger. There's rock music filtering out from inside though, and that counts in our favor.

*Another tick in the rare-stroke-of-luck column.*

His eyes widen as my bullet hits its mark, and red blooms on the white t-shirt covering his chest just a second before he staggers to his knees and falls face first in the dirt. My heart rate spikes, but only after he goes down.

A smile spreads on my lips as I incline my head toward Dylan when he looks up, his eyes on mine after he sees the guy hit the ground behind us. He grins, but then Nix waves his fingers and we're off again, moving onto the next spot he designated for a charge.

Tension rolls through me with every minute it takes him to get the damn explosives in place. Every minute we're here, the risk of us being discovered again increases exponentially, and I'd really rather get back to our ambulance waiting without any serious incident.

We don't get that lucky, though.

As Phoenix lays the last charge just a few feet away from the main doors, three men walk out with their weapons raised. They don't see us at first, but their gazes are alert and scanning. "Owen? You out here? Owen!"

*Fuck.*

Owen must be the dead guy, and while he *is* out here, he's not going to answer them. In an instant, Dylan rises to his feet and we've both got our guns raised. Nix isn't a second behind us, and as the guys searching for Owen turn, we're dead in their sights.

Dylan's gun pops first and one of the guys falls. Another fires off a shot, and Nix grunts but he's still standing, his own gun going off simultaneously with mine. The other two guys go down, but since that one got a shot off without a silencer, the music that has been playing turns off and pandemonium erupts inside.

Dylan glances at me and then murmurs the command, "Run."

We take off toward the trees at a full sprint, the guys behind me as we rush toward the hole we cut in the fence to get in. The ambulance is parked behind some trees right on the other side, but we might not make it.

I feel the shift in the air a second before I hear the gunshots. I duck my head, but I keep going, my heart hammering now as my entire body breaks out in a thin layer of sweat.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

My sneakers land with dull thuds on the dirt, my eyes firmly on my feet as we lose the light from the house when we

reach the trees. Cries and shouts ring out from behind us, and then a motor revs just as I reach the hole.

Diving through it, I finally glance over my shoulder and a sob of relief wracks through me when I see my guys right on my heels. I don't let it slow me down, though, not stopping until Nix and I dive into the back of the ambulance.

Nix lurches for the doors and he's still shutting them when Dylan peels away, heading down the small, unlit road with all our lights off instead of going back toward the highway.

"Nix," he growls as he speeds in the opposite direction. "Tell me this misdirect doesn't end in a fucking cul-de-sac or something."

"Just go!" I grunt at him as Nix and I wrestle with the latches on the doors. There's a trickle of blood sliding down his neck and my heart lurches, but this isn't the time to interrogate him.

Dylan keeps gunning it away from the scene of the crime and once we've managed to lock the doors from the inside, I slide my phone out of my pocket, my hands trembling as I open my maps app.

It takes me a second to orientate myself, then I make out a clear blue line heading back to some kind of main artery. "Keep going. It's not a dead-end."

Engines are still roaring in the distance, and I'm sure they're going to split up to look for us. Nix glances down at his own phone, then his head snaps up. "There's an intersection coming up. Make a right, then cut across the grass. It's only about fifty feet or so, then we should be on the road leading back to the farm. Hit the lights and the sirens as soon as we're on it."

"Got ya." Dylan presses his foot down some more, and the massive vehicle lurches forward, responding to him like a prize stallion to its rider.

For the next few minutes, I don't breathe. My heart is thundering in my ears and I hold onto the handle next to the flat seat I'm on, my head down as I listen. Listen for any traces

they're behind us. There's still at least one engine revving and if I listen carefully, I can hear shouts, but they don't seem to be getting any closer.

"Hang on," Dylan calls before he makes a sharp right, then we hit the grass Nix mentioned and our ride turns decidedly more bumpy.

It's only for a few seconds, though. Another sharp turn that makes my whole body jerk and the sirens come on, followed closely by the lights. I can vaguely see them flickering, but I'm still locked in place.

"Detonate the charges," Dylan snaps. "*Now!*"

"Yes, sir."

Phoenix presses a button on his phone and in the next heartbeat, there's another shift in the air just before a plume of fire erupts in the direction we're headed. A cloud of smoke billows soon after, but there are no more engines revving. No more shouts.

I don't know if it's just because my ears are ringing or if it's the relief that we actually got it done, but for a moment, I have complete peace.

We did it, and we got away mostly uninjured.

Then I remember that my other two guys were on a similar mission.

Fear strikes at the very heart of my being, and as I lift my phone again, I nearly start crying when I see the message waiting for us on the group chat.

MAV

All done. All good. Meet you back at the parking lot.

Relief unlike anything I've ever felt before barrels through me, and my chin dips and stays against my chest as I suck in a deep breath of air. *God, that was terrifying.*

A heavy arm slings around my shoulders and Phoenix's clean scent makes me melt into him as his lips start moving against my temple. "Hell of a job, *mo cara*. I'm glad you decided to come with us."

"So am I," I mumble, closing my eyes and just focusing on breathing him in.

I'm not naive enough to believe that tonight would've always gone well. We had this sprung on us. Had to improvise and had to make do with pulling it together at the very last minute, but we fucking did it and all we're all okay.

As I lift my head to look at Phoenix, I realize that the top of one of his ears is bleeding. That must be what caused the trickle of blood earlier, and he flashes me a sheepish smile when he notices me noticing. "I got grazed. Sort of. I'm fine."

I stare up into those burned caramel eyes, blinking hard until my hand pulls back to slap him. "Son of a—"

He catches my wrist before I can make contact, holding it in a gentle grip as he shakes his head at me. "I'm fine, Skye. Seriously. I would've told you if I wasn't. It's not even worth a band-aid. Some disinfectant and I'll be good."

"Are you sure?"

He leans forward and plants a whisper-soft kiss on my lips. "I'm sure."

"Not to interrupt anything back there, but you might want to get ready just in case we get pulled over. It looks like news of two explosions has hit the airwaves."

Dylan turns the volume up on the radio, and sure enough, there's a reporter babbling on about incoming reports of two explosions. The ambulance's radio is all aflutter itself, calling on units to respond.

"Lie down on the gurney," Nix murmurs to me as the reporter speculates out loud about what's going on. "If we do get stopped in a roadblock, we need to make it look like you're our patient."

I sigh, but I do what I'm told and after he gets me covered in a thick, crinkly blanket type thing, he grabs two uniforms out of a cabinet near the door and hands Dylan the hat and jacket of one. We slow down as he shoves his arms into it, then Nix straps me down, pulls a hat low over his head, and sits down on the same seat I was in before.

“Okay, now just breathe for me, ma'am. We'll be taking care of you soon enough.”

Giggles erupt out of me, but in the back of my mind, I can't stop thinking about Blackthorne Manor and what's going on there. Maverick hasn't sent any messages about it yet and he has to have heard from Dwayne by now.

In that place in my being where there should only have been relief and elation, right now, there's dread and fear. More as the seconds pass on our way back to the city. More than anything, I want to think that this is it for our night, but I just don't think it is.

I think there's more to come, and I'm terrified to find out what it is.



CHAPTER  
**ELEVEN**

## DYLAN

Jas meets us at the parking lot at the corner where we picked up the ambos. One look at his face and I know I'm not going to like whatever he's got to tell me, but before he can speak, I arch a brow at him.

“Did you bring it?”

He nods. “I've got the gas. You want to torch these things?”

“Yes.”

Features smoothing out of the tightly held mask they were in when we climbed out of the vehicles, he spins on his heels and heads to his car. After popping the trunk, he takes out two generic red containers and marches back to me.

I take one from him while he carries the other to the ambulance Mav and Colt were in, then we douse both with the accelerant and toss the plastic containers into the backs where we know they'll be incinerated.

Nix herds the others into Jas's waiting car before he passes me a book of matches. “You want me to do it?”

“No. I'm good. Thanks.” I strike the first and toss it, then I strike the second.

A whoosh goes up, but we don't stay to watch it burn. This wasn't part of Liam's plan as far as we know, but we don't want to leave any evidence behind and fire is the best way to make sure there's nothing to find.

These explosions are going to be the talk of the town for the next few months, and we don't want anything out there that can possibly connect us with these crimes. As I climb into the car with the others, I glance at Jas.

“You've got someone watching?”

“Yes, sir. They'll stay until there are only burned out shells remaining.” He doesn't look at me, his eyes on the road as he backs out and gets us as far away as fast as he can, taking routes we know have blindspots until we finally emerge into the lively streets of the city.

As soon as that's done, my eyes close for a fraction of a second longer than a blink. *What I wouldn't give to have just two minutes with him without Skye listening in.*

But that's not going to happen.

She's here in the car with us, and although she's on Mav's lap, he keeps looking at me. Expecting. Waiting.

*He hasn't heard from Dwayne.*

He hasn't said it, but I know it's true.

“Where are they, Jas?” I ask the older guy who's been with us for at least half a decade now. “What happened at the Manor?”

“I don't know exactly, sir. I have a voice message from Dwayne for you, but he preceded it with one saying not to listen to this one until you were with me.”

“Play it.”

He nods, his phone connected to the car's speakers as he hits the magic button. Less than a beat later, Dwayne's voice fills the air and the strain in it is obvious. As is the emotion. I've never heard the man cry, but it's clear he's fighting back the tears as he speaks.

*“Blackthorne Manor was breached earlier tonight. The Boss and Ms. Love are gone, but everyone else is dead. Jamie. Jock. Everyone. Gone. I'm working on finding out where Mr. Blackthorne is. The place has been turned inside out. Ransacked. Mr. Jameson isn't answering my calls.”*

For a long minute, there's absolute silence in our vehicle. My fingertips and toes have gone numb and my chest feels like someone has dropped a cinder block on it. Struggling to breathe, I don't even want to look at Skye.

She's with the others. On Mav's lap. They'll take care of her.

And me?

I've just become the *de facto* head of the New York Triskele while having no idea what happened to the old one.

My head suddenly feels numb too, but somewhere in all that numbness, something shouts at me to call him. So I do.

Lifting my ass, I pull my phone out and scroll to my dad's number. I've always known there was a possibility that this would happen. Always known I could be forced to take over in the blink of an eye.

But now that it could be happening...

*Jesus. Fuck. I need a minute.*

For starters, I need to find out what happened to my dad and Elizabeth. And Liam, for that matter.

The loss of guys like Jamie and Jock is devastating. Especially Jock. I clocked him earlier this year, but he's been a constant in my life. For so many years, his face has been the one I see at some point before I get out of my car at my dad's place.

Arriving without him being there... I can't imagine it.

That thought is what makes it real to me.

I know Dwayne wouldn't lie about something like this. If he says they're gone, they're gone. It's real. Jock will never be there again. He won't be anywhere.

*Because he's dead. Fuck!*

Pressing my phone to my ear, I listen to the ringing, desperately hoping he picks up. But when a voice suddenly comes on the other end of the line, it's not my dad's.

It's Liam's. "Dylan," he says my name like a gunshot. "Blackthorne Manor was—"

"Breached. I know. Are they alive?"

"Yes, but they've gone to ground. Damian refuses to gamble with Elizabeth's life. He's going to get her settled in a safehouse. He'll be back as soon as he can but until then, you're it, son."

My chest caves in and all the breath escapes me in a loud rush, but I close my eyes, clawing it back in until I've regained the ability to form words. "Yeah. Okay. They got out fine? Uninjured?"

"They did. That's the fucking miracle I said I needed earlier. Look, I'll come talk to you as soon as I can, but watch your backs."

"Who was it?" I ask woodenly. "Who breached it?"

"Luca Mazotti's son, Matteo. He's out for blood. Yours is probably next. Go back to your place, grab what you can, and get out."

"Get out and go where?" I bark, but the line goes dead.

I didn't have the phone on speaker this time, but as I turn to the others, I can see that they've figured out what happened and who I was talking to.

Skye's tears are streaming silently down her cheeks. Maverick is holding her tight, his own face a mask of shock and fear, his lips parted as he stares at me. Nix is blinking too much, too fast, and Colton looks like he's seen a ghost, his cheeks pale as he gapes at me.

"All hail the new king?" he tries to joke, but it falls flat. Sighing before he collapses back against his chair, his eyes remain on mine. "We're it, huh?"

"We're it." I can't believe I'm saying those words right now, but I am and I need to be ready for what they mean. "Liam said to go back to our place to grab some clothes and stuff before we get out."

“Yeah, and?” Nix asks, his head already tilting as he tries to work out my angle. “You don’t want to do that?”

“No, I don’t. I want to go back to our place, but I’m not moving from there after. I’m going to wait for Mazotti to come for us. If he’s not already there.”

“This was Mazotti?” Colton arches one eyebrow while the other dips low. “You’re talking about a different Mazotti, right? My Mazotti is definitely dead.”

“Your Mazotti had a son,” I say. “Matteo. Liam says he’s out for our blood. I don’t doubt he’s coming for us next. My dad and Liz are okay, but he’s taking her to a safehouse s—”

“Your dad is leaving us in the middle of a fucking war?” Colt grinds out, and I think it over before I shrug.

“If Skye was being threatened, wouldn’t you do the same? Wouldn’t you want to make sure she was safe before you do anything else?”

His jaw is still grinding, but he nods grudgingly, slamming his head back against the seat as he lets out a measured exhale. “That mean he’s coming back?”

“Apparently. Eventually. Liam says he’s just getting her settled, but I don’t know where they’ve gone or how long they’re going to be there, so from here on, this is on us for now.”

“Did my dad say where he is?” Mav asks. “Or did he just drop the ball in our court again and hang up the phone?”

“The latter. We’ll be fine, though. Anyone else want to wait for Mazotti to hit us, or should we just get a hotel and lay low for a while?”

Skye’s still crying silent tears, but she speaks up anyway, her voice shaky but the determination in it sure. “If we check into a hotel under any of our names, he’ll come for us anyway. It seems like a waste.”

“We’ve got contingencies in place for that,” Nix offers. “Identities and accounts not linked to our names. I agree with

you though. It's a waste. We're going to have to go after him anyway. Better to make him come to us."

"All in favor, say aye." I don't need to spell it out for them.

If Matteo Mazotti got into the Manor, he'll get into our condos. Maybe he was hurt tonight and he'll give it a rest for a few days, but maybe not. He could even already be waiting for us or they could've tried hitting us at the same time.

All I know is that I won't run from him and I won't hide. As I think it, Phoenix nods. "Aye."

Colton goes next, grinning like he's won some sort of prize. "Aye."

"Aye," Skye says, her voice still shaky but her eyes now gleaming with that same determination I heard before.

Maverick's lips tug into a smile at just one corner when he nods at me. "I think the ayes have it, but just in case, aye."

Dipping my head into a nod, I close my eyes and lie back against the seat, taking a minute to process it all.

As I do, shock reverberates through me.

Someone got into Blackthorne Manor.

Someone tried to kill my dad and Skye's mom.

Someone *did* kill so many of my dad's men.

No, not someone. Matteo Mazzoti, and if he doesn't come for us, then we're going to go after him.

I swallow hard as I open my eyes, staring straight ahead at the sun starting to rise in the distance and the warm orange glow it's bathing the city in.

It's a new day—literally and figuratively—and even though it's probably only going to be for a few days, I need to step up to the plate. Which means I can't wallow in grief or misery. I can't get hung up on the details of what happened.

All that matters is that our parents are safe and that Dad will make sure Liz stays that way. We also know who did it—

and that's what I need to focus on: taking out the next Mazotti in line for Tony's Underboss throne.

As far as I know now, Luca only had one grown child so at least it shouldn't take too long.

Jas pulls up to our place, and I turn to look to look at him before I climb out. "Go to Dwayne. Take care of each other. We won't be needing your team today."

"But, sir—"

I raise my hand to cut him off. "How many did we lose?"

His reddened green eyes meet my own. "Seven."

*Fuck.*

My eyes close again under the weight of such an enormous loss. All the men guarding the Manor have been there for years. Some are guys I grew up with. This is...devastating. When I open them again, I swear I see a flicker of gratitude in Jas's. I don't really have time to think about why that might be, but I suspect it's because he's relieved that I genuinely care—and I do.

"How many of theirs?"

"At last count, there were twelve bodies. Dwayne said there may be more, though. They're still combing the place."

*Well, at least we lost fewer men than they did.*

It's little consolation, but I'll take any scrap I can get right about now. "We'll handle Mazotti. All I need from you today is the contact details for the families. Other than that, you lost a lot of friends and coworkers last night. Go be with the ones that remain. We'll take care of the funeral costs. If there are arrangements we can help with, let me know."

"Yes, sir." Jas isn't crying, but there's moisture glimmering in his eyes.

A deep sense of sadness fills me at the sight. This man is battle hardened, tough as shit and yet, this war is chipping away at all those hard parts and hitting even him where it hurts. First they took a shot at his wife and now this.



As I look back at him, I let that sadness in, let him see it, and then I use it to strengthen my resolve.

We're going to end this thing.

Soon.

I'll be damned if we're going to let it drag on any longer than it has to.

Reaching out, I put a hand on his shoulder and squeeze. "Go be with them. We'll be okay."

"Yes, sir."

The others are waiting for me at the entrance to the stairwell, looking about as wretched as I feel. Maverick's got an arm around Skye's shoulders, but it looks like he's leaning on her as much as she is on him. Phoenix and Colton are standing behind them off to one side, and not even Colt seems to be able to find his sense of humor right now.

Their expressions are tight and worried. Mouths pressed into lines and brows drawn together. Eyes locked on mine as I approach.

"When we get up there, we'll start at Colton's place and work our way through. Check everywhere. Every nook and cranny. In closets. Under beds. Even behind curtains. Once we clear a condo, lock it up. We'll arm the alarms and the motion sensors and activate the cameras. My place is closest to the elevator. We'll hole up there."

Phoenix slides his phone into his pocket. "I checked the cameras on the way over. No signs of activity, but we can't be too careful."

"Weapons at the ready," I agree, then I reach for Skye's hand and as her fingers twine with my own, I lift her hand to my lips and brush a kiss across her knuckles. "Any chance I can convince you to wait outside for this one?"

A soft, sad smile slants only the very corners of her lips upward. "Sure. I'll wait outside, Boss. But only because I don't think there's anyone up there."

“Neither do I, but we’re being careful, remember? We’ve got a future planned with you and I’d kind of really like to be there for it.”

She brings our joined hands to her mouth in turn, her lips as soft as a cloud as they touch each of my knuckles gently. “It wouldn’t be the same without you, Boss. Let’s go do this, then. We all need a couple hours of sleep and then we need to talk to the families. See what we can do to help.”

“And then it’s right back here to murder Mazotti number two?” Colton asks hopefully as he opens the door leading into the stairwell.

“Sounds about right,” I say, taking the lead after putting Skye behind me.

There’s a chance there’s someone up there waiting for us and I don’t like it. I won’t risk her life. I’m not taking any chances. Not anymore. Not with her safety and not with anyone else’s either.

The Triskele is mine now and that means I have to take responsibility for every life pledged to it. Every life *lost* to it.

It’s a responsibility I intend on taking seriously—and it starts right now.

CHAPTER  
**TWELVE**

## SKYE

It turns out there's no one waiting in any of the condos. The guys do a full sweep anyway, then they activate every layer of security they have and the array is impressive. Alarms, motion sensors, reinforced locks on the doors, and cameras installed in strategic places.

After our last run-in with security cameras, I'm skeptical of those being on, but we'll just need to keep it clean when we're in any of the places the cameras can see. I definitely don't want a repeat of our accidental sex tape.

*And I still need to talk to Damian about that first one.*

I have absolutely not forgiven him for that, and as painfully awkward as it's going to be, he and I need to have a conversation about it.

Eventually. When all the rest of this is over and life after the war begins. We can't afford to distract him with it right now. It's been long enough. It can wait just a little bit longer.

Thinking about my future stepfather makes my chest feel tight. Too tight.

A swarm of bees is suddenly zooming around my stomach, stinging the lining and making me itchy and sore from the inside out.

I still can't believe someone got into Blackthorne Manor.

Of course, we knew the Rivieras were probably going to come after Damian—and us—at some point. It was inevitable. I mean, we're planning on going after them when the time

comes as well. It happens, but what I can't believe is that *they got in*.

Just twelve hours ago, we were talking about how that was the safest place to be. And now, here we are.

Mom and Damian got out. They're safe. But if we went there last night...

My throat burns at the thought. *If we went there last night, we might not have lived to tell the tale.*

And I would've gone there.

If things didn't happen exactly the way they did, I'd have dragged the guys over there as soon as we figured out why Mom had that weird conversation with me. The weight of that reality is crushing, but I inhale deeply as I head up the stairs to the master bedroom.

Purposefully raising my chin, I square my shoulders and shove at the weight. On any given day, if things go any other way, any person could wind up dead. When it's our time to go, we go. Whatever decisions we make to get us there.

This seems a little different, but the point is that we're not dead.

Our parents are not dead.

We're here. We're alive. Damian is taking my mother somewhere safe. Liam is probably with them. She's going to be fine, and so am I.

It's the first time in my life I have no idea where she is or when I'm going to see her or speak to her again, but I can do this. So can she. It's necessary and we *will* get through it.

I'm not going to get tripped up by the *what-ifs* or the *almosts*.

I'm past that part of my story.

This part here is the part where I'm strong.

We all made it through last night alive. That's what matters.

As I trudge into the bedroom we're sharing, I start stripping, leaving a trail of clothes from the door to the shower in the en-suite bedroom. I just need to wash last night off, put on my pajamas, and then get in bed.

Hopefully with Dylan.

I saw that look in his eyes this morning when reality dawned. Saw the flare of panic, then the grief, and then finally, the flicker of responsibility that turned into a flame, then a fire, and then an inferno.

He needs me now. And I need him.

We also both need sleep, but we'll get to that. After we talk. Maybe before. That depends on whether he's even still awake by the time I get out of the shower.

Turning the faucet to hot, I wait until steam starts fogging up the glass partition between it and the rest of the bathroom before I step under the spray. It's scalding, but it feels good. I let the heat burn away what it can until I finally set the water to a more comfortable temperature.

As I close my eyes and dip my head back, running my hands through my hair to get it soaked through, I hear the soft snick of the door closing behind someone. Smiling as I open my eyes, I meet Dylan's piercing blues and hold out my hand.

"Join me?"

"Definitely." His eyes are still on mine as he steps around the partition and into the shower still fully dressed.

I don't call him out on it, though.

Instead, I move closer, sliding my hands under his leather jacket and pushing it off his shoulders while he kicks off his shoes. Gaze never leaving mine, he holds up his arms so I can peel his wet t-shirt off and then he helps me with his jeans and black boxer-briefs.

Once he's naked, I smile up at him and run my fingers into his thick blond hair. "You doing okay?"

"No." He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me closer until my curves are flush against his hard abs. "Wanna

talk about it?”

“No.” I push up on my toes and press a kiss to his full, soft lips. “Do you?”

“No.” He tightens his grip on me, lowering his head until his mouth seals over mine.

The hot water pelts down on us as we kiss, our bodies responding to each other with a desperation born of fear and relief. It feels like we’ve been through a war already, and we’re only just beginning.

But we have each other, and that’s something.

I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer as he deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding past my lips to tangle with mine. His hands roam over my wet skin, sending shivers down my spine.

The kiss is intense, filled with all the pent-up emotions from the past few hours. I hold him close as my body molds to his. The water cascades over our skin, creating a cocoon of warmth and intimacy.

Dylan and I have been through a lot together, and moments like these make all the danger and uncertainty worth it. As we break apart for air, I lean my forehead against his. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

“I’m always here with you,” he says, running his hands down my back. “No matter what.”

I smile, feeling the familiar flutter in my stomach at his words. “I know.”

His hard length is pressing against my stomach.

“You’re sure you don’t want to talk about it?” I ask when I pull back, biting my lower lip. “It might make it easier.”

“No,” he growls, angling my head up and plunging his tongue back into my mouth.

I moan softly as he pushes me up against the tiled wall and then slides his hands up to my thighs and under my ass. He lifts me up as though I weigh nothing and I wrap my legs

around his waist, tangling my fingers into his hair and kissing him with everything I have. He sucks my lower lip into his mouth and then gently bites it, sending a lightning bolt of pleasure through me.

“I love you,” he whispers against my lips before kissing me again, harder this time.

“I love you too,” I whisper back, tangling my hands in his hair.

Our gazes lock. “Good, remember that because I’m about to fuck you like I hate you.”

With that, he pushes his cock against my entrance and with one deep thrust, he buries himself inside of me. I dig my nails into his back and scratch him.

If this is what he needs to process everything that happened, then I’ll give him everything I have to give, take everything he wants to do to me. I’m in this for forever and he damn well better remember that every time he touches me.

“I need you, Dylan. More than I ever have before.”

He doesn’t wait. He fucks me hard and fast, his chest heaving against mine with the effort. I brace myself against the wall, moving with his every thrust. The water keeps cascading over us, making everything slippery and wet. The hot spray rains down on our skin, adding to the sensation.

I run my hands over his shoulders and down his back. His muscles are hard and hot under my fingers. The tension in his back is palpable. He’s clenching his jaw and his teeth are grating against his lips. He puts his hands under my ass, spreading me wider as he pushes in as deep as he can.

His cock slides in and out of my pussy with a force that has me gasping for air. His hands roam my body as though he’s still trying to convince himself that I’m here and I’m okay.

His gaze is unrelenting, boring into mine.

My legs lock around his waist as his body moves with purpose. His thrusts become more urgent and I silently beg



him to take me harder and faster as I adjust the angle of my hips. I feel my nails sink into his flesh and he lets out a feral groan as his hips keep slamming forward.

“You’re mine,” he growls possessively in my ear.

“Yours,” I cry out, feeling the pleasure-pain build inside me.

We are writhing together in our own little world of heat and steam, slick bodies entwined in a passionate battle of give and take. His grunts become wilder as he pushes deeper into me and I scream his name when the orgasm takes hold of us both.

Waves of pleasure spill through my veins as every muscle in my body tenses up, gripping Dylan tightly until we can’t take anymore. Our manic rhythm slows to a gentle rocking motion before coming to an abrupt halt. He collapses against my chest and mutters “Don’t ever fucking forget it. You’re mine, Skye Love.”

“Tell me about this future you have planned for us,” I murmur as I brush my fingers through his hair once we’re dried off and tucked together in bed. “You mentioned it earlier, but you and I have never really talked about it.”

“Do you want to talk about it *now*?” he asks softly, turning his head to look into my eyes. “What is it about so much death that makes people want to have sex and plan their lives?”

I shrug one shoulder, stroking my fingernails gently across his scalp. A little shiver passes through him, and I smile. “It reminds us that life is short and makes us want to take advantage of every minute. We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“I do want to.” Mild surprise flickers in his eyes before he lets out a quiet chuckle. “I never thought I’d want to talk about my future with a girl, but I really do.”

“That’s probably because you thought the only girl you had a future with is the one you were going to be married off to. Makes sense that you never thought you’d want to talk about that.”

“Yeah, well, now the only girl I’m going to be marrying is you.” He raises a hand and catches my chin between his fingers, looking at me like I invented the goddamn sun and am personally responsible for the fact that it rises every morning.

Meanwhile, my heart has just turned upside down and my mind has gone blank. “You are?”

A smile spreads on his lips as he nods. “Yes, Skye. I am.”

I stare right back into those sparkling, clear blues, and it’s like I can suddenly see my forever in them. With all of my boys. This just happens to be the first time we’re talking about it like it’s a probability instead of a possibility.

My heart is going nuts, bounding around in my chest as my stomach lurches and my entire body yearns for his. I know this is stupid, *but why wait, right?* “Should we just, like, do it right now?”

“We just did it,” he teases lightly before he arches an eyebrow at me. “Unless... Are you asking me to marry you, Skye Love?”

*What? No. Am I? Abort! Abort! But also, maybe.*

I’m too tired, too emotional, and too wired all at the same time to be having this conversation logically right now. “I, uh. No. I mean. I think so. Life is short, right?”

“Yes, it is.” He leans forward and plants a chaste kiss on my lips. “When one of us asks the other to marry them, it’s not going to be a *think*. It’s going to be a definite question and it’s not going to be asked in the wake of a massacre.”

“Our entire lives are happening in the wake of a massacre.”

He smiles and drapes an arm around my waist, pulling me closer and burying his face in the crook of my neck. “That won’t last forever. Sleep now, my angel. We’ll talk more later, okay?”

*Sleep?* There’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep after all that. Or at least, that’s what I think until I close my eyes and focus on the rise and fall of his chest against mine.

My head is spinning, my heart is full and broken simultaneously, and in the midst of all that, sleep seems so far away but before I know it, it steals me into its grasp and I drift off, dreaming about a day in the future when there will be no more massacres. No more faces of dead men flickering in my mind as I close my eyes and no more threats of death against those I love the most.

Now that? That is going to be a damn good day.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTEEN**

## COLTON

Lazy, golden late afternoon sunshine streams into the living room when I wake up. I could've used another few hours, but hey. At least I managed to grab some shuteye after everything that went down last night and before whatever is in store for us tonight.

That feels like a win.

As I blink the world into focus, stretching my arms out above my head and yawning, I suddenly become aware of Dylan sitting at the dining room table with his laptop. It takes me a minute to process what I'm really looking at right now, though.

*The new Boss. For real.*

He's staring at the screen, scrolling and then scowling before closing out what he was looking at and moving on to the next thing. I'm not usually super detail-oriented, but I've known the guy so long that I notice small changes to his demeanor that I wouldn't have if he was anyone else.

Like how he seems to be sitting taller, but his shoulders are slightly caved in. Almost like there's an invisible weight there. Like how his jaw seems to have gotten even sharper in the last few hours and his stare is more intense than ever.

As I sit up, blinking away the last vestiges of sleep, it dawns on me that it's because he's the new Boss. For real now. I know I just had that thought, but shit. It's a biggie. It's a huge fucking biggie. Way bigger than Mav's dick even, which is saying something.

All our lives, we've been waiting in the wings, training for the day this was going to happen, and now that it's here, it feels surreal. I realize it's probably only going to be for a couple days, but the way I see it, this is our trial run. *Or maybe it's more of a job interview.*

Either way, it's not just him that has to step up. It's me, too.

*Holy fuck, I'm the honest-to-God underboss of the Triskele now. Who the hell thought that was a good idea?*

A bark of manic laughter escapes me, and Dylan's spine shoots completely straight as he twists to face me. "What the hell was that?"

"Realization." I don't explain what I mean, but he knows.

That frighteningly intense stare settles on mine, and the next thing I know, he's laughing too. Doubled over, hair hanging over his forehead as he bows his head, laughing.

"This is insane," I mutter as the laughing bug bites me again, my belly already starting to ache as I laugh like I haven't done in a long ass fucking time. "We're in charge. That's a horrible decision."

"I know." Dylan keeps laughing, swiping away the tears gathering in his eyes as he shakes his head. "What the hell are we supposed to do now?"

"I don't know." At the admission, my laughter starts subsiding and so does his. That felt damn good, but he asked a valid question and I honestly don't know the answer. "If we're in charge, we can't just sit around waiting for Mazotti to come after us, can we?"

"No." He sits back again, lifting his hands to massage his cheeks before he sighs and scrubs his hands over his face, letting out a loud groan as he pulls his cheeks down. "Why'd you sleep on the sofa?"

I shrug. "I don't really know that either. I guess I just crashed."

“I get that.” He stands up, raking his hands through his hair before slapping both of his cheeks. “I need to wake up. Coffee?”

“Espresso,” I counter. “Did you manage to get any sleep?”

“Eventually, yeah. I got about two hours. I spoke to Skye a bit first.”

I follow him to the kitchen, hooking my arms behind my neck one at a time and stretching them out as we walk. “Anything come up I need to know about?”

“She wants to get married.” He says it without looking at me, and I frown at the back of his head.

“Yeah, I know. Or at least, I kind of figured. Was it news to you?”

He’s quiet for a minute when we reach the kitchen, staring out the large window behind the sink. Still without responding, he reaches to take two mugs off the open shelf and slides two pods of espresso out of the glass jar next to the machine and slots them into place. After putting the mugs in position, he finally turns to look at me, cocking his hip against the counter as he folds his arms loosely over his chest.

“No. I knew she wanted to. I just didn’t realize she was serious about doing it with us.” He rakes his hands through his hair again, looping his fingers together at the nape of his neck. “It’s not legal for us to marry her.”

“Who cares? Do you need the actual piece of paper to make it real?”

“Nah. I don’t give a shit about that.” The look in his eyes is faraway as he draws in a deep breath. “We just need to figure it out, is all.”

“We’re young. We’ve got plenty of time for that.” I hesitate. “You’ll be her stepbrother by then. The wedding’s still on for the summer, right?”

“Yep. They postponed it because Skye got kidnapped, but they’re not going to do it again. Come hell or high water, they’re going to get married in August. Why do you ask?”

“Just wondering if it’s bothering either of you.”

He stares at me for a long second before he shrugs. “It’s not bothering me, and it’s never bothered Skye. We didn’t grow up together. There’s no sibling dynamic. We’re just two people whose parents happen to be getting married. Do you think it’s going to bother her?”

“No, but something’s bothering you. If it’s not that, what is it?”

He scratches the side of his jaw, grimacing a little. “I need to ask you a favor.”

“Sure thing, Boss. What do you need?”

“We have to take care of the St. Adamses. Today. We’ve let them get away with their involvement with Tony for too long. I realize Blackthorne Manor isn’t one of their properties and never has been, but to have gotten inside...”

A piece of the puzzle clicks into place in my head and my pulse skyrockets. “Someone got Mazotti the floorplans. You think it was Jonathan?”

“The shoe fits. He’s got contacts up and down the city planning office, and we know for a fact not Tony or any of his top guys have ever had a real inside man there. I’ve checked every name Stone has sent us. There’s just no evidence that anyone in that office has ever been involved with the Rivas’. I realize they could be flying way under the radar, but Jonathan is a known ally of theirs. And he has *all* the contacts there.”

I nod as I think it over and Dylan swallows hard before he carries on. “We also know we didn’t have another rat, because everyone who worked that detail regularly enough to know much about the house is dead.”

My mind races to catch up. To come up with any other avenues for him to consider. Not because I don’t want to go after St Adams. I do and I’m going to, but we need to be prepared if it turns out that it wasn’t him. We need to have thought it through so we can repair any other leaks we may have.



“Harriet could’ve given him the information before she died?”

“No, I’ve been emailing with Hunt. To the best of his knowledge, she only ever went to my dad’s study when she was there. It doesn’t mean she didn’t have a basic lay of the land for the rest of the house, but he swears he never discussed security with her or anything else that might’ve helped.”

“St. Adams could have contacts inside the firms who installed the security systems,” I say after thinking it over for another minute. “He owns so many properties that it’s entirely possible he’s got people everywhere. Especially among security professionals.”

“I’m looking into that.” Dylan scrapes a palm across the scruff growing under his jaw. “Mazotti has to have gotten that kind of information somewhere. There’s no other way he’d have gotten the drop on them. He wouldn’t have been able to bypass the security systems and the guards just by surveilling the place.”

“Well, to be fair, he could have gotten a decent amount of information that way, but you’re right. The strike was too effective and it can’t be coincidence that it happened just as we started turning the tide.”

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” He pins his gaze on mine. “Jonathan *and* his wife, but it needs to look like an accident or a murder-suicide. Nothing that will trigger an investigation.”

A slow smirk curves on my lips as I crack my knuckles. “I think I can handle that. When do you want it done?”

“Now if that’s good with you. Maverick’s awake. Take him with you. I’d go do it myself, but...” He sighs, a pained expression drawing his brows together as he swipes his tongue across his lips and takes a deep breath.

I nod. “But seven of our own died last night and you’re the Boss. You need to talk to the families, help with the funerals, and find new security guards and systems for the Manor. We can’t leave it unprotected and Dwayne and the rest of our guys need to sleep and grieve.”

Gratitude warms his eyes as he dips his chin. “Exactly. That and a few other things, like sending someone down to Louisiana to take care of that secondary income from the cigarette trade. I know we were going to do it ourselves, but it’s just not as important right now. We need to speed things up and that means it can’t wait until my dad gets back. We’ve lost people before, more in these last few months, but they went for the jugular with the Manor. We need to do the same thing.”

“Playing catch up again,” I mutter just as our mugs start filling. “Let me drink that, then I’ll go get dressed. You got any idea where St. Adams is right now?”

“Uh, yeah. I do actually. I had a tail put on him after that thing with Mick at the Club. I meant it when I said we’d let it go on for long enough, but we just haven’t had time to go after him yet. This is the time, though. No more excuses.”

“Do you and Nix have things covered here? Mav and I might not make it back by nightfall.”

He nods. “We’ll be fine. Mazotti won’t come early in the evening.”

There’s a reason most violent crimes involving home invasions are committed late at night. Fewer witnesses around makes it easy to hide in the dark.

“Have you looked that up?” I joke. “Is that an actual statistic?”

He scoffs, but hands over my coffee instead of punching me. “No, asshole. I haven’t looked it up, but in the movies, it’s mostly at night unless it’s some super savvy serial killer or a guy having a mental break doing the invading.”

My nose wrinkles. “What the hell have you been watching? And when have you had the time?”

“I make time.” He waggles his brows at me, then he sends me the location of the St. Adamses house and heads back to his laptop.

*Poor bastard.* Mav and I get to go out and have all the fun while he has to deal with the grieving families and the admin. *Yeah, I’ll take my job over his any day.*

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“You’re sure they’re here?” Maverick asks as we look up at the McMansion in front of us.

It’s big, sure, but otherwise, there’s nothing special about it. Just a big old house in a fancy old neighborhood with too many trees to hide behind along his fence and a bunch of security features that don’t mean much.

You’d think a guy like Jonathan St. Adams would be more careful, but he’s got cameras mounted on his perimeter walls that don’t even cover half the street-facing part of the property and the damn garden gate is open.

*Idiot. He’s a fucking idiot.*

Not that we’re on the street-facing side of the property. It’s not even dusk yet and there are witnesses we can’t hide from in the dark. So we’re going in from the back where the St. Adams property borders on a cutesy little man made dam.

“Yeah, I’m sure. Blade confirmed with some guy on Dwayne’s team a few minutes ago. Are you ready?”

Mav nods and reaches for the gun tucked into his waistband. “We’re going with murder-suicide, right?”

“Yeah, I think that’s probably going to be the fastest and the easiest. We need to get back to the condos. Dylan doesn’t think anything is going to happen early, but you never know.”

Maverick cocks his head before rolling it from side to side. “Yeah, you’re right. On the other hand, he may not come after us tonight at all. He could be feeling his losses as much as we were.”

“Guess we’ll find out, but the Boss wants this taken care of right now. It’s a loose end that’s been dangling for too long.”

“Amen to that.” Mav turns his sights on the back door.

It’s damn risky doing this while there’s still enough light outside to see us creeping around, but neither of us are willing

to miss the fireworks that will eventually be going down in our own home.

We need to be there. To protect our brothers, our Boss, and our girl. There's no way we're wasting any time here.

I've been going back and forth on whether doing this today is a good idea, but ultimately, Dylan was right. We've left it for too long and we keep getting busy with other stuff. This needs to happen, and there's no time like the present.

Mav and I hug the fence, staying behind the trees and landscaped hedges as we advance toward the house. Thankfully, these people seem to like plants and there are plenty in their backyard to keep us semi-hidden as we approach.

If anyone really looks, they'll see us, but as soon as Mav finds the kitchen door open and we go inside, we realize why they weren't looking. The St. Adamses are going at it like rabbits right there in the kitchen.

Jonathan's pants are around his ankles as he takes his wife from behind. She's bent over their island, and it doesn't take a genius to see she's not enjoying it. He can't see her face, but her eyes are shut so tight and her mouth is twisted in annoyance.

As for her dear husband, he's got his gaze shot toward the ceiling, roaring as he pumps in and out of her pussy. I kind of feel sorry for the guy. For one, because we're not even gonna let him finish one last time even though he seems to be right on the edge and also, if your wife is that irritated about having sex with you, man... *You're doing somethin' wrong.*

Mav's lips press together as he looks at them, his eyes rolling before he glances at me. I shake my head before inclining it toward the dysfunctional couple. *They have to go. Now.*

He raises his gun without making a sound, walking around the island to stand in front of them before squeezing the trigger and putting a bullet between her eyes before she's even opened them. She slumps, and Jonathan opens his mouth to scream,

but I'm right behind him, clamping my hand over his mouth as Maverick presses the gun to the man's temple and fires.

It hasn't even been two minutes since we entered, and it's done. Without saying a word, we position them, staging the scene to make it look legit, then Mav wipes down the gun and places it in Jonathan's hand.

It's not registered to us and they won't find any prints on the bullets. Everything is as clean as clean can be, and although none of this comes without risk, as we head back out the same way we came, I'm feeling good about the job we just did.

Another one just bit the dust, and it was a big one. St. Adams has been in this game all along and taking not only him but one of Genevieve's best friend's down with him is another win I'm going to take.

*Oh, hey. I'm on a streak. Would you look at that?*

CHAPTER  
**FOURTEEN**

## SKYE

**M**azotti doesn't come that night. Or the next night or the one after that. Or even the one after that.

As I watch the fourth casket in so many days being lowered into the ground, red hot rage swirls through my veins. I was sad when these men died, but I didn't really know them then. After four days of eulogies and comforting their families, I feel like I know them now.

*Knew* them.

Whatever the right way is to think about it.

I've hugged their children, cried to their favorite songs, and released biodegradable balloons into the air. We've had wake after wake, toasting to lives well-lived and hearing stories in bars about the men we were saying goodbye to. Stories about their service to the Triskele, their lives, and their kids.

Jamie's widow stares as the gleaming wooden box her husband is in sinks into the ground, her shoulders shaking as she presses a snow white handkerchief to her nose. Thankfully, this couple had no kids.

Yet.

Apparently, their plan was to start trying next year. A plan that is being buried right along with her husband and the man she thought would be the father of her future children.

Rabid vipers unfurl in my belly, and I'm so angry that hot streaks paint my cheeks and even my freaking ribs are

sweating. My eyes close when a final prayer is said, but I'm not focusing on what the priest is asking for.

Instead, I'm thinking about the revenge we're going to get. The revenge we already *have* gotten.

We've been told that word on the street is that Tony's drug supply is drying up. There's still some of his product available, and I've asked Jas to procure me some of my father's heroin. He was worried at first, but fuck that. I have a feeling we need to have some in our arsenal.

Our operation in Vegas is also still going well. Tony's former casinos and our own are bringing in good money, and now that Damian and my mom are lying low, we're the ones getting the daily tally.

*Headspin* isn't the way to describe what I feel when I see those numbers. We'd be able to feed small *countries* with the amount of money the Triskele has made just these last few days.

Between Aaron and Phoenix, the illegal gambling sites are being shut down as they pop up. Some are slipping through the cracks, but I'm sure we've put a nice dent in that source of income too.

Meanwhile, the Hunts have gone to the authorities about the trafficking ring. They're working with them but unfortunately, I've been told that's going to take a lot more time. It's not something that can be shut down overnight and as a result, that stream of income is beyond our control at the moment. And it's a big one, but there's nothing we can do about it right now.

Also, Jonathan St. Adams is dead and so is his bitch of a wife. Murder-suicide, reportedly, but Colt and Mav have an entirely different story to tell. Mick St. Adams has been photographed entering the family company's HQ as their new CEO and my boys have told me that he's weak. That we can lean on him if we have to.

I'm hoping we never have to.



Music starts playing as the mourners are dismissed from the gravesite, and I stare at the mound of dirt now covering one of my favorite Blackthorne Manor guards. We never really spent any time together, but he was always smiling. Out of all of them, he was the only one who used to greet me back when Mom and I first moved in last summer.

He became a familiar face. A welcoming one. One I trusted and who made me feel like I was more than just a parasite, leaching on his Boss's money with her whore of a mother. I sigh, tears stinging the backs of my eyes, but I don't let them fall.

I *can't* let them fall.

Dylan is the Boss for now and I'm his future stepsister. We're not touching each other in any way that makes it seem like we're more than that, but I'm not touching any of the others either.

This is official Triskele business and right now, they're the leaders and I'm part of their family. We talked about it and decided not to be *those* people at the funerals, the ones who somehow try to make it all about themselves and the statement they want to make.

We don't have anything to prove. We love each other and all of us know that. It doesn't have to be rubbed in anyone's face, but especially not right now.

As we're walking to the car, within touching distance of each other but still not touching, my phone beeps and I fish it out of my pocket, but my feet slam to a halt when I see the message waiting for me.

UNKNOWN

You stood me up, Skye. I waited at the pier.  
Perhaps this will get your attention.

Underneath the message, a screenshot of an article published two minutes ago appears and the headline makes my blood run

cold.

***SEX OFFENDERS MISSING:  
THE WORK OF A VIGILANTE?***

For the longest time, all I can do is stare at my screen, willing the picture I'm looking at to change.

But it doesn't.

It's right there, clear as day and written in bold, capital letters.

I jerk when Phoenix's phone rings, and he looks around to make sure no one is within earshot before he hits speaker. Aaron doesn't wait for him to say anything. "Have you seen it?"

"Skye just got a message," Nix says, confirming that he saw what Tony sent me. "What do we know?"

"It's about your offenders. Each and every one you had me look into. They're all there." Panic oozes through the phone as Aaron continues. "This guy, the reporter who wrote the story, he's good. He's also got someone on the inside feeding him information. He's been at it twenty years, writing about the New York underground, and not a single bad mention of the Rivas." "

"So he's one of Tony's," Nix concludes as he shuts his eyes and lets out a heavy sigh. "Find out everything you can. We need to shut down this story and we need it done yesterday."

"Searching as we speak." I hear the faint sound of his keyboard clacking before he ends the call.

Phoenix's burned caramel eyes meet mine. "This isn't good, but don't panic. We'll work it out."

I nod, but it feels like my chest and brain are about to implode. My breaths are coming in fast, quick pants and my thoughts are swimming. I knew it was possible this was going to get out, but knowing it may and having it happen are very different things.

My lungs are suddenly too small and my skin is itchy. If my guys are found and arrested, they'll never breathe outside of a prison again. I can't let that happen. Not when all they were doing was getting revenge for *me*. Taking out all those *dickless cunts* because of what happened to me.

I just...

A heavy pair of hands land on my shoulders, and when I blink, I find myself looking into Colton's endless gray eyes. "Breathe, Skye. With me, okay? One, two, three."

He takes a big breath of air and I do the same, focusing on the blue-silver irises in front of me as I inhale. "What are we doing to do about this?"

"Same thing we always do, Pinky. Try to take over the world," he teases, then he wraps his arms around me and speaks into my ear. "We're going to take care of it, Princess. That's what we always do, right? One way or another, we take care of it."

I nod against his strong shoulder, because we do always take care of it one way or another, but I really wasn't expecting to have to take care of this today. Jamie's widow, sure, I figured we'd have to take care of her and that I'd have to take care of my guys, but this...

"Are we taking care of it today or tomorrow?"

I feel him smile against my neck. "Tomorrow. Today, we have a wake to go to. Jamie was important to us all. Important to our men. We have to be there, but tomorrow, we'll take care of it."

"We have another wake to go to tomorrow," I remind him quietly. "After that?"

"After that," he says. "The final decision is Dylan's, obviously, but I'm pretty confident he's going to agree with me. We'll do it tomorrow."

Nodding as I close my eyes, I wonder if it's selfish that I'm relieved the last two men's bodies are being buried in Ireland. Which means Colton's dad will be attending those funerals and we don't have to.

Only one more to go. For now.

I know it won't be long before there are more, though. Not unless we get this done. Win the war and attend one last funeral: Tony's. Even if only just to make sure that it's really him being put in the ground.

---

There's that old saying: *it never rains but it pours*.

In our lives these days, that saying is overwhelmingly, painfully true. Before I've even washed the scent of stale cigarette smoke out of my hair after Jamie's wake, an alarm starts going off and my entire body tenses up.

I know what that alarm means. It's the perimeter alarm the guys set up when someone forces the stairwell door, and while we've been waiting for it, I didn't expect it to happen today. Mazotti has held off on coming here for so long that we thought he'd only strike once they were done burying their own men.

We were wrong. If that alarm is going off now, it means someone tripped it and my guys aren't the type to do it by mistake.

With that thought, my limbs kick into overdrive. The lights go off. Thankfully, I brought a pair of sweats and one of Mav's old '80s band tees into the bathroom with me tonight. Grabbing a towel, I race through drying only the bare necessities before shoving the shirt over my head and yanking the sweats on almost at the same time.

Not fifteen seconds after the alarm started, it cuts out and the bathroom door crashes open. Maverick stands in it, looking me over in a flash even though it's dark as hell in here, and when he realizes I'm fine and that no super villain turned himself into water and came through the faucet, he gives me a tight nod.

"Let's go. They're here."

"I figured. Where do you want me?"

“Phoenix is in the study. He’s going to activate the sprinklers and then join me on the landing so we have a higher vantage point. Dylan and Colton are in the living room and the kitchen, covering the first floor. We want you in the panic room, but go to the study. Nix will show you what to do.”

I narrow my eyes, but this isn’t the time to argue. We’ve talked about who’s going to be where, but they seem to have switched plans on me. Probably because of where everyone was when the alarm first went off.

As I race down the hall to the study, I mentally go over the booby traps Nix has been installing in the house at night. They’re not Home Alone level in terms of entertainment value, but they *are* deadly, which is kind of what we’re after.

We have trigger mechanisms attached to shotguns. They won’t go off when Mazotti or his guys open the door because that would’ve been too obvious, but it will go off when they’re a few feet in. We’ve aimed the guns where Mav reckoned they’d have gotten to before they come to the conclusion that it’s safe to keep going.

We’ve also got tripwires attached to explosives. The blasts won’t be that big, but Nix assures us it’ll be enough to hurt. Over and above all that, we’ve got pepper spray alarms—which is also why we’ve stashed masks for ourselves in random places.

As I run into the study, I grab a mask from the top of the bookshelf against the wall. It seemed like a place that was easy enough to access, but you wouldn’t realize it was there unless you knew where to look.

Nix spins in his chair when I rush in, then he’s on his feet and motioning at the monitor as he crosses to me. They’ll be breaking down the front door any minute now.”

“If they come in that way.”

“Sure, but they’re going to be here soon. You remember what I told you about the traps?”

I nod, reciting the information he gave me just last night. “Next to the video feed is a list of rooms with a list of traps for

each one. Just click on the trap you want to activate.”

“Good girl,” he says before planting a crushing hard, lightning quick kiss on my lips. “Watch the monitors. I know you wanted to be out there, but it didn’t work out that way. Help us from here.”

I nod firmly. “I’m on it.”

“You got a gun?”

“No. I didn’t have it in the bathroom with me.”

“Bottom drawer,” he says as he jogs toward the door. “The combination for the lock is your birthday.”

“Got it.” I watch as he disappears and then I drop down in the chair he just vacated, immediately focusing on the security system he’s already pulled up.

On the bank of monitors on Dylan’s desk, video feeds in black and white show every room in the house. We added more cameras while preparing for this attack, but the main ones give a decent view of every room.

I watch as my guys take their positions, Dylan crouched behind the wall separating the kitchen from the hallway and Colton peering out from the living room. Maverick is on the landing just like he said he’d be, and as I watch, Phoenix skids in next to him on his knees. They’re all armed and ready, and I’m reminded that I need to be as well. I bend over and unlock the drawer Nix mentioned, quickly extracting the gun they stashed there.

As I sit back up, there’s a loud bang. I press the button I already had the mouse hovering over and only a few moments later, the shotguns fire. Two bodies drop, but I count three more running in behind them. These new guys are more careful, moving slower as one checks the pulses of their fallen comrades before he motions to the others to proceed.

My heart is racing faster than it ever has and it’s making it hard to breathe. Hard to concentrate, but I need to do this. Squinting at the screen, I see a little light flashing to tell me the motion sensor closest to the first trip wire has picked up an intruder, so I activate that next.

This is home automation in a way I never thought I'd see it, but it's damn effective. As the guy hits the wire, the little explosive device I just woke up detonates and I hear the screams coming from below. I can't make out what happened to the guy just yet, but it clearly hurts.

I'm sweating profusely, the back of my neck, my scalp, and my torso drenched, but I lean forward, watching for any indication that there's someone approaching another one of the traps. Two of the pepper spray alarms' indicator lights start flashing at the same time.

One is in the living area, and I hope Colton's found a mask as I hit the button to activate the spray. It would've gone off automatically if it'd been armed—a precautionary measure just in case we were sleeping and couldn't get into position on time—but this way, it goes off right in the guy's face.

Satisfaction burns through me as more screams filter up from below, and I realize it might make me sick to enjoy these guys' pain, but they killed Jamie. They killed Jock and five others. They tried to kill my *mother*.

Because of that, I won't apologize for enjoying this. A gunshot goes off and the screams stop abruptly, telling me that Colton just hit the guy who was in the living room.

The second pepper spray canister with the proximity indicator flashing is right near the bottom of the stairs, which means the idiot passed right by Dylan. I hit the button and there's another scream, but this one cuts off faster when another shot rings out.

Obviously aware now that we're here, awake, and that we have a few tricks up our sleeves, the other five guys I count on the monitor slow down. They're trying to regroup when Dylan and Colton surround them, guns raised just a moment before the muted pops of more gunshots ring out.

I watch as Maverick and Phoenix rise up on their knees, trying and failing to get a clear view of the mayhem breaking out on the floor below. Thankfully, they don't take any shots just yet, not willing to risk the lives of their Boss or Underboss by shooting one of them by accident.

A cold chill runs through me at the thought. Two more bodies drop, and they don't belong to my guys. Relief floods my senses, but this is far from over. They brought fewer men, but our building is much smaller than the Manor grounds and though the whole thing belongs to the Triskele, all of the condos here combined probably aren't as big as the square footage of the house where Dylan grew up.

Even so, there are three more men that we know of. More could be enroute. Since we've also got a camera in the garage, I know there's no one down there right now, but they could be coming.

Keeping a close eye on it just in case, I return my attention to where one of the three men has broken away from the pack. He's advancing steadily toward the stairs, hunched over and staying close to the walls.

My pulse skyrockets again. He's not close enough to the next pepper spray canister to use it against him and Maverick is looking the other way, still searching for Colton and Dylan as more shots keep ringing out.

My guys are staying out of sight, though. Both fell back when the return fire started and they're taking cover behind two walls.

I look around wildly, trying to find one of the radio headsets we've got. Not knowing if any or even one of the guys managed to grab their own, but Nix was in here before.

It's a good bet he's got one. I didn't see it, but it was dark and it's not like either of us stopped for long enough for me to inspect him. My gaze finally lands on one of the tiny earpieces, and when I fit it in my ear and hit the power button, Dylan and Nix are whispering into their own, their voices so familiar that I know exactly which one is which.

"Can you see him yet?" Dylan asks.

"No," Nix breathes. "He's got to be coming up on—"

"To the left of the staircase," I whisper into my microphone. "If you stand up and look straight down, you'll be able to see him."



“Skye. Thank God, you’re okay,” Dylan says. “Ok, Nix. I’ve got eyes on the others. Colton’s keeping one busy and mine is about to turn. Go! Now!”

As I watch, Phoenix obeys Dylan’s whispered command without hesitation, standing bolt upright and aiming exactly where I told him to. He fires off two shots in rapid succession, and the guy’s body crumbles to the ground.

Victory surges through my veins, but it’s premature. The next thing I know, a loud grunt comes through the earpiece I’m wearing and Colton’s strained voice comes through it. “Fucking found it. Finally. Where is the—”

He’s cut off by another grunt, but this one sounds decidedly more pained. Sounds of scuffle ring out through the earpiece, but I can hear them from below as well. There’s a crash and then Dylan mutters, “Colton’s guy found him. Hand to hand. He managed to knock the gun away. I’m going to him.”

“Stay put, Boss,” Maverick says firmly. “I’ve got eyes on them. Going down now.”

Dylan doesn’t argue, and when I seek him out on the screens, I realize why. While he was trying to get to Colton, the guy he was looking for found him as well. For a moment, my heartbeat seizes and my eyes slam shut, but I can’t keep them that way.

“Dylan and Colton are both wrestling,” I breathe into the microphone. “I’m coming.”

Abandoning the monitors after triggering each and every one of the pepper spray devices, I race to the door with my gun at the ready. Hitting the corridor at a full sprint, I fly down the stairs and almost crash into the body of the guy Phoenix shot.

It’s dark as anything down here, the drapes drawn to block out any ambient light from the city and not a single light on. *Right. We’ll need the night vision goggles next time.*

My eyes adjust soon after coughing starts echoing from both sides of the condos. Coughing and retching, and it must

give my guys the gap they needed because after a few more seconds of crashing and grunting, there's a whoop from Colton before Maverick announces, "That's it on our side."

"Same here," Nix says. "Can someone get the fucking lights?"

"Wait." Mav's voice is quiet in the darkness. "That's it, right, Skye?"

"Last I saw, yes. That's it." As I hit the main lightswitch for the living room, the first thing I notice is movement coming from the guy we got with the tripwire.

I didn't activate any of the others because my guys were too close to them for comfort, so I know exactly where this guy fell. I'm still blinking against the sudden brightness of the room when I find myself standing over him, my gun raised as I look into the man's eyes.

They're dark and cold, unfeeling even though he's got a chunk blown out of his shin and half the other ankle is missing. I'm not sure, but based on Colton's description, I think this is Mazotti.

*Wow. I can't believe I'm the one who's going to get to take him out.*

And I do.

My finger tightens on the trigger and my heartbeat is steady as the muted shot rings out. I'll find out later if I was right about who he was, but it doesn't really matter. For now, all the intruders are dead, and we need to call in yet another cleanup crew.

*Stat.*

CHAPTER  
**FIFTEEN**

## MAVERICK

Buried balls deep in Skye with Colton taking her from behind, it's hard to believe that only twenty four hours ago, we were defending the condos like an invading army was trying to take our fortress. It's even crazier to believe that Nix's stupid booby traps helped us win.

Pleasure races through me when I feel Colton's cock swelling through the thin membrane inside her, and she clenches around me at about the same time. Our girl's red hair is hanging in a curtain around our faces, her delicate features scrunched up in concentration as she screams right before she comes.

The orgasm barrels through her and takes me next, making my muscles spasm as Colton splays out over the back when he's spent. Her knees give out and she crashes into me, and I groan, still riding the high of the climax as I grip her hips and thrust into her one last time.

Skye's breath feathers across my chest and I stay put, breathing hard until my heart rate returns to normal. As soon as that happens, I swat Colton's shoulder. "Get the fuck off, man. You're heavy."

Still panting, he lifts up his head and winks a gray eye at me. "Don't lie," he murmurs lazily. "You like having my weight on you."

"Get. Off."

"I just did," he mumbles as he sighs and pulls out, wrapping an arm around Skye and rolling her off me and onto

the mattress with him. She's like putty in his hands, her body seamlessly fitting against his as he curls around her back and presses a kiss to her shoulder. "Sleep now, Princess. We're safe here. You can sleep now."

Her eyes are still closed, but after the last few days we've had and getting zero sleep last night, I don't blame her. My own eyelids are heavy and when I glance at Colton, I realize he's half asleep too.

The water is running in the shower, so I'm assuming Phoenix is still in there, cleaning up after she sucked him off mere inches away from my face. *Strangely, it was kinda hot.*

I'm not sure where Dylan went after he ravaged her pussy like a madman, but I groan when I realize I should probably go find him. *The Boss and Enforcer thing of it all.*

"I'll be back," I murmur to the half-dead-to-the-world two at my side, then I roll over and press a soft kiss to Skye's forehead. She smiles, but her eyes don't open.

As I get up, I pull the covers that wound up at the foot of the bed over them, then I bend down and swipe up my underwear. At least, I think they're mine. How we got to the point where I'm semi-okay wearing one of the others' underwear by accident, I'll never know.

But I'm too tired to even begin thinking about it right now.

Quietly leaving the room once my junk is covered, I shut the bedroom door and look around the tiny hunting cabin we're borrowing from Jas's mother-in-law's sister for the night. It's not much, a little wooden structure in the middle of nowhere with only one bedroom, a bathroom, a kitchenette, and a small lounge with a fireplace in the corner, but as soon as he offered it to us, we were more than happy to take him up on it.

Blackthorne Manor still isn't safe. Dylan had a new security firm remove all the old stuff and they're busy fitting it with a new, state-of-the-art system, but it's going to take a few days. Meanwhile, we've got a dozen guys watching Damian's study to make sure no one goes in or comes out.

We could've stayed in one of the other condos, but we didn't want to. Mazotti and his men proved just how easy it was to get in there, and Skye might've put a bullet in him, but that doesn't mean we don't have any other enemies. He won't be the last one to come after us.

After briefly considering going back to the Academy, we decided against it for now. We're magnets for trouble and Tony got in there once. All we'd be doing by going there is to put the entire student body at risk.

An option, but not a smart one. My dad's house, as well as Colton's and Phoenix's were other options, but we ruled those out almost immediately. Blackthorne Manor was more secure than any of those, and Mazotti got in there.

It seemed smarter and safer to just come here. A temporary sanctuary, but I guess it's true what they say: *any port in a storm*.

As I look around, I realize Dylan's not here. The weather has warmed up since we're well into spring, but I grab a blanket from the back of the sofa anyway and wrap it around my shoulders before I head out to the miniscule porch.

It's barely big enough to take the tiny, round metal table and two chairs on it, but that's where I find the Boss, naked as the day he was born, sitting back with a bottle of whiskey in his hand. With his head half tossed back, blond hair still sticking up in all directions from having Skye's hands in it and his feet kicked up against the railing as he stares into the darkness of the woods we're surrounded by.

"And this?" I ask quietly, sliding the blanket off and tossing it in his lap. "For fuck's sake, I see enough of that thing. Cover up, would you?"

He lets out a dark chuckle that betrays the mood he's suddenly in. "Your phobia of my cock is the least of my worries right now."

"It's not a phobia. It's common decency to cover up during conversation." I take the other chair, kind of enjoying the cool night air as it washes over my skin.

Dylan shrugs, passing over the bottle without looking at me. “I didn’t know I’d be having a conversation. Kind of figured you’d crash when you got done.”

“Nah. Can’t leave you out here all alone and unprotected.” I bring the bottle to my lips and take a long sip of the liquid inside, relishing the slight burn as it slides down my throat. After I’ve swallowed, I hand the bottle back. “What exactly brought you out here, bro? I get not wanting to see my O-face, but it can’t just be that.”

“I see enough of that thing,” he echoes what I said just a minute ago, attempting to lighten the mood before he blows out a heavy breath. “We need a game plan. I’ve been making a list in my head but I need to decide where to go from here.”

“Hit me,” I say. “Maybe I can help.”

He finally darts a glance at me, and I see the reluctance in his eyes. “This isn’t your burden to carry, Maverick. No matter what we do, people are going to get hurt. And probably die. I don’t want to put the guilt of that on your shoulders.”

“That’s not what this is. We’re a team. So hit me. And give me back that bottle if you’re just going to stroke it instead of taking a damn drink.”

In response, he chugs down a generous amount and gets up. “If we’re going to do this, I need pants and you need a glass.”

As he heads inside, I stand and follow him, grabbing a pair of glasses as he emerges from the bedroom with a pair of Phoenix’s gray sweats on. He rolls his eyes when he sees me noticing, then he shrugs and motions for me to keep quiet.

I do, taking it as a signal that the other three are fast asleep at this point, and Dylan confirms it once we’re back on the porch. He fills up our glasses as he says, “Are you sure you don’t want to go sleep with them?”

“When I can drink with you? No way. Like I said, hit me.”

He sighs, but picks up his tumbler and gets comfortable in his chair before he looks at me again. “Obviously, we need to take care of that reporter. There was another story today. I was

only going to tell you about it tomorrow, once everyone had gotten some sleep, but Nix knows. Aaron sent him the link.”

I huff out a breath. “I’m not questioning you here, but you should’ve told us as soon as you found out.”

“I know,” he says evenly. “Right now, I’m just trying to prioritize. Priority number one was getting us here safely and getting some sleep tonight. I didn’t want anyone insisting on going after this guy when they hadn’t slept for forty hours.”

“Fair enough, but you still should’ve told us.”

“I know.” He turns his head up, canting it so he’s looking at the heavens above. “It’s so damn peaceful out here. I haven’t seen this many stars since we left our house.”

“Yeah,” I agree as I follow his gaze. “Do you want to write a song about it, or can we get back to business?”

“You’re cranky. If you want to go to sleep, go to sleep.”

“No. Tell me what we’re looking at next.”

He sighs, grudgingly bringing his gaze back to mine. “There’s the reporter, but we also need to find out where Tony’s stashing his weapons. He’s got almost as many as we do, and that’s another major stream of income for him. Apart from that, if we can destroy it, it’ll give us the advantage.”

“Sure, but they can buy more guns just about anywhere.”

He nods. “Of course, but they’ll be the guys playing catch up for once and it’ll take some time to re-arm every last one of his men. If we can knock them down to only what they’ve got on their person or in their houses, that’s a point for us.”

“Okay, I hear you. I also happen to have looked into this already. Major stream of income and all.”

“And?” He cocks his head. “You learn anything?”

“Not much.” I run my palms over my cheeks and heave out a sigh. “Wherever he keeps his stash, it’s a closely guarded secret. Apparently, it’s known only by a few select members of the organization.”

“Anyone we’ve recruited so far?”



I shake my head. “Unfortunately not.”

He turns his gaze back to the stars, swirling the whiskey in his glass as he shrugs. “Well, an easy win would’ve been nice, but I guess we’re just going to have to work for it.”

“Okay, so we’ve got the reporter and the weapons stash on our list. What else?”

“Operation Triskele Blitz. Dwayne reported back on the situation in Louisiana. That’s under control. They’ve found the illegal cigarette supplier and they’re putting the screws to him now, but the dollar amounts being thrown around are small. We’re talking a couple bar a year. If we can shift the guy’s allegiance, we should be able to double that.”

I shrug. “Filthy fucking habit, but sure. You’re right. There’s always going to be a market for cigarettes. We should be good on that front. What about Operation Triskele Blitz? Also, are we really calling it that now?”

“It kind of stuck. I don’t like it much either, if that helps.”

“Not really, but fine.”

Staring off into the middle distance, he takes another sip of his drink before refocusing on me. “I’m thinking we should leave that until last. We know who the players are and if we need to take one out before we bring down the whole structure, then fine, we’ll do it, but I think we’ll have to save the structure itself for last.”

Leaning back as I contemplate his suggestion, I sip my drink and a few moments later, I nod. “That’s smart. As soon as we start going after his support network, things are really going to heat up. We need to cut him off at the knees before we do that.”

“That’s what I’m thinking,” he muses as he nurses his drink. “A few players might even stop playing for his team if the money dries up before we get there. I don’t think the knocks he’s taken has made it that Tony’s a pauper, but an organization like the Rivas is expensive to run.”

“The prostitutes and the weapons are still in play, though. We can’t knock out the human trafficking side of his

operation, so...”

“Weapons next,” he concludes. “We’ll go after this reporter, find out what he knows, and decide on a course of action once we do. In the meantime, we’ll focus our energies on finding the weapons stash and keeping tabs on his support network.”

“You got it,” I say, a smug grin curving on my lips. “You really needed help figuring that out?”

“No, but none of these decisions can be made lightly. Like I said, lives will be lost. I need to be sure of absolutely every move I make.”

The grin fades. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Which brings me to my next question, what do you want to do with the weapons when we find them?”

“Take as many as we can and then destroy the rest. We’ll decide how once we know where they are. Water. Fire. More creative means. It’ll be easier to decide what’s going to be the most efficient when we’ve got a location.”

He falls silent after that, then he suddenly looks at me again. “Hey, Mav.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you thought about the future?”

I frown. “What part of it?”

“After.” Those blues burn into my own. “Skye wants to marry us. She can’t wear four different engagement rings on one ring finger. We need to figure it out. Just food for thought. Unless you’ve changed your mind about being in this for the long haul.”

I snort. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, brother. Let me think about it. If I come up with a plan, I’ll talk to you about it.”

Dylan nods, knocking back the rest of his drink before he stands up again. “Okay, that’s it for me for tonight. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow and we need some sleep if we’re going to do it well.”

“Amen to that,” I agree, trailing in after him after taking one last look at the woods around us.

It’s all quiet and peaceful, but I slide the deadbolt into place on the door and arm the few tripwires Nix grabbed from the condos just in case. He also set up portable motion detectors around the house, but God only knows if those are going to work to alert us of anything other than a deer.

These days, we can’t be too sure or too careful though. This place is great, but we’re exposed here. We can’t stay for more than just this one night, which means we’re moving again tomorrow. I just don’t know where we’re going yet.

CHAPTER  
**SIXTEEN**

## SKYE

**B**ack in the city, we're staying with Hand of Hope. With everything that's going on at the moment, Ava's moms pulled her from campus and decided she was safer under their watchful eyes.

I don't blame them. If I had a kid right now, I'd want it with me too.

Ava, however, doesn't quite agree. She pouts at me from where she's sitting on the bed in the studio apartment that is ours for now. Mine and the guys', that is. Not mine and Ava's. I miss my roomie, but she's definitely safer not sleeping under the same roof as we are at the moment.

Her moms apologized for not having anything bigger available, but we don't mind the tight quarters. With an open concept bedroom, bathroom, living area, and kitchenette, it's everything we need and more importantly, it's safe.

"I can't believe they won't let me stay here with you guys," she complains as she leans back against the headboard and looks around. "Or next door, at least. I would *not* want to sleep in here with you."

I roll my eyes at my best friend, smiling as I grab her foot and tickle it. "Stop being so dramatic. You're just a block away and besides, you'd hear us through the walls if you were next door."

Her nose scrunches up and she laughs as she tries to kick her foot free of my grasp. "True. I didn't think about that. I've just missed you, is all."

“I know.” Getting up on my knees, I scoot forward and pull her into a hug. “I missed you too, but we’re here now and roomies or not, you’re going to be seeing a lot of me.”

Her arms wrap around my neck and she holds me close. I can practically feel the waves of her worry barreling into my chest. She’s also definitely lost weight, her shoulders narrower than ever and her frame suddenly bony where it presses into mine.

When a tremble runs through her, I pull my head back so I can look into her eyes, frowning when I notice the tears shimmering in them.

“Hey, now. What’s going on? What is this?”

She snuffles, releasing me to press her index fingers to the bottoms of her eyes like she’s trying to keep the tears from falling. “I’ve been so fucking worried about you. And my moms. And Sterling. And Al. And even that Aaron guy.”

Her blonde ponytail bobs as she gives her head a hard shake. “It’s ridiculous that you’re all in the thick of this in some way, and I’m sitting here under lock and key, watching lectures online and doing my fucking homework. I feel like a kid.”

“We *are* kids.” I rock my head from side to side as I consider. “Well, sort of, anyway. Trust me, if I could be sitting under lock and key—”

“Don’t,” she mutters, those green eyes narrowing into an accusatory glare. “Don’t lie to try and placate me. You’re happy to be exactly where you are. In fact, you insisted on it. I just wish you didn’t *all* have to be in danger *all* the damn time.”

My eyes narrow right back as realization dawns. “Waaait a second. I understand you being so worried about your moms and about us. Maybe even Sterling, but Al and Aaron too?”

Her cheeks burst into flame, growing so hot she starts glowing. Leaning forward, she slides a pillow out from behind her back and throws it at me. “I won’t have any judgment from you, young lady.”

“Good, because you’re not getting any.” I laugh, catching the pillow and sticking it between my back and the wooden foot of the bed frame. “It was just a question. I’m curious. Tell me what’s been going on with you. Why Al and Aaron?”

Her gaze catches on mine and stays there, the redness in her cheeks receding as she bites the inside of her cheek and turns contemplative. “Well, uh. It’s not much really, but Sterling and I are kissing. Like...a lot.”

My eyes pop wide open and a squeal tears out of me. “What? That’s—”

I’m cut off by the cavalry bursting through the door. And by cavalry, I mean Colton and Maverick who have been warned not to enter this apartment under any circumstances whatsoever.

Mav snorts when his gaze clashes with my own and his hands come up in defense. “You can’t scream if you don’t want us busting in here,” he says as Colton races to the adjoining bathroom and calls out once he’s in there.

“It’s clear. All empty.”

“Of course, it’s empty.” I can’t fight the smile that breaks free when he emerges from the bathroom looking genuinely relieved. “We’re right in the very center of a compound that belongs to a biker gang that’s becoming one the biggest and most powerful in the area. Do you really think anyone is going to be stupid enough to come after us here? In broad daylight?”

Colton shoots me a sheepish grin. “Old habits, I guess.”

“Yeah, actually, we prefer the term *motorcycle club*,” Ava says lightly. “Biker gang sounds a bit rough, you know?”

Maverick does his best to swallow a laugh, but he doesn’t quite get it right. When she shoots him a glare, he shrugs. “Have you seen the people walking around out there? They’re bigger than I am, with more tattoos, and they’re more scowly than Dylan. They’re pretty fucking rough, Aves.”

Her eyebrows pinch together. “Aves?”

Maverick shrugs again, laughter shining from those deep blue eyes. “Yeah. You’re my girlfriend’s best friend and you’re providing us with safe harbor. That means you get a nickname.”

I glance back at her just as her tongue darts out to swipe across her lips. I thought the guys didn’t make her nervous anymore, but I guess I was wrong.

As I think it though, she suddenly perks up and flashes him a megawatt grin. “*Aves*. I like it. I’ve never had a nickname before.”

“Really?” Colton frowns and moves like he’s about to come join us on the bed. I stop him with a sharp shake of my head and he presses his palms together. “Please? It’s boring as fuck out there with just Maverick as company and he refuses to leave the door unguarded even though I told him you were perfectly safe here. So we’re just sitting there and he’s not even talking.”

Mav grunts and rolls his eyes. “That’s because you wanted to talk about pancake recipes. I thought you’d given up on the cooking thing for now.”

Colton’s lips part and he brings his hand to his mouth, pretending to fan himself with his free hand. “Well, I never.”

Maverick pushes off the door he’s been leaning against and makes no apologies when he stretches out on the bed with us, his head on my lap and his feet on what tonight, will be *his* pillow. “Yeah, I can’t do it anymore. Tag us in. The squeal was about guy-news, right? Maybe we can help.”

Colton eyes the bed, searching for a space before he comes over and sits down next to me, his arm immediately sliding around my shoulders as he grins at Ava. “Yeah, *Aves*. Tag us in. We can help. ‘Sides, I don’t say this too often, but Maverick is right. When a girl squeals like that, it’s usually got something to do with a guy. I mean, it wasn’t squealing for the fun reasons this time, but who cares?”

Ava glances at me, her eyes filled with doubt until she finally presses her lips in at the corners and gives them a stern



look. “Fine. I know you’re going to find out about this anyway, so I’ll tell you but only if you promise to shut the hell up about it.”

Colton dutifully mimes zipping his lips while Maverick just shakes his head. “No deal. We can’t help if we’re not allowed to speak.”

“You’re not allowed to speak,” I say as I look back at my friend. “That’s what she means. You can hang out here and listen, but not speak. This is girl talk and Ava wants to share, not be interrogated.”

Colton sighs. “I’m good with that. I need to check in with the Boss anyway, so don’t mind me. I’ll just be here, trying to win a war from the comfort of my own, temporary home.”

A frisson of panic slides through me at his mention of the Boss. Of course, it hasn’t been far from my mind that Dylan and Phoenix aren’t here, but I’ve been trying not to think about it. *Now that he brought it up, though...*

“Have you heard from them yet?” I ask, unable to keep the worry out of my voice.

Colton moves his hand to the nape of my neck and rests his forehead against mine, those silvery-grays melting into one. I see the answer I was looking for in that one eye, though. He hasn’t heard from them.

“They’ll be fine,” he assures me. “It’s just a meeting. Nothing dangerous.”

“A meeting with a mysterious informant who refused to give them his name?” I arch a brow at him even though he probably can’t see it. “How is that *not* dangerous? We have no idea who they’re meeting with or what they’re meeting about. All we know is that the guy asked for a meeting with the Boss and refused to deal with anyone else.”

Ava clears her throat. “I thought we were talking about my love life here.”

I know she’s trying to distract me and I appreciate it, but damn. It’s weird to have someone else in the room after so long of it just being us. I almost forgot she was even there.

After one more moment of staring into Colton's eyes, silently pleading with him to let me know if he hears anything and getting a curt nod in response, I turn back to my friend.

"Yes, we are. We're talking about your love life. A love life which apparently suddenly includes Sterling, Alistaire, and Aaron."

Maverick's brow hitches up, puckering as he stares at her without lifting his head out of my lap. "Seriously? No wonder there was a squeal."

"You're doing a piss-poor job of shutting up," she says, but I see a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "But yes, seriously. Now either squeal, or be quiet."

Mav lifts his hands and waves them around excitedly as he lets out a lackluster squeal and arches a brow at her. "There, are you happy now?"

"Never." She pops her eyebrows at him before focusing on me again. "Sterling still thinks we can't be together. He says he likes me, but I don't know. He obviously doesn't like me enough to tell my moms about us. It might be time to let him go if his rank in the club is always going to be his number one priority."

I nod, but Colton scoffs at my side and glances up from his phone. "That's not fair. I don't know this dude, but you don't know how long or how hard he's worked to get to where he is. You're also the first to complain about how protective your moms are and if Skye is only finding out about all this now, that means it's pretty new. You can't expect him to put it all on the line for the presidents' daughter when he doesn't even know if there's any chance it's actually going to work out."

"Well, I do know how long and how hard he's worked," she says, but her eyes are glazed over with thought. "I don't know everything about his past, but I know he didn't have it easy growing up. I realize that I can't ask him to risk it all. This is the first real home he's ever had and the first real family too, but we're sneaking around. We can't go on a date because he's too scared someone will see us together. We can't

hold hands unless we're behind a locked door. We can't do anything normal couples do, and—”

“That’s bullshit,” Maverick grunts. “Once I meet him, I’ll be able to tell you for sure but for now, give the guy a fucking minute. If it’s true that this is his first real home, he’s probably terrified of losing it. He may not say it or cry about it on your shoulder, but that doesn’t mean he’s not scared as shit. The way he sees it, he’s probably already risking it all just being with you. Have you ever thought about it from that point of view? That if he likes you enough to risk it at all, it probably means he’s fucking crazy about you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Colton grins and lifts the arm around my shoulder to offer Mav a fist bump.

As their knuckles collide right in front of my face, I shake my head and put a hand on each of theirs, gently lowering them to look at my friend. “I hate to say it, but I’m with them on this one. I know it sucks not being able to be together in public, but we were like that for a while and look at how far we’ve come. Where is the elusive Sterling anyway?”

She sighs, worry swimming in her eyes before she looks down at her hands. “With Aaron. They’re in a meeting with the FBI, I think. I never know exactly what they’re doing or where they are, and that sucks too.”

“It really does.” I commiserate with her so hard on that one. “Eventually, this is probably all going to be yours, though. When that happens, you’ll know everything all the time, which isn’t a barrel of laughs either, but I know how hard it is just hanging back and not knowing or hearing anything.”

My heart aches dully at the memory of a time when I was in her shoes. It wasn’t even that long ago. A few months. *Fuck, has it really only been that? It feels like a lifetime.*

Mav’s gaze moves up to mine, and there’s definite understanding there as he shoots me a soft smile before glancing back at Ava. “So Aaron, huh? I didn’t even know you’d met him.”

“A few times.” That same fiery blush from earlier blooms up the sides of her jaw. “He’s really nice, though. My moms like him. They say he’s one of the smartest people they’ve ever met.”

“Why do Moms only ever like the smart ones?” Colton grumbles, and I chuckle as I turn my head to press a kiss to his shoulder.

“My mom likes you just fine, my love. Relax.”

He winks at me. “That’s only cause she thinks I’m smart. Let’s keep her thinking that.”

I turn back to Ava instead of rising to the bait and inflating his already healthy ego with compliments about how clever he is. He’s smart and he fucking knows it. That’s enough. “Okay, wait. So you met Sterling when he was guarding you on campus and you guys took all those walks. Alistaire came into the picture when you were at our place, but apart from asking us to set up a date, none of us knew anything had happened on that front, and now you’ve met Aaron too. I’m going to need details. I feel like I’ve missed too many chapters.”

“Same,” Colton agrees.

Maverick just sighs and rolls onto his side with his head still in my lap. “I might doze off, but yeah. I’m with them. I have no clue what’s going on.”

Ava glances at him and rolls her eyes. “What happened to the days when you refused to talk to anyone but your brothers? It turns out that I liked those days better.” She looks at Colton. “The same goes for you, mister. I don’t know when you guys got so comfortable talking around me, but I think I might have preferred it when you used to shut up as soon as I got close.”

Colt winks at her. “Those days are long gone. You’re our Aves now and if you want Skye, then we’re part of the package.”

I sigh, running my fingers into Maverick’s hair and resting my head on Colt’s shoulder as I look at my friend. “Just ignore them. They’ll never shut up if you keep giving them attention.”

“Oof, you’re mean.” Colt pretends to shudder.

I laugh but nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. “Pipe down now, please?”

He nods and puts a finger in front of his lips, his gaze dropping back to his phone as he unlocks it. Apprehension tightens my gut when I realize it’s been hours since we last heard from them, but I can’t afford to get freaked out right now. If they’re in trouble, they’re already in it and they haven’t sent out a distress call. If they’re not in trouble, then there’s no use worrying.

Either way, I haven’t seen Ava for way too long and I really do want to know what’s been going on with her. We’ll hear from them when we hear from them and if we haven’t heard anything by sunset, we’ll know we have to start worrying.

For now, no news has to be good news. It just...has to be. Clearing my throat, I nod at Ava to continue. “They won’t interrupt again.”

She shrugs, smiling just a little as she glances at them. “That’s okay. It’s actually kind of nice to feel like I’m part of a group of friends. It’s also nice that they don’t think I’m guilty of anything anymore. That was horrible.”

“It was,” I agree, making no excuses because there aren’t any. “At least it’s in the past now. Do you want to tell us about Alistaire, then? How did you guys get back in touch?”

Her cheeks pink as her teeth sink into the back of her lip. “Well, uh, after he got done packing up your house, he moved into that place Damian got him on campus. Do you remember that?”

“Oh, yeah.” I vaguely recollect that being the plan, but I didn’t know it’d actually happened. “I’m assuming he looked you up on campus?”

“Yep, he did. He came over one night to say hi and I invited him in for coffee.” Those greens turn all sparkly and dreamy. “We talked for *hours*. Sterling nearly fainted, he was so jealous. It was a good night, though. A really good night.”

“And she says he doesn’t like her enough,” Maverick grumbled sleepily from my lap.

I know it’s killing him to have been left behind today, but Dylan decided it was more important for him to stay here with me than to go along to protect him. I still think that was the wrong call, but Phoenix is good in a crisis and excellent with a gun. I have to believe that they’re going to be okay and besides, Maverick hasn’t been sleeping well. It will be good for him to have a nap.

Ava glances at him and opens her mouth to respond, but then she suddenly lowers her voice instead, obviously realizing that he’s close to dozing off. “Anyway, Sterling and Alistaire have gotten to know each other a bit with everything that’s been going on, and Alistaire and I are friends now.”

“Are you kissing him too?”

She shakes her head, but there’s definitely some disappointment flickering in her eyes as she does. “We’re just friends. He and Sterling are slowly becoming friends too, and Sterling and Aaron get along surprisingly well.”

“Yeah, how on earth did he end up as part of this conversation again?” Colt asks before pretending to wince and waving his phone at us when we both turn to look at him. “Sorry. Shutting up. Going back to work.”

Ava chuckles, but answers his question even if his eyes are glued to his screen again. “You already know the basics. He volunteered to help out with the human trafficking stuff once he got wind of it through you. When my moms found out about it, it struck a chord. They had a friend once who—”

She gives her head a firm shake. “Wait. Once I start with that, I’ll lose my train of thought and we’ll have to restart this conversation all over again. So Aaron. That’s where we were. He came here and stayed at the compound for a couple nights while they were first trying to piece everything together. We haven’t spent much time together, but we hit it off and at least he’s better at keeping in touch than the others.”

I arch a brow at her as I lean back against the pillow. “Well, I’m just going to say it. I’m impressed. Back when I first started seeing these guys, you said you wanted some of your own and it looks like you found them. Good on you for following through.”

She blushes until she’s the color of a fire hydrant. “They’re not mine.”

“Yet,” I counter, smiling as I tilt my head at her. “All I really care about is that you’re happy. You *are* happy, right?”

She sighs, but then she shrugs and grabs one of the pillows from behind her back to hug it. “I’m not unhappy, but I’ll be a lot happier once you’re all out of harm’s way.” As if she’s reading my mind, her gaze drifts to Colton and her brow furrows. “Are they safe? You’re being suspiciously quiet about updates. Where are they? Surely, you can track them on your phone.”

He grimaces as he tosses it down on the bed and lets out a frustrated huff as he shakes his head. “I should be able to, but I can’t seem to find them. They’re both offline and so is the car. I know I’m not Phoenix, but I should’ve been able to find them and I don’t know why I can’t.”

Just like that, the peace that settled over me just for the last couple of hours is shattered. It wasn’t even complete peace. Just, like, a tiny sliver. An oasis made up of being able to catch up with my best friend without having to worry, but now...I don’t know.

If Colton can’t track them, that means we won’t know where to start looking if they *have* gone missing. If they’re offline, that would also explain why we haven’t heard anything from them—and why we wouldn’t have gotten a distress call even if they *are* in trouble.

Instantly, I’m on edge. I’ve been trying to talk myself down since they left but now, that isn’t working anymore. Living in fear is one part of this life that I absolutely despise and yet, I’m also getting used to it. I can with an emotion I despise, but I can’t live without one of my guys and the longer

this goddamn war drags on, the more likely it becomes that eventually, I'm going to have to.



CHAPTER  
**SEVENTEEN**

## PHOENIX

“This is fucking weird,” I murmur as Dylan and I pull up at the address we were given. He’s driving and I’m navigating, which means I know I didn’t get it wrong, but as I glance at the decorated white wall beside us, I frown deeper than I have in a while. “That’s a preschool.”

“Are you sure you got it right?” He turns in his seat to face me, exasperation burning like wildfire in those eyes. “You have to have fucked it up. There’s no way he wants to meet us here.”

“First, we don’t know it’s a *he*. Second, when have I ever fucked it up? This is the address he sent. I’ve triple-checked it.”

He sighs and drags both hands through his hair, leaning back as he looks around like he’s expecting someone to approach us. No one does but in the silence, the sound of children’s voices and laughter filter in from outside.

*So it’s not a front. It really is a school. For little kids. What in the actual name of Fuck is going on here?*

I shake my head and refocus on our surroundings. Maybe I did miss something. I know the address is correct, but there’s got to be something else here.

On one side of the street is the school and on the other is a park. A small, neighborhood style play area with some greenery and a little patch of lawn. The street is quiet, with a few cars parked up and down but none that really strike me as suspicious.

“Let’s go.” Dylan turns over the engine and as he does, I spot a small, square shoebox on the bench in the park. It’s wrapped in bright red paper, but what caught my attention wasn’t that. It was... I squint to make sure I’m not seeing things. “Is that the *Triskele* symbol?”

His eyes nearly bulge out of his head when his gaze follows mine, and I feel him do a double-take beside me. “Yeah, that’s definitely it. What is this, a fucking spy movie?” He mutters the last part under his breath, then he lets out a sharp huff and reaches for his door handle. “I’ll go get it. Stay put.”

I snort, my arm flying out and smacking across his chest to stop him. “Uh, no. That’s a supremely stupid idea and you know it. I’ll go get it, open it over there, and if it’s not a bomb, I’ll bring it over. If it is, then I guess it was nice knowing you.”

Without letting the moment drag on, I unlock my door and get out before he can stop me. I hear him groan before I slam it behind me and I know he’s hating me a little bit right now, but it can’t be helped.

This reeks of a setup. First, we got the call from some person using a voice scrambler who insisted on meeting with the Boss and only the Boss, and now this. Odds are that I’m going to die as soon as I cross this street, but the preschool is still throwing me off.

I know people have very different sets of moral codes, but generally speaking, leaving an explosive device anywhere near a preschool would be a no-go. Anyone who happened upon it either on their way to or from school might’ve opened it, with or without a child with them, and whoever set this up knew that. Which is making me wonder why they chose this specific spot.

Strangely, my heartbeat is even as I cross the street. If I’m right, then this park was chosen as a peace-offering of sorts. A way to set our minds at ease about this person. I don’t know why I think that, but I’ve just got a hunch that the preschool means he comes in peace.

Gravel crunches under my feet until I reach the park and hop over the low fence to jog across the patchy lawn. Regardless of my gut instincts, I have to be careful here. I have no actual evidence that the box isn't rigged in some way and I really don't particularly want to die today.

A slight breeze ruffles my hair when I stop near the plain wooden bench, and as I peer over at the box, I realize it's been cut open at the top. There's nothing inside except for a single sheet of paper. I frown, my gaze snapping up as I scan the few trees in the park and along the road.

Whoever left this here has to be watching us. Otherwise, anyone could've found this note and all his efforts would've been in vain if they'd taken it with them. All of which also means this box was put here either while we were already here or just before we arrived. Either way, the person could still be here.

A chill runs through me, but I take a deep breath and dip down low to check if I can see anything between the slats of the bench and the box itself, but there's nothing. Suspicion creeps through me, but not only do I not see anything there, I also didn't see the slightest hint of anyone watching us.

Since I know Dylan will be getting out of that damn car despite the possibility of danger if I don't give him something soon, I turn to face the car and shrug. I can't see him through the tinted windows, but I know he'll be watching.

As I turn back around, I reach into the box and lift the paper out carefully, but even that seems like just a regular sheet of paper from just a regular legal pad sold at probably a dozen places on every block in the city. It's folded into quarters and Dylan's name is printed on the front.

Sliding it into my back pocket, I pick up the box and realize it's a plain brown moving box that's been wrapped in the red paper with the Triskele hand-drawn on the front. Confusion races through me, but I don't have time to figure it out here.

The point is that there is no threat and I need to get back to Dylan before he loses his shit. Taking it all with me, I jog back

to the car and hand over the note once I've locked the door behind me. "It's for you."

He swipes it out from between my fingers, his features pinched as he unfolds it. "I know you've already said it, but this is really fucking weird."

"Uh-huh." I lean over as he holds the paper between us, and printed in the same font as his name on the outside is another address. "Fuck."

Dylan dips his head in a nod before he crumbles the paper in his fist and drops it in the footwell. "Wild goose chase or worth following?"

"Let's go. I'm really curious about what this is all about. We'll never know if we don't check it out, and this person has obviously gone through a lot of effort to get this to us."

Those blues rise to meet mine, then he shakes his watch down to his wrist and glances at it. "We've got time. It's only been about an hour, so fine. We'll go, but if there's nothing there, we're going back to the compound."

"Sure thing." I drop the box after inspecting it thoroughly, but even after dismantling it and tearing all the paper off, there's nothing else there.

The second location turns out to be a youth center, and my pulse spikes when I realize he's brought us to another place involving kids. It's definitely not a coincidence, but then what's it about?

Shaking my head, I look around and this time, Dylan spots the box. It's next to the dumpster pushed up against the center's wall and when I go get it, I realize there's nothing special about this one either. Inside, there's another piece of paper, but once I'm back in the car, I see that there's a big difference between this one and the last.

This is an actual note and it ends with an address in Queens. Dylan reads it quickly, then he snorts and hands it over.

*Blade,*

*I know where he's keeping what you're looking for. It's in the basement of this address, but you need to leave your phones and other tracking devices in the dumpster. We'll watch it for you, but they'll know you're coming if you go there with them.*

*Sincerely,*

*A Concerned Citizen.*

“We’re not leaving anything in a fucking dumpster,” he says firmly. “Text the others. Tell them we’re coming home.”

I turn the note over in my hands, scanning it to make sure we’re— “Wait. Hold up.” Right there on one of the corners, there’s a tiny little hand-drawn gun. My blood runs cold and shock reverberates through me as I realize what this guy is leading us to. “Give me your phone. We’re leaving everything in the dumpster. If this is what I think it is...”

I point at the gun, and Dylan’s nostrils flare as he blinks hard. “You don’t think...”

“I do think.” I slide my phone out of my pocket and hold the power button to turn it off.

I’ll leave it in a dumpster, but not when it’s on. I’ve got so many passwords on this thing, it’d take even a seasoned expert who works for the manufacturer months to get in. But I’m not taking any chances.

Once that’s done, I hold out my hand for Dylan’s phone and he grunts, but lets it drop with a soft thwack in my palm. “Do you honestly believe this is the Holy Grail?”

“It’s Tony’s weapons stash. If that’s what you’re referring to, then yes. I honestly believe this is the Holy Grail.”

He leans back in his seat before he slides the chair itself back to give himself some wiggle room. Bending over, he crawls in underneath the steering wheel and removes the secondary tracking device connected to Colton’s phone before he pops back up and drops that in my palm as well.

“Do you have any idea how to disable the cars?”

I nod, and a few minutes later, it’s done. Leaving our phones and the tracking device disabled and in the dumpster feels a hundred kinds of wrong, but my gut is still telling me this is the right thing to do. I have no idea who we’re dealing with, but I’m starting to suspect they’re leading us to places involving kids for a simpler reason than I thought before.

The area we’re in is a hotspot for Tony’s weapons to change hands. Almost every unregistered gun down here came from him and there have been more than a few reports of kids getting caught in the crossfire when violence has broken out. “I think our concerned citizen is someone who lost either a child or a sibling because of Tony’s dealings around here. Of course, you eliminate him and someone else will start supplying the same people, but this feels personal.”

Dylan nods sharply. “Yeah, I’m coming to the same conclusion. You think they got it right, though? Do you actually think that’s where he keeps his stash?”

I shrug. “We’re about to find out.”

It takes for-fucking-ever to get to Queens. Traffic is shit and all the roads are jammed up, but when we finally get there, I’m even more bowled over than I was when we pulled up in front of that preschool.

“That’s a church,” I say slowly, squinting again just to make sure, but nope. It’s definitely a church. It’s even got a steeple and sign out front with the times of the Sunday services. “That’s why no one has ever found it. He keeps it in a fucking church. That’s...sacrilegious.”

“Yeah,” Dylan breathes, clearly just as shocked as I am. “I always thought Tony was a good Catholic, but apparently not. Rumor has it he grew up around here, though. That might have something to do with it.”

“Maybe.” I screw my eyes shut as I try to get my head wrapped around what we just learned, but it’s pretty impossible to believe it could be true.

Since there’s no purpose in hanging around and that every second we spend here just risks tipping them off that we know, Dylan takes off almost immediately. “It would have been a lot easier if this *concerned citizen* had just texted us that Tony keeps his guns in this church. Straightforward, you know. All this cloak-and-dagger shit was unnecessary.”

“Probably, but I’m sure there was a reason for it,” I think out loud, leaning my head back as we slowly make our way to the youth center—and the dumpster where we left our stuff.

Surprisingly, it’s all exactly where we left it. It doesn’t seem to have been touched or disturbed at all, but I crunch the tracking device under the heel of my heavy leather boot anyway and drop it back in the trash. The phones are a little more difficult to replace, so I’ll check them out before we decide to give them the same treatment.

Pastels are already painting the sky in oranges and pinks, the sun setting when we get back to the HoH compound. Dylan slows to go through the security checkpoint at what, from the outside, appears to be simply an upmarket, access-controlled housing estate. I have to give it to Ava’s Moms: they really know how to get themselves set up properly.

Once we get up to our studio apartment, I finally turn to look at Dylan. “They’re going to be worried as shit. You ready?”

He sighs and reaches for the door handle. “Yeah, I’m ready. I just don’t know if they’re going to be.”



CHAPTER  
**EIGHTEEN**

## SKYE

**M**y nerves are completely frayed by the time the door suddenly opens and Phoenix and Dylan come striding in. I stop pacing in front of the bank of windows overlooking the street, turning on my heels to face them as my arms fold over my chest and my chin flies up.

“What. The. Fuck. Was. That?”

Maverick and Colton are flanking me, backing me up as I glower at my other two boyfriends. Neither of them seem any worse for wear, though. Not even a hair out of place as they shrug out of their jackets and sling them over the sofa before starting on their boots to get those off too.

“We thought you were dead,” Colt grinds out. “Or captured. Possibly both. Answer the fucking question.”

“It’s a long ass story, man.” Nix is the first to kick off his boots, making a beeline for me and opening his arms. Those warm browns are apologetic on mine. “We’ll tell you everything in a few. Just let us grab some drinks and get comfortable. It’s going to take a while to tell you what happened today. Where’s Ava?”

“Bailed before I woke up,” Mav grunts. “Presumably because these two were starting to tear their hair out. Oh, and also because Alistaire, Aaron, and some dude named Sterling texted to say they’d be back in about an hour. Amazing how that works, right? A phone. It can be used to contact people to let them know your whereabouts when you know they’re bound to be worried about you.”

Phoenix wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his chest as he sighs. Relief barrels through me as I rest my head against his chest and listen to the strong, steady beat of his heart and feel the weight of his warm arms around me. My eyes close and I inhale deeply, thanking whatever gods are out there that they're home safe.

"We know how phones work, Mav. Ours were simply left unattended for a few hours and neither of us wanted to risk turning them on until we know if they've been tampered with."

I go stiff in the circle of his arms, my head dropping back so I can look at his face. "Your phones were unattended? Why? That never happens."

"Tell me about it." Dylan comes up behind me, sweeps my hair off the back of my neck, and plants a hot, open-mouthed kiss on my nape before wrapping his arms around my waist. "Drinks and then we'll talk? We're really fine, though. I promise. It's just been a long, incredibly weird and confusing day and traffic was shit."

After soaking up the feeling of both of their warm, *alive* bodies pressed against mine, I finally feel some of the tension of the afternoon starting to ease out of my muscles. At the thought, I reach up to smack Nix's bicep and then turn to do the same with Dylan.

"Next time, I don't care if you have to stop to use a goddamn payphone. Just let us know you're alright."

Dylan nods, twining his fingers around mine while Nix, Colt, and Maverick head over to the kitchen to grab our drinks. It takes them about thirty minutes to tell us their whole story, and my ears are ringing at the shock of it by the end.

Not only does it seem like something out of a fantasy novel where a portal has opened and sucked us into an alternate universe, but it also just feels surreal. Like it's not something that can possibly be happening.

"So let me get this straight." I look from Nix's caramel browns to Dylan's ocean blues. "Someone sent you on a

treasure hunt to find the location of Tony's weapons?"

Dylan smiles and his eyes light up as he reaches out and wraps his fingers around my thigh. I lean into him at my side, so fucking happy that they're okay that my legs are a little numb.

"Yeah, that's about it. A treasure hunt, huh? I thought of it as more of a wild goose-chase until we got to the end, but I guess we're both onto something."

"Weird as shit. That's what it is." Colton has been sitting on the armchair across from the sofa Dylan, Nix, and I are on while Mav's on one of the stools at the kitchen counter, but both get up now, pacing the same route I was before as they try to process it.

"If it seems too good to be true," Mav mutters, trailing off when he reaches the window overlooking the main street that runs through the compound.

Our place may be small, but it's a really great location with easy access in and out and a pretty decent view of the happenings below. It doesn't quite have the wall of windows I've grown used to since I met the guys, but half a wall on either side of a modern, stone fireplace is good enough for me.

I smile as I cuddle into Dylan's side, exhaustion finally taking over now that I know they're safe. A yawn slides out of me even though it's still early evening, but I don't even try to fight it. The compound is the first place I've felt truly safe since...I don't even know.

Back at the guys' house before I was taken, maybe. I felt safe in bed with them that morning before Tony showed up at the Academy, but then he showed up and that kind of ruined it so...

*Yeah, it's been awhile.*

"I should text Ava to let her know you got back okay." I sit up and fire off the text I promised, then I stand and stretch my arms out above my head. "That's it. I'm calling it a day before something else happens."

“That’s probably a good idea,” Nix agrees, but then he pauses and his brow furrows. “Have you guys had anything to eat? I can make some eggs and toast before we hit the hay?”

Colt groans before he nods. “Deal. I’ll have some groceries delivered so we can start eating properly again, but I’ll do it tomorrow.”

“Better yet, Alistaire is here,” Maverick says, perking up. “Think he’ll mind making—”

I cut him off with a firm shake of my head. “We’re not asking. He probably won’t mind, but he’s got a lot going on himself and Colt can cook. We don’t need Alistaire and I’d really just rather not burden him more than he already is.”

Before Ava left, after Maverick dozed off and Colton went to grab a shower, she told me that Al’s really struggling at the moment. Being involved in a case surrounding the human trade has brought up a lot of old wounds and memories, and while I won’t betray her trust by spelling it out for them, I really just feel like we need to leave him be on the cooking front.

When he sees the guys, I’m sure he’ll tell them what’s been going on and I’m sure he’ll confide in them about how he’s feeling about it, but for now, I don’t want them charging over to his apartment. Apparently, it’s in our building but with him only just having arrived back himself, I’m also pretty sure he doesn’t want them barging in—especially not because I know Ava will be going over there tonight.

So instead, we settle in and eat our eggs, change into pajamas, and then climb into bed. Ava’s moms had a twin delivered to extend the regular king size that’s in here, but it’s still a pretty tight squeeze.

Eventually, Maverick gets up and heads over to the sofa and almost immediately, I hear his soft snores drifting over to me in the dark. As I listen to the steady beat of Nix’s heart under my ear and feel Colton’s breathing even out against my back, I smile.

Just a couple hours ago, I was worried I'd lost not one, but two of the loves of my life. Now they're both here, safe, and happy even if they're also confused and worried about the events of the day. It may not have been a perfect first day at the compound, but all things considered, it went well enough.

We've gained another vital piece of information. No one got injured or dead, and I got to see my best friend again. For my life being what it is these days, this was a pretty good day. And I guess that's how we're going to get through all this.

One day at a time, and every once in a while, we may even have a good day. One that will remind us of what we're fighting for and that if we can just keep chipping away at all the obstacles like we are right now, we may even wake up one morning to find ourselves on the other side.

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My eyes slowly flutter open. The sunlight dances through the morning rays, shattering into a thousand dust motes that dance and swirl in the air as beams of light splash across my field of vision. My mind is still drifting between sleep and being fully awake. I don't know what time it is or why I woke up—until I feel it.

A warm breath on the inside of my thigh.

My legs are pushed open and then a tongue strokes between my folds. A soft moan escapes my mouth and I feel more hot breath on my neck before someone plants a sweet kiss there. I turn my head to the side and see Colton's face, his eyes half-closed and a lazy grin on his lips. He leans in and whispers in my ear, "Good morning, princess."

I turn over to face him and he takes my hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing it softly.

I let out a giggle, feeling the little puffs of air he releases tickling my skin. He moves his hand down my arm, his fingertips leaving light goosebumps in their wake. I reach up and run my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer to me.

Phoenix stirs beside us, his eyes fluttering open as he becomes aware of the activity taking place. A small smile forms on his lips as he watches us, taking in the sight of us tangled together. He moves closer to us, pressing his body against mine from behind. I can feel him growing hard against my thigh, adding to the arousal that's already coursing through my body.

When I lift my head, I find Maverick lying between my thighs. He's licking my pussy like he's a starved man. He must have woken up early and moved to the bed from the sofa where he's been sleeping.

Colton leans in and captures my lips in a passionate kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth as he deepens it. Phoenix's hands move down to my breasts, his fingers pinching my nipples as his lips descend to my neck.

I moan into Colton's mouth. When he breaks the kiss, I look up and see Dylan standing at the end of the bed. Our gazes lock and I can see the passion burning in his. I can feel Maverick's fingers spreading me open more, so that he has better access with his tongue. He sucks my clit between his lips and I can't help but buck my hips.

He groans deep and long, the vibration sending a ripple of electric shocks coursing through my veins. Phoenix rears up and pins my body beneath his own with strong hands, and I feel his lips searing my collarbone, his tongue in a blazingly feral dance as it trails down my neck. I feel Colton's hands running down my arms as he spreads my legs open even wider, allowing Maverick even better access to my pussy.

Maverick lets go of my clit and lines up his dick with my entrance. He slowly slides inside of me. Colton lazily strokes circles around my clit, intensifying the feel of everything else that's going on. Dylan starts pulling his boxers down and stroking his hard length while Phoenix brings his head to my nipples and licks them.

My head is spinning, and I feel like I'm about to go over the edge. There are so many hands on me, so many bodies surrounding me.

And I love it.

I absolutely fucking love that they are all here for me.

Maverick pulls back and moves aside to give Dylan some more room. He gets on the bed next, taking his place between my legs and pushes his dick inside of me.

“Skye Love, you feel so damn good.”

They’re all working together, all touching me, all ready to explode. I lower my hands and take Phoenix’s shaft in one hand, Colton’s in the other.

I start stroking them, slowly at first. Maverick is standing beside the bed, moving his hand on his dick at the same pace I’m setting.

When Dylan starts moving faster, I do too, unable to help the urge to match the pace he’s using as fire begins to burn in my veins. My eyes roll back and I shudder as Phoenix clamps his teeth over my nipple, sending a wave of pleasure through me. Their hands roam over my skin and caress the valley between my breasts and the curve of my hips.

They move in perfect synchrony, pushing me higher and higher towards the edge. My heart thunders in my chest, expanding with every touch.

The pleasure becomes too much and I cry out as my body convulses and shudders beneath theirs. A chorus of male voices join mine as Colton’s fingers dig into my clit, sending me hurtling over into ecstasy.

Maverick releases first, coating my stomach with hot liquid, Phoenix and Colton not far behind. Their own creamy loads join the mess on my skin, marking me as theirs. I can feel Dylan speeding up just a little more before his stomach dips and he shoots his load deep inside of me.



CHAPTER  
**NINETEEN**

## DYLAN

**H**and of Hope took us in when we had nowhere else to go.

Okay, so we had plenty of places to go, but nowhere near as safe as this. They gave us this port in a very big storm, and as much as I don't like owing them one, I will admit that we do. We owe them many, actually. It's a debt I plan to repay; I just don't know how yet.

Early morning sunlight streams in through the window, warming our place as Skye gets out of bed and pads over the laminated wooden floors to the kitchen on bare feet. Lying with an arm hooked behind my head, I watch as she grabs a glass and fills it with water from the faucet, bringing it to her lips and draining it all in one long gulp.

She's naked, her fiery hair hanging down her back like it's pointing at her shapely round ass. As she turns to set the glass down, I catch a glimpse of side-boob, the curve of those mounds where they disappear behind her arm.

My cock stirs and I let my head drop back to the pillow instead of keeping my eyes on her. I still can't get enough of that girl and if I start something right now, we're not going to get anything else done today..

Colton rises up on his elbow at my side, also naked as he reaches across me to grab the tablet lying on the nightstand. I grimace, sending a point glare down to where his cock is barely an inch away from my leg."

"Is that really necessary?"

He frowns, but I see the laughter in his eyes as he makes them big at me. “Sorry. I didn’t realize you woke up pissy. What’s up, Boss?”

“Nothing. Put some pants on, would you?”

“Nope. I’m not going anywhere, so I’m letting the boys breathe a little bit.” He pumps his eyebrows at me, rolling onto his back as he powers up the tablet. “I’m house-hunting again. Any new requests?”

My gaze drifts to the windows and in my mind’s eye, I picture the street down below. “We still don’t know when my dad is going to be back.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I sigh. “Your dad is still in Ireland. Hunt is busy with the trafficking thing and Liam is with us, but he’s pulling back.”

“Okay. I know all that too. Why are we talking about this?” He rolls onto his side so he’s facing me, the tablet lying forgotten on the bed between us. “For the record, I like pillow-talking with you.”

I drop my arm over my eyes and groan, but at the same time, I can’t hold back the laugh that tears out of me. “Has it ever occurred to you how fucking weird this is? We’re naked and you’re right. This is pillow talk.”

Phoenix drops down at the foot of the bed. At least he’s got his underwear back on, but as he stretches his long legs out ahead of him, his feet reaching my chest as he lies back, I shake my head at both of them.

“What are we pillow-talking about?” he asks with the barest hint of a smile raising the corners of his lips.

His hair is tied up now, only a few strands falling over his face while the rest is in a bun behind his head. I sit up too, bringing the sheets with me so they’re at my hips, but at this point, I guess it really doesn’t matter.

Colton sure as shit doesn’t care. He kicks the sheets off himself as he sits next to me and winks at our friend. “Dylan is getting philosophical.”

“Bullshit. It’s not philosophy. It’s fact. The entire upper echelon of the Triskele is as good as gone. They said the war was their swan song, but the way it played out is that they’re the support and we’re running the show.”

Phoenix’s expression grows contemplative, his features drawing together slightly before he nods. “Yeah, that’s true.”

Maverick tosses Skye over his shoulder in the kitchen and she lets out a peel of laughter as he carries her to the bathroom, shooting us a playful grin as he walks by. “Don’t talk about anything too important without me. We’re going to get cleaned up.”

Jealousy fizzles through me, but it dies almost instantly. The truth is that I’m not really jealous that he’s going to take a shower with her. I just wish I could have some carefree time again too. I definitely didn’t appreciate that enough when I had it.

Sighing as I nod at him, he takes off with a laughing Skye and I turn back to Colton and Nix. “My point is that things are changing. Fast. If we survive, we’re going to head up the Triskele and Skye is going to be at the top of the Riviera organization. Ava will eventually be the president here.”

Colton flashes me a lopsided grin. “We’ll be the rulers of the New York Underworld. It’s going to be a trifecta.”

I scoff back a laugh. “Yeah, and for the first time in history, there aren’t going to be any turf wars or disputes getting innocent bystanders killed.”

Phoenix leans back and crosses his legs on the mattress. “That’ll definitely be a first, but it won’t last long. Sooner or later, there’ll be a new player in town and the cycle will start all over again. That’s if the new player hasn’t already arrived and we just don’t know about them yet.”

“Circle of life,” Colton says. “No one will stand a chance against the Trifecta, though. Think about it. With the power and weight of the Triskele, the Rivas, and Hand of Hope behind us, there’s no way anyone does anything we don’t give them permission to.”

My brow hikes up. “Nah. Phoenix is right. It won’t last forever, but when we’re eventually threatened again, we’ll go to bat just as we’re doing now. You asked me if I have any new requests for a house, though.”

Nix glances around and spots at the tablet. “I thought we were staying here until the Manor is ready and that we’re moving in there at least until Tony is gone. We’ll gain access to all his properties when we win, so why are we looking for a house now?”

“We’re not staying in one of Tony’s places.” Colton’s face falls and turns hard. “I’ve actually had a thought about what we can do with them, but I need to discuss it with Skye and we need to win first, so there’s no rush.”

“All I was saying is that we’ve got the Manor and we will have a multitude of properties we could renovate or sell. If we sell, we could use Tony’s money for our new beginning and keep all of our own to use on other, better, funner things. Seems poetic in a way. House hunting right now seems unnecessary.”

“It’s not,” Colton growls, his grays locking firmly on Phoenix’s. “When the dust settles, I want a fucking home.”

“So do I, but our world is going to look very different when the dust does settle,” Phoenix reasons.

I lean forward, putting my hands out toward each of them as I intervene. “This isn’t an argument. We all want a home to start over in, but we do need to consider what the world is going to look like for us once Tony is gone. We won’t be able to live hours away, for instance. If we’re going to be in charge, we’ll need to be here in the city. Or at least as close to it as we can get.”

Nix scratches the back of his neck as his gaze moves toward the windows. “I see where you’re going with this. You think we need a similar setup to HoH. A space we can fortify and live with our top lieutenants and our closest advisors.”

“Look, I’m not saying it’s not great what they’ve got here.” Colton shoves a hand into his hair, shaking his head as

he thinks it over.” It is, but it’s also dangerous. Someone infiltrates just this one place like they did with the Manor and the entire organization is fucked.”

I shrug. “There is something to be said for that argument, but I need to talk to my dad. Find out if he’s coming back at all. If he’s not, there’s more than enough space on the Manor’s grounds for a few extra houses.”

Colton’s lips spread into a slow, wide grin and Phoenix’s eyebrows shoot up, but neither of them argue with me. I nod as I look at each of them in turn. “Hold off on the house hunt for a few days. We’ll run it by Skye and Maverick and then, if they’re onboard, I’ll talk to my dad.”

He sighs, but pushes the tablet away to show me he’s surrendering. For now. Nix must sense there’s more, because he dips his chin in a curt nod and then looks at me again. “Next order of business?”

“We need the building plans for the church. Put in a call to Mick and have him reach out to the city planning office. That’s the cleanest way for us to get hold of them. Even if Tony does catch wind of it, if the request comes from Mick St. Adams, he won’t think it’s for us.”

Phoenix smirks. “It’s good to know my brains are rubbing off on you.”

I roll my eyes. “I don’t want to think too much about you rubbing off on me. Hits too close to home.”

He laughs and winks at me. “You’d love it. I’d offer, but I’m assuming we’re not done here yet?”

“What happened to taking it slow today and getting settled in here?” Colton flops back on the bed. “I was looking forward to some downtime.”

“We don’t get any downtime right now. Not while my dad has left the Triskele in the middle of a war he’s been gearing up to for decades for a woman.”

I still can’t actually believe it, but it’s true.

Dad chose Liz—and he’s choosing her again every morning he wakes up and doesn’t come home. We haven’t heard from them at all, which was to be expected. The fact he went with her in the first place spoke volumes. But now...

He’s been gone for weeks. He missed the funerals of men who have been with him for years. Sure, Liam sent flowers on Dad’s behalf and he’s now in contact with the widows in the aftermath, but Dad himself is nowhere to be found.

Some would call it cowardice. Last year this time, I would’ve been one of those people, but now that I have Skye in my life, I know it’s not that.

It’s love. He’s not running away; he’s choosing her. Choosing the love of his life over the organization he dedicated it to before her.

I never saw it coming, but here we are. Phoenix reaches out and pats my foot. “Do you know how to get hold of him about the Manor?”

“Liam.” That one word is all the explanation I need and Phoenix gets it, so I move on. “Okay, while we’re waiting on the building plans, we also need to take care of this reporter. What do we know about him?”

Colton straightens up, his eyes alert and focused as he swipes up the tablet. “I looked him up. He’s a freelance investigative reporter who’s been in the game for years. The bad news is that he’s definitely one of Tony’s. Aaron was right. Frankie Hayes has been reporting on the New York underground since our dads were our age and he’s never written a word about the Rivas. He hasn’t written about the Triskele either, but no one does. When it’s Tony that isn’t being written about, it’s a different story. There’s more to it than just that, though.”

Unease snakes through my gut. “What is it?”

“Every time someone has gone up against Tony and things have started looking bad, Frankie comes out of the woodwork with an investigation against the threat. He puts the authorities

onto them with his stories and inevitably, they do the dirty work for the Rivas from there.”

“And with all the support Tony has from within the authorities, no one has ever broken this cycle, have they?” Phoenix asks, but it sounds like he already knows the answer.

Colton’s jaw ticks as it clenches when he nods. “On the face of it, it’s all legitimate. The guy gets a tip about a crime that has really happened, he investigates and reports on it, and then he turns over everything he has to the authorities. Once that happens, they follow his evidence and they apprehend the people responsible, at which point the justice system takes over. They’re always heard by a judge on our list and the case is prosecuted by one of Tony’s too. It’s a pretty bulletproof system, especially because the allegations are always true and the evidence is there to support them.”

“Fuck. We’re not going to turn him, are we?”

“Nope.” Phoenix’s legs slide off the mattress and his knee starts bouncing. “I managed a quick call with my dad earlier. That’s where I was when you guys started your pillow-talk, and here’s the kicker: they know Frankie Hayes.”

Blood pounds in my ears. “What?”

“Yep.” He flinches before he gets up. “Frankie’s dad served in the military with Tony’s back in the day. Old man Riviera saved Hayes’ life, which is why Tony’s had a loyal lapdog all these years.”

“Fuck.” Colton suddenly gets up too, finally grabbing his sweats and covering up. “There goes that plan. There’s no way we’re turning him with a more enticing story if he’s repaying that kind of debt. It’s a pity too. I’ve been digging up some leads we could’ve fed him about the Rivas that would’ve connected some pretty big dots.”

“He won’t bite.” That much, I’m sure of. “So we need a new plan.”

My mind churns, but there’s really only one option. “We need to find out what he knows. Soon. Tonight. I doubt he’s got anything concrete on us, in which case, we’ll leave him to



chase the ghosts, but on the off-chance that he managed to find something, we need to take him down.”

“I’ll go,” Colton volunteers immediately. “I’ll get his address and go have a look around his office later. He doesn’t work for a publication, so it’s a decent bet he keeps everything he’s working on under lock and key at home.”

“Under lock and key being the operative words in that sentence, but yes. Get in and out as fast as you can, you hear me?”

He snaps two fingers to his forehead in a salute, then strides into the bathroom to brush his teeth and possibly to join Mav and Skye in the shower. Meanwhile, I’m now the only one naked and I guess it’s time for me to go put on some pants myself.

“One last thing.” I glance at Phoenix as I get out of bed. “Go pay Mick a visit. Don’t call. I’m sure he’ll remember who you are and we need him to get this done fast and our way. We haven’t dealt with him very much before. I don’t trust that he won’t record a phone call or hit speaker for whoever he’s with to hear.”

Phoenix drops his chin in another nod. “Good call. I’ll go see him later. I just need to grab a shower once they’re done.”

As he says it, Skye emerges from the bathroom with her hair wet and messy around her shoulders, only a towel on and tucked between her breasts. Lust ripples through me and my cock twitches, but thankfully, I’m already wearing my sweats.

I really cannot afford to get sidetracked by sex anymore. It fucking sucks, but we’ve got responsibilities now that have to take priority. Even if we don’t have anything urgent planned right this minute, we literally just had sex less than an hour ago. That has to be enough for now. We need to stay focused and let go of those versions of ourselves we used to be. The ones who kept right on fucking all day long. *Which really fucking sucks, but what are you gonna do? Not like I can cry about it.*

“What are you guys talking about?” she asks, those green eyes burning into mine as she suspicion creeps into them, tightening them at the corners. “You ended up talking about important things without us after all, didn’t you?”

Phoenix smirks at me. “I’ve got a few calls to make. I’ll leave it to you to handle this one, Boss. Good luck.”

Skye’s hands find her hips and she lifts her chin as she stares at me. *Shit*. “Thanks, I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

CHAPTER  
TWENTY

## SKYE

“I swear, around here, it’s like you blink and miss it.” I release an annoyed huff through my nostrils. “We just went to grab a shower. You couldn’t have waited?”

Dylan smiles, his eyes having a hard time leaving my chest before he reaches down, adjusts himself, and then sits back down on the bed. He curls one of his long legs underneath him, the other still hanging over the side of the bed as he beckons me to him.

I shake my head. “I’m not letting you make it up to me with orgasms.”

It’s so rare to hear him chuckle these days that the sound catches me off-guard, and he’s so damn beautiful in this moment that I go to him anyway. With that blond head thrown back just a little, his abs rippling as he laughs and that gorgeous face not strained with worry for once, I’m still not letting him touch me but he’s just so freaking irresistible that I crawl into his lap to hug him.

“I wasn’t going to offer to make it up to you with orgasms, but I could,” he murmurs against my hair as he hugs me back, fitting his hard, warm body against mine and resting his head against my own. “We didn’t leave you out of anything. I promise. Colton and I were just talking and one thing led to another.”

I giggle, lifting my head away so I can look at him. “Yeah, I know exactly how that goes.”

He chuckles again, lying down with his back against the mattress so I'm straddling him as he hooks his hands behind his head. "I didn't want to know that, but I'm sure you do. Remind me to ask about your exes when all this is over so I can take care of them for you."

"No need," I say lightly. "They're already taken care of."

He jerks a little as his eyes pop wide open. "You fucking killed them?"

"No," I laugh, shaking my head as I swat his chest. "Of course not. I broke up with them. That's enough. Now stop stalling and tell me what you were talking about."

Those blues drill into mine, and I can see he doesn't really want to do this. He doesn't want to let go of this one, quick lighthearted moment, but he does it anyway, breaking it down for me quickly and concisely.

Once he's done, he sits up again, presses a chaste kiss to my lips that he breaks before I can deepen it, then he smacks my ass. "Okay, love. I need to grab a shower."

When I follow his gaze toward the bathroom door, Colton's just coming out. With only a towel wrapped around his waist and his own washboard abs on full display while I'm still straddling Dylan.

*Shit.* I should get a medal for ever getting anything done with these guys around. Since it's been a while since I could really appreciate any of them though, I'm making the most of the time I've got now.

Colton smirks and drops his towel as Dylan heads into the bathroom, then he spreads his arms out the sides, turns in a slow circle, and twerks to show me his ass once he's got his back to me. "Like what you see? It's all yours, baby."

I laugh, putting my hands together and cheering. My own towel falls, and Colton laughs as we head over to the walk-in closet together. As I'm pulling out a pair of jeans and a light knit sweater, he turns to me with a slightly nervous look in his eyes.

"So, uh, he told you we talked about houses, right?"

“Yes, he did. He also mentioned you’ve got a plan for the Riviera properties? You’re counting our chickens a little bit, but I’m curious. What have you got in mind?”

“Everything Dylan and Nix told us about this concerned citizen tells the story of someone who’s seriously suffered under Tony’s rein. At least, that’s how I feel about it. You don’t give out that kind of information for free unless it’s a matter of serious principle.”

I pause with my jeans halfway up my shin. “I hadn’t thought of it like that, but sure. The Triskele would’ve paid good money for the location of Tony’s weapons.”

“Millions,” he says without skipping a beat. “I was thinking about it last night after you guys fell asleep. Over the years, we’ve heard a lot of stories from a lot of people. We deal in the same trades, but our way of doing things is very different to his.”

My heart suddenly feels like it has a rock lodged right in the center of it. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking about that too, but tell me what you want to do with the properties first.”

“We could turn them over to charity organizations. I don’t know how many properties he has or how big they are, but my guess would be that there isn’t just one small apartment. We could give them to organizations that provide housing for the homeless, for orphans, and for people who are struggling to get back on their feet. If you want to, of course. We could also just sell them and make some money.”

“No,” I whisper, overcome with emotion as I straighten up and look into his silvery-grays. My mouth wants to gape, but I don’t let it. There are already tears pressing against the backs of my eyes. I don’t need to look like more of a sap than I already do. “Colt, that’s perfect. We’re doing that.”

“Yeah?” A small, relieved grin tugs at the corners of his lips and he tilts his head as he stares back at me. “Good. I’m glad. Also, I’m glad that’s one decision about dismantling his empire we’ve already made. There’s a lot more of that in your future, so whatever I can do to help...”

“Our future,” I correct him quietly, dragging in a deep breath before I pull my jeans the rest of the way up. “Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

He laughs, the heavy moment gone as he grabs a t-shirt and shoves it over his head. “Never, but the decisions about the Riviera organization and its assets belong to you. We’ll help, but we can’t tell you what to do. It’s your birthright.” He grins at me. “If you want it.”

“I don’t, but it’s mine anyway. Half-mine, at least.” I put on the sweater and stride back out with him hot on my heels.

Colton walks to the kitchen and puts on some coffee as I pause in front of the windows, looking out at the main street but not really seeing anything. “Hey, Colton?”

“Yeah?”

“About what you said before. How *do* you do things? The Rivieras are assholes, sure, but what makes the Triskele better?”

“We don’t deal in humans, for one.”

I sigh. “Yeah. No. I know that, but you *do* supply prostitutes to those hotels in Vegas. I know you said it’s not the same and I realize you don’t, like, buy people at auctions, but to me...”

“It feels the same,” he concludes gently, dragging his hands through his black hair as he leans against the kitchen counter while waiting for the coffee. “I guess the big difference is that we don’t force anyone to do anything against their will. We pay those who are already in the industry exceptionally well and because of that, they’re willing to work for us.”

I turn it over in my head. “That is a big difference, you’re right, but is it an industry they actually want to be in? Or do their circumstances force them to be there? Sex work is great for some people, I get that, but we’ve got to put the safeties in place. Starting with consent, so do you have that or that?”

He shakes his head slowly from one side to the other. “I can’t answer that. It probably depends from one person to the

next, but I can tell you that we've had a lot of people leave us when they've made however much it was they set out to make. I can also promise you that even if their circumstances forced them into it, with what they get paid, they can get out if they want to."

A tiny bit of the weight lifts, but not much. I know they are better than Tony. Really, I do. But I'm still wondering if we can't be even better. I've been thinking about it for a while, but now probably isn't the time to get technical.

"Fine. Okay, but let's shelve that for a moment. Let's assume, just for this moment, that everyone who works for you in that industry is absolutely happy doing it, but what about the drugs? We just destroyed Tony's stuff, but the Triskele supplies, too."

"So do dozens of others," he says gently. "The best we can do is to make sure the product we put out there is good quality. We don't cut it with rat poison or whatever else, and while I agree that it would be better if every addict just stopped using, that's not going to happen. At least this way, we know no one is dying because of something we've put into the stuff they're putting in their bodies."

"But people are still dying."

He nods once, and Dylan walks out of the bathroom, frowning when he sees the contemplative expression on my face. I'm guessing he also heard some of what we were saying while he was getting dressed, because he doesn't ask for an explanation before he jumps in.

"What it boils down to is this: It would be great if the world was all sunshine and rainbows, but it's not. Drugs exist and people are addicted to them. To alcohol. To nicotine. Narcotics. Guns exist and people are going to use them to keep killing each other. They're also going to keep using every other weapon that has ever and will ever be invented to hurt each other. To wage wars."

Irritation ripples through me and I frown, my mouth twisting as I shake my head at him. "I know that, *Blade*. I'm not suggesting otherwise, but I *am* having a crisis of



conscience about being in control of an organization that contributes to all of that.”

“I get it.” His voice is surprisingly understanding as he strides over to me, putting his hands on the sides of my arms and dipping his head to look straight into my eyes. “It’s not black and white though, Skye. And sure, we live in the darker shades of gray, I’ll grant you that, but the difference between us and them is that we do everything in our power to mitigate the damage. We’re no saints and we’ve never pretended to be, but we keep a close eye on the people who supply our narcotics. We also keep to our own territory to minimize petty turf disputes that can only end with innocent people getting killed, and we intervene when the lower level gangs or clubs who operate underneath us get out of hand.”

“That’s one of the reasons it’s going to make such a difference in the city when the Trifecta is solidified,” Colton says. “You, Ava, and Dylan will be heading up the three most powerful organizations, which means you can rule with iron fists if you want. You’ll be able to keep the peace and to call the shots.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “Are we ridding Gotham City of villains?”

He laughs, but then he shrugs. “Nah. There’s always going to be crime, thank God. It means we can keep making a good living for ourselves, but ultimately, we’ll be able to lay down the rules. Intervene when we need to and try to keep the unnecessary skirmishes to a minimum. That’s about the best you can do.”

“Skirmishes?” I smile as I turn back to the window, trying to dispel this sudden weight crushing my chest. “So what you’re saying is that guns don’t kill people; people do. That it’s all about flooding the market with the best quality narcotics you can get your hands on and try to keep the peace between the tribes?”

“Exactly.” Dylan gives me a tight smile before he backs away, spins, and heads into the closet. I sigh, shaking my head at myself.

“Your morals are super gray,” I mutter under my breath, leaning a hip against the windowsill and staring at what’s going on down below. “I think we can do better, though.”

“How? If all drug dealers, and arms dealers, and pimps dropped dead tomorrow, there would be more to take their place by sunset. The same goes for corruption, medical fraud, insider trading...you name it.”

“I don’t know how yet, but I’ve got some ideas. I’m not suggesting we try to rid the world of everything and everyone evil. I just think that we need to work harder to never be like Tony.”

Colton pushes away from the counter and makes our coffee, picking mine up and handing it over as I keep marveling at everything happening outside.

“This is a pretty damn impressive setup they have here.” I look at two kids running down the street, a burly, bearded man with full sleeve tattoos on his arms chasing after them with a wide grin on his face. “It’s not really what I pictured a motorcycle club compound to look like.”

Phoenix strides back in and comes to stand next to me. “I can help with that.”

“Of course, you can.” I glance at him, smiling as I motion for him to continue. “Share your knowledge, oh wise one. Why does it look like they’re living in the after of a fairy tale down there?”

“I guess it’s because they kind of are living in the after of their fairy tale.” He turns to face the room, perching his butt on the windowsill like a preschool teacher who’s about to start story time. “So, uh, you already know we didn’t pay Hand of Hope much attention before you came along.”

I look back at him and nod. “Sure, yeah. I remember. You told me you knew when they moved into town as a new MC, but that they weren’t really a big player.”

“At the time, yes. That’s what we thought, but they’ve grown steadily and since they’re part of a nationwide organization, they’ve always been a force to be reckoned with.

They just never made themselves a problem for us, so we largely ignored them.”

“Dad went and spoke to Ava’s moms back when they first moved here,” Dylan offers. “They were respectful. Told him they wouldn’t get it our way and after that, we had no reason to keep Ava on our radar while we were at school.”

“But after she came to stay with us that weekend and started talking about the compound, I got curious.” Phoenix smiles at me. “She also happened to be your best friend by then, so I figured it was time to know more.”

“And by curious, you mean you found out everything there is to know about them?” I back away from the window and sit down next to Mav on the sofa, my eyes never leaving Phoenix’s. “So, what’s their deal?”

He gets comfortable on the windowsill, his open palms resting on either side of his thighs as he leans back. “It turns out that their Godfather-like character was a guy called Johnny Johnson. An old mechanic with a shop on the street level of a building he inherited in some no-name town back in the ‘50s.”

“Okay, I’m getting a mental picture.” I say slowly as my mind conjures up some happy little town with people tipping their hats at one another and old man Johnson smiling as he greets everyone who walks by. “Tell me more.”

“The town was a shithole.” Phoenix splashes a big tin of black paint all over the picture in my head and I sigh, but I let it go. *There’s no changing the past.*

“Johnson broke his arm when one of his pieces of equipment failed and dumped a muscle car on him, and he was going to go bankrupt if he didn’t get help, so he employed a down and out ex-con. The guy had just gotten out and he was in need of a place to stay, so Johnny offered him an apartment in the building above the shop.”

I rock my head from side to side. “It seems like a win-win situation to me.”

“It was, but Johnny faced a lot of backlash from the community for taking the guy in and giving him a home. The

town was already on its way downhill and they claimed that encouraging criminals to make it their home would only accelerate the slide.”

“They probably weren’t wrong,” Maverick reasons. “Is that what happened?”

“Pretty much, but Hand of Hope’s history comes from this story so let me tell it.” Nix gets a faraway look in his eyes, like he’s trying to picture it now himself. “Okay, so now you’ve got Johnson with his broken arm and the ex-con who’s working for him. The townspeople are pissed, but he’s also the only mechanic who stayed behind when the logging company pulled out so—”

“Wait, there’s a logging company now?” Colton asks. “Where do they come in?”

“Nowhere, but that’s why the town went to shit. The logging company built it, but when the natural resources started drying up, they moved on and most of the town lost their jobs.”

Sadness grabs hold of me as the picture I’ve been drawing in my head suddenly gets a lot darker. “That’s where HoH comes from? Is that why you said this is the after in the fairy tale?”

Nix huffs out a frustrated breath, chuckling as he shakes his head at us. “Wait and see, people. Jesus. Let me tell the fucking story.”

One by one, we nod and Colton even clamps his hand over his mouth. Nix rolls his eyes, but then he carries on. “Reluctantly, the townspeople keep using the services of their only mechanic, but luckily for Johnson, his ex-con has a few friends. He was too proud to ask for their help, but he’s not too proud to work on their bikes and cars, right? Obviously, not. So now, there’s a whole different element regularly coming to visit their friend and somewhere along the way, Johnson starts chopping cars.”

I sigh. “Of course.”

Nix shrugs. “Anything to stay alive. That’s kind of what HoH is founded on, though: doing anything it takes to stay alive. To provide for their own. On the upside, the shop started doing so well, they could afford to hire more help, so they took in this kid who just aged out of the foster system. He got an apartment and a job too, and now they’ve got six working hands.”

“Johnson’s arm has recovered by then, I’m assuming?” Mav asks teasingly.

Phoenix rolls his eyes again. “Obviously. None of this happened overnight. The cycle keeps going and eventually, Johnson’s shop has expanded and it’s also become known as the premium chop-shop in the county.”

“There’s such a thing as a premium chop-shop?” I ask.

Nix shrugs. “For the purpose of this story, yes. Johnson’s whole building is now home to all kinds of ex-cons and men from all different walks of life who’ve got some knowledge about cars. He’s quite old at this point, but he’s making a damn killing so when he dies, he’s got to keep the legacy going, right?”

“I guess,” I say. “He didn’t have any kids?”

“Nope, but he started thinking of all these guys he took in as his sons, so since he couldn’t take his money with him, he created a trust fund and left the shop, the building, and all his money to them. The trust was called Extending a Hand of Hope.”

“This is starting to make sense now,” Dylan muses. “That’s where they started?”

Phoenix nods. “After the old man died, all his boys and a lot of their loyal clients and friends took his ashes, got on their bikes, and rode hundreds of miles. That was the first of what is now an annual Legacy Run. They scattered Johnson’s ashes somewhere in the desert and as he blew away on a light summer’s breeze, they—”

“A light summer’s breeze?” Maverick laughs. “Way to embellish, dude.”

“Do you want to tell the story?”

“I would, but I don’t know it, so continue.”

Phoenix tugged at the elastic band holding his bun up, pulling it out and then remaking it. “While they scattered his ashes, they decided that they were going to honor his wishes. Keep the legacy alive, so they used his money to buy up more properties in more down-and-out towns, set up more shops, and hired only people who couldn’t get other jobs.”

“And with more feet coming to those towns, I’m assuming they breathed new life into them?” I asked, genuinely interested.

Phoenix smiled. “To an extent, but yeah. I guess some motels and diners probably survived a little bit longer than they would’ve if not for them. Fast forward a few decades, and here we are. HoH still takes in all the birdies with the broken wings and they’re still chopping cars, but they’re also involved in most other profitable ventures. Just like us. Only to them, it’s simply a way of making enough money to keep the legacy alive and to keep helping people.”

“That’s pretty cool, actually.” I feel a smile lifting the corners of my lips unbidden. “Does that mean they’re the good guys of the underworld?”

Dylan snorts. “No one is the good guy here. Some of us are only marginally better than others, which brings us full circle to what we were talking about earlier. Everyone is doing what they need to do to survive, but you can do as much good as you want to do along the way.”

*Doing good...* I’d love that. Even in the context of being a future mob Boss. After everything I’ve been through, I’m going to love the power I’ll have when I take over the Riviera Family, but that can’t be where it ends. I don’t just want to take over. I want to transform.

“You don’t need to give me an answer right now, but I’ve been thinking about those minors in Vegas, the drugs, everything.” I take a deep breath. “What I want to do, at the very least, is to start supplying every one of my dealers with

Narcan and funding safe places for people to shoot up. Doing background checks on brothel employees and everyone else. I think the Triskele should do the same.”

Dylan blinks— a lot. He glances at Colton, then at Phoenix, who shrugs, and then he looks back at me. There’s a strange, almost constipated expression on his face, but he’s not saying no. Not yet, anyway. “Let me think about it.”

My phone beeps with an incoming text, and I turn the screen to show the guys after I read it. “Ava wants us to meet them in the park. Apparently, it’s down the block.”

“They’ve even got parks here?” Colton huffs out an incredulous laugh and shakes his head. “Nice. We really need to get our act together.”

I don’t say it, but I agree with him. It’s a plan to be made another day, though. When they’ve had time to think about my suggestions. I, for one, plan on taking some inspiration from Hand of Hope. They’re balancing good and bad in a way I never knew was possible, and it’s given me a lot to consider for my own reign when it begins.

That’s not happening right now, though. Right now, we need to get to the park so we all go back to the closet to grab our shoes and once we’re ready, we head out.

The streets in the compound/former housing estate are wide and clean, with tall trees lining the sidewalks and hopscotch painted on the concrete outside some of the houses where I assume kids live. It really is damn impressive, and by the time we’ve made it down the block, I’m wondering if there’s any way I can emulate this for the Riviera organization in the future.

But then Mav balks when we round the corner to the park. “I don’t do picnics.”

I frown. “You don’t do picnics?”

He shrugs, almost starting to walk backward before I stop him with a soft hand on his bicep. “Why not? You don’t like eating food out of a basket?”

He shrugs. “It’s just that we don’t live in the ‘60s and we don’t exactly have the kind of life where you sip apple cider in the sunshine and watch kids kicking a ball around.”

“Today, that’s exactly the life we have.” I wrap my arm around his and lead him to where Ava’s got a picnic blanket spread out on the lawn in the shade of a big old oak tree.

There are four baskets of food instead of just one. She’s got sandwiches, plastic cups and cutlery, chopped fruit, and cold cuts along with the apple cider Mav just mentioned. My mouth waters, but Maverick was right. This is pretty far removed from our normal lives.

As we stride across the lawn, I vaguely notice the three men sitting on the blanket with her. Alistaire is there and he stands up when he sees us approaching. As does Aaron.

There’s a dark-haired guy who’s only slightly smaller than Maverick sitting right at the edge of the blanket, his body angled so he’s not looking at either us or them. His arms are dripping with ink, his denim-clad knees pulled up to his chest as he toys with a lip ring and scowls off into the distance. This must be Sterling, but for now, it’s Ava I’m focused on.

My friend is wearing a pale yellow sundress and her blonde hair is fastened in a high ponytail, her face bare of almost all makeup. She’s smiling warmly as she gets up with Aaron and Alistaire, and I feel a bit of a pang just looking at her. Which is why I only vaguely noticed the guys before.

Ava does a good job of pretending she’s a bad ass, and she is, but she’s also got an innocence to her I really envy. I know I shouldn’t. I fought hard to get to where I am right now, with my guys and to be on the inside of the action, but she looks so happy and relaxed.

She set up a fucking picnic in a park at noon and she brought all the trimmings. I mean, it really does kinda look like something out of a fairy tale. And in that moment, it hurts me to the deepest recesses of my soul that she’s not going to get to hang onto that innocence.



I may envy it, but I'm also so happy that she still gets to have it—and that's what hurts. Her moms aren't going to live forever and with what they're involved in right now, their days are probably as numbered as ours.

Which means that eventually, picnics in the park and pretty sundresses are going to be a thing of the past for her. She's going to get sucked into the belly of the beast just like the rest of us already have been and then, she's going to be in just as much danger as we are.

Maybe even more. I learned this morning that there's a lot more I don't know about HoH than what I do know—which is almost nothing. They've probably got enemies of their own and a laundry list of activities that might end up getting her hurt or killed.

I shove it all down when a lump starts to grow in my throat, though. This isn't the time to be scared. Now is the time to make the memories I'm going to be clinging to soon. As soon as tonight, even. When Colton goes off to break into an investigative reporter's house and Phoenix drops in to visit Mick.

*Fuck.* This little fantasy of ours really isn't going to last long, so instead of indulging the sadness and the fear, I smile back at Ava and release Maverick's hand to pull her into my arms.

“Hey. Thanks for inviting us.”

She squeezes me real tight before releasing me and winding her arm around mine. “Of course. Let me introduce you guys to Sterling.” She laughs when she sees Alistaire and my guys already handing out back thumping hugs and Nix and Aaron already talking quietly with their heads bent together. “I guess it's a good thing the others already know each other, but Skye, meet Sterling. Sterling, Skye.”

I didn't even see the guy move, but suddenly, he's towering over me, standing right in front me, and he extends his hand slowly. Like he's about to make a deal with a devil he'd rather have shot on sight. A tingle of caution runs through me, but Ava knows him. She might just be in love with him, so

instead of heeding it, I stick my hand right out and smack my palm into his.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you, Sterling. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-ONE**

## COLTON

I think we fell down a rabbit hole on the sidewalk. Unless Ava's just into trying to look like Alice and making me feel like we're in Wonderland.

Is it weird that I've gotten this far in life without ever having had a picnic? Probably. Is it surprising given the line of work my family is in? Probably not. I don't know, but as we all sit down on Ava's checkered fucking blanket, I get why Maverick tried to bolt.

This is way too Stepford-y for me. Yet, Skye is smiling as she sits down with Ava and that Sterling guy, so I guess we're staying.

While Aaron and Phoenix talk about Frankie Hayes and Dylan falls into a deep but quiet conversation with Alistaire, Maverick and I end up next to each other, both of us sitting with our spines ramrod straight and our arms crossed. It feels wrong to be out in the open like this. I know we're in a supposedly secure compound, but shit.

This park is huge. I can't even see the end of the lush green lawn as it stretches into a copse of trees on the far side. We're surrounded on three sides by streets lined with neat, single-family homes, and there's no indication that there's a sniper in a window pointing a muzzle at us, but my heart is still beating too fast, my palms sweaty as I glance around.

"You're safe here," a steely, rough voice announces from the other side of the blanket and I start until I realize it was Sterling.

People say my eyes are gray, but his are like gunmetal and it sets my teeth on edge because I also see the telltale bulge of a gun under his t-shirt. I jerk my chin at it. “If that’s true, why are you packing?”

“Presidents’ orders. Ava is precious to them. She’s not to be unprotected under any circumstances.” There’s zero inflection in his gravelly voice, but I still see worry in his eyes. His shoulders are held as tight as mine and Maverick’s and his features are set as hard and sharp as Dylan’s usually are.

Another sign of his obvious discomfort is the press of his tongue against the ring in his lip. I can see the bulge of it whenever he toys with it on the inside of his mouth, but he doesn’t make it so obvious as to tug it between his teeth or let his tongue peek out. But still, this guy’s uncomfortable. And worried.

I frown, but Mav suddenly cocks his head. “I’m assuming there’s no need for introductions.”

“Nope.” Those steel-colored gaze rests on Mav’s and it’s hard, but I also think I see the barest glimmer of curiosity. Possibly even respect, but he still doesn’t trust us. That’s for damn sure. “Maverick Jameson and Colton Baker. I wish I could say it was nice to finally meet you.”

To my surprise, Maverick’s still not frowning or looking as on edge as I feel. In fact, he smirks at the guy and blows out a sharp breath through his nostrils. “Dude, relax. We’re no threat to you or your girl.”

“She’s not my girl.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course. We got it.” Mav lifts his hands to show he meant no harm, and then he fucking *winks*.

*Maverick Jameson winking at a strange man. A strange man who has a gun and is sitting next to our girlfriend with it. This really is Wonderland.*

I turn to shoot him a look, and he catches it but laughs. “Relax, Colt. He’s not going to pull that thing on us unless he thinks we’re a threat to the girl he’s absolutely not in love with. That’s why he brought it. To protect Ava. From *us*.”

When I glance back at Sterling who's now glaring daggers at Maverick while Ava blushes all the way to her hairline, I realize he's right. Laughter erupts out of me and Sterling's suddenly glaring at me, looking like he wants nothing more than to rip my head off with his bare hands.

"I come in peace, man," I tell him as the laughter subsides. "Sorry. I guess I just wasn't really expecting that. Your girlfriend is safe with us."

"She's not my girlfriend," he grits out before he ricochets to his feet and his expression softens as he looks at Ava. "I'm going to check the perimeter. I'll be back."

"Of course."

As he marches away, Aaron breaks off his conversation with Phoenix to glance at Sterling's back. He sighs. "Don't mind him. He's grumpy."

"The grumpy to my sunshine," Ava jokes.

I frown. I don't get it.

But Phoenix clearly does. He laughs and looks over her outfit. "I was wondering why you were dressed like that."

She rolls her eyes and flips him off. "Screw you. This is a nice dress and it happens to be super comfortable. That's why I'm wearing it."

Alistaire leans forward so he can see Ava past Dylan and he gives her such a genuine smile that I'm pretty sure Skye was right yesterday. Ava is in the process of putting together a harem of her own.

"You look beautiful, Ava. As always. Don't pay any attention to Phoenix."

She flushes again and strangely, Aaron does too. His gaze hits his lap and I smirk. *Well, this is going to be interesting.*

Unfortunately, I don't get to see it unfold. As Ava tries to change the subject by asking everyone which sandwich they want and starts handing them out, my phone chimes. I slide it out of my pocket, standing up as soon as I see the message on the screen.

JT

Hayes is on the move.

Skye frowns when she looks up at me. “What’s that about?”

“Jas’s guy.” I walk around the blanket to her, bending over to press a kiss to her forehead. “I gotta go. I asked him to keep an eye on my target this morning and a window has just opened up.”

I don’t want to say too much since I don’t particularly want Ava or Alistaire to cotton onto what I’m saying. Aaron already knows about the sex offenders and Al knows some, but not everything. I’m pretty sure Ava knows some too, but I don’t know for a fact that Skye ever told her the whole story and besides, if they wake up tomorrow morning to the story of an investigative reporter who was found dead in his home, I don’t necessarily want them connecting it to this conversation.

Maverick rises from the blanket. “I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t need company. I’m only gathering information, remember? Plus, JT is there. He’ll watch my back.”

“Let him watch mine, and I’ll watch yours.” Mav dusts off his ass and strides over to me before dipping down to kiss Skye goodbye. “We’ll stay in touch. Love you.”

“Love you too.” She glances up at me, worry clashing with amusement in her eyes. “And you, too. Be safe, will you?”

“We’ll be home before you know it.” I bend over again, pressing a kiss to the top of her hair and wishing we weren’t leaving her here, out in the open. “I love you, Love. You’ll get inside before sunset?”

Dylan scoffs. “Nix and I aren’t chopped liver. Go. Your window could be closing.”

---

By the time Mav and I got to Frankie's place, JT had already let us know that the window was closed. Sitting in the back of Jas's surveillance van, we're both disappointed but at least it turns out the trip wasn't a complete bust.

JT managed to get in while Frankie was out, and he stashed a camera and a bug in the reporter's home office. For a newish recruit, he did damn well. I grin as I reach out to smack his shoulder.

"That was quick thinking, my man. How long have you been with Jas's team?"

The guy is clearly nervous around us, but he seems like one of the good ones. Dark blonde hair in a crew cut. Honest, kind brown eyes. *I like him. I think we can keep him.*

"Three years, sir." He glances at Maverick and clears his throat. "I was there the night you got hit. How are you doing?"

Maverick ignores the question. "Your background is military, correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call me Maverick." He extends his hand toward the guy, giving him another, closer look as he shakes with him. "Jas speaks very highly of you. I might be thinking about putting together a personal security detail for the Boss. Interested?"

Surprise flashes in the guy's eyes, but I don't blame him. Damian doesn't have bodyguards and as far as I know, Dylan doesn't want any either. "Absolutely, Maverick. Please. It would be an honor."

I frown. "Yeah, we'll get back to you on that. Is that camera you planted connected yet?"

"Yes, sir." He turns back to the screens mounted inside the faux utilities van.

A few keystrokes later, we're looking at the inside of a nondescript home office. The man inside is as unremarkable as his office, a chubby, bald guy who has a face made to forget. *I guess it serves him well to be able to blend in, though.*



He's sitting behind his computer, but as JT zooms in on the screen, I realize that we're not going to get anywhere like this. The image is too blurry on zoom to make out any details and the microphone on the bug is on, but he's not muttering to himself or recording any notes.

*Fuck.*

"Okay, so I guess the only thing we can do now is to wait." Maverick and I settle in, and while he starts grilling JT about his past, I fire off a text on our group chat to let the others know we're safe. I also ask Phoenix to be on standby to help me get into Frankie's computer if needs be.

Minutes turn into hours, and I check in on some other stuff while we wait, but fuck. Surveillance is boring as hell. Eventually, once evening has fallen and my stomach starts grumbling, Frankie finally leaves his office, grabs his phone, wallet, and keys off his desk, and heads for the door.

JT spins to me. "I left the window in the office unlatched. It may be your best shot at getting in and out fast. Are you sure you don't want me to go?"

"Sure. Just keep your eyes open."

Maverick's jaw tightens. "This is a risk, Colt. We don't know where he's going or how long he's going to be."

"The time suggests he's stepping out for something to eat," JT offers.

I groan. "A man after my own heart. Too bad we can't ask him to get us something."

With that, I open the door and head out, looking both ways like a good boy before I jog across the street. Once I'm on Frankie's side, I make it look like I know where I am and what I'm doing, heading for the gate between two properties and finding it unlocked. I have no idea how JT managed this earlier, but maybe the gate was unlocked all along.

Either way, it's smooth sailing around the little house and just like our guy said, the office window is unlatched. Grabbing hold of the bricks, I glance around to make sure no one in a neighboring building can see me, but there are no

highrises around and the tree cover is decent enough around the fence that I should be able to slip in and out unseen.

Grunting as I pull myself up, I slide the window open and dive in, landing like a cat on my feet and straightening up. After shooting a quick grin and a thumbs up at the camera, I get to work.

For an office this small, turning up anything while going through it turns out to be more of a feat than expected.

There's a filing cabinet, but it's all personal stuff. Bank records. Mortgage payments. Bills. I dig everywhere. In every drawer, on every shelf, and in every cupboard on the bookshelf, but there's nothing relating to his work.

I even page flip through the books and check that there's nothing taped to the bottoms of the drawers and other surfaces, but it's clean. I tear the place apart as carefully as I can, but there's nothing.

Eventually, I turn to the computer but it's locked. The screen is on, but good old Frankie signed out of his profile. *Shit. I'm going to need Nix's help with this.*

As I pull my phone out of my pocket to make the call, I see a text from Maverick that just came in.

MAV

GET OUT NOW.

Disappointment surges through me, but I don't waste any time. This mission failed, but at least we know now that Frankie won't be making it easy on us.

---

Twenty-four hours later, I'm back in Frankie's office and this time, I'm armed with a flashdrive from Nix that he assures me will crack the password to the reporter's computer. Since it

now seems that he goes out every night this time for takeout, I get in fast, don't waste time on searching again, and slide the flashdrive into the port as I sit down.

"It's in," I murmur as I hold my phone in front of me, having switched it to speaker so I wouldn't have to keep it against my ear. "The screen is on."

"Give it a minute," Nix says calmly. "It's doing its job. You just won't see it running lines of code like it does in the movies."

My anxiety levels are sky high, but I take a deep breath and wait it out. A few minutes later, the lock screen disappears and I'm staring at the man's desktop. "Fucking magic, man. That's amazing."

"Told you," he says smugly. "Just don't forget it in the goddamn computer."

"I won't."

Immediately reaching for it, I pull it out with one hand while I look for an obvious place to start. His computer seems as clean as his filing cabinet at first, but I hit the jackpot in a folder labeled *Cricket Teams*.

"Okay, I found it," I murmur. "What now?"

"Please tell me you left the drive in? Transfer the folder. Everything that might have to do with us."

I curse under my breath, but there's no point in berating myself for pulling it out prematurely. The best I can do is to put it back in and hope. *At least this is the only aspect of my life where that's the best I can do. Ha.*

My nerves take flight as I watch the progress bar, but the transfer's not even halfway done by the time Phoenix barks at me to get out. "Don't bother removing it safely. Just get out."

But I don't.

I'm not coming back here tomorrow night. Fuck that. We need to know what he knows and I'd rather just take the risk now. "I'm hanging up. Text me with updates."

My adrenaline shoots through the roof when I hear the faint creak of the front door opening. *Shit, they really meant it when they said to get out now.*

Heart pounding, I look around wildly, but there aren't any brilliant hiding spots. The office is small and my best bet is half behind the bookshelf near the window, covered by the drapes hanging from above.

It's weak. A five-year-old would find me in a heartbeat, but he'd know we were playing. Frankie doesn't. Shooting out his chair, I dart toward the shelf and slide in as far as I can behind it, making sure to tuck my feet out of sight as I duck behind the drapes.

Footsteps pad down the hall and the scent of Chinese food drifts to my nostrils. Thankfully, I ate before we came this time, knowing this guy's dinnertime is about the same as mine. It's a small mercy, but at least my stomach isn't grumbling.

The office door creaks, and my heart stutters in my chest as my lids slide shut. I left the drive in the computer, but I hid the progress bar. With any luck, he won't check the computer box under his desk. Most people don't, right? Those who still use PCs just kind of reach for the power button, I think.

*I hope.*

Swallowing past my fear, I keep my eyes closed and my ears open. Heavy footsteps move closer, but he stops at his desk and a few keys clack before he murmurs, "Fucking useless. Thanks for nothing, asshole."

My heart pounds when I hear the soft squeak of his chair again, my mouth completely dry. I can take this guy in a fight, but we still don't know how much he knows and more importantly, if he's set himself up so that if something happens to him, it's all released automatically.

Phoenix thinks it's possible that he's done something like that. To protect himself from the likes of allies like Tony who can turn on a dime and decide you're worth more dead than alive. For one terrifying second, I think he knows I'm here.

His footsteps move the door and then they pause before starting back across the room.

When he stops again, he's so close that I can smell the vaguely acrid, BO stench of him and I grit my teeth, willing myself not to even need to breathe. The drapes on the far side of the window move, and if he bothers to glance my way, I'm made.

My muscles tense, sweat breaking out across my forehead. Fists bunching at my sides, I brace for impact.

But it never needs to happen. The next thing I know, he lets out a harsh sigh and mutters to himself some more as he strides back to the door. "Who are you, vigilante? I know you're out there, but where? Why doesn't anybody know anything?"

As soon the door shuts behind him, a relieved breath rushes out of me and I sag against the wall. *Well, that was fucking close.*

I stay put for another few minutes just to make sure he doesn't come back if he's forgotten something, then I make a half-dive for the desk, slide the drive out of the port, and yank my phone out of my pocket to take a picture of the email still open on his screen. I don't have time to read it, but hoping the image is clear enough, I race back to the window, climb out, and drop down to the lawn below.

The others are going to give me hell for staying when they told me to get out, but as long as what I got is worth it, I'll go to the grave defending my actions. This war is ours to win or lose, and I'll be damned if we go down for doing a job the system couldn't get done. I've also always been a sore loser, and I have no intention of finding out what it would feel like to see the Triskele go up in flames.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-TWO**

## SKYE

“So he’s got nothing?” It’s what we’ve been hoping for, but it seems too good to be true. “Are you sure? Is there any chance he saved it to a different folder?”

Colton shrugs, his broad shoulders rising and falling as he tosses another shot of whiskey down the hatch. “I don’t know, but I doubt it. All the information about the offenders was in that folder along with the drafts and the final versions of the articles he’s already published. Why would he save his actual evidence somewhere else?”

“Logic dictates that he wouldn’t,” Phoenix muses. “He’s a pretty paranoid guy, though. You’re sure you heard him say what you think you heard him say?”

“Yeah. I’m sure.” Colton swigs the last of his whiskey from the tumbler he’s got in his hand, then pours another shot. “Plus, what I heard makes sense in the context of that email.”

*Right. That’s true.* The email we watched Frankie read from the van was from a source in the police department confirming they didn’t have any leads. I’m hellishly relieved, but I swipe my tongue across my lips anyway, still feeling jittery after watching with bated breath as Colton hid.

“You should’ve gotten out.” I cut a glare at him, but he doesn’t seem to be listening. He laughed almost all the way home and then climbed into the whiskey as soon as we got here. Sighing as I realize that he doesn’t need to be chewed out right now, I pad across the room to the armchair and slide into his lap.

My arm winds around those broad shoulders and I push my fingers into his hair, stroking the thick locks gently as I bring his head to my chest. He lets me move him, resting his ear against my heart as he silently keeps sipping his next drink.

Worry is swimming in Dylan's eyes as he looks between us, but then he interlocks his fingers at the nape of his neck and exhales slowly. "Okay, so we can't be one hundred percent sure about evidence, but so far, all signs point to him not being able to connect us to it."

"We need to get rid of him," Maverick states as casually as if he's saying that eggs are his favorite food—which they are, but still. "He's not the kind of guy that gives up. I've been reading his stories, and while it's true that a lot of them were definitely fed to him by Tony and that he never writes about the Riviervas, he's also good. Thorough. He's like a dog with a bone. I'm not sure he'd stop even after we kill Tony. We could still go down for this. Even if it takes him years to uncover the truth. There's no statute of limitations on murder."

I roll my head back, my lips pursing as I think it over but I can't come up with a better plan. Unless... "What if we turn him after we kill Tony? He won't feel like he needs to keep repaying a debt to a family that's dead."

"Tony has kids," Phoenix reminds me. "Frankie will simply shift his allegiance to them, but it's Riviera blood that kept his dad alive and it looks like he takes that kind of thing pretty seriously."

I arch a brow at him. "Okay, I hear you, but *I* have Riviera blood. Why wouldn't he simply shift his allegiance to me? As the person who'll be taking over, it makes sense that he would. I'm the forgotten heiress. The bastard child. My story could be like the modern day, dark version of Cinderella, except that I'm a mafia princess who'll be taking over the underground instead of a kingdom."

Dylan lets out a long exhale through his nostrils, but he doesn't say no. Surprisingly, he seems to be considering it. "It might work, but it's a risk. We don't know for sure that he'll



support you and more importantly, do you really want to tell him your modern day, underground Cinderella tale? Because he *will* publish it. Your name and your story will be out there for the world to read, which means you'll be watched closely by every member of every law enforcement agency out there."

"That's true," Phoenix says. I can see from the thoughtful gleam in his eyes as he sips his own whiskey that he's not just saying it. "The Riviera organization is notorious. Tony is our generation's version of the Godfather. There's a task team on him right now and they haven't been able to get enough on him to make a move, but you can bet your ass they'll start building a case against you as soon as they find out you've taken over."

"Better to let them think the Rivieras died with Tony," Colton mutters. "Don't risk your freedom or your life in exchange for Frankie's. We'll give him a chance to come over to our side and if he turns us down, we kill him. Cleaner. Safer. Better."

"Before we kill him, we need to know if he's hiding evidence that could condemn us." Dylan pushes away from the kitchen counter and strides over to the coffee table to top off his drink. "Any ideas?"

"Torture," Maverick volunteers happily and immediately. "I'll take care of it."

"That's not going to cut it this time." Dylan shares a look with Mav. "We need to be completely, one hundred and ten percent sure that we're not signing our own death warrants with his."

"Truth serum." The idea pops into my head like a lightbulb going off, and I voice it as soon as it does. "That's a real thing, right?"

"Sort of." Phoenix sits up on the sofa so fast that his drink almost spills. "There's no drug proven to cause consistent or predictable truth-telling, but certain barbiturates have been known to enhance the possibility. The drug targets the central nervous system and it's believed that it makes subjects unable

to censor themselves if you give the right drug in the right dosage. It could work.”

Dylan brings his glass to his lips, but instead of taking a sip, he just lets it hover there as he keeps nodding. “Let’s do it. I’ll call the chemist.”

“Chemist?” I frown. “Who the fuck is the chemist?”

“Our chemist.” Maverick grins at me like he thinks I’m the most adorable thing he’s ever seen. “You think we’ve never used shit like this before? Who do you think gets us the stuff we need when the situation calls for it?”

“Have you?” I ask curiously. “Used barbiturates before, I mean.”

He shrugs. “Never had to, but we’ve used similar psychoactive drugs. I went through an experimental phase. I—”

I cut him off. “I love you, but I don’t need those details until I need them.”

While I don’t particularly like the road we’re headed down, these are desperate times. Besides, it’s too late for me to start questioning my own new codes of morals now. Once Tony’s dead, hopefully, I’ll find some humanity buried deep down inside of me to fall back on, but right now, this seems like the only option to keep my guys safe. To keep *myself* safe.

I was there a few times. I knew what they were doing. I’m as guilty as my boyfriends are, and I’m not going to spend the rest of my life in prison for taking the lives of those animals. There are certain aspects of this life—of my future—that I’ll admit to being uncertain about, but this isn’t one of them.

Every last one of those rapists deserved what they got. One day, maybe I’ll have to face some higher power for it, but the way I see it, even said higher power would thank me. Us. It’s the system that failed the survivors in these cases that needs to answer for its failure—not us for setting it right.

My shoulders move down and I raise my chin into the air, letting go of any residual uncertainty or doubt about the decision we’re making right now. “Get me the drug. I’ll catch

up to him and find a way to inject it. We'll get the answers we need, then I'll take him out."

"You?" Maverick's eyebrows clash together. "Why you?"

"Because I'm a girl, Mav. I can get close to him easier than you can, find out what he knows, and take care of him."

"I know you're a girl, Sunshine. Trust me, but this doesn't have to be on you."

"It does. You started all that for me, but I need to be the one to end it. I need to lay it to rest."

I'm not quite sure why I feel that way, but I do. They took vengeance for me before I even knew they were doing it, and sure, they've been hella supportive and they've given me the chance to get closure before, but I never took it.

I was too scared back then. Too sickened. Frankie Hayes may not be a perpetrator, but he's looking to expose the men who stood behind me when others tried to forcefully take what I wouldn't give. I *need* to be the one to do this.

Dylan's piercing blue eyes lock on mine, and they stay there for a beat before he nods. "If Skye wants this job, it's hers. She needs closure."

And just like that, the Boss has spoken.

No one tries to talk me out of it, no one argues with him, and no one offers to do it if I can't. Dylan carries his whiskey back to the kitchen, calls their chemist, and that's it. That's all it takes for him to order these drugs we need. Now we just need to get me in a room with Frankie Hayes.

"Once you inject him, offer him the opportunity," is all Phoenix says to me later that night as we're getting ready for bed. "Tell him he can find a new home with the Triskele."

"I will." Exhausted, I pull back the covers but as Colton hits the lights, I sit up. "Wait. if the guy looking into this suddenly drops dead, won't other people pick up the scent?"

"I've thought of that." Dylan rolls onto his side and looks up at me. "You asked for some of Tony's heroin before it was

destroyed. We got it. We still have it. Make it look like an overdose.”

---

Waking up at the HoH compound always feels a little bit like a dream. We're safe, Ava's right down the street, and we've even started to integrate a little into their community. Most of their members don't trust us and I don't blame them for it, but those who have taken the time to get to know us have been welcoming.

For the most part.

As I stare at Sterling, noticing the big man just standing at the door of the Mexican restaurant Ava and I are in, I can't help feeling that he doesn't like me. Not one bit. Usually, I don't care what people think of me. God knows, I'm not everyone's cup of tea and I've pretended to be, but this feels different. Personal.

“What's up with him?”

“Sterling?” She frowns as her gaze follows mine. “Nothing. Why?”

Turning back to her, I raise both my eyebrows and let out a long breath. “Don't play games with me, babe. What's his problem?”

Her green eyes remain on him for another minute before they slowly move back to mine. “Fine. I'll tell you, but you cannot tell the guys.”

“I can't promise that.” I don't want to lie to her. “We're on a real honesty kick at the moment. If it's relevant, I have to tell them and I'm not going to promise you that I won't and then do it anyway.”

“I respect that and I'm not asking you to lie to them. It just doesn't have anything to do with them.”

I pop a nacho into my mouth and once I've swallowed it, I nod. “If that's true, you don't have anything to worry about.”

Those bright green eyes travel back to her shadow in the door. My guys are jealous, possessive, and they hate leaving me alone, but they don't have a patch on Sterling. On the other hand, they don't work for my mother and they've learned to trust me. I'm also not now and I never really have been the innocent Ava is, but even so, Sterling has been in a class of his own when it comes to her protection.

The little Mexican place is on the compound, run by members of HoH, and it's only a few houses away from Ava's. There's no way anyone is hitting her here, but he won't leave. He won't come in either, choosing to be a skulking, dark hulk of muscle at the door instead.

Ava looks into my eyes, and I see the moment she decides to tell me regardless of whether I may have to tell the guys. She glances back at him, worried. Her teeth sink into her lower lip and she chews it for a moment before she sighs. "Do you remember when I told you he had a tough time growing up?"

I nod. "Yeah, I do. Of course."

"Well, after that picnic, I asked him why he was like that with your guys. He's always abrasive, but I don't know. There was something about him that day that didn't sit right with me, so I asked."

Dread sinks like a stone to the pit of my stomach. I haven't been involved with the Triskele all that long, nor am I a full member, but I have a feeling that what she's about to say is going to make me regret ever agreeing to help them at all.

"Sterling went into foster care when he was a teenager. His parents both died of an overdose. When he got old enough, he found out that it was Tony's drugs that killed them."

My stomach swirls. *So it's not the Triskele at all this time. It's Tony.*

"I'm sorry, Ava. If he wants me to—"

"That's not all." She grimaces before she shoots me an apologetic look. "His first night in a group home, there was this twelve-year-old who shared a room with him. Just a boy,

but he took Sterling under his wing and showed him the ropes.”

Tears start shimmering in her eyes, and the dread grows even heavier. I’m not even sure I want to hear this anymore, but I also feel like I need to. I need to share this burden. Help her carry the weight.

“The night after Sterling aged out, he took Miles out for dinner. He was only fifteen then, but Sterling took him for a burger and promised to find a way to let Miles come live with him instead of staying in the group home until he turned eighteen himself. Miles was the closest thing he’s ever had to a brother and on their way home, there was a shootout.”

“Tony’s weapons?”

She nods. “Tony’s guys too. Miles didn’t make it. Sterling says more than fifty people showed up to his funeral. That’s a lot when you’re that young and you don’t have any family.”

My heart breaks and pressure builds in my chest and behind my eyes. “Fuck.”

“Yep. He joined HoH not long after the funeral and he’s been working to forget all this time, but everyone who knows anything knows now that you’re Tony’s daughter. So when he found out you were also my best friend...”

“You almost lost him?”

She gives me a tight nod. “The only thing that helped was that I could swear to him that you don’t know the man and that you’re going to kill him one day.”

“At least it’s true.” *I hope.* “When we came to stay here?”

She sighs. “He understood why my moms offered you the apartment, but it hasn’t been easy on him. First, he had to find out that the girl he liked is best friends with you, then I became friends with a boy who worships the ground you guys walk on, then Aaron arrived and...”

“He’s surrounded by reminders,” I finish for her when she trails off. “We can leave. If that’ll make things easier?”

Shaking her head, she gives me a sad smile. “It won’t help. Old wounds have reopened, but he knows you’re all working night and day to bring down the Rivas. That helps. A lot. The enemy of your enemy should be your friend, but you’re still Tony’s daughter. I don’t think he trusts that you’re going to take the shot when the time comes, but he also knows about Dylan’s mom. He trusts him because of that, but the rest of you...”

“I’m sorry, Ava. I wish I could do more than just say it, but I really am sorry.” My eyes are burning with the need to tear up, but I stubbornly refuse to let it happen. This isn’t a pity party and even if it is, it’s not mine.

“Just kill the sonofabitch, would ya? And when you do, if it’s not too much trouble, make a video so Sterling can see it happen before we delete it together and put this chapter behind us.”

“No promises on the video, but we’re doing the best we can to make it happen.”

Our waitress brings our main meal then, and as we tuck into steaming chicken enchiladas, she tells me more about why her moms got involved in the trafficking investigation. “That’s why I brought you here today. The food is the best, but Maria, the owner, she’s my moms’ friend. She was trafficked. They found her beaten and bloodied near the border. After they took her to see our doctor and she got all healed up, she went back home for a couple months but in the end, she came back. She said she didn’t belong with her family anymore. That she was ruined.”

“This is the most devastating lunch I’ve ever had,” I mumble as I glance at the petite woman in the kitchen. “Any other bombs you’d like to drop?”

She chuckles. “No. I just thought you should know there’s a reason my moms offered you this place. We’re all on the same team. Take down Tony, get whatever information he’s got on trafficking syndicate, take them down, and then we all get to live happily ever after.”

I pick up my margarita and raise it above the table. “From your lips to all the gods’ ears, my friend. Let it be so.”



CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-THREE**

## MAVERICK

**B**lackthorne Manor is finally ready for occupation. We're headed there today, but as I toss my clothes into a suitcase, I don't feel particularly good about it.

Damian is still with his bride. We watched the wedding on an online stream. They got married on a beach somewhere with only an officiant and my father present, and now Dylan and Skye are officially stepsiblings. Apparently, they'll have another wedding here when the time is right, but I don't know. I've kind of given up hope on the Boss ever returning.

Even if he does, I doubt he'll be coming to make any meaningful contribution. My dad has assured me that they're still working together to whisper in members of the Rivas' ears, but truth be told, I think he's fuckin' lying. I think they're kicking back with cocktails on that beach and that they've washed their hands of this war.

Anger races through my blood at the thought, making my heart beat too fast and my stomach tighten. If that is what they're doing, then fine. At least just fucking tell us so we'll know that the shots we're calling really are for us.

As it is, it feels like we're stuck in a twilight zone, but I'm done with that.

As is Dylan.

His suitcase is open on the bed next to mine and as he balls up another shirt and tosses it in, he nods. "Do it. Get JT and any of the other younger soldiers to come. As long as they don't have a family, it's an open invite. It'll feel like a dorm

for a while, but we'll get the cottages built as soon as we can. Once that happens, we can bring in anyone with a family who wants to move."

I nod. "I'm glad you came around. For the record, it's not because I think we can't defend—"

"I know. HoH is onto something here and more than that, we could've prevented the deaths of a lot of our own that night if they'd been on the inside. Besides, that place is massive. It's got the space. We might as well turn it into a commune."

I smirk, but I agree with him. Rolling my jeans into a sausage, I wedge them in on the side of my bag. "You sure you don't want to talk to your dad about it before we do this?"

"What is there to talk about? We won't take their bedroom, but for the rest of it, Blackthorne Manor belongs to the Blackthorne leading the Triskele. It's in my grandfather's will. I don't want it, but it's mine now anyway. Let's just see if we can make it our home."

Upon Alistaire's insistence, he's going with us. He's also coordinating the effort to get our own furniture into some parts of the house and moving all of Damian's and Dylan's grandfather's stuff into the rest of it. The last I spoke to my dad, he told me that Dylan should continue as he sees fit and that he doesn't know if Damian's going to be coming back before Tony is dead.

He also told me that the threats against Liz's life continued at the first *three* safehouses they went to, and that they've had to go further to ground as a result. Damian is still refusing to leave her side, proving to all and sundry that he's lost his motherfucking mind—and that he loves her—but the point is that he's gone.

Eventually, they'll be back but for now, we're all we have. "Skye wants to talk to her mom. Think we can make it happen?"

I shake my head. "I've asked my dad, but he says that stream of the wedding was the best they could do."

Which is bullshit. It was live, but all communication on it was shut down. And the reception was crappy. Basically, all we got was two blurry figures walking down the beach together, kissing after some other blurry figure took his place at the front, and that was it.

Just like that, we were supposed to accept that they were married. Dylan wasn't taking that part well. "She's my fucking stepsister now. Does that make it weird?"

"Why would it?" I frown. "It's not like you grew up hating each other from across the hall and sharing family holidays. It will only be weird if you make it that way."

Skye appears in the door between the bedroom and the bathroom, wearing only a towel again and smiling devilishly as she reaches for the knot between her tits. "Well, I guess if you want to make it weird, it's just me and Mav this morning."

She flicks at the thick white fabric and the towel plummets to the ground, that devilish smile still on her lips. "Phoenix and Colton have gone ahead with Alistaire, right?"

Dylan's jaw tightens. "Yeah, they're gone, but it's not just you and Mav, my love. I'm here and I refuse to make it fucking weird."

She saunters to us butt ass naked, her red hair towel dried and billowing around her head, those green eyes shining with mischief. "In that case, I guess you can join us."

A few hours later, Dylan has proven his point and it definitely wasn't weird. It was hot as fuck, actually. I watched as he teased her, saw the tension in his shoulders when he was holding back and the wetness on his dick before he finally pushed into her. Since I was taking her from behind, I also saw his face all the way through and...fuck. I'll never get used to thinking about seeing my friends in action as hot, I can't deny that it really was.

Once we're done, Skye gets dressed and leaves our naked asses behind—in bed together—to go say goodbye to Ava. Dylan has a blissed out look in his eyes when I glance at him, but then he blinks and it's gone.

“We need to talk,” he says as he sits up, gets out of bed, and grabs his jeans. “About a few things, but the most important part of it is the FBI.”

“The FBI?” I must have fallen asleep after I came, because there’s no way I’m really hearing what I think I’m hearing, but Dylan nods and shoves his hands through his messy hair, reacting just like he would if I wasn’t dreaming and this was real.

But it can’t be, right? There’s no way—

“The FBI,” he confirms as he buttons up his jeans, capping it off by scrubbing his hands over his face and letting out a muffled scream into his palms. “Fuck, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but it’s time.”

“Time for what?” I frown as I kick the crumpled covers off. My dick is flapping free as I hop off the bed and stride over the windows, but I don’t give a shit. At this point, they probably know it even better than I do. “What are you talking about, Boss man?”

“We’re going back to the Manor.” As he says it, he grabs a shirt and jams it over his head, clearly exasperated as he sticks his arms through the holes and grunts. “Okay, fuck. Just give me a minute. I really can’t believe I’m even thinking about it, but it’s something we need to consider.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I’m not the guy you consider stuff with. That’s Colton. Phoenix if you need advice on how to go forward. I’m the guy you talk to about fucking shit up.”

He rolls his eyes at me, striding to the kitchen and setting the coffee maker to espresso before he spins to face me again. “There are hundreds of names on Stone’s list.”

“Yeah. So?”

“So there’s no way we can kill or turn them all in a matter of days, and it needs to happen that fast because if it doesn’t, Tony has too much time to get to whoever we haven’t gotten to yet.”

I swipe my tongue across my lips, still butt ass naked as I start pacing. “Better make that two espressos.”

Dylan slides another cup into the holder and stabs at the button again, but he's barely broken eye-contact with me. "We know there's a task team. We know they've been gathering information on him and his contacts for years, but we also know they don't have nearly as much as we do."

"Yeah, but again, so?"

"So I think it's time we help them out. Use them to get some of those names off the streets for us. Our guys have been approaching those we think we can turn, and we'll leave those names off the list we leak to them for now. We'll also leave off the high profile names we want to take care of ourselves, but everyone else..."

My heart lurches, beating in my throat as I stare at one of my oldest friends. "Just to make sure I'm understanding this properly, you, the new Boss of the Triskele, wants to become an informant? Is that right?"

He shrugs, his jaw ticking as it tightens. "I don't want to, Maverick. I just think it's smarter at this point, and I won't become an informant. I'll have Phoenix deliver a neat package of information containing everything we've gathered on every name we leak."

"It'll never be that simple, brother. You'll risk exposing yourself. The Triskele. Our families have been working for decades to keep our existence here a closely guarded secret. The blood and sweat of hundreds of IT guys have gone into keeping it that way."

Those blue eyes blaze into mine before they narrow. "You think I don't know that? But how long do you think we're going to stay off their radar now that the war has broken out? We already know that they've noticed the bodies dropping all over the fucking show. Either way, it won't be long until they start looking for the ghosts rumored to be the Riviera's biggest rivals."

"True, but that's going to happen whether we leak information to them or not. The Hunts are already working for the Feds, so are Aaron and Al. Eventually, they're going to start wondering where they all came from and why now, at a

time when the underworld was leaving dead bodies everywhere.”

Dylan blows out a long breath and flashes me a sideways smirk. “And you said you weren’t the guy to consider things with. You’re doing a great job, Mav.”

I have the strangest urge to stick my fucking tongue out at him like I used to when we were kids, but instead, I shrug and turn to face the window, crossing my arms firmly over my chest. My muscles are tight, bulging as fear and worry build deep down inside.

“We could cut a deal,” he says quietly, almost like he’s not sure he wants me to hear. “They leave us alone and in return, we give them everyone who’s a part of Tony’s network. High profile and otherwise.”

My entire body goes rigid, my spine shooting straight as I stare right at the window with my left eye starting to twitch. “Are you serious right now? They won’t go for that. They’ll know we’re just using them to take care of a problem for us and you can bet your pretty fucking ass that they’ll be coming right after us as soon they slam the last cage shut on the Riviera network.”

“They will go for it,” he says confidently. “They’ll go for it because we’ll sweeten the deal. They’ve been after Tony for a long time, and—”

“*And* we’re not letting him live to stand trial as part of this deal?” I interrupt because my eye has gone way past twitching. It’s bulging now. “Skye would never agree to that.”

“Nor would I ever put it on the table,” he reasons. “I want him dead more than anyone else. Trust me. The point is simply that they’ve been after him for a long time. It’ll be a huge win for the city if they round up everyone he’s associated with and his body gets discovered for them to plaster all over their website. We’ll let them take credit, even if we don’t promise them that in so many words.”

“How do you intend to sweeten the deal, then?”

Dylan exhales slowly. “By serving up their biggest win in living history and promising them the full might of the Triskele in the trafficking op. We’re already planning on getting involved with that. Making it official won’t change anything.”

I snort. “You’re insane. They’re not going to give us immunity for everything ever just because of that, bro.”

“Probably not, but we won’t be asking for immunity. They don’t have any evidence against any of us for anything. All we’ll be doing is asking them to leave us be.”

“And if they don’t?”

I’m still not looking at him, but I hear the shrug in his voice. “Then we just keep doing what we do anyway. Think about it, Mav. They’ve never gotten anything on us and they never will. We don’t officially fucking exist. It’s not like I’m ever going to propose that we take Tony’s place in the limelight. Some other organization will spring up to do that. It’s not our style.”

“You’ve discussed this plan with Colton and Phoenix?”

A tiny cup of coffee appears at my shoulder and I take it, letting my fingers get a little bit burnt just in case I was dreaming before, but I wasn’t and I’m not now either. Dylan gaze meets mine as he shakes his head.

“Not yet. There hasn’t been time, but I will. We’re running out of options, Maverick. Even if everything else goes off without a hitch, while Tony’s network stands, the Riviera Family will not fall. We can kill him, but he’ll have a plan for that. Maybe it’s not a formal line of succession or a traditional chain of command, but we both know he won’t let the Family die with him if they’re left with a fighting chance.”

As those blue eyes sear into mine, I know he’s right. I just hadn’t thought about it that way, but the Family has been around for way longer than the Triskele have. Sure, things have evolved. The leadership has changed hands. This and that, but ultimately, the Family has survived.



No doubt that even if we stomp it out of our city now, it will eventually be back, which is fine. It's inevitable and we'll deal with it when the time comes, but for now, offing Tony and putting Skye in his office while the network stands really wouldn't have much effect.

While she's still trying to differentiate her ass from her elbow in that office, another will rise up to lead Tony's forces. And I mean that with the greatest respect to my girlfriend. It wouldn't matter who takes over from Tony—it could be Damian Blackthorne him-*fucking*-self—and it still wouldn't make any damn difference.

With the kind of connections the Family has, they will rebuild and in the not too distant future, they will be thriving again. They will also have one sole mission, which would be to destroy us.

Holding Dylan's eyes, I incline my head in a slow nod. "Talk to the others when the time comes, but I'm with you. Let's change the rules. Let's light it up. I'll be right beside you."

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FOUR**

## SKYE

The last few days have been turbulent. We moved back to Blackthorne Manor, but none of us have slept much.

We're up at every sound and with the amount of people now in the house, there are a *lot* of sounds.

Maverick invited a bunch of his men to stay with us and while I understand the appeal of having more people around, it's been busy. The guys have got their men on patrol, both inside and outside, around the clock. A construction crew they trust has also been by to take a look at the grounds and apparently, they're going to start building soon.

It's hectic. People constantly coming and going. The possibility of construction. Building plans being made. Furniture moved and the guys' stuff brought in.

Phoenix has been working on adding extra layers of security where he can. The computerized systems have come from Switzerland and they're supposedly as impenetrable as their banks, but he's not convinced.

I found him laying more trip wires at 3 AM, muttering to himself about explosive force and the width of the corridor. As I make us some coffee, worry gnaws at my insides. It's not just him that's nervous about moving out of HoH; it's all of us.

Dylan has taken up residence in his father's study, learning everything there is to know about the Triskele's operations on a day-to-day basis. And when I say he's taken up residence there, I mean I've hardly seen him since we arrived. JT told

me he's been sleeping on the sofa in the study and that they've been bringing food to him.

Meanwhile, Maverick has turned into a drill sergeant. He spends his days putting his new private army through their paces, training with them as he continues to build his own strength back up.

Colton is the only one who hasn't lost his mind, but even *he* has set up shop in what used to be a guest room. It seems he's been designated to take point on the actual war. I found out last night that Mick got the plans for that church, and even though everyone should've been focused on those, they're not.

To a certain extent, I get it. I really do. There's no point in fighting a war for the Triskele to win if there's no organization left by the time the war is won. The organization itself needs to survive as much as we do, which means Dylan needs to focus on keeping it healthy and alive, making money and coming out the other side profitable and strong. Maverick, on the other hand, is focused on the soldiers, the men who will be on the front lines with him when we take down Tony's network and those within his Family who won't bow to me.

The other thing that's been keeping me busy is the plan I'm still formulating about what I'm going to do with the power when I get it. The way I see it, we can't rid the world of everything bad and we don't want to, but what we can do is to control the morality of these bad men and make things better. Other than those suggestions I made to them back at HoH though, I'm not really sure how to go about doing it just yet.

I guess this is the long game, but it's frustrating as fuck that we've had to hit pause on the actual fight. It's only been a few days, but they're days we could've been using to work toward putting this behind us.

Unfortunately, the reality is that the guys are now in charge. They've already put the castle back together and Dylan's been keeping an eye on their operations from afar, but now that we're here, he needs to actually take control.

So once again, our lives have changed. We're settling into this new version of normal and just like it has been every time

it's happened, it's a learning curve. An adjustment process. I'm starting to wonder if we're ever going to get to a point where change and adapting isn't our only constant.

Mentally giving myself a shake as the mugs start filling, I refocus on Phoenix and it's done, he takes his coffee from me with a grateful smile. "Thanks. I'm sorry if I scared you. I just can't help but feel like we need to be ready if there's another attack. I'm also sorry if I woke you up."

"You didn't wake me up. The bed is just very empty with none of you in it and hey, I'm with you." I lean against the counter and wrap my fingers around my mug. "Fuck knows, we'd have had a much rougher time back at the condos if you hadn't laid your traps, but are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine." His reddened eyes and swollen lids tell a different story altogether, but I won't argue with him about it. Not right now.

"What can I do to help?" I ask instead. "I can mount more shotguns on th—"

He leans forward and motions for me to come to him, and I do. Pushing off the counter, I hold my coffee carefully as I approach, brushing my knuckles over the stubble of his cheek once I'm next to him.

"You need to let me help, *mo anam cara*. I want to and I can. There's no need for you to do it all by yourself."

He leans into my touch, his loose hair falling across my wrist as he moves his head to press a kiss to my pulse. "Do you know that's the first time you've called me that?"

I frown. "Is it?"

He smiles softly as he nods, closes his eyes, and breathes against my skin before he releases my wrist and looks up at me. "Yeah, it is. Any reason for the change?"

"No, not really. I didn't even realize. I think it was a given for me that I felt the same way and that you *are* my soulmate. You know that, right? Whether I use a nickname or not, you are my soulmate. All of you are."

The gold in his eyes practically glows as he nods. “I know, but it’s still nice to hear it.” He falls silent for a beat. “The chemist delivered earlier today. We’ve got what we need.”

My heart skips and then races as I stare at him for a long second, blinking hard as sweat breaks out across my nape. “Really? I didn’t know.”

“Yes, really, but you’re allowed to change your mind, Skye. You still don’t have to do this, and you definitely don’t need to do it alone.”

I draw in a deep breath. “No. I’m fine. I’ll do it. You’ll be right outside if I need you, right?”

“Always.” He lets me process for a moment, then he straightens up and brings his coffee to his mouth to blow on the surface. “The bed’s empty? Where are the others?”

“Maverick is with JT and Dwayne. I’m not sure what they’re doing, but mentioned something about making sure we have cohesive teams when they need to be ready to move. He said he was just going to crash on a sofa somewhere when they were done so he wouldn’t wake me up. Dylan’s in the study and Colton is in his.”

Nix cants his head at me, drinking me in as he looks into my eyes. “This is hard on you. Harder than some of the other changes have been.”

I don’t want to admit it, but I nod. “Anything that forces us to spend more time apart than together is going to be hard on me. That’s all this is about. I don’t like the separation, but I understand why it’s necessary. I guess I also always knew there would come a time in our relationship when it wouldn’t be all us, only us, all the time, but now that it’s here, it’s something to get used to.”

He smiles softly. “It’s hard for us too, but I guess this is growing up. It’s the crash course version for sure now that the dads are all just suddenly gone, but we’ll get through it. We’ll get used to it, and I promise I’ll sleep next to you every night I can, okay?”

“Okay.” My heart gives a little tug of sadness that it’s even a promise he has to make, but again, I get it.

He’s carved out a workspace for himself in the pajama lounge near my bedroom and during the day, he’s been busy sifting through all the intelligence that keeps coming in. On the people involved in Tony’s network, their investigation into the *concerned citizen*, suppliers, and god only knows what else.

After taking a few sips of his coffee, he gets up. “Thanks for this. I’ve got about an hour left before I’ll be done with that section of the house. I’ll come to bed straight after, okay?”

“I’ll meet you.” I watch as he gives me one last smile before he takes his coffee out into the hall with him, and it’s not a minute before heavy boots sound out on the tiles.

The next thing I know, a group of Triskele soldiers walk into the kitchen wearing their black fatigues, and the guy in front slams to an abrupt halt when he sees me in here. I don’t know who he is, but he clearly wasn’t expecting to find anyone already in the kitchen.

His mouth opens, but when he starts to move back, I shake my head. “It’s all yours. I was just on my way out.”

“Th-thank you,” he stutters, then he and the other four guys step aside for me to pass.

Living with so many people is definitely weird. Especially because I don’t know most of them. The guards I knew died in the attack on the Manor and other than Dwayne and Jas, I’ve never really had the opportunity to get to know any of my guys’ men. I guess I should make a point of trying to at least learn their names, but a coffee run at 3:30 AM hardly seems like the time to do it.

Leaving them to their caffeine, I carry my own out into the dark hall and look up and down. Aside from the sound of their murmured voices drifting from the kitchen, it’s all quiet. Most of the lights are off and there’s not a person in sight.

It’s unsettling, and while I was exhausted before I fell into my fitful, lonely sleep hours ago, I don’t feel tired at all now.

Since I didn't see Dylan yesterday and only for about thirty minutes the morning before, I decide to head to the study instead of going back upstairs.

As I walk along the darkened corridor, I wonder what all these soldiers think of living in a house with expensive, patterned tiles on the floors and extravagant chandeliers hanging overhead. I've lived here for a few months on and off, and I'm *still* not used to staying in such a sprawling property with 180 degree views of lush, verdant lawn leading down to the waters of Long Island Sound.

I mean, sure, I got used to the views from the guys' old house, but this is definitely something else. We're less than ninety minutes away from the center of Manhattan, near Greenwich, Connecticut, but it feels like we're a world away. In an area known for being a playground for the rich, the Manor was developed long before most of the other houses out here were built and its grounds are expansive. I don't even want to know what people would offer the Blackthornes for it, but I doubt they'd ever sell. Especially since Dylan now intends on turning it into a Triskele resort of sorts.

I blow out a breath as I wonder about his plans. I understand the appeal, but this property has always been his family home. I just hope he doesn't regret all this later—and that Damian doesn't kill him for doing it.

When I reach the study door, I wrap my knuckles across it softly, not wanting to wake if he's asleep, but less than a second later, his voice rings out from the inside. "Yeah? Come on in."

I push at the door, peeking past it to find my boyfriend behind his dad's massive partner's desk. Dylan's blonde hair is messy, his eyes red and tired, but he smiles when he sees me and rolls back his chair.

"You're a sight for sore eyes, love. What's up?" He rises from the chair and meets me halfway to pull me into his arms, and as they wrap around me, so warm and so strong, I sigh and burrow into him, my arms sliding around his waist as I fit myself against him and hold on tight. "Hey, are you okay?"



“I’m fine.” I rest my head against his chest, fitting snugly under his chin as I close my eyes. In the process, I feel some coffee trickling over my fingers and I realize I spilled some, but it’s not that hot anymore and I’ll clean up later. “I’ve just missed you. How’s it going in here?”

“As well as can be expected.” His lips land against my hair and he presses a soft kiss to it as his chest expands on a deep breath. “The business side of our operations has been a rudderless ship since my dad left, so there’s a lot to do to get on top of everything, but I’m getting through it. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah. I guess I’m just lonely. Can I be a needy girlfriend for a bit and stay with you? I won’t be a bother. I’ll even help if you want to put me to work.”

He chuckles and lets go of me, sliding his hand into my own and leading me to the sofa against the wall. When we pass his desk, I set down my coffee mug before I end up spilling it all, but I don’t let go of his hand.

As he sits down, he pulls me with him, settling me on his lap and resting his big hands on my hips as he drops his head back against the sofa and those eyes find mine, sharp jawline covered in two-day old scruff.

“Nah. I’m about due for a break. It’s only been about sixteen hours since my last one.” A tired smile spreads on his lips. “How are you holding up?”

“Uh, okay, I think. I’m bored, though. Everything is quiet in Vegas, which is great but I don’t really know what else I can do. So I’m serious when I say you can put me to work.”

His blues bore into mine, worry darkening them as his fingers flex on my hips. “Has someone told you that the chemist has delivered our order?”

“Yeah. Phoenix did. Just a few minutes ago.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” He bites the inside of his cheek, eyebrows tugging together slightly as he looks deep into my eyes. “What you have to do won’t be easy, love. Gaining access to his place will be one thing, but then

injecting the drug, questioning him, and possibly having to overpower him to inject the heroin next? I'll understand if you're worried."

"Not worried. Nervous, maybe? I don't know. I just don't want to screw up, but Phoenix said he'll be there if I need him."

"Yeah," Dylan murmurs. "I wish I could be too, but if you're going to do it tonight, I just don't think I will be. Take Maverick as well. And JT. Colton too, but I'm pretty sure he'll insist on going. You won't have to drag him along."

I chuckle softly. "I don't need *all* of them as backup. Just one will be fine and it's only in case I need help tying him down if I have to. I'll be fine."

"I know, but I'm allowed to worry." He takes my hand and pushes his palm against mine, lifting our joined hands as he wraps his fingers around mine and then turning them to press a kiss to my knuckles. "I love you. Putting you in a position where you feel like you have to do this is the last thing I ever wanted."

"*You* didn't put me in this position. Genevieve did when she sent those guys after me. This is just me finishing what she started, and it's going to feel good."

He tucks my hand against his heart, letting me feel the steady, confident thrum of it against my palm. "I have no doubt, but still. I won't apologize for not liking it. You'll call me as soon as it's done?"

"Of course." Leaning forward, I press my lips against his and smile as I kiss him. "You should get some sleep, baby. You'll burn out before the end of the week if you keep going like this."

"Maybe, but for now, I have other ideas." He shifts underneath me and releases my hand to wrap an arm around my back, then he lifts me smoothly and lies me down on the sofa, covering my body with his own as he kisses me. "Unless there's something else that desperately requires your attention at 4 AM?"

I wind my arms around his neck, my fingers stroking the back of his head as I look up at him, so damn gorgeous with his hair falling over his forehead and flames suddenly flickering in those eyes. “No, I don’t. The only thing desperately requiring my attention is you.”

“Damn right I do.” He seals his mouth over mine and kisses me until I’m breathless, my heart racing as my legs wrap around his hips.

But as he settles beside me, his lips moving to my throat and his hand trailing down my abdomen, his breathing evens out and the next thing I know, he’s asleep in my arms. My entire body is aching for him, but I won’t wake him up for that.

Instead, I smile and shake my head, turning into him and pressing a kiss to his temple as I just hold him while he sleeps. It seems he really did require my attention desperately—even if it was only to distract him so he can finally get some sleep.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-FIVE**

## PHOENIX

“Hey, Nix. Have you got a minute?” Alistaire’s voice pulls me out of my racing thoughts as I stare at my computer screen, and I smile, taking one last look to finish reading the email I just got before I turn to the door.

The smile drops away from my lips when I see he’s not alone, though. Sterling is with him, and the bigger guy does *not* seem happy about being here. He’s toying with his lip ring again, his Maverick-sized arms crossed tightly over his chest and his silver eyes so narrowed, I can’t even see the irises.

“Hi.” I stand up, waving them into my makeshift office.

Alistaire strides in and drops onto one of the sofas in the pajama lounge/intelligence office, but Sterling hangs back, catching himself at the door like he’s not sure he can take another step.

Al huffs out a breath and rolls his eyes as he pats the spot beside him. “We’ve talked about this. You can trust him. Just get in here.”

Sterling’s jaw hardens and he takes a long, deep breath, his gaze now fixed on Alistaire as if he’s finding the strength to do this in his support. Slowly, he lifts first one foot and then the other, making his way in like he’s waging a mental battle to keep going with every step he takes.

I frown, shooting Alistaire a puzzled look. “What’s going on here, guys?”

“Sterling’s got something to tell you.” He settles back, completely relaxed and ignoring the other guy’s apparent

internal struggle as he looks at me. “Before you ask, I only found out about it this morning. Otherwise, I’d have had him here days ago.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, confused as shit as I walk back to my chair, roll it further away from the desk and spin to face them just as Sterling finally sits down. “Found out about what?”

Al doesn’t answer me, simply glancing at his new friend and nudging him in the ribs when the guy refuses to even look at him. “It’s okay, dude. Just tell him. You trust Dylan, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m still unclear on why we didn’t just go to him.”

“He’s a little busy these days.” Al reaches up and puts a hand on Sterling’s shoulder, waiting until he finally glances back at him before he murmurs, “Nix was there. He loved Deborah like a mother too. Just tell him.”

*Deborah? The fuck has this got to do with Dylan’s mom?* My hackles rise, and I’m about to snap at him before Sterling suddenly locks his gaze on mine. “I’m the one who tipped you off about the weapons.”

My heart stumbles over itself before it starts galloping. “What?”

“Yeah,” he mumbles, shaking his head as his features tighten but his chin lifts in what becomes an almost challenging glare. “You idiots weren’t finding it and I got tired of waiting. If you’re serious about taking down the Rivas, you need to know where it is. Didn’t seem like you were even looking.”

“We were, but why all the theatrics? Why not just come right out and tell us?”

He rolls his eyes at me, his knee starting to bounce as he breathes out sharply. “I don’t know you. Ava told us you were coming to stay at the compound, so I went to the presidents. Questioned if it was a good idea to let you in.”

From the look on his face, I’m guessing he was opposed to it but I don’t say so. Clearly, they didn’t take his advice and

ultimately, he still gave us the information so they must've said something to convince him we were trustworthy.

“They assured me you didn't pose any danger to us,” he grinds out like it hurts him to say the words. “I wasn't sure, but since they also assured me that the Triskele is actively at war with the Family, I figured it was time to pick a side. Wasn't any question about which side to take.”

This is making very little sense to me, but I'm glad he thought of us as the lesser of the two evils. “Yeah. Okay. Uhm, thanks?”

He scoffs. “You gonna do anything about it anytime soon? We gave you the stash, man. Why is it still just sitting there?”

“We had to figure out a way in.” I wouldn't usually feel like I owed him an explanation, but he did give us the info so I'm willing to make an exception. “Colton is working on that as we speak.”

“How?” he snaps, a storm gathering in those eyes as he shakes his head. “You haven't even been back there.”

“How do you know?” My eyes tighten at the corners as I look back at him. “Have you been following us?”

“No, but a couple of my former foster brothers have been keeping an eye on the church so we'd know when you made a move and could be there if you needed help, but you haven't done shit.”

Irritation flares deep in my soul, but I inhale slowly through my nostrils and set him straight with as much patience as I can muster. “Actually, we've done everything we can except charging in there unprepared and getting ourselves killed. If that happens, who's going to bring down Tony?”

“I fucking will,” he breathes angrily, but then Al squeezes his shoulder and the red streaks that were rising to his cheeks recede somewhat. “We want to help.”

“Hand of Hope?” I frown. “It seemed to me like you guys have your hands full with the trafficking.”

Alistaire shakes his head, paling a little as his hand drops back to his side and he sighs. “We’ve hit a dead-end, so we’re free for now while Aaron and the Hunts’ try to find a new, actionable lead. Of course, it’ll be much easier once Skye takes over the Family. How are you doing with that?”

I glance at Sterling, but he just trusted me. I suppose he knows everything through Alistaire, Aaron, and Ava anyway, so there’s no point holding back now. But first... “How did you know where Tony’s weapons were, and why are you so invested in our fight against him?”

The column of his throat moves up and down on a hard swallow, and he scowls at the ground before he takes a deep breath. “Not all of us were born into this,” he mutters, and I can hear the bitterness chewing him up on the inside in his voice. “For those of us who weren’t, Tony is the fucking devil. He destroys everything he touches and entire neighborhoods are decaying in the face of his poison, and yet, you do nothing.”

“Excuse me?”

His gaze shoots back to mine and he looks right into my eyes, as unwavering as he is unapologetic. “Growing up, I heard about the mysterious Triskele. The only organization supposedly strong enough to bring down the Family. There were nights that I fucking *prayed* you people would finally fucking do something, but you didn’t. You let him be. You fucking let him—”

“We have *not* been doing nothing,” I seethe as my pulse thunders through my veins, making my heartbeat roar in my ears. “You have no *fucking* idea what we’ve done. What we’ve *lost*. You’re right, you know. You were born on the fucking outside and maybe you should stay there. The Triskele has been going up against the Rivas since long before you and I were even a twinkle in anyone eyes and—”

“Exactly.” His boots drop to the floor with heavy thuds as he jumps up and strides over to me, getting in my face with his eyes narrowed and accusations darting from the slits that remain. Alistaire is still on the sofa, staying out of the



argument. “And where are we? Huh? The fuck have you done to actually stop him? Nothing. That’s what.”

*Jesus.*

Usually, I let the others handle this kind of thing on account of the whole me not liking blood thing, but I’ve had just about enough of him. “You may be Ava’s boyfriend, or bodyguard, or whatever the fuck you are to her, but you’re nothing to me. Nobody. Thank you for the information and for offering to help, but we’ve got it from here.”

“The hell you do!” he snaps, breathing hard as his gaze fixes on mine. “If you’re not capable of actually doing fucking anything, then I will.”

“Stay. The. Fuck. Away. From. This.” I don’t know how I can be any clearer. “You walk into that church, guns blazing, and you *will* die. Now, I don’t really care if that happens, but it will make Al sad. And it will make Ava sad, which in turn, will make Skye sad. At some point, I’d really like to see her happy again, so just settle down and let the big boys handle this, okay?”

He snorts, but before he can say another word, Skye’s voice rings out confident and clear as she strides into the room. “Calm down, boys. There’s an easy way to settle this. If you’ll both just whip ‘em out, I’m sure I can find a measuring tape somewhere.”

When I finally manage to force my eyes away from him, I find her immediately. My girl is looking fierce in a skintight, black leather minidress and sky high stilettos on her feet. Her hair has been pulled up into a sleek, shiny ponytail and her makeup is dark and dramatic.

“Looking good, Skye,” Alistaire says, his voice light and friendly but I still want to pour acid in his eyes for seeing her like this.

It’s at that thought that I realize this has gone much too far. Alistaire is my friend and Skye’s, and Sterling is his friend. *A friend he brought here to tell us the truth.*

Drawing in deep breath, I check my watch and nod at her.

“I know. We need to leave. Just let me wrap this up.”

“You’re Riviera,” Sterling snarls as he spins to face her, his arms crossed tight across his chest again.

Just like that, my blood pressure shoots back into the red, but Alistaire speaks up before I can. “Simmer down, bro. Remember who she is to Ava.”

I see a glimmer of pain in Skye’s eyes, but as she stares at Sterling, I realize that it’s not her own. She’s feeling pain, but it’s his. My jaw slackens as she nods at him, her features softening with a comprehension I don’t understand.

“I do have Riviera blood in my veins, but I am a Love.” She keeps her eyes on his as she moves further into the room. “Tony’s drugs took your parents and then his weapons being wielded by his men took Miles, the only other person you’ve ever regarded as family.”

Shock crashes into me. I didn’t know any of that, but it seems she’s not done yet. She glances at me. “As for you, I know you’re not used to anyone speaking out against the Triskele, but you also know that he’s right, Nix. Damian *has* waited a long time to make a move against Tony. I realize that he was overcome with grief when Deborah died, but I also know what he did with that grief. He didn’t have to stop after he killed the man who killed her. He could’ve gone after Tony back then and he didn’t. Neither did any of the others.”

My gut tightens. If anyone other than Skye had said what she just did, I’d have put a bullet right between their eyes, but it’s not anyone else. It’s her, and as I stare into those emerald green eyes I love, I realize that she’s right. Damian could’ve done everything she just said and more, and I’ve known it all along. I’ve just never heard anyone other than us voice those thoughts.

She gives me a soft, understanding smile before she turns back to Sterling. “Nix and I have got someplace to be, and I’m afraid it can’t wait. We need to get it done tonight, but we can spare a few minutes.” She looks at Alistaire. “I heard what these guys were saying as I was coming up the stairs and all

the way down the corridor. They weren't exactly keeping their voices down, but I didn't hear what you said."

"I asked how it was going with the war. Not in so many words, but that was the gist of it. Any end in sight?"

She shakes her head at him, deep red ponytail swaying behind her head with the movement. "Not just yet. As soon as he stops breathing though, you can march right into his study with me. We'll find everything he has on any trafficking operations and you can have it all. We've also already vowed to help with it as soon as we can."

"Great. Thank you, Skye. We need all the help we can get." Al's gone deathly pale and it looks like he's going to be sick. "It's starting to look like this is the ring that rose from the ashes after..."

My stomach twists as realization dawns. "These people are what's left of the syndicate that took you?"

He nods tightly and Sterling finally backs down. He deflates like a balloon, the rage leaving him in a loud huff as he walks back to the sofa and sits down next to Alistaire. To my complete surprise, it seems like he actually cares when he turns to our friend.

"We *will* get them. This is just another setback."

Skye glances at me, tears sitting heavily on her lower lids as she nods. "We're going to help, Al. I promise. But in order to get there, we need to get to everything Tony's got. The only way to do that, and to get the revenge we all want on Tony, is to take him down first." She glances at Sterling. "Ava asked me to make a video of the moment we kill him and I'm going to do my best."

"Over my dead body." I shake my head hard and fast, my eyes bigger than ever before. "There is absolutely no way we're filming it. Especially not for him."

"I still can't believe she told you all that stuff." Sterling's face drops into a disappointed, betrayed scowl, and Skye features smooth out as she sends him a piercing look.

“No. You don’t get to be angry at her because of this. She told me because she’s in love with you. She wants us to get along and she wanted me to understand why you don’t like us. That’s why she did it. To try to keep the peace. To prevent us from fighting with each other about things we don’t understand. She’s not like us, Sterling. You can’t hold it against her.”

He sniffs, but then he rises to his feet again. “Wherever you’re going tonight, I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not.” I step forward and put myself between them. “I don’t know who you think you are, but you don’t get to call any shots around here, buddy.”

“I’m not your fucking—”

“Do I really need to go get that measuring tape?” Skye sighs as she steps out from behind me and pointedly looks him up and down. “Why do you want to come?”

“Because Ava talks about you like you’re the second coming. The presidents’ trust you, but I don’t. If you prove to me that you’ve got what it takes to kill Tony, I may just put some stock in what everyone has been saying about you.”

“She doesn’t need you to believe in her. She’s already got us for that.” I glance at Alistaire, wanting to let him know that it’s time to take his friend home, but when I look at him, I see the pleading in his eyes.

For some reason, he wants me to agree to this. “Why?”

He’s not surprised at my question. “Sterling needs to heal just as much as the rest of us. He doesn’t think it’s true, but it is. Besides, he’s a good soldier. He’ll fall in line and you want him there to have your back if push comes to shove.”

“Okay, then,” Skye agrees, and my face contorts as I shake my head.

“Uh, no.”

She turns to me, closing the few steps of distance between us and putting her hands on my hips as she looks into my eyes, not even needing to drop her head back to do it on account of

how high those heels are. “Let him come, *mo anam cara*. Tonight’s mission is all about healing and closure, isn’t it? There’s more than enough of that to go around. Let’s share it.”

My teeth gnash together, but I don’t argue. I can’t. This is her mission. If she wants him there, the only thing I can do is to watch him watch her back—make sure he doesn’t put a fucking knife in it. “Fine, he can come, but only because you asked so nicely.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SIX**

## SKYE

**N**o one likes the fact that Sterling climbs into the car with us, but Colton has stopped arguing about it. Nix fell into silence right after he agreed, and Maverick twists to face us from the front seat, sending Sterling one more glare.

“You’ll shut up, follow orders, and behave like the observer you are,” he warns, his voice a dangerously low growl. “You are here *only* because Skye wants you to be. I’m not above kicking your ass to the curb if I need to.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” he snarks, his shoulder bumping into the side of the car as he scoots as close to the door as he can possibly get.

Maverick is driving and Colton is up front, leaving Nix and Sterling in the back with me. Sterling seems afraid I’ll bite him—or maybe that Nix will—if he sits too close, and there’s almost a foot between him and I as Phoenix tugs me as close to his side as the seatbelt will allow.

I sigh internally. *Who knew being surrounded by so many alpha males could be so damn exhausting?*

I’d have thought I’d seen about the worst of it with my guys, but it turns out that bringing another into the mix has made their beasts rise to the surface. *As if I didn’t have enough to worry about tonight...*

This is for Ava, though. Since I’d do just about anything for that girl, I suppose in the greater scheme of things, having

to take him with us isn't so bad. As long as it has the desired effect of allowing him to believe he can trust me.

The last thing I want is for his hatred and distrust of me to come between him and Ava. From what I've seen, she has real feelings for him and things are going to be hard enough for them as it is. Her friendship with me has already been an obstacle for them. I'll do whatever it takes to get out of the way.

"What else do you want to know?" I ask, turning to look at him as I lean against Nix's side. "Consider this your one-and-only opportunity to ask me absolutely anything you want to know."

As those dark gray eyes cut to mine, I kind of see why Ava enjoyed all those walks she took with him so much. The guy is hot, with high cheekbones, a strong jaw and nose, and an intensity about him that would've melted my panties right off before I fell in love myself.

He's also surprisingly pretty—turned incredibly sexy—with the tattoos that rise up to where the edge of a turtleneck would sit if he was wearing one. There's definitely something undeniable about him, but I can't quite pinpoint what it is. All I know is that the last time I saw and felt it so clearly was when I met each of my boyfriends.

*Sheesh. Good luck, Ava May. He's not going to make this easy for you.*

He regards me quietly for a long moment, clearly curious about my offer. "You'll answer me honestly?"

"Yes."

He tugs at his lip ring with his teeth, then he jerks his head at the guys. "Does this offer extend to them?"

"I don't know." I glance at Nix behind me. "Are you willing to play along?"

He blows out a deep breath, eyes locked on mine for a moment before he nods. "Yeah. Sure. Within reason, though."



Colton grunts and Maverick doesn't react at all, but any questions he's got for them can be answered by Phoenix. *Probably. We'll see.*

"Shoot," I say encouragingly. "Ask away. We don't have anything to hide."

He turns to face forward again, his features as hard as stone before he suddenly asks, "What are you going to do after you've killed Tony? It's one thing to say you're going to take over the Riviera Family, but do you have an actual plan?"

*Well, he's certainly not pulling any punches.*

Happily, I've been giving this a lot of thought recently. "I do, but it's a loose one. I'll need to be able to adapt it on the fly as things happen, but realistically, a lot of Tony's people are going to break away from the organization once I take over. They're as loyal to Tony as our people are to us, which means they won't take kindly to any level of involvement with the Triskele."

"You should just kill anyone who won't fall in line," he mutters.

Suddenly, Maverick grins as he glances at Sterling in the rearview mirror. "Now you're speaking my language, but the long and the short of it is that it won't be that simple. We'll have to take care of some. Those who might pose a threat to lead a rebellion against Skye, but there are just too many of them to kill 'em all and have it go undetected."

Sterling meets his gaze in the mirror. "What are you going to do about it?"

"We've made some headway within the Family. There are some, the less loyal ones, who are already looking to jump ship. They know it's going down and with its future uncertain, they're looking for new homes."

"Yeah, we've already taken in a few at HoH, but that doesn't really answer my question."

"We can't force them to be loyal to me. Once Tony has stopped breathing, I fully intend on taking the keys and marching right into the kingdom. You, Alistaire, and Aaron

will be welcome to walk in right next to me when I do. I meant it when I said you can have all the information he's got on the human trade and I know time is of the essence, so I won't make you wait."

"The kingdom being his house, right?"

I nod. "Genevieve won't be around anymore either, and since we know their kids aren't in the country, we don't expect anyone will be there waiting to defend their castle."

"Except his people."

"Sure, but he doesn't have an Underboss at the moment. When word of his death gets out, there will be a scramble and no clear hierarchy, which I will then take advantage of."

Sterling arches a brow at me. "You know he's been looking for a new Underboss, right? There are qualified people within his ranks. Rumor has it he's been interviewing for the spot. He's expected to make a decision before the end of the month."

*Fuck.* "How do you know that?"

He sighs and scratches the side of his neck. "I thought the game was me asking you questions, not the other way around."

"I swear to—"

Sterling cuts off Colton's threat with a snide smirk. "Relax, dude. I was just saying. I know that the same way I knew about the weapons."

"And how exactly is that?" Nix asks. "You still haven't told me."

Sterling tugs at the lip ring again, but just when I think he's not going to answer, he surprises me. He speaks slowly at first, almost grudgingly, but his eyes take on a faraway quality while he speaks and eventually, he falls into a more natural rhythm.

"The group home I ended up in after my parents died is just a few blocks away from that church. My foster mother still insists on every kid in her care attending with her every

Sunday. Tony still goes there too. The 9 AM service. Every fucking Sunday, he's there. I grew up in an apartment just a few miles away from it and the house where Tony grew up is right down the street. He still owns it. I also went to the same high school he used to go to."

"Okay, we get it. You're from his neighborhood." Colton says. "Why the hell does he keep the guns in a *church*?"

Sterling stares at the back of Colt's head. "Because it's the one place no one will ever look."

"Yeah, that seems reasonable," Maverick muses. "I guess the better question is how he convinced them to let him."

"He didn't have to convince them. The priest's family goes way back with the Rivas. Their fathers were friends. The way I heard it, he and Tony have been friends themselves since kindergarten. That kindergarten we led you to, actually. Appreciating all the effort we put into that yet?"

I'm dumbstruck, but Colton doesn't skip a beat. "Does everyone in your neighborhood know about all this? About the guns?"

Sterling scoffs before he chuckles. "No fucking way. I'm not everyone, though. After I found out that he's ultimately responsible for every bad thing that's ever happened to me, I wisened up. Did the legwork you should've done and found out a few things."

"With your foster brothers?" I ask before his comment about doing the legwork can gain any traction to start another argument with my boyfriends.

He nods. "The guys who still live there now were just kids when I was there, but I never stopped visiting. Someone needs to watch out for them, and it might as well be me." A fond smile lifts only the very corners of his lips. "For the record, the cloak and dagger stuff was their idea. I told them it was stupid, but they're all scared. So am I, if I'm being honest. If Tony or any of his guys find out where you got the information..."

"They won't." Maverick's voice is strong and sure, and Sterling gives him a grateful nod.

“Thanks, but now you know. We figured the less of a chance there was of them tracing it back to us, the safer.”

“Why all the places involving kids?” Nix asks. “Because of this...Miles?”

Sterling releases a shaky breath and nods. “Miles and kids like him. You guys don’t get it. You may hear about it from your ivory towers, but I grew up on the streets he owns. I wasn’t protected, and neither is any child who lives in any of the areas that belong to him.”

“Of which there are too many,” I say sadly. “I’m sorry for your losses, Sterling. All of them.”

“Yeah, we’re going to need to put a pin in this. We’re here.” Colton pulls into a parking spot a few blocks down from Frankie’s house. “JT is in the van. Our man is home and in his office.”

Sterling glances out the window, seeming surprised about the fact that we’re in a middle-class, suburban neighborhood. “Do I want to know what we’re doing here?”

“We’re going to have some fun,” Maverick says cheerfully. “Well, Skye is. We’re the backup and if we can convince her to let us come, then maybe we’ll get to have some fun too.”

“By fun, he means...?”

Colton glances at him and nods, a slow smirk curving on his lips. “That’s exactly what he means. It’s been a while since he’s gotten to feed the monster. Just ignore him. Besides, if you think this is bad, you should’ve seen him before we met Skye.”

Sterling looks at Maverick with what is definitely respect in his eyes this time. “Sounds like you and I have got the same idea of fun. I haven’t gotten my hands dirty lately either. Let us come, Skye. Please?”

“The things I do for Ava,” I mutter as I nod. “Fine, you can both come, but I’m going in first and it’s my show. Wait at the window. I’ll let you in when I’m ready.”

Maverick nods at Sterling. “Don’t worry. I know what she means. You’re with me, man. If you have any more questions, feel free to ask on the way.”

“Just one for Skye. Another one for you, but that, I’ll ask on the way.” He turns to me. “What happens to Tony’s other children? You march into his house, where they hopefully won’t be, but rightfully, one of them could step up. It sounds like you people are already whispering into the ears of the Family members. I don’t really think you know what you’ll be up against with them, but that’s not my problem. What is my problem is if another full-blooded Riviera steps into Daddy’s shoes instead.”

“We can’t guarantee it won’t happen.” I’m being a hundred percent honest with him. “As far as we know, none of them have the balls to do it, but it’s possible that eventually, at least, one of them will rally the troops that will rise against us once they break away from the Family. It’s also possible that when that happens, they’ll come back for everything that is rightfully theirs. Money, property, other assets.”

Colton picks up from me. “Skye has decided what to do with some of that, but she also won’t leave them penniless. If she does, it’ll only motivate them to come after her later. They’ll get their inheritances and the rest of what the organization has will be divvied up between charitable organizations to try to make up for some of the harm he caused.”

That last bit shuts Sterling up, and he seems deep in thought as we climb out of the car and head down the street to Frankie’s house. I’m glad this seems to be going well, but I need to get my head in the game now.

As much as it sickens me, I’m dressed the way I am because Phoenix managed to get into Frankie’s computer. It seems he has a hard-on for female doms wearing exactly the kind of outfit I am tonight. We debated luring him out, away from his house and doing the deed there, but in the end, we determined there would be less evidence this way.

JT has canvassed this neighborhood top to bottom. He found out where every camera is, which is why we parked where we did and why we're taking the route we are. We won't be on any feeds if we stick to his plan.

He also parked the utility van—with different stickers this time—in a spot that will mean I'll be blocked from the view of most of the neighbors while I knock on the door and try to talk my way in. The drug is already in a syringe in the pocket of my coat, so if all else fails, I'll just have to shove my way inside and jab him.

With every step we take closer to his house, my heart rate spikes until it's beating so hard, I feel faint. Sweat has broken out across the nape of my neck and there's a bead sliding down my spine.

That whole part of our history, my assault and everything they did for me after, has culminated in this.

In tonight.

In my stepping up to protect them the way they once did for me.

In a way, the guys and I may not have gotten together if it hadn't been for the assault. Everything changed for us after they found out about it. I don't want to give Genevieve or my assailants the credit for my relationships or my happiness now, and I won't. We're the ones who found each other and we're the ones who've made it this far, but I wonder how long it would've taken us if I hadn't cut Colton that day. If Dylan hadn't insisted on seeing me after...

When we reach Frankie's block, Colt heads for the van and hops in and Sterling and Maverick practically disappear as they melt into the shadows between Frankie's property and the next. I take a deep breath and square my shoulders as I go up the few steps to his front door and knock.

This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. It's been almost a year since the assault and just a little bit shorter than that since I found out what they were doing on my behalf.

Tonight, once this threat is eliminated, we'll be able to put it all behind us once and for all.

I'm looking forward to it. It's finally something we can really lay to rest, and it's about damn time too.

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-SEVEN**



## SKYE

Frankie Hayes reeks of stale cigarette smoke and ginger, the scent of him so acrid that it makes my nose sting as he leers at me. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, you can,” I snap, trying to emulate the women from those videos he likes so much. It makes nausea swirl in my stomach, but I keep my head up and face impassive. “My car broke down. I need to use your phone.”

I don’t wait for an invitation or explain why I couldn’t just use my own phone. According to Phoenix, the secret to this act lies in not asking or explaining. It’s simply in the doing. The attitude of being absolutely entitled to whatever I want from him.

On the inside, I’m a mess. I’m nervous as hell, my stomach all knotted and my heart thrumming, but Frankie can’t know any of that. Brushing past him, I hold my breath so as not to get a closer whiff of him but I don’t miss the gross heat flaring in his eyes as he steps aside and shuts the door behind me.

He’s right on my heels as I unbutton the coat to let him get a load of the scrap of fabric masquerading as a dress underneath, but I don’t take the coat off. I need to keep him on his toes and the syringe has to be on me when I see an opportunity to dose him.

When I turn to face him and he sees the dress, he draws in rattling breath and revulsion speeds through me, but I stand still, letting him look me slowly up and down and pretending

not to mind the disgusting appreciation in his beady eyes when they come back up at mine.

He clears his throat. “Of course. Phone. Yes. I’ll get it. Can I call a towing company for you? Get you a drink?”

*Shit. The outfit must really be working.* I’m pretty sure if I told him to hit his knees right now, he would. “A drink, then you can bring me your phone.”

I can’t let him call anybody. We’re going to make it look like an overdose. I’ve got the heroin in my other pocket, but just in case someone ever bothers to look, there *cannot* be a record of him calling for a tow truck.

Thankfully, he nods and is practically bowing and scraping as he motions to his grubby sofas. “Feel free to have a seat. Put your feet up. Make yourself comfortable. I have vodka. Is that okay?”

*Holy crap. How does some leather have such a profound effect on this man?* Honestly, for the first time in my life, I’m interested in the psychology of it all, but since it’s working in my favor, I won’t question it.

Instead, I allow myself to relax a little bit. *This is going to be a breeze.*

“Vodka,” I say like I’m making the decision out loud. “Yes. That works. On the rocks.”

Frankie’s jowls jiggle as he nods, then he rushes to his kitchen while I walk down the hall to his study. By the time he’s got the drink ready, Maverick and Sterling will be in the house and I’ll let them hold him down for me to inject him.

Heart pounding all over again, I hurry across the small study to the window, tap on it, and then turn to head back to the lounge. I’m almost there when he emerges from the kitchen, momentarily confused when I’m not where he left me.

As his head turns to look for me and he sees me coming down the hall, he frowns. “Where did you go?”

“Bathroom,” I say curtly, nodding to the glass in his head. “Is that my drink?”

He still seems a little more uncertain than he was before, but it doesn't matter anymore. As he follows me into the lounge, Maverick and Sterling appear like specters in the hallway I just left, and as my eyes meet Mav's, I nod.

A radiant grin breaks out on his lips and frankly, Sterling looks just as excited. Mav moves in behind Frankie and grabs his wrists, twisting his arms up behind him while Sterling clamps a hand over his mouth. *How the hell did they do that so seamlessly without even talking about it?*

I shake my head, but I guess I can ask my questions later. Frankie's muffled screams fill the room, but no one will hear him. The drapes are drawn over his windows, so no one will be able to see this either.

He jerks around in Maverick's grip, but he doesn't even almost manage to break it. Sterling smirks at the guy as they hold him still. "Give it up, man. Not even I would be able to get away from him. You don't stand a chance."

Sliding the syringe out of my pocket, I show it to Frankie as I approach them. "You're going to feel a little pinch when I inject you. Fair warning, it might be more than a little pinch. I've never actually done this before."

I *have* watched a few videos on YouTube, though. I don't think that'll matter much to him, but hey. *At least I did my homework.*

Frankie's eyes are wide and filled with bright terror as I slide the needle out of the plastic cap, and he cries out when I step up to them. Sterling is still muffling his screams, though. He also helps me by straightening out Frankie's arm and holding it in an iron grip while I press the needle to his skin. It's surprisingly tough to get through his skin.

Tears stream down Frankie's cheeks when I push the tip of it in, hoping I've found a vein. Without wasting any time or drawing out the moment, I push down with my thumb on the plunger. The clear liquid disappears into him, and I hold my breath.

We won't know if it's going to work for a few minutes, and Maverick puts those minutes to good use. He glances at Sterling. "Find me something to tie him up with."

Sterling nods, but leans in and growls in Frankie's ear before he lets go of his mouth. "If you make a sound, he'll snap your neck."

Frankie whimpers, but jerks his head in a nod. Sterling steals away and Frankie stares at me with wide eyes, his voice a hushed, horrified whisper. "What do you want from me?"

"The truth," I state clearly. "What evidence do you have on the vigilante?"

"What?" He frowns, those eyes turning pleading as he stares at me. "Please...I don't have anything. The guy is a ghost. A rumor. I got a tip and the offenders are missing just like my source said, but they vanished without a trace."

"Maybe we didn't need the drug after all," I say to Mav, but since we've already given it to him and we need to be surer than we've ever been about anything before, I look back at Frankie. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"I don't have anything," he repeats, his voice still ragged. "I'll give you the password for my computer. I'll—"

"How many computers do you have?" I ask.

He frowns. "Two."

My heart skips. "The one in your office and?"

"A laptop. It's in my bedroom."

Sterling strides back in with a few belts, deftly helping Maverick to tie Frankie up before he turns to me. "I saw a laptop bag. I'll get it."

"I'm glad we brought him," Mav says as he watches Sterling go, then he glances at the hogtied man on the floor. "As for you, I need you to confirm a few things for me. Your source was Tony Riviera, am I correct?"

For the first time, Frankie doesn't answer. He writhes on the floor, suddenly breathing harshly until he mutters, "Yes."

Then, he winces. “I don’t know why I said that.”

“It’s the drug we gave you,” I tell him, feeling just a stirring of sympathy for the man. “Do you have anything set up that releases information when you die?”

He gags against the urge to speak, but then he nods. “Yes.”

“Information pertaining to the vigilante?” Mav asks.

Frankie starts sobbing. “No, not him. I told you, I don’t know who he is. No one does.”

“What’s the information that will be released?” I’m suddenly really hoping he’ll take our offer so he can stay alive, but I guess that remains to be seen. “Who is it about?”

“Damian Blackthorne,” he breathes in a harsh whisper. “I’ve been investigating him for years. Man thinks he’s a shadow. A ghost, but he’s not. He’s the leader of—”

“We’re aware.” Mav sighs as he looks at me. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

*That Frankie needs to die. No offer.* “Unfortunately.” My gaze moves back to Frankie’s. “How do we stop the release from happening?”

“You can’t. If the circumstances of my death are suspicious, five of my peers have access to the information. They’ve had the passwords to the cloud for years.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna need those passwords.” Maverick pulls his phone out of his pocket and makes a call. I’m assuming it’s to Phoenix. “We need you in here. Turns out there *is* a failsafe, but it’s about the Boss.”

“Fuck,” Sterling says as he walks back in carrying a battered black laptop. “This thing looks like it’s been through the wars, but it’s secure. I already tried to get in.”

“Go get the door.” Maverick glances at Sterling as he ends the call. “Nix is coming in.”

When he looks back at Frankie, he sighs and shakes his head. “How do we get into the laptop?”

Frankie groans and strains against the belts, flopping over and whacking his head on the floor. Maverick strides over to him and presses his boot against the man's chest. Since he knows we can't leave any traces behind that we were here—and therefore, we cannot injure him—he keeps the pressure light, but it's enough that Frankie stops fighting and gives him a pitiful stare.

“Even if you do get in, my colleagues will get an alert that someone is attempting to get into that folder on the cloud. They'll download the information faster than you can delete it. If they haven't done it already.”

Phoenix strides into the room with Sterling hot on his heels. He cracks his fingers before he picks up the laptop Sterling set down to go open the door for him. “Well, I suppose I'd best be quick, then. The password, Mr. Hayes.”

“Amberlightbubble99.”

Nix arches his brows at the man, but then shrugs and opens the laptop's lid. My heart is in my throat as I watch him. I'm also sweating profusely now, the trickle turning into a stream the longer we're here.

“What if they've already downloaded it?” I ask softly, worry apparently now affecting my ability to speak clearly.

“We'll get a list of people he shared the folder with. I should be able to track previous activity on the cloud, but if I can't, then I suppose we've got a few more people to visit.” Nix's eyes don't leave the screen while he speaks, his fingers flying over the keys. “Now, Mr. Hayes, which cloud am I looking for? You've got a lot of backup storage on this thing.”

Frankie practically spits the name at him. It's one I can't even pronounce, and it's definitely not one I've ever heard of. Nix mutters under his breath, “Well, that complicates things.”

He glances at me for a beat. “They're known for being more secure than most, but no matter. Sterling?”

“Yep?”

“Get Aaron for me, would you? I need his help with this.”

Sterling plucks his phone out of the inner pocket of his jacket without hesitation or question, and a few seconds later, his phone is on speaker next to Nix and the two seem to be speaking a language I don't understand. Maverick exchanges a look with his new friend, who shrugs and says, "I don't know either. Guess we've just gotta trust them. If you have any other questions for this guy, I'd ask them now, though."

"True," Mav says lightly. "Do you have any questions for him?"

Sterling snorts as he tries to hold back a laugh. "Thanks for the offer, but I don't even know who he is. Safe to say I'm good."

Maverick chuckles as he raises one broad shoulder in a shrug. "Never say I haven't tried to give you anything. Okay, Frankie. Walk me through this. You've been investigating Damian Blackthorne. What have you got on him?"

"Not as much as I would've liked. More than he wants me to have." Strangely, Frankie seems calmer now, kind of whimsy and lyrical. He's stopped fighting and he's almost peaceful as he lies on his back on the floor. *Delirious, maybe?*

"Well, no surprise there since he wouldn't want you to have anything, but you've got to give me more. If only to save the lives of these colleagues you endangered by sending them this stuff in the first place."

"It was necessary," he sing-songs. "Tony said so. He told me to make sure I have a backup plan."

"My biological father, everybody," I mutter. "He's just the gift that keeps on giving." Striding over to Frankie, I cross my arms and look down at him with what I know is cold fire in my eyes. *Let's see if the outfit still has any power even when he's high.*

"The truth. Right now. We don't have time for games, Mr. Hayes. What have you got on him?"

He chuckles, but then he sighs as his gaze openly rakes over me. Then he realizes I'm wearing a dress. "Take a step closer."

“Not on your life.” Mav gives him a deadly scowl. “Talk. Now.”

“Fine, fine,” he replies good-naturedly, chuckling some more before he lets out a sound that sounds suspiciously like a coo.

*Are you fucking serious right now?*

“It’s my best work,” he says breathlessly. “Over two decades of investigating him for only a few pages of evidence. He’s careful, your Boss. I’ll give him that. Smart, too. Ruthless, but smart.”

“What evidence?” Mavericks voice comes out sharp and there’s a vein distending in his neck now. “What have you got, Frankie?”

“Not enough. Just enough for one life sentence. Maybe two. He’s killed a lot of people, that man. Only one murder I can prove. The man who killed his wife. We knew he was after Ed. I took steps. Followed him. Got just one picture of Ed being taken away by Damian’s men, but Ed was never seen again, was he? No, sirree.”

My pulse spikes and Maverick’s cheeks drain of color. He swallows hard before he glances at Nix. “Any luck?”

“Some.” Phoenix’s fingers are still flying over the keyboard. “I gave Aaron access. He’s helping me dig now. None of the others have accessed this folder for several years. That’s something.”

“But they’ll already have gotten a notification that it’s been accessed.”

“Yeah, by you,” Nix shoots back. “Aaron won’t leave any trace of himself behind.”

“You don’t think they’ll get suspicious if I’m found murdered shortly after I accessed that folder?” He laughs. “I’m tired. You can leave now.”

“Tell me, Frankie. Do you have any history with narcotics?” Maverick grins down at him. “According to my research, you’ve been known to indulge occasionally. Of



course, you've been trying to get clean for a long time. To stay off the hard stuff. How's that going for you?"

"We got it," Nix says. "I'll be done and out in under three minutes. Do what you need to do. We have to get out of here."

"I'll stay behind and watch him until it's over," Sterling volunteers. "Just to make sure he doesn't get to a phone before he leaves this world for good. Consider it my thanks for letting me be a part of this tonight."

Surprise trickles through me, but I nod. "Thanks. That would be great."

"Anyone touch anything?" He looks at each of us in turn, but we all shake our heads. "Good. I won't have to clean up, then."

Maverick's deep blue eyes swing to mine, and I see the weight of the worry reflecting from them. "You're sure you want to do this?"

My hand trembles as I slide it into my pocket to retrieve the heroin, but yeah. I'm sure. Once I've got everything ready, I crouch down next to Frankie, looking into the man's glazed over eyes for the last time.

"You can still switch sides, you know," I tell him. I know the fact he's been investigating Damian means they want him dead, and rightfully so, but I need to at least try. If only for that one last bit of peace of mind. "Tony won't be around for long enough to blame you or to seek retaliation. The Triskele pays well, and we'll keep you safe."

"You're offering him an out?" Sterling mumbles so quietly that I almost miss it, but I nod. He frowns. "That's... unexpected."

"So what do you say, Frankie?" I tie the tubing we brought for a tourniquet around his arm. "Switch sides, or take one last flight?"

He sneers as he looks up at me. "I'd rather die. Damian is worse than Tony will ever be."

“Now there’s a wish she’ll make come true, but you’re wrong.” Maverick watches as I move the needle to Frankie’s arm and then, as if he feels my hesitation, he reaches out and touches my shoulder. “I’m here if you need me.”

“Thanks, but I don’t.” I stick the needle in near the puncture mark caused by the drug before, feeling strangely numb as I inject the man for the second time tonight.

The final time.

With that, Nix wipes down the laptop, carefully bringing it to Frankie’s hands to replace some of the fingerprints, and then he leaves it open next to him before he takes my hand. “Let’s go, *mo cara*. There’s nothing left for us to do here.”

CHAPTER  
**TWENTY-EIGHT**

## DYLAN

I do *not* like being left out of the action. I don't like being out of the loop. I got a text over an hour ago that it was done and they were on their way back, but as I pace the entrance hall, not looking at any of the soldiers passing me by or shooting me questioning glances, my stomach feels like it's been filled with iron.

I glance at my watch again. *Fuck, where are they?*

Maverick doesn't drive as much like a bat out of hell when he has Skye in the car with him, but still. They should be here soon. They could've been here already if I'd given him some incentive. *Shit, why didn't I think of that before?*

As I resume my pacing, I head for the windows at the back of the house, looking out at the expansive grounds, the sparkling pool, and the smooth, dark water of the Sound in the near-distance.

If I had my way, this entire wall would be glass. Dad has a billion-dollar view here. It's a pity to hide it behind brick. But he doesn't mind feeling trapped.

Me? I can't stand it. Neither can Colton. We'd live outside with only a roof over our heads and no walls at all if we could.

I shouldn't be making any decisions right now. I haven't slept since those two hours I got while Skye was holding me in the study, and I'm worried and wired as fuck.

But as I stand there, feeling as trapped as I haven't felt in a long time, I decide that it's coming out. All of it.

We've reinforced the perimeter walls. Doubled them in height and installed electric fencing on top. With infrared cameras every two feet. We have every biometric lock, every exterior spotlight, and every sensor, beam, and alarm imaginable. From the water's side, we have patrols, an advanced security system with remote-controlled CCTV cameras that have built-in infrared sensors watching every inch of the shore, more alarm sensors...

This place is as safe as it's ever going to be. If anyone does manage to get in, we've also got a helipad on the roof for emergencies and a pilot on standby at all times. Soon, we'll have cottages with more people living here permanently than have ever even been on this property.

It will never be empty again.

But if we're going to be living here, I can't feel trapped. I need the natural light during the day and I need to be able to see out at night. It's a thing for me. A trigger, maybe? But if I feel trapped, I get panicky, and if I'm inside and I feel like the walls are hugging me, I feel trapped.

It started after my mother's death. Along with the panic attacks.

Colton and I were playing video games in the basement while she was being slit open. Maybe that's why he can't stand it either. If there had been windows, we might've been able to see, and if we had seen, we might've been able to stop it from ever happening.

My blood thickens just thinking about that day, and it suddenly feels like there's a boulder on my chest. I focus on the windows, but the walls start closing in anyway. Bringing my hands up, I press the heels of my palms against my eyes. Hard.

*Breathe. Breathe. Breathe.*

The reminders don't work. My lungs are too small. That's why I can't breathe. I dig the heels of my hands harder into my eyes. *Shit, not now. Not now.*

"Boss?" a voice speaks behind me. "Are you okay?"

“Fine. Go. Check if they’re back yet.”

My voice is strained. Even I can hear it, but the footsteps marching toward the front door tells me whoever that was is following my order anyway. Blood pounds in my ears and as I’m breaking out into a cold sweat, that same voice calls from the door.

“They’re pulling up now, sir.”

The relief that surges through me buckles my knees. *Thank God.*

Dropping my hands back to my sides, I struggle to pull in breath after breath but even so, I spin and break into a jog on my way to the door. My steps are shaky and black spots dance in my field of vision, but I don’t care. I just need to see her. I need to know she’s okay.

Skye strides into the entrance hall and comes right for me, her jaw set and a determined look on her face until she sees me. Her features crumble as she starts running, smacking into me hard and wrapping her arms and legs around me. She holds on tight, stroking my hair as I stumble back. “You’re okay. You’re okay. You’re okay.”

My arms close around her, and when the backs of my thighs hit a sofa, I perch my ass on the edge. We’re on the wrong side of the thing to sit down, but she’s here and she’s safe. *They’re all safe. They got it done.*

And that fucking wall is coming out. *Tomorrow.*

Focusing on the heat of her against me, the warm, nutty scent of her hair in my nostrils, and the feel of her heart racing against mine, I close my eyes and I finally manage to suck in a whole breath. With it, the panic begins to subside. My head starts feeling clearer with every breath I take and eventually, I stop shaking enough to pull my head away from hers.

“Are you okay?”

She stares at me with dark concern in her eyes, sliding down until she’s standing on her own two feet again, but her hands capture my face and she stays pressed right up against me. “I’m fine. What happened?”

“Fuck. Nothing.” I let my head drop forward to rest my forehead against hers and somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize that I don’t need to lower my head as far as I usually do in order to reach it. But I can’t figure out why that is just yet. “I don’t know. I was worried about you. I started thinking about the walls and then...”

I let out a long sigh, shaking my head at myself. “I’m just relieved you’re okay. How did it go?”

Her brow is still furrowed, but she manages a soft smile. “We had a couple of hiccups, but it’s done. Sterling called while we were on our way back to confirm that Mr. Hayes is no longer with us.”

“Sterling?” My eyebrows shoot up, my heart rate spiking all over again. “Why the *fuck* was he there?”

“It’s a long story, which we will tell you, but not now. For now, all you need to know is that it was my call to take him and that he’s on our side.”

I search those perfect, glittering greens, but I don’t find anything to worry about so I nod. “Fine. Yeah. Okay. I can accept that. Drink?”

“Many.” She takes my hand and leads me through the lounge to the bar, where I find Colton, Maverick, and Phoenix already waiting with drinks of their own in their hands and ours already poured.

I pick up a tumbler, immediately bringing it to my lips and tossing it back. Nix wordlessly fills it up again, and after the second shot, I finally realize none of them have said a word. Suspicion and dread appear like wraiths deep in my chest and I narrow my eyes at them.

“What?”

Colton swipes his tongue across his lips, his black hair sticking up at all ends and his eyes wider than they should be. His cheeks are flushed too, which is never a good sign unless it’s been caused by physical exertion.

“So, uh, we’ve got some news,” he says lightly, but his voice isn’t light at all. I can see he’s trying, but it’s just not

working. His tone is too tight, his inflection too high.

*Oh, shit. This is bad. Real bad.*

“Spit it out, Colt. What is it?”

“Hayes is gone, but we’ve got another problem.” He meets my gaze dead-on. “It turns out he’s been investigating your dad since before we were born. Phoenix and Aaron managed to wipe everything he had, but it’s starting to look like some of the older information has already been downloaded.”

I go completely stock still. Numb. “By who?”

“An Irish reporter. He’s working out of Dublin at the moment, but from what we’ve been able to learn just on the way home, this guy has it out for Damian. We don’t know if it’s him specifically, or Ian, or the Triskele as a whole, but suffice it to say he’s not a friend.”

“Fuck.”

“I’ve taken the liberty of calling my dad already,” he says. “Apparently, they know the reporter. He said he’ll take care of it, but you should brace yourself. If what Hayes had on Damian ever sees the light of day, your dad is going to have to lie low in a non-extradition country for the rest of his life.”

My heart slams against my ribs, but otherwise, I’m still just numb. “Is that all of it?”

“Uh, no.” Phoenix grimaces when I turn to look at him. “We’re also going to have to move up our timeline, or risk having to push it back. By a lot. Enough time to find out who the new Riviera Underboss is and to take him out before he can lay down roots and make contingency plans.”

My fingers and toes feel weirdly cold. “Tony has a new Underboss?”

“Not yet, but if he’s still breathing by the end of the month, he will.” Nix reaches out and puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezing lightly before he withdraws it again. “Colton taking out Mazzoti was never really part of the plan, so even if a new Underboss is appointed, we’ll be able to adapt.”



“It’ll just be better if we don’t have to,” Mav grumbles before he swigs down his whiskey and sets the glass down with a loud thud. “I’m going to take a shower. Clear my head. Meet you guys back here when I’m done?”

“No.” I can’t believe I’m saying this, but... “We’re not going to discuss it tonight. Not any of it. It sounds like you guys have had a hell of a night and none of us have slept enough. If we’ve only got three and a half weeks to put this war to bed, we’re going to need some rest.”

Skye drains her glass before she refills it, hops onto a barstool, and kicks off the ridiculously high heels I didn’t even realize she was wearing. *But I guess that explains why her forehead was so much closer earlier.*

“In that case, let’s drink. I don’t know about any of you, but there’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep if we go to bed right now.”

“Who said anything about sleeping, Princess?” Colton winks at her. “I need to grab a shower too, but after that, I’m all yours.”

“A tempting offer,” she teases. “Let me get back to you three drinks from now.”

He laughs as he walks backward out the room, spanking his own ass and crying out before he spins around and heads upstairs with Maverick. Phoenix watches their retreating backs for a beat before he glances at me.

“Thinking about the walls gave you a panic attack?”

“You overheard that, huh?”

He shrugs, swirling the whiskey around in his tumbler before he glances at the windows. “Those *are* pretty small by our standards. What do you want to do about it?”

“Rip ‘em out. Tomorrow. It’s happening.”

Skye brightens up, sending me a happy smile as she nods. “If we’re renovating, I have a few ideas. Mostly about adding a second kitchen so I don’t give your men heart attacks about finding me in the kitchen while I’m making coffee.”

“Were you naked?” I ask, my gut burning at the thought, but she laughs it off.

“No, asshole. Why would I be naked in the kitchen knowing that we’ve got, like, a dozen people living here with us? No. It’s not that. It’s just that I think I make them uncomfortable.”

“Do *they* make *you* uncomfortable?” Phoenix asks.

“That’s a damn good question,” I mutter as my eyes narrow. “If they do, they’re out. First thing tomorrow.”

Skye blows out a harsh breath through her nostrils and groans. “No. Let’s dial it back a notch, okay? I’ve had more than enough big dick energy around me today. I don’t need more. They don’t make me uncomfortable. I just think that if this is going to be a long-term thing, we need to make provision for so many people in one house.”

“It’s not going to be long-term, though,” I say. “A few months. Tops. We’re building smaller units for the single guys, remember? I can even ask the construction crew to start with those.”

“Maybe that’s a good idea,” Phoenix says before he looks around the room. “If Skye doesn’t have any other ideas for renovations, I do, but we can’t tear up the whole house without talking to your dad first.”

“Yes, we can. He might be spending the rest of his life in a non-extradition country. I doubt he’s going to care what we do to the Manor.”

“He might also *not* be spending the rest of his life abroad.” Skye reaches out and rests her hand on my forearm. “In which case, he absolutely will care about what we do to the Manor. Just talk to him.”

I sigh, squeezing my eyes shut as I add it to the mental pile of shit I need to wade through tomorrow. Skye, however, has the perfect distraction lined up and waiting.

“So, uh, it’s your birthday soon. Then Colton’s and then Maverick’s. I’ve already missed Nix’s, which means we need to make up for that, too. We’ve also got our one year

anniversary of meeting coming up after that and then our dating anniversary. What do you boys say we start planning some parties?"

Phoenix grins at her. "Definitely not. My birthday has come and gone. We're not celebrating it eight months later. There's always next year. As for the anniversaries, I've already got something planned for our actual anniversary. I didn't realize we had to celebrate the day we met as well."

"After the year we've had, we're celebrating fucking everything," she says.

"If we survive until then," he counters, but then he glances at me. "We're not talking about that tonight though, so let's focus on their birthdays, then you can tell me how you'd like to celebrate meeting us."

I groan. I've hated my fucking birthday since the first year my dad forgot it. Which also happened to be just after we lost my mom. The mere thought of it usually leaves a horrible taste in my mouth, but as I look at the smile on Skye's lips, I decide that it may be worth celebrating this year after all.

"You know," I say, leaning forward and smiling at her. "Our birthdays and all that other stuff is coming up, but so is yours. In just a few days, unless all that information we got about you way back at the beginning was wrong. So tell me, Skye Love, how do you want to celebrate your first birthday with us?"

CHAPTER  
TWENTY-NINE

## COLTON

The days after our mission to Frankie's are filled with blueprints and plans to infiltrate the church. Dylan pops in as often as he can, but he just can't give it his full attention right now. The rest of us, however, are in my new study and we're focused on how we're going to render the enemy weaponless.

At this point, it might make the difference between win or lose. We're doing well, but we can't take anything for granted. Unlike what Damian predicted, Tony isn't scrambling. He's down several major streams of income, but he's still fighting back, swinging in a way that is remarkably collected.

Just last night, we got word from Stone that he's feeding information about Damian to his DA friend. Not personally, but he's making sure that the Triskele is getting some heat. After years—all my life really—of flying under the radar, suddenly being on it doesn't sit well.

Liam has assured us that he's handling it, but it's still making me nervous. Over and above all that, Tony's also still texting Skye, he's tipped off companies about corporate espionage that we're involved in, and he's managed to get back into the illegal cigarette trade already. There are also still new, smaller gambling sites popping up all over the place and rumor has it that he's negotiating with a new supplier to bring over some narcotics from Mexico.

*So yeah...we're doing well, but he ain't dead yet.*

Sticking to Phoenix's prongs has served us well so far though, and if we can pull this off, it would be a massive blow to him financially but also to his people's ability to fight against us. Two more of our own have lost their lives, and many more of his, but we need to get this show on the road.

"Okay," I say, pointing at the blueprints rolled out on top of a small dining table I had moved into the guest room I commandeered as a study. "So the Alpha team will go in here. It's the side entrance with the least amount of visibility from the street, but we're still going to have to be careful. Beta is over here, Charlie, and Delta."

As I say the name of every team, I press my index finger down on their entry point on the map. JT nods curtly, and so do Dwayne and Jas who are flanking him. I turn to meet each man's eyes in turn.

"Maverick has determined that you're going to be the team leaders for this raid, but it's on a volunteer-only basis. No one is ordering you to take the job."

"I'm in," Dwayne says without hesitation as he steps forward. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. Boys?"

He turns to glance at Jas, but not surprisingly, the other man shakes his head and grimaces when he looks at me. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't do it. I promised the wife I'd stay out of high-risk situations and someone needs to stay here anyway. Hold the fort."

"Of course." I don't smile at him, but I don't need to. He knows me and he knows I wouldn't have made the offer if I was going to hold it against them if they took me up on it. "Thanks for volunteering to stay. You're absolutely right. We do need someone here to hold down the fort, and it'll be great if that person is you. We trust you, Jas. You're defending the home front, then."

As I turn to JT, he steps forward and bows his head. "I'd be honored to lead a team, sir. If Jas doesn't need him here, I think we should take Eric to lead the final team."

I have no idea who Eric is, but Maverick nods thoughtfully where he's sitting on the bed. The big man stands up and strides to the door, poking his head out and barking at whoever is in the hall to bring Eric up immediately.

While we wait, I glance at Skye. She's on the bed too, her long legs spread out ahead of her and crossed at the ankles as she sits with her back straight against the headboard. When she sees me looking at her, she shakes her head.

"Stop it, Colton. I'm not staying behind."

*Fuck.* "I know, but you can't blame me for trying."

"I don't, but you can stop trying now. I want in on this and we're taking fifteen other people with us. I'll be just fine."

"Of course you will be. All nineteen other people going in will make sure of it."

Well, it could be eighteen. I don't actually know if Dylan is going to come yet. He wants to, but he shouldn't and all of us know it. If he does go in and he dies, we're Bossless. Which means *I* become Boss, which is a job I seriously don't want—and that's only if I don't die too.

*Now that'd be a shitshow.*

Technically, I shouldn't go if he does. In theory at least, I should stay behind if he chooses to go, but that's not happening.

I lift my chin, my jaw hardening as I look at Phoenix. "You should consider—"

"Fuck you. I'm going. My dad is busy with other stuff at the moment, but if I don't make it, he'd be back here in a flash to do the only job you really need me for."

My teeth grind together, but I dip my head in a nod, then I glance at Skye again and force myself to give her a playful little wink. "You wouldn't consider letting one of us put a baby in you? Just in case. At least there'd be an heir to one of the fucking positions that would need filling that way."

"No positions will need filling because I fully intend on bringing all of you home with me." Her deep green eyes hold

mine steadily. “Move on with the briefing, Colt. You’re wasting time. Four teams of five. Our entry points have been decided. What else?”

Inhaling deeply, I fill my lungs with air and hold it there for a minute before I blow it out and turn to face Maverick—the only one of us with any real reason to go on this mission. It’s literally his job, but I still don’t like it.

“You heard her,” I say. “What’s the strategy when we get inside?”

Maverick leans against the door, then pushes off it when another man appears beside him. Eric, I’m assuming. He’s older than I thought he would be. Late thirties maybe, but after Maverick asks him a few questions, he nods and extends his hand toward the guy. “You’ll be leading the Delta team. Welcome to the front lines, brother.”

Eric’s chest puffs out a bit and he goes to join JT and Dwayne, and then Maverick walks to what has become the front of the room. Standing against the built-in closets, he nods as he cuts a glance at the men who are now confirmed to be the team leaders.

“Right, I’m leading the Alpha team. That leaves Dwayne on Beta, JT on Charlie, and Eric, as I just said, on Delta. Alpha and Beta are going after the weapons. This church has basements and sub-basements, but we think we’ve got an idea of which Tony’s using for storage. Once we’re in, we’ll head straight there and Charlie and Delta are responsible for watching our backs and intervening if anyone should try to come down there after us.”

One by one, the men nod and Maverick continues, laying out his plan step by step. “Once we’ve located the weapons, we’ll take what we can carry provided that Charlie and Delta have cleared our path. We’ve got a few trucks coming in to meet us there at 1 AM sharp. Whatever is still in the basement by then gets destroyed. Got it?”

“Fire?” Skye guesses.



Maverick nods. “Fire and water are our best shots, but fire will be more efficient. The Church grounds are big enough that it shouldn’t spread to any neighboring properties and no one lives onsite, so there shouldn’t be any collateral damage.”

“Do you know how many men he’s got in there guarding it?” Dwayne asks.

I shake my head, my lips pressing in at the corners. “No clue. Curiously, Sterling and his foster brothers don’t know either and they’ve been watching the place around the clock. All they can say for sure is that there are at least two. At 4 AM, two men are always seen going in and those men are replaced at 4 PM. No other suspicious movement to speak of.”

JT frowns. “Is it possible that he’s only got two men on something this important?”

Phoenix scratches the side of his neck as he shrugs. “It seems highly unlikely, but from the information we’ve gathered, we know he’s been keeping it locked up there for years. No one has ever tried anything, so perhaps he’s let his guard down.”

“In the midst of a war?” Skye snorts as she levels with him a curious look. “Do you really think he’d be that careless?”

“No, I don’t. If he’s only got two men on it, it means we’re going to be up against a hell of a lot of other security measures. Could be traps. Could be alarms. Could be unpickable locks on a hidden door. Or it could be all of the above.”

“Yeah, that sounds more like it,” she murmurs absently before she refocuses on him. “How do we prepare for these things if we don’t know what we’re going to be facing?”

“We get ready for them all.” He tears his gaze away from her to look at Maverick and his men. “I’ve got gadgets, but I’m going to need to teach one guy from each team how to use ‘em. Send me someone by noon today. Someone smart, please.”

“Way to be condescending,” Maverick jokes before he nods at his guys. “You heard the man. Since you’re the team

leaders, you're going to be choosing the soldiers you want with you, but you need to give them the same choice we gave you."

I sit down on the edge of my desk, one foot still on the floor as I rest the other thigh on the wooden desktop. "Right. So we're loading our trucks full of weapons and getting out of there by no later than 1:20 AM."

"That gives us only 80 minutes for everything," JT says slowly, his brow furrowing. "Are you sure that's enough?"

"It has to be," I tell him firmly. "We can't afford to take any longer than that. As it is, 80 minutes at that time of day gives them plenty of time to send back up. A lot of their men, and Tony himself, live in the area. They wouldn't have taken long to get there even in peak traffic, but at midnight..."

JT's jaw grinds, but he nods his understanding. "Right. 80 minutes it is. We're leaving on the trucks?"

"No," Maverick says. "We'll have transport ready and waiting at the exit points. It's safer to split up after. Medics will be waiting here. Only divert to a hospital if you've got no other choice."

Dwayne suddenly looks like he's got a rhino sitting on his shoulders. "The dead?"

"We bring them with us if we can," Mav replies somberly. "That church is likely to be gutted by the flames once we set the fire. I think we'd all prefer it if we have bodies to bury."

For a long moment after that, no one says anything as the seriousness of the mission sinks in. Chances are that we're going to be bringing home at least one person in a body bag—and no one wants that.

But this needs to get done and they've made their choices. They're all in, and if that means dying, it's a risk they—and us—are ready to take.

Once the moment has passed, Maverick focuses on his men again. "Alright. All of this is happening the night after tomorrow. We have two and a half days to get ready. Remember to send your men to Nix. You're dismissed."

With that, they leave the room and Mav strides back to the bed. The door's still open, but he lies down next to Skye, pulling her into his arms and letting his head hover above hers as he looks into her eyes.

“What's it going to take to get you to sit this one out, Sunshine?”

She drapes an arm around his neck, a smile on her lips as she shakes her head at him. “That's not happening.”

“Dylan might be staying,” he murmurs as he lowers his lips to her throat. “Stay with him. Keep him company. You may be able to help him ward off another panic attack.”

She groans. “That's not fair.”

“Maybe not, but it is true.” Phoenix walks over to the bed and lies down on her other side, his hand on her stomach as he watches Maverick dot kisses up and down the column of her throat. “Stay, *mo cara*. The Boss needs you to. We need you to. I know it's not our decision to make, but we're asking you, begging you, to reconsider.”

When she turns her head to give Maverick better access, her gaze clashes with Nix's. “I'll think about it,” she promises. “Only if Dylan stays.”

I know it's premature, but relief courses through me anyway. Dylan vowed the day Damian left to put the Triskele first, and staying behind is what the Triskele needs him to do. If he was serious about putting his own interests aside, then he needs to not go on this mission regardless of how much he wants to—and Skye might stay with him.

Sliding off the desk when Phoenix leans in to kiss her, I feel my cock pressing against my fly as I stride over to the door to shut it. If this is going where I think it's going, I don't want an audience.

All I want is to spend some time with them after days in this room going over every shred of information we've got on that damn church. As I shut the door, I text Dylan to meet us here. If we're going to carve out some time for a late-morning delight, it's only right that the Boss gets in on the action.

Dude's been working like a dog, so God knows, I'm pretty sure he could use it right about now.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY**

## SKYE

With the bulk of the planning now done, I give in to Maverick's soft kisses and Phoenix's lips on mine. We've got so much more to do, but right now, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

Besides, with all that talk about bringing the dead home with us after the raid, I just need to be close to them. Feel them. Touch them. Taste them. I need to reassure myself that they're all still here, unharmed and safe—at least for today.

With all the danger and threats we're facing on a daily basis, it feels like we need to take every opportunity. Especially now, with such a dangerous mission right around the corner. We've hardly touched each other since we moved back to the Manor. We've barely even all been in the same bed at the same time.

I feel the mattress dip when Colton climbs onto the bed with us, and when I hear the soft snick of the door opening, I pull away from Phoenix and smile when I see Dylan walking into the room.

"That was fast," I say lightly when my eyes meet those intense, brilliant blues. "How'd you know?"

He smirks before he slides off the jacket he's wearing and hangs it over the back of the sofa. "I know everything, my love, but also, I was already on my way up here already when Colton texted me."

I laugh as warmth invades my chest. "There was a time you'd just have told me that you know everything and left it at

that. I'm glad we're past that time."

"So am I, love." He saunters towards the bed, slowly undoing his button-down shirt. His gaze lingers on my body as he hangs it over the lamp on the nightstand so it won't be too rumpled before he has to go back to work.

As he gets on the bed too, Phoenix steals my mouth with a passionate kiss and I moan as the musky taste of him makes me crave more. Maverick fits himself to my side, still lazily kissing my neck as Colton and Dylan start taking off my clothes. Maverick keeps lightly nibbling on my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

I want them, and although we've all got better things to be doing right now, I'm not going to make any excuses for it.

The sounds of heavy breathing and soft moans fill the air as we tangle ourselves together. When Dylan pulls my pants and panties down, Maverick's hand travels down my body and finds its way between my legs, making me gasp as his fingers work their magic. Dylan's lips find my neck and his hands roam over my breasts, leaving me aching for more.

I'm lost in the sensation of their touches, the warmth of their bodies, and the taste of their lips. I can feel the tension building inside me, and I know I'm already close to the edge.

Maverick grazes his fingers over my clit and I buck my hips. He moves them between my folds and groans when he feels how wet I am.

"You're ready for us, aren't you, Sunshine?"

I nod my head. "Always."

He pushes his fingers deep within me, until I'm no longer in control. Heat coils inside me and my body trembles as he moves faster and deeper with every thrust. His skillful fingers bring me too close to the edge of pleasure. Too close for comfort. Then Maverick pulls back, and my eyes snap open to find every one of them smirking at me, their eyes full of mischief.

"We've got too much planned for you to let you come already, Skye Love." Dylan's voice is full of anticipation for

what comes next.

With that look in his eyes, my already aroused body ignites into flames. He reaches down and takes my hand before pulling me up off the bed. My shirt and bra are removed so I'm standing naked before them. He points at the ground, and I drop to my knees without hesitation.

All four of my men are standing in front of me, shirtless but still wearing their jeans. They look like a photo from a magazine. I lick my lips when I let my gaze wander over all of them. It's like a wall of muscle staring back at me.

Dylan pulls his pants down and his erection springs free. When he grabs his shaft and sets it right in front of my lips, I don't hesitate to lean forward and take him into my mouth. I start by sucking on the tip, tracing it with my tongue. He places his hand on my head and grabs my hair, forcing me to look up into his smoldering eyes.

"Fuck, Skye. You're so good at that," Dylan says, running his fingers through my hair. "There's nothing I love more than your lips wrapped around my cock," he says, and my pussy contracts with need as he says the words.

His hands tighten in my hair, guiding the movements of my head and tugging softly at the strands. Just a taste of pain mixed with my pleasure. It makes me feel even more on edge.

He grips both his hands in my hair before he pushes himself to the back of my throat and keeps me still. I have to fight my gag reflex and breathe through my nose.

"Such a good girl," he praises.

I look up at him with watery eyes, but when I see the look in his, it's all worth it to me. He lets go and I take a deep breath as he slides all the way out of my mouth and caresses my cheek.

"Be a very good girl, and give the others the same taste, my love."

I love being his good girl. I love being a good girl for all of them. Dylan steps aside and Maverick takes his place. He gives me the same treatment. First slowly letting my suck him



before grabbing my hair, shoving his dick to the back of my throat. When he's about to come, he pulls back and moves aside so Nix can take his place. He gives me the same treatment too, and then moves aside so Colton can as well.

When Colton pulls back, I look around to see all four of them standing around me. All of them are focused on me, and it makes me feel so special. So wanted.

God, I love being with them like this.

They all take their cocks and start stroking them in front of me. I just kneel between them and look around to see them towering above me. It makes me feel small, but protected by these four strong men. *My men.*

One by one, they groan out their relief and come on my face and breasts.

Maverick bends down and lifts me up. I'm still in a daze from the entire scene, so when he picks me up and puts me on the bed, I don't object. He opens my legs and lowers his head. I can feel his hot breath on my pussy, just a second before his tongue slides up and down my folds. With each pass up, his tongue does a little swirl, and I can't hold back my moans. He traces the outside of my clit, bringing me closer and closer to orgasm before he stops abruptly and lifts his head.

"Don't stop," I protest.

He chuckles and I see the others standing behind him, watching.

"He's not stopping, Princess. Now spread those legs wider so we can all have a good view."

I immediately follow his order and spread my legs as wide as I can. Maverick stands at the end of the bed, then he pulls me a little closer towards the edge so my butt is hanging over a little. He looks at Dylan and Colton.

"Hold her legs for me," he orders them.

They grin and stand next to me, each one holding a leg and spreading me even wider. Nix moves next to me and lifts my head a little so I can get a better view.

Maverick slaps my pussy with his full hand, making me buck my hips.

“Are you going to be a good fucking girl, Sunshine?”

I nod my head and he slaps my pussy again, making it burn and sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

“Yes,” I cry out in a desperate plea. “I’ll be a good girl.”

“That’s more like it,” he says with a gruff voice.

He puts one finger inside of me, followed by a second one. And then he starts moving. Fast and hard and relentless. He curls his lips and finds my G-spot inside.

“Oh God,” I gasp. “Don’t stop, please don’t stop.”

“Wasn’t gonna, Sunshine.”

True to his word, he keeps pushing his fingers in and out, increasing his pace, pushing even deeper inside of me. Just as I’m coming, I can feel a wet stream releasing from my pussy and I squirt all over him.

“Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh. *God!*” I repeat over and over and over.

I feel so embarrassed.

When I open my eyes they’re all staring at me in awe; Dylan and Colton are grinning and Nix looks like he’s about to burst with pride. He lowers my head until we’re level and smiles at me tenderly. “That was the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.”

For a long moment, all I can do is stare back at him, then I collapse down on the mattress, giggling, and panting, and wondering what the hell they’ve done to me. Colton joins in my laughter, crawling in beside me before the others follow him onto the bed.

It takes ages for us to settle and when we finally do, I don’t want to interrupt this one moment of pure relaxation by talking. But that only lasts so long. Eventually, I remember something I’ve been meaning to ask Maverick for a while now, and since I’m afraid I’ll forget again, I turn to him.

“Hey, did Sterling ever ask you whatever it was that he wanted to ask you the other night,” I murmur with my brain now finally having returned to my body. “Before we got out of the car at Frankie’s, he said he had one last question for me and he asked it, but he also said he had one for you.”

Maverick cracks open an eye and smirks at the ceiling. “Yeah, he did ask me. He wanted to know about us. All of us. How it works. If it’s really working. I think he may be interested in that little fantasy of Ava’s about having a harem all of her own.”

Surprise trickles through me, but it’s not as much of a surprise as it could’ve been. I saw what he was like with Alistaire the other day. They may not go way back, but it’s clear that they’re learning to trust each other. After what Ava said about Sterling being so jealous about her all-nighter with Al back on campus, I know they didn’t like each other at first, but I think they’re coming around.

I grin. “Way to go, Ava. Think Aaron will bite?”

I don’t even have to look at Phoenix for him to know I’m talking to him. He chuckles and strokes his fingers through my hair as he thinks it over. “I don’t know, but it will be good for him to have three other people loving him that much. The guy’s been too isolated. He *has* asked me a bit about us too, though. He sounded pretty interested himself and if Sterling is asking questions as well, then I think that’s a good sign.”

Excitement for my friend ripples through me. More than anything, I want her to be happy. Before we can continue the conversation, Dylan’s phone and Nix’s start ringing at almost the exact same moment.

For just a second, my blood nearly freezes in my veins as terror snakes through my chest, but it turns out it’s only duty calling. Dylan has a meeting with the contractors and Phoenix has those team members waiting for him.

Just like that, I watch as the two of them rise, get dressed, and take off, leaving me with only Colton and Maverick. But then Mav’s phone rings too. He groans, but presses one last, hard kiss to my mouth and takes the call while he gets dressed.

As he covers his gorgeously inked, gorgeously ripped body, Colton tickles my side and gives me an apologetic smile when I look at him. “Sorry, Princess. I’ve gotta go too. But, uh, just a quick question before I do. Do you like ice hockey?”

“Ice hockey?” *I’m so damn confused right now.* “Uhm, sure? I think so. I’ve never actually watched a game, though. Why?”

Mischief glitters in his gray eyes as he mimes zipping his lips and then gets up. “No reason. I was just asking. Love you.”

He leans over and brushes a quick kiss to my forehead before grabbing his clothes and getting dressed before I can even begin to wonder what that was all about. Honestly, I’m probably better off not knowing.

With Colton, anything is possible and I really wouldn’t have it any other way. Nor would I want to ruin what he obviously wants to keep a surprise.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-ONE**

## MAVERICK

Orange, ambient light drifts up to the church from the street and the low lights that are on inside aren't helping. Colton, Phoenix, and I are hunched over as we rush toward the side door that is our entry point, the two soldiers behind us staying close and keeping their guns at the ready.

Our footsteps are silent on the asphalt, the only sound the rustling of our fatigues as we move and the traffic in the distance. The church's street is quiet at midnight and if our luck holds, it'll stay that way.

In my mind's eye, I can already see the red and blue flashing of the lights that will be here in just a few hours from now. Hear the echoing of the sirens racing toward our location and the fire roaring as they approach.

The only question now is whether we'll make it out in time—and alive—before that happens. But I can't get hung up on the what-if's. We've got a job to do in the here and now, and that's what I need to be focused on.

As I glance at the door ahead, I run over the plan in my head. Once we're through that door, it's a straight shot and a right turn to get to the back of the pulpit. Behind it, there's another door. Our first possible hurdle.

From what we've gleaned from Sterling's foster brothers, the regular donations are kept in the first basement. One of them volunteered last week to help move some stuff in there. Clothes, food, toiletries and the like were all he saw down

there, which means our target is in one of the basements beyond the first.

My best guess is that it's in the second sub-basement, the deepest and the furthest from the public eye. Also the easiest to defend without the risk of an enthusiastic volunteer making it so far to drop off some things and walking straight into whatever Tony's got waiting for us down there.

As my heartbeat remains steady and my breaths are coming out in even puffs, I wonder if my heart and lungs are still going to be functioning by tomorrow morning. I got lucky once and I won't be so presumptuous as to assume it'll happen again.

Tony's got little to no men on this place—even now, in the middle of the greatest war he's ever waged. There's no doubt he has some surprises in store for whoever dares step foot down there, which is why I'm leading the way.

If any of us are biting it tonight, it's going to be me. I've already gotten my second chance. If I manage to get myself shot or injured twice in one year, then that's on me and I don't deserve to see another sunrise.

With that being said, I've never been as relieved as I was when Skye said she was staying behind with Dylan. He ranted and raved for at least an hour, but with everything else the Triskele has going on at the moment, he just couldn't come along.

An added bonus is that if this op goes tits up, the Triskele still has a leader who has the love of his life by his side. *They'll get each other through losing the rest of us, I hope.*

It's only seven more days until Skye's birthday. In just one more week, she'll be a whole year older than she was when she met us and I desperately want to be there to celebrate with her, but...

Just in case something goes wrong here tonight, Colton left her a surprise in the bedroom.

Dylan knows it's there. He'll make sure she doesn't get it unless he hasn't heard from us by 1:21 AM. Phoenix has also

left Dylan with a list of possible substitutes in the event that we don't make it, people he's vetted and trusts to take our places.

Dylan doesn't know about that yet. It's securely tucked into Nix's *In Case of Emergency* folder in the Boss's filing cabinet. If we die, it's the first place Dylan will go. *Standard operating procedure within our ranks.*

Every member of the upper echelon has a folder stored in the Boss's office. Phoenix, Colton, and I updated ours just this morning. Dylan was outside with the construction crew while we added several vital pieces of information to each of our folders.

The mere thought makes my heart feel heavy, but it is what it is, and what it is, is not something I can afford to worry about right now.

Suddenly faced by an intricately carved wooden door, I realize the time for thinking is over. We've made it all the way to the church without being attacked or apprehended, which means that it's go-time.

Turning to glance at Nix and Colt over my shoulder, I make eye contact with each of two of my closest friends. Burnt, warm brown and an almost clear silver-gray look back at me, and I nod at them. It's not exactly a goodbye, but it's going to have to do.

Then Colton rolls his eyes at me, barrels past, and kicks open the unlocked door. It's theatrical, but we planned it this way. As much as I feel like I should be the one who bites it, Nix and Colton are willing to lay down their lives for those of our men as well.

Logic dictates that Colton shouldn't even be here, as the Underboss and all, but as he cocks his gun and extends his arms out ahead of him, I give up. *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*

Then again, I knew there was no chance of him giving it up as soon as he got into the car with us. I tried one last time



anyway, but nope. The guy would put his dick in a vice—and not the fun kind—before he sits this one out.

Sighing internally, I follow him in with my own semi-automatic raised, but it takes my eyes a second to adjust to the lighting inside the church. It's dim, but focused more in some places than others. There's a pool surrounding a statue of Jesus behind the pulpit and some focal points like the stained glass windows on high.

The wooden pews are darkened, the pulpit itself lit up like someone's about to step behind it. It's disconcerting, and in the second it takes me to get my bearings, the first pops of gunfire go off. A man who was running toward us drops, sprawling out on the floor like even in death, he's trying to mow us over like a human bowling ball.

Colton grins at me at pumps his fist. *So I guess he's responsible for taking the guy out. Go figure.*

Behind me, the glow of a faint red light says Nix has turned on one of his gadgets as we rush toward the pulpit, stealing past the heavy, burgundy drapes to the door waiting beyond. Before Colton can go and do something stupid like charge ahead, I grab his shoulder and hold him back as I step in front of him, blinking again for my eyes to adjust to the much lower light in here.

As Sterling's foster brother reported though, it's nothing but donations. Stacked to the roof, there are piles upon piles of clothing, crates of homewear, sports gear, books to be sorted, and canned food along with some other goods.

But there are no weapons—unless they've hidden them within the donations, which is how I'm thinking they probably move them, but there's no way they've got their entire cache hidden in here.

More muted gunfire rings out from above and I freeze, but there's no point worrying. *I'll find out soon en—*

“Second guard down,” JT's voice whispers harshly into the speaker in my ear, and I release a silent breath.

That means that both of the Riviera men we know are here are dead. There's no guarantee that there aren't any more waiting, hidden downstairs, but at least it's looking good so far.

Sterling's foster brothers have told us that there's often movement around the church—at all hours, but that they only managed to identify the shift changes of two men at a time. It's still highly unlikely, but it's also all we've got so we need to work with it.

The second chamber of the basement is much the same as the first, so are the two beyond it. It's only once we move past those and descend an old set of stone stairs that Nix's device beeps. It's low and electronic, but it's so loud and so out of place down here that it makes us all stop instantly.

I spin to face him and he motions ahead, explaining quietly as he activates some kind of feature on his gadget. "Laser Beams. See those black bars on the walls? Those are going to let Tony know we're here if we so much as sneeze on them."

With that one press of a button on the nifty little black box in his hands, the corridor in front of us lights up and it's a mess of red lines covering every inch of the floor, ceiling, and walls. "Fuck, so what now?"

"We're prepared for this," he tells me softly and gestures for one of the soldiers to join him. "This is Aster. He'll get us through. If we're lucky, there will be a control panel on the other side, which is risky for him to disable since Tony might will probably be notified if it's tampered with, but in the alternative, he rushes through, grabs whatever he can carry on the other side and brings it back with him after setting the rest on fire."

I regard the clear brown eyes of the man behind the mask, and I recognize him from the training sessions I've been running with the guys since we got back to the Manor. Aster is small, agile, and nimble. In a nutshell, he's everything I'm not.

I've put them through scores of exercises just like these, and he touched exactly one beam on exactly one occasion. If I

was going to ask for any of our men to be on our team right now, it would've been him.

I nod. "We *were* prepared for something like this. Let's get you ready to go."

The man steps up and spreads his arms just like I taught him, and I fill his inside pockets as much as I can with the little flasks of accelerant I brought along. "This will burn fast. I'm putting a lighter in your breast pocket. Douse the crates, make your way to the door, and toss the lighter at the further point you can reach. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

I nod. "If there is a control panel on the other side, risk it. The more of these weapons we can get, the better. We'll need it for the next part of our plan."

Aster salutes me and then gets to it, and I swear, the next fifteen minutes are the longest of my goddamn life. We watch as he clears each beam carefully, lifting his limbs like they're not even connected to the same body as he weaves and rolls his way through the red lines.

My heart is in my throat every second that passes, but painstakingly, he makes his way across. There are a couple of close calls, fractions of inches that would've had the Family on us faster than we could say *shootout*, but amazingly, he makes it.

If I was the kind of guy who cheered, I'd have broken out into a song and dance, but the best I can manage is a brief grunt of acknowledgement. Past the worst obstacle, Aster takes a beat to catch his breath and then takes off to search for a control panel.

Colton, Nix, the remaining soldier, and I get ready to move. If we do this and he finds a way to let us in, there is every possibility that the cavalry will come speeding in. With our guns drawn and our eyes open, we wait when he pauses at a peculiar point on a bend in the tunneled corridor.

Another low, digital ding sounds out and then Nix charges ahead. I reach out to stop him, but the next thing I know, the

beams go down and our way is cleared. The asshole turns and jogs backward, gun still drawn even as he winks at me.

“Thank Aaron for that when you see him again. He just bought our access to this corridor.”

I frown, but at the same time, I realize Aster must’ve been armed with more than just my accelerant. He must’ve had another gift from Nix with him—a gift designed by Aaron to get us past an obstacle just like this one.

That guy deserves something nice. A fuck, maybe. *I wonder what Ava would say to that.*

As we jog silently down the corridor though, I realize this isn’t the time to speculate. Aster waits for us exactly where he was when he brought the beams down, and when we get closer, I notice another low beeping sound coming from his device.

Phoenix curses under his breath. “There are more traps ahead. It looks like we also tripped a silent alarm by letting those beams drop, so get ready, boys. This is going to get hairy.”

I’m on edge immediately, laser focused and ready to get this done. Down the corridor, we run into tripwires similar to those Nix has been installing everywhere we’ve lived recently. The kind linked to explosives that thankfully, he knows how to disable.

It takes him precious minutes to do it though, and my heart is beating out of my chest by the time he’s done. Exhaling a sigh of relief as we proceed, we clear a few more obstacles by the time we reach the sub basements, precisely where I thought we’d be ending up tonight.

Which is when we hit our next big problem.

In front of us is no ordinary door, but a vault type thing with a wheel in the middle and it’s made out of what appears to be solid steel. Phoenix steps up and puts his hands against it with his palms flat on the metal. He cocks his head, then he sighs.

“This might take me a while.”

“We don’t have time.”

“Then fucking buy me some,” he snaps before he gets to work.

My pulse is racing as I spin to face the corridor. There’s no one else down here yet, but the sounds of very muted gunshots coming from above alerts me to the fact that we’re no longer alone. Bravo team should’ve been within eyesight by now and the fact they’re not is bad news.

A sense of dread trickles through me, solidifying in my stomach and making my veins feel like they’re filled with sludge. Even my blinks become lethargic, which is when Nix suddenly shoves a gas mask at me.

“Put this on. They released something into the tunnels.”

*Fuck.*

My hands are stupid as I take it from him, but I manage to get it on just as black spots start dancing in my vision. When I glance at him, I see he’s already wearing his and has gotten back to work. Colton has one on too, and he’s helping the final, sagging soldier secure his behind his head.

The more I breathe, the clearer my head gets until I realize the gunfight above has intensified. The pops of shots are coming faster now and there are cries ringing out as men charge and go down. No doubt they won’t be having a service here this coming Sunday, but that’s the least of my worries.

As my vision clears, I become aware of men making their way toward us—and we’re trapped where we are. The only way to go is through the vault door—which is locked.

“Hurry,” I murmur to Nix as I raise my gun and take aim.

We opted for heavy, semi-automatic weapons this evening, and they come in handy as the four of us cover my brother. My friend. He needs to make it through this. Dylan will be able to replace me and even Colton with time, but Nix? He’s willing to go down swinging but he shouldn’t.

Other than Aaron, I don’t know anyone as smart as he is and I’ve never told him that, but if we live to see tomorrow, I

fucking will. A few of the men stumble back as my bullets find their mark, but there are more behind them, pouring down the tunnel like ants who aren't afraid of stepping on their fallen comrades to get to us.

My heart rate elevates, but only slightly. This is the kind of shit I live for and it's about to get real. We've only got two and a half weeks until the end of the month. It's July 10th and if we fail here tonight, Tony *will* appoint a new Underboss.

Dylan, Skye, and whoever makes it out of here alive will have to rethink everything. Formulate a whole new plan. I'm not sure the Triskele has that amount of time.

We're bleeding money with this war and the shots Tony is taking back at us. We've lost more men than I care to think about, and tonight will be a turning point for whoever goes home in one piece.

Determined to be on the winning side, I let out a feral yell and charge ahead, completely focused on my targets. They're wearing bulletproof vests but no masks, and I aim for parts that aren't protected.

*Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes. Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.*

The refrain plays on repeat in my head and as it does, I follow my father's instructions delivered to the tune of the old song for toddlers. Some upbringing I had, I know, but hey, it's efficient. As I watch, Aster, Colton, and the other soldier follow my lead, probably singing the same song in their own heads.

I taught it to all of them—some more recently than others.

Right in front of my eyes, the men opposing us start dropping and the scene is reminiscent of that in an action movie. When heads start exploding and guys start falling like flies. Above the ringing in my ears, I don't hear their shouts of pain, fury, or determination.

The only thing I can hear is my own blood thundering through my veins and that fucking song, over and over again until there's no one left to oppose us. Bodies litter the floor of

the tunnel, and I grin savagely at the sight, taking great pleasure in the corpses of my enemies laid out at my feet.

“I’m in,” Phoenix says softly from behind me and I turn, marching back to join him as he cracks open the door.

“How the fuck did you manage that?”

He smirks. “Same way you did. Practice, determination, and a whole lot of luck. Are we talking or getting the goods?”

“Getting the goods.”

I stride past him into what can best be described as a walk-in safe. A safe as stacked to the rafters as the basements we were in before, but we’ve hit the good stuff this time. Wooden boxes housing every weapon Tony keeps in the state are right in front of us, and I start passing them to the Alpha team and the Betas when they join us.

I recognize them as Dwayne’s team, but the man himself is nowhere to be seen. “Where is he?” I bark at one of his guys, and the look in the man’s eyes makes my heart stall in my chest. “How?”

“The Priest’s assistant, sir,” he murmurs. “He was in his office. We tried, but he’s gone.”

Shock renders me motionless and speechless for at least a full minute. I can’t actually believe what they’re telling me, but I know it has to be true because if it wasn’t, he’d be here with them and he’s not.

Wave after wave of sadness and loss crashes into me. The day my dad announced that I’d be taking on more responsibility, Dwayne was the first guy who stepped up to serve under me. I was a fucking kid, sixteen, and he trusted me enough to volunteer.

He’s been with me since the very beginning of my journey in this role and replacing him...I just can’t. A silent scream lodges in my throat as red hot rage whips through my being.

He was my friend. One of only a handful, and now he’s gone. *Someone is going to pay for that.*

Like a machine, I hand over crate after crate, passing some to the Charlie and Delta teams when they arrive as backup. One look at their faces tells me they've lost people too, and Aster's is among the pile of bodies we walk over as we carry the crates upstairs.

Colton grimaces when he recognizes him, his eyes suddenly shiny as he passes off the crates he was carrying and gently lifts our man over his shoulder. There are more gunmen waiting upstairs, but that anger is still burning through my soul, tearing me up on the inside as I drop my crates and sling my gun back into my hands in the same motion.

A feral roar tears out of me as I tighten my finger on the trigger, blind to rage eating me up from the inside out as I send a hail of bullets raining down on them. Behind me, footsteps ring out and I know it's our guys clearing the building, but I still can't see anything but Dwayne's face as I keep firing.

Eventually, two pairs of arms wrap around me and force me to lower my weapon, and those same arms guide me into one of the waiting trucks. I follow them wordlessly, assuming but not knowing for sure that the arms belong to Colton and Phoenix.

Right now, I don't care. My friend is gone. He's dead, and I'm not going to rest until I kill every last one of the people responsible.



CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-TWO**

## SKYE

Dwayne's funeral was awful. His wake was worse.

My guys are hurting and so am I. Once again, we're attending too many funerals, day in and day out. Dwayne's, Aster's, and so many men I never even got the chance to get to know. It's heartbreaking.

It's not lost on me that these men died protecting my boyfriends. My heart. And, sure, the organization they all pledged their lives to, but still. It's been a little over a year since Mom and I moved in with Damian and I found out the Triskele was real, and I still don't really get it.

That kind of loyalty. The depth of that sense of duty...

But while I don't understand it, I respect the hell out of it. Not so grudgingly anymore, I also respect the hell out of Damian and the kind of organization he turned the Triskele into after he took over from his father.

As I watch yet another coffin being lowered into the ground, I glance up at the man's wife and son standing on the other side of the grave and a hot tear rolls down my cheek. Dylan has barely slept since the weapons raid, personally visiting every man's family if he had one.

He's promised the grieving widows free housing for the rest of their lives, as well as medical, car and life insurance... a whole package of benefits that has to be more generous than any I've ever heard of.

Once he saw how many kids had been left without their fathers, he also went further than just offering them said

package. He went and bought up the two estates on either side of Blackthorne Manor and is now planning on developing those as well.

Every widow has a choice about whether she wants to stay on the Triskele property or somewhere else, but either way, he's paying for it. Well, the Triskele is, but I've heard him murmuring to Phoenix in his study late at night. My boys are planning on paying for a lot of the promises they've made personally.

They're taking care of their own, and seeing it happen is what sparked my newfound surge of respect for Damian. Apparently—and they've told me this before, I just didn't know if I believed it—this is the way he's always done things. It's instilled my men with a sense of responsibility to the members of the organization and they're upholding that duty now.

Colton grips my hand tight, his fingers strangling mine as he lowers his head, his jaw clenched as the first mourners start filling the grave with dirt. Everyone adds a shovelful, and as they've been doing at every one of these funerals we've attended since the war started, my guys stay behind until the entire grave is filled, taking over from the mourners and doing it themselves once everyone else leaves.

When there's a mound of dirt on the grave, Maverick swallows hard, his eyes glistening but not wet as he takes a moment by himself to the next burial site. These are his men we're putting in the ground, and while we're all broken, he's wrecked.

As I watch, his jaw bunches out and he swallows again before he spins on his heels and marches to the car, not bothering to wait or check that everyone is following him. We're right behind him, but he just doesn't care. Not right now.

Wrecked by loss and grief, he—and the all the rest of us—have been listless one second and gung-ho to take out Tony's network the next. We're not sleeping. We're not eating. We're definitely not even thinking about having sex.

My heart weighs a ton as I hold Colton's hand, practically dragging him to the car with me when all he wants is to pop open a beer and drink it next to that grave, toasting to the fallen soldier. He's been coming out here every night doing just that with those we buried that day. None of us have come with him, but he had the sense to let us know where he was going before he headed out that first night, telling us that he'd bribed the groundskeeper to let him in.

Eight of the twenty men who went in that night didn't come out alive. That's nearly fucking half, and each of my guys has been grieving his own way. Working too, but Colton's got his nightly ritual of sharing one last drink. Maverick has been killing himself in the gym. Dylan upgraded at the Manor, training harder and longer than ever and mentoring every soldier who chooses to train with him.

Phoenix has been behind his computer almost all the time, not taking a break unless he falls asleep on his keyboard or I drag him outside for an hour to take a walk. Dylan has been working nonstop too, but not just on the Triskele's actual business. He helped the families organize all these funerals and when there wasn't any family, he arranged it himself. Apart from all those visits he's been making, he's also still overseeing the construction and obsessively checking our security.

As for me, I've been going over the lists Stone sent us with a fine toothed comb. Dylan mentioned wanting to hand over the bulk of it to the FBI, but he asked me to look into every person on that list, deciding what to do about those against whom we don't have enough legal evidence to turn over.

JT has been helping and Maverick nearly clocked him for it last night. As we climb into the car, I replay the scene in my head, recalling the way Mav had charged into the room like a wounded buffalo, all sweaty from training with his muscles bulging and his eyes wide as he breathed hard.

He grabbed JT's collar, shoved him up against a wall, and then, just before he'd taken a swing, JT had thrown his hands up and uttered perhaps the only words that could've saved him in that moment.

“I’m not hitting on her, Maverick. I’m just trying to help. She looked like she needed a friend, and I was there, but I’d much rather fuck you than her. I’m gay, Mav. I wasn’t hitting on her.”

Maverick deflated like a balloon, released him, and then stomped right out of the room without saying anything. He’s been doing a lot of that lately, though. Not saying anything. Honestly, I’m getting worried.

I loved Dwayne too. I really did. Admittedly, not as much as they did, but I did love him. I just won’t allow the men I’m in love with to endanger themselves to avenge him. I also won’t let any of them destroy themselves because of what happened to them.

The car rocks along the bumpy road out of the cemetery and my body rocks along with it as I look out over all the gravestones. Row upon row upon row of granite where an entire life is reduced to two dates and a few words. It’s surreal, and yet, it’s all too fucking real.

Leaning my head back against the seat, I catch Colton’s eyes as he stares at me. “What’s going on?” I ask softly. “You okay?”

“Yeah. No.” He gulps and then sighs, shaking his head before he lifts his hands to rub his tired, reddened eyes. “It’s your birthday tomorrow.”

“I know, and I also know you were planning something, but we don’t have to do it. Let’s just relax.” It’ll be the first day since the raid that we don’t have a funeral or a wake to go to, having attended more than one a day for the last five. “Really. I’m serious. Let’s just spend some time at home and stay in our jammies all day.”

God knows, we need it, but Dylan’s gaze snaps to mine in the rearview from where he’s sitting in the passenger seat. None of us are in any state to drive, so we’re being carted back and forth by trusted members of the Triskele.

“We’re not staying home in our pajamas, hiding from the goddamn world,” he insists as those blues burn into my own.

“It’s your birthday, my love. Your first one with us. We’re celebrating.”

“Besides, Ava and her crew have already accepted my invitation.” Colton yawns, barely covering his mouth with the back of his hands before he leans against the seat and closes his eyes. “Barry’s widow opted against the wake, so we’re headed home. We’ll get in bed early, hopefully get some fucking sleep, and then be ready to have a good time tomorrow.”

I want to argue, but even Maverick shakes his head at me. Still silent, but making it painfully clear that he’s not going to take my side on this one.

Sighing as I resign myself to the most depressing birthday ever, I cuddle into Colton’s side and close my eyes too, and when I open them again, it’s morning.

Somehow, I’m in our bed at the Manor, in Dylan’s old bedroom where we’ve all been staying. My shoes have been removed, but I’m still wearing the outfit I had on to Barry’s funeral when I come to.

The bed is achingly empty, and as I sit up and swipe my eyes over my eyes, my head still groggy and vision still clearing, I realize it’s not just the bed that’s empty, it’s the whole room. There’s not a sound coming from outside either, which is odd.

Since we’ve been living with so many people, even in these last few days when no one has been saying much, there’s always been the low humdrum of movements. Construction taking place. People on their phones as they walk past our door. The heavy thud of the guards’ boots as they patrol...

Things suddenly being this quiet is eerie and instantly, I’m alert and on edge. Carefully pushing the covers of my legs, I head to the window and look outside, but there are no contractors out there. No trucks clogging up the drive and no soldiers on the lawn with Maverick.

My eyebrows mash together and I force myself to take in a deep breath as I reach deep into my brain, but the last thing I

remember is being in the car after the funeral. I was exhausted but surely, I should've woken up when I was carried to bed. Or something. At some point during the night, I'd have needed to pee or something considering that I'd had a whole bottle of water in the car before I'd fallen asleep.

*The water.*

My pulse spikes and my palms suddenly grow clammy. *What if they put something in the wat—*

My thought is cut off by the near-silent opening of our bedroom door. My hands fly up so I can defend myself, but the sight I'm met with isn't threatening. It's not even the least bit scary.

Instead, I find myself blinking hard as I take in all four of my boyfriends, each one freshly showered and wearing a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. They're also all smiling, which I haven't seen them do for at least a week.

Colton's carrying a decidedly homemade looking cake, complete with lumpy pink icing, bulges in the cake itself, and a few candles placed haphazardly on top. He flashes me a sheepish grin when his eyes meet mine.

"Happy birthday, Princess. We baked this ourselves because we thought it would mean more, but we should've just ordered one. This thing is going to be disgusting."

Dylan brushes by him with a flick of his hands, his eyes warm on mine before he pulls me into his arms. "Don't listen to him. It won't be disgusting, but it's probably mildly poisonous."

My heart is still racing, but as he holds me tight, I finally feel my insides starting to relax. They're fine. Obviously, I wasn't drugged—I really was just *that* exhausted.

Winding my arms around his waist, I give him a squeeze as I listen to the steady beat of his heart under my ear, feeling near overwhelming love for them all rising up from deep within me. "I don't care if it's the worst thing anyone has ever tasted. You were right not to order a cake. This means so much

more, but uh, did anyone take a video of this process? Because I'd kill to see that."

Dylan chuckles before he releases me and passes me off to Phoenix. His hair is still damp and it's loose, so much longer now than it was when I met him. It's no longer only to his shoulders, but it's grown so much that it's almost to his waist.

His oceanic scent envelops me and I breathe it in, feeling inexplicable tears pressing at the backs of my eyes. "Don't worry, mo cara. I've got you. It's not a video of the whole process, but I think I captured enough for you to get the general idea."

I laugh, fighting the tears as I hugged Maverick next. My big guy smells of sugar and flour, and I immediately picture him covered in white powder. "What happened? Did you get into an argument with the ingredients?"

His chest rumbles against my ear as he chuckles, and hearing that sound after not hearing it all for a week makes the first tear escape from my eyes. "It's not my fault the packing is so stupid. Fucking stuff exploded when I barely touched it."

"Barely touched it?" Colton echoes as he wraps his arms around my waist and steals me from Maverick, lifting me off my feet and spinning me in a circle before he sets me down again and bends me over until my loose hair is touching the ground as he seals his mouth over mine.

After giving me a firm, playful kiss that leaves me longing for more, he straightens us both up and winks at me. "He did not just barely touch it. He wrestled it into submission."

"Showed it who was boss, too," Maverick grunts, but there's still a little smile playing at the corners of his lips and more tears leak out of my eyes at the sight of it. "Hey, now. What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I'm not. I..." I suck in a deep breath, looking at the four men who have captured my entire heart and soul in the past year, and then I shake my head at myself. "It's nothing to worry about. I'm just being a girl. Are you guys really feeling better today, or are you just pretending for my sake?"



Although I asked them all, Maverick must realize that the tears appeared after I saw that small smile on my face because he steps up first. For a moment, I see that haunted look creeping back into his eyes, but then he blinks it away and wraps his hand around mine.

“I’m not gonna lie to you, Sunshine. This is rough. We’re celebrating while we’re also building houses for kids who have lost their dads and trying to figure out ways to make them feel at home here.”

“I still think slides into the pool and more pools,” Colton says thoughtfully, not even joking a little bit. “A playground. A few more docks on the water they can fish from. It’ll be like heaven for any kid.”

It’s easy to see from the soft look in his eyes and the fact that he really doesn’t seem to be joking that he’s still hurting too, and I appreciate them being honest with me even if they got up early to bake a fucking cake just so I’d wake up to one on my birthday.

“Those are all good ideas,” I say to him before I turn back to Maverick. When those deep navy eyes meet my own, I incline my head. “I realize this is damn hard, which is why we don’t have to celebrate. To be honest, I’m not really in the mood either.”

“Oh, but you will be,” Colton promises, then he picks me up and carries me to the chest of drawers he set the cake down on. “Light the candles, Blade. Our Princess has a wish to make.”

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-THREE**

## SKYE

Ava squeals as we walk into a private suite at Madison Square Garden. “I can’t believe we’re about to see a Denver Devils game live. This is so cool! It’s like, the best birthday present ever and it’s not even my birthday.”

She squeezes my arm, her eyes nearly bugging out of her head as we walk deeper into the luxurious suite. On one side of it, a long bar stretches from one wall to the other. A massive mirror mounted behind it is covered in all sorts of sports paraphernalia, team stickers, and vinyls, and even a bunch of autographs.

I know my eyes are wild as I look around, but I’ve never seen anything like this. I’ve never seen any sports game live, actually, and seeing my first one from an exclusive suite with floor level seats is a little hard to get my head wrapped around.

Colton’s arms snake around my waist and his chin lands on my shoulder. “What do you think, Princess? I know it’s not diamonds or pearls, but we wanted to give you a fun experience to replace all the bad ones you’ve been having recently.”

“I love it.” I lift my hand and run it into his hair, giving his head a hug as I stare out the packed stadium and the seats still filling up outside. “This is incredible. It’s much better than diamonds and fuck pearls. I like those things, but they wouldn’t have compared to this.”

Ava tightens her grip on my other arm. “Agreed. Someone find Sterling and remind him how much I value experiences

over jewelry.”

Colton chuckles and lets go of me. “I’ll do it. He’s over at the bar with Aaron and Dylan.”

As his arms slide away from my waist, I miss the heat of them there but I’m also just happy to be here. It’s a risk to be taking the night off right now, but on the way over here, the guys assured me that our people are on all the different things we’re supposed to be keeping an eye on.

“You okay?” Ava asks once Colton has walked away. She glances at me, green eyes filled to the brim with concern and excitement. It’s a weird mix, but I’d rather quell the concern so the excitement can take over.

“I’m fine.” I could leave it at that, but since I know she’d still be worried if I do, I’m just going to lay it all right out there so we can move on. “The last few days have just been a lot, but we’re here to celebrate. I’m under strict instructions not to talk about Dwayne, the war, Tony, our impending deaths, or anything else that could be construed as negative.”

Her blonde eyebrows sweep up. “Got it, but do you *want* to talk about it?”

I look back at her for a long beat before I shrug. “Not really. I’d much rather learn about this game. Who are they playing again?”

“It’s the Denver Devils vs the Rangers.” Her voice drips with exasperation as her nostrils flare and she drags me closer to the TV mounted above the bar. “It’s an exhibition game, which means it’s not part of the regular season, but it’s still pretty important. Plus, we’re here, which means it’s the most awesome, important game ever.”

I chuckle, squeezing her arm as I let my head drop to rest on her shoulder. “You’re right. I wonder if the players know we’re here and that it’s the most important game they’ll ever play because of that.”

She shrugs. “You know, I wouldn’t put it past Colton to have told them we were coming.”

He appears like magic beside me, smirking as he hands us each a beer. Those gray eyes are twinkling and relaxed for the first time in weeks and it's damn good to see them like that. I know it won't last long, but hey. I've got to take what I can get at this point.

"Colton did tell them we were coming," he says smugly. "I cashed in a couple favors and managed to get in touch with Austin Ryker. He said he'd try to stop by here after the game. I don't know if--"

"Austin Ryker?" Sterling echoes from Ava's other side, having appeared seemingly out of thin air himself. He stares at Colton with wide, disbelieving eyes. "How the hell did you manage that? I've heard it's nearly impossible. The dude's phone number is like a national security level secret these days."

Colton laughs and I frown. "Austin who?"

Sterling groans, those silver eyes flashing with disappointment as he shakes his head at me. "How are you here, for this game, and you don't know who Austin Ryker is? You wound me, Love. Seriously."

Ava rolls her eyes at him and smiles at me as she guides me to seats facing the ice, but still inside the suite. We've got chairs outside, but neither of us are stupid enough to go out there while the lights are still on and the place is still filling up.

"Austin Ryker is the Captain of the Denver Devils," she informs me as we sit down. Lowering her voice, she brings her head closer to mine. "Between just the two of us, he's the hottest guy you've ever seen and it's only made better by the fact that there are two of him."

"Two of him?" Confusion muddies my brain until the realization occurs. "He's a twin?"

"Yep." She grins. "His brother is Brooklyn Ryker. He plays for the Devils too. Apparently, according to social media anyway, they're identical in every way, except that their--"

She cuts herself off abruptly as Aaron comes to take the seat on her other side. Those hazel eyes of his are alert, darting around nervously as he sits with his spine straight as an arrow. His hair is messy again, but I'm starting to think it always is. It's kind of part of his charm, I think.

Dressed in his usual jeans and a t-shirt combo, tonight's jeans are faded and the t-shirt is a deep blue with some kind of devil printed on it. It takes me a minute to realize that the flames and demon face seems to be the logo for the team playing tonight, the Denver Devils.

After he does a quick scan of the area, his gaze moves to mine. "What she was going to say is that rumor has it you can only tell the difference between them by their dicks. One curves left, the other one curves right. No one knows if that's true, though."

Ava scoffs. "A lot of people know. They're just not talking, but those guys get around. Some people *do* know and I'm going to find out if it's true."

Aaron eyes dart to hers and he frowns. "I don't think Sterling would like that much."

She flushes and releases a soft groan. "I didn't mean I was going to find out like *that*. I just meant I was going to...you know what? Never mind. Why are we talking about this?" She turns back to me, and it's not hard to see that she's flustered. Her cheeks are still glowing, but her jaw is also strangely hard and it's like she can't bring herself to look at him right now.

I have no idea what that's about, but I can't exactly ask with him sitting right there, and then my chances of getting an opportunity to find out become even slimmer when Dylan drops into the chair on my other side.

"There's a fatal flaw with your statement that they're the hottest guys Skye will ever see," he says matter-of-factly, peering past me at Ava as he slings his arm around my shoulders. I don't even know how he heard her, but he definitely did. "She already saw the hottest guy she'd ever see the day she met me."

I laugh, turning my head to nuzzle his neck and speak against his clean-shaven, spice-scented skin. “You can handle a little competition, can’t you?”

“You already know I fucking can,” he grumbles as he moves his hand into my loose hair and presses my head against his neck for a moment before he lets go and then winks at me. “I just thought the record needed setting straight.”

When I look back at Ava and Aaron, she’s giggling, but he’s staring at Sterling with a strangely thoughtful expression on his pretty, boyish face. “It’s odd that he wasn’t here to correct her himself. What is he talking to Colton about?”

Dylan grimaces. “Hockey. It seems they share a mutual love of the game and are now bonding over it.” He smirks at Ava when she looks back at them. “Also, just so you know, for my money, the Ryker twins don’t hold a candle to Travis Oakley.”

She makes her eyes big at him and I can see her formulating an argument in her head, but I’m going to need help again before she gets the chance to make them. “Who’s Travis Oakley?”

This time, the judgment comes from Aaron. *Tough break, I kind of thought he was on my side, but I guess not.*

“The Devils’ goalie. Austin is their Center player and Brooklyn is their Right Defenseman.” He glances at Ava and Dylan. “While they hash it out, do you want me to explain the game to you?”

I nod and motion to Ava to switch with me. “Yes, please. Fuck, I’m so lost. My mom did her best, but we didn’t watch much sport while I was growing up.”

His head cants slightly, those gorgeous messy, curls falling over the top of his forehead as his brow furrows. “Then why did Colton bring you here for your birthday?”

“We’re collecting experiences,” Phoenix answers for Colton, who’s still locked in conversation with Sterling near the bar.

Nix bends over to drop a kiss on top of my head, then he sits down in the row of chairs behind the one we're in. Aaron's still frowning, though. "Yes, but why hockey if Skye isn't a fan?"

Nix chuckles, his brown eyes warming as he glances at Colt. "He said he wanted to start new traditions. Anything that results in us making good memories together. Apparently, we're going to be raising our kids here."

I nearly spit the sip of beer I just took all over him. Swallowing so hard that my throat hurts, I make my eyes bug out at him instead. "What? What kids?"

He smiles and tips his beer bottle at me. "The ones we're going to have with you, *mo cara*. Happy birthday."

"Not anytime soon, you're not," I mutter. "Give a girl a break. I'm not even twenty-one yet and I still need to take over a notorious crime family."

He chuckles as he inclines his head at me. "I know and there's no pressure now, nor will there ever be any pressure, but eventually. When the time is right. Unless you've changed your mind?"

"No, I just..." I trail off, glancing at Aaron who's staring at us like he's making a study of this conversation, and the way he's looking at me makes me so nervous that I glance directly back at Phoenix instead. "I haven't changed my mind. I just didn't know we were talking about it like it's really going to happen any day now and that we're making plans for the kids we don't have yet."

"Well, not any day now," he reasons calmly. "I think what Colton is doing is referred to as nesting. It's natural. Nothing to worry about. He's in a serious, committed relationship with a woman he sees his future with. He's just growing up, I suppose. Don't tell him I said that, though. I think he sees himself as Peter Pan."

I chuckle and turn to look at the man in question just as he rakes a hand through his dark hair. *God, Dylan was right. I don't know who these Ryker twins are, but there's no way*



*they're the hottest men ever. That title belongs to each of my guys.*

Meanwhile, Aaron has started asking Phoenix about nesting, Ava and Dylan are still talking about the players and who's better, and Colton and Sterling are still bonding over their love of the game. Maverick and Alistaire are near the door, sipping their beers and seemingly keeping watch.

In that one moment I have to myself, I look around the room but this time, I'm not gawking at the expensive finishings or the luxury of it all. I'm thanking my lucky stars that all the people who are in here with me are still here. They've made it this far alive and it's starting to look like we all might just make it through this that way.

Once Aaron and Nix finish their conversation, Aaron turns to me and dutifully explains how the game works and he's surprisingly patient. He answers all my questions without making me feel stupid and by the time the players skate onto the ice, I'm pretty excited to see what this is all about.

The atmosphere around us becomes absolutely electric and when the camera pans in on a guy with brilliant blue eyes and a shock of jet black hair, Ava leans into me. "That's Austin Ryker. What did I tell you? Hot, huh?"

"Definitely, but uh, with all the helmets and pads on, it's hard to tell for sure." They're absolutely not hotter than any of my guys, but I do see what all the fuss is about. The guy's face is chiseled as fuck and when he starts skating, it's like nothing can stop him.

And okay, I have to admit that he becomes even hotter when the identical brother skates to him and stops in a spray of ice. Brooklyn was just involved in some kind of altercation with another player and when the twins bend their heads together to talk, even I swoon a little bit. The picture the Ryker twins cut together like that would've set my panties on fire before I met my guys.

Ava sighs dreamily. "I've just realized that Sterling is better looking, but still. Would you just look at that picture?"

I nod, but then Dylan steals my mouth for a fiery kiss and by the time he ends it, I've forgotten the twins even exist. Colton and Sterling are sticking together, cheering and shouting from behind us and bantering about who's the better player.

Colton thinks it's Austin and Sterling says Austin is too much of a goodie-goodie, so it has to be Brooklyn. Colt smirks at Sterling. "A goodie goodie who pulls more women than you ever will. Say what you will about him, but he's a player you have to respect. On and off the ice."

Sterling snorts and Dylan twists in his seat to shake his head at Colton. "No way, man. Travis Oakley is the best player on that team by a mile."

I roll my eyes and leave them to it as I turn back to Ava. She and I keep giggling like school girls about the twins and their apparent friend, the goalie, Travis Oakley. With his bright blond hair and deep green eyes, he's plenty hot himself and it's clear from the way people scream his name that he's also a pretty popular player.

To me, all of this is a whole new world and I love every minute of the experience. I immerse myself in it as much as I can, learning about the players and the game, listening to why everyone else thinks a particular player is the best one, and drinking the beer while also eating the pretzels. It's pretty damn great.

Unfortunately, like all good things do, it comes to an end too soon and JT piles us into a van since we've all had too much to drink to drive ourselves.

"What happened to Austin Ryker coming by?" Sterling pokes Colton in the ribs. "I didn't drink that much, so I know I didn't miss him."

Colton sighs. "I don't know, bro. He had a good game, though. Probably pulled some puck bunny and took her home. I would've." He glances at me where Ava and I are sitting in the back of the van. "Before I met you, obviously."

"Obviously." I smile.

All the beer I drank has made me lazy and mellow, and I can't muster even one good comeback. I'm also just too tired for banter.

He doesn't seem to be. In fact, all the guys are surprisingly jovial and talkative as JT drives us back to the Manor. Ava and the others are sleeping there tonight, and I have a feeling their party is only just getting started.

As I'm leaning back against the seat, thinking back at what an incredible game we witnessed and how much fun it would be to raise our kids at games just like that one, my phone chimes and I absently lift it off my lap.

All the mellow happiness evaporates in the blink of an eye as soon as I see the name on my screen. It's a message from Tony, and it's not a friendly one.

TONY

Happy birthday, Skye. Since I didn't get you anything this year, I'm willing to give you one last chance to meet with me. Tomorrow. Noon. I'll text an address. If you're not there, I'll know which side you've chosen.

*Well, fuck. Why do these texts always have to come in when you're so many drinks in?*

Ava gasps at my side, apparently having read the message with me. When I glance at her, her face is ashen and her lips are parted. She darts a look at the men all happily arguing over some calls made by the referee, but I shake my head.

I know I need to tell them about this, but not right now. They're only just getting their groove back and the last thing I want is to take it from them quite so soon.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FOUR**

## DYLAN

Being a leader in a time of crisis is hard. Harder yet when you're at war and your most loyal soldiers keep dropping like flies.

First the attack on the Manor and then the major losses suffered that night at the church. It would be enough to make anyone doubt themselves. I, on the other hand, am finding that it's fueling me.

I have a plan. I know where we're going and how we're going to get there, and I'm ready to put the final steps into motion. *And it's not a minute too soon.*

With only eight days left until Tony chooses a new Underboss, we need to act now or hold our peace until the dust settles again. Since none of us are feeling very peaceful right now, there's no way we're holding anything.

As the line connects, I tighten my grip on my phone and brace to hear my father's voice for the first time in weeks. "Dylan? What's wrong? You told Liam this was urgent."

"It *is* urgent." I know that him talking to me is a risk. He and Liz have had a hell of a time finding a safe place to lie low where no one has been able to find them, and I don't want to cause any trouble for them but he and I need to talk. "The others and I have moved into the Manor. We've started construction on the grounds to provide housing for any Triskele member and their family who wants it. The funerals were nice, but they cost us a bunch of money. Also, I'm sure you heard, but we took out the weapons stash."

Dad grunts. “You’re doing *what* to the Manor?”

“We’re turning it into a compound of sorts. A safe place for every man, woman, and child who’s part of this organization. The time to protest our plans has passed. If you wanted a say, you should’ve been here.”

For a long moment, he doesn’t make a single sound, then he exhales heavily. “Well, it’s good to hear you’re taking things more seriously these days. Taking charge has helped you with that, huh?”

My eyes narrow. “Enough that I won’t listen to that kind of bullshit from you anymore. I figured you needed to be told what we’re doing and that I’m the one who should do it. Happy retirement, old man.”

To my surprise, Dad chuckles. “Thanks, but we will be back in the City eventually. It seems like I won’t need to work when we get there though, which is welcome news.” He gets serious, his tone more somber now. “How are you all holding up?”

“We can’t chat right now. Liam was clear that I needed to make this fast. We’re starting to go after the network today. I’m sure Liam will keep you posted.”

Before Dad can say anything else, I hang up the phone, looking out the windows that have replaced the back walls that felt like they were closing in on me that night. We still have a lot of hard work ahead of us, but I let out a relieved sigh that at least our house isn’t giving me panic attacks anymore.

JT strides toward me with his black fatigues crisp and fresh. “Are you ready to go, sir?”

“Yes, I am.” I slide my phone into the inside pocket of the matching fatigues I’m wearing. “The others?”

“Still unhappy that you’re coming, but Skye and Phoenix are in your study, ready to do their part. Colton, Maverick, and Sterling are waiting outside.”

I nod, wondering again why Maverick agreed to let Sterling come. The guy seems to have gotten addicted to our action, but Mav claims that he’s going stir-crazy now that

there's still a lull in the trafficking op. It also sounds like Hand of Hope have pulled him off of whatever else he used to do for them so that he'd be available for the trafficking thing, and now that they're expecting him to sit on his hands and wait it out, he's become a volunteer for the Triskele.

*It's a fucking weird world out there right now.*

Either way, Maverick has assured me that the tattooed biker is an asset, and I trust his judgment. Striding to my study, I stick my head in and smile when I see Skye and Nix sitting side by side behind my desk.

"I don't like this." Phoenix sits up straighter and looks right into my eyes, and I see the torment behind his. "You and Colt shouldn't both be going on this mission."

"You two are staying here. That's good enough. Besides, if something happens to us, you'll be a much better Boss than I could ever be anyway and you'll have Skye to help you."

She narrows her eyes as she gets up and folds her arms across her chest. "You're not leaving if that's the frame of mind you're in. I thought you said this mission wasn't as dangerous. Why wouldn't you be coming back?"

"I *am* coming back." I push open the door and stride directly to her, wrapping my arms around her waist and pressing a hard kiss to her forehead. "I am coming back, my love, but I can't sit another one out and I wasn't lying. This isn't as dangerous as any of the other recent missions have been."

"People die doing shit that isn't dangerous every damn day," Nix snaps before he lets out a long sigh. "I know I can't stop you, but be careful."

"We will." I turn back to Skye and slide my finger under her chin, applying not-so-gentle pressure until my stubborn girl lifts her gaze to mine. "This needs to be done, love. We need to go after all the people we don't have enough evidence on to turn over. It's the only way."

"I still can't believe we're just going to give everything we've got to the FBI." Phoenix shakes his head. "With that

said, Dad has told his contact to get in touch with the task force. I'll make the drop tonight. Everything is set up exactly the way you told me to get it set up."

I nod, moving my eyes back to Skye's deep greens. She's still staring at me with worry and disapproval swimming in those orbs, but we've been over this. Every able-bodied member of the Triskele—except for Phoenix and those guarding the Manor—is part of this op, and that includes me.

She drags in a breath so deep that I feel her chest brush against mine before she releases it slowly. "Go. We'll be here. I love you."

"I love you, too." With that, I lower my lips to hers and give her a lingering kiss, and when I turn to join the others waiting outside, I see Colton and Maverick striding in to say goodbye.

Colton sweeps her up in his arms and spins her around in yet another circle, then he kisses her like the ship is going down again before he passes her over to Mav. Honestly, these days, every time we leave the house, the ship might just be going down so I can't blame him.

Our plan is in motion, though. The first of our strike teams have already left and now, it's our turn. The evidence we've collected against every high ranking member of Tony's network is going to be delivered to the authorities by Phoenix tonight. We've already—anonously—provided them with the list of names and Nix's dad has negotiated on our behalf, trying to repair the damage that has been done with all the information Tony has leaked recently about the Triskele.

The long and the short of it is that Dad and Baker are now on a watchlist and won't be able to come home anytime soon. Liam has managed to avoid making the watchlist, but he's gone to lie low with Dad and Elizabeth and Baker is still taking care of things in Ireland.

Meanwhile, even Sterling has assured us that the FBI knows nothing about any of the rest of us. Their contacts have told them that the Triskele isn't being watched in the States, though it seems Ian managed to get himself on Interpol's



radar, but that's not our problem. All I wanted in return for the evidence was to be left alone, and it looks like I'm getting what I wanted.

The operation we're running now is to take care of certain low and mid-level members of Tony's network. They're people we know are working for him: beat cops, DA's assistants, and the like. But tonight's targets are those we haven't managed to get any actionable evidence on.

We'll also be going after some people who have been helping him commit medical fraud: pharmacists, members of the state medical board, and doctors. But also others who have been involved with him one way or another. We got some evidence on some of those who have assisted with the white-collar crimes, but not enough to convict.

Which means we're taking them out. Picking them off one by one.

We're not taking any chances, so we're sweeping out all the trash—to quote Colton—and then we'll be going after Tony himself. My teeth grit as I head out of the study without looking back. I need to find Blade and then I need to let him out to play for the next few days.

I won't find him while I'm looking at Skye, though. I haven't been able to for awhile now. She just makes me all warm and wanting to put a baby in her, which isn't exactly conducive to getting in the mood to kill a bunch of people.

As I reach the front door, Colton is next to me, stone-faced and getting in the zone himself, and as we walk out without saying a word to each other, Maverick joins us too. His features are hard as he nods at JT and Sterling, who round out our team, and then we're on our way.

Night has just started falling when we reach our first target. It's usually a risk going after people this early, but we started with this guy because he doesn't live in the city. He's an assistant DA who lives on the outskirts of a town close to the Manor. Out here, it's all suburban faux-farmland, but that's suits us for what we're here to do.

Maverick parks in the lot conveniently situated right behind the perimeter fence running along the back of his yard, and Colton and I jump it with Sterling serving as our backup in case we need another pair of hands.

Skye, Phoenix, and Jas are coordinating the strikes over the next few days. We worked together on finding entry points and all that stuff, but they're essentially running the operation, being the voices in our ears, while I get to be out in the field.

Colton, Sterling, and I stay down as we run toward the kitchen door, and since it's summer, the top part of the barn door is open. Colton smirks at me as he jerks his head at it. I roll my eyes in return. He bet me we'd find it this way and even though I didn't take the bet because I agreed with him, to his mind, I now owe him a cruise for us all to any destination of his choice when this is all over.

As that one moment of brevity passes, I refocus on the mission ahead and pull my gun out of its holster, taking it off safety before I slide open the latch on the bottom door. Colton pushes it open and pads into the house while Sterling nods at my signal telling him to hang back.

I follow Colton inside, seeing him smiling and raising his gun as I clear the kitchen. Our target is watching TV, his back to us as he munches on fried chicken for dinner. When Colt glances at me, I nod and step into place, raising my own gun now.

We discussed it before and he agreed that if there was time, he'd let me take the first shot. Lining the man up in my sights, I squeeze the trigger and a muted boom later, he slumps over and slides to the floor with a dull thud.

Since that brings us to the end of our business here, Colton and I head back out the way we came, sliding the latch back into place with my gloved hand and jogging across the backyard to the car. Sterling follows us, simply nodding when we tell him it's done.

Over the next few hours, with Skye and Nix's voices in our ears directing us to our next destinations and giving us updates, we take down eight more people. We're quiet,

efficient, and none of us misses a single shot. There's no playfulness or joking around tonight. Not even Colton tries to engage anyone in banter.

Our first night on the op goes well, but since we've got at least one or two more to go, it's too early to start celebrating. When we walk back into our house two hours before sunrise, Skye and Nix are waiting.

She hugs and kisses Mav, Colt, and I hard and fast, then she smiles at Sterling and JT and tells them to get some sleep. Taking Mav's hand in one of hers and Colton's hand in the other, she leads them upstairs and Nix and I fall into step behind him.

"I made the drop," he murmurs quietly. "Parked the van with every shred of evidence we've got in an abandoned lot the agent my dad has been working with nominated. Everything went well. It was quiet."

I nod as I absorb the information. "You weren't followed?"

"Not as far as I know. I took every precaution I could just in case, though. It took me five fucking hours to get back here."

Relief permeates through my exhaustion and I glance at him. "Everything went well on our end too. Maybe a little too well."

He frowns. "That's a good thing, though. It means no one knew you were coming, so Tony didn't warn them."

"Not yet, but after tonight, you can bet your ass he'll warn everyone else." I let out a long breath. "Skye hasn't heard from him again yet?"

"Not since the text on her birthday," he says. "I still think he wanted her to meet with him to convince her to be his Underboss. It makes sense and it explains why he was taking his time with it. He was hoping she'd come around."

I raise an eyebrow as I peel off the fatigues once we're in our bedroom and Nix is shutting the door firmly behind us. "It could be, but if that's true, then he's not just going to give up."

“I agree,” he murmurs. “He’s going to try to come after her, but I think he knows she’s not just going to comply with his demands.”

“Unless he has leverage,” Nix adds darkly as he gives me a meaningful look. “He’s not going to come after her directly, Dylan. He’s going to come after one of us. That’s the only thing he can do to get her to agree. One of our lives in exchange for her pledging hers to him.”

Skye is climbing into the massive bed we’ve had custom built for the room and since the shower is running and Colton is nowhere to be seen, I’m assuming he’s in the bathroom. Mav is down to his boxer-briefs and he sits down on the side of the bed nearest to the bathroom door.

“It’s a good bet that you’re right,” he says. “Let him come, though. He’s weak right now. We’ll be fine.”

Skye’s eyes widen as she shakes her head, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. “I don’t think you’re right at all. He won’t get to you and he knows it, but he could get to Ava. Her moms and everyone else at HoH is distracted with the trafficking ring and Gen still has Annabeth as a friend. She would be able to get in there pretty easily now that we’re gone.”

My pulse spikes, but I don’t let her see it. “I’ll put in a call. Warn them that we suspect Genevieve might be coming after Ava. In the meantime, go to bed. We’ve got another big night tonight.”

She scowls at me. “You make the call and I’ll wait for you before I go to sleep.” She pauses, blowing out a sharp breath. “They can’t trace any of those hits tonight back to us, right?”

“Nope. Every one of them was done using one of Tony’s guns. Phoenix has also called in an anonymous tip to the task force that the Rivas are cleaning house.”

Nix nods his agreement with me. “According to my dad, they’re going to act fast on those names we gave them. He was willing to bet they’ll act even faster now once they wake up to

that many fresh bodies. Watch this space. There's going to be a mass raid any day now."

"We're still sure about turning them over instead of just trying to bring them to our side?" she asks as she lies back in a sea of pillows and brings the covers to her chest. "That seemed like a good plan to me at the time."

"At the time, it was," I agree. "The problem is that there's too much heat on the war right now to kill so many people. Those we can put behind bars need to go there. We can always deal with them when they get out, but it's the safest way for now. We plan on spending the rest of our lives here, with you, not rotting in a cage somewhere just because we didn't know when to call the cops."

She nods tightly, wrapping her arms around Phoenix's neck when he strips down and climbs into bed with her. He must've already showered after he got back from making the drop. Mav is waiting for the shower in our bedroom, so I head to the guest bathroom down the hall, already realizing we're going to need more than one bathroom adjacent to our room if we're going to be living here permanently, which we're planning on doing.

Adding it to the mental list I'm constantly making for the construction crew, I put in the call to a very confused Annabeth and once I've warned her, I grab a quick shower myself. Utterly exhausted after, I practically crawl to bed, crashing as soon as my head hits the pillow and knowing that I have to be ready to do it all over again tonight.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-FIVE**

## SKYE

“**T**hey took her, Dylan,” Annabeth’s hysterical voice shouts over the speaker on Dylan’s phone. “Our baby. They took her.”

The look on Maverick’s face says it all. His deep blue eyes are haunted and his jaw is slack with shock. The phone call Dylan just got was real. Ava is gone. She was taken. No doubt by my motherfucker of a father.

Rage and panic combine on my insides, making me want to scream and cry but I can’t seem to remember how to make a sound. In the background, the news we’ve been watching all morning is still on, the reporter’s voice blaring into the otherwise silent room.

“For those of you who are just joining us, authorities are in the process of carrying out one of the biggest ever raids on organized crime. Following an anonymous tip, the task force who have been investigating crime lord and Mafia kingpin, Tony Riviera, for years finally managed to break the case wide open. Let’s go over to John, who’s coming to you live from City Hall where the Mayor is expected to make a statement in just a few minutes.”

The air whooshes out of my lungs and my knees go weak. All of this, everything we’ve done, was to rid ourselves and the people we love of that man and now, at the bottom of the ninth—Colton has been teaching me some stuff about sport since the hockey game—he’s gotten another one over on us.

Somehow, even though we warned them and even though Ava's moms have always been so completely overprotective of her, she's... gone. The Riviervas got to her, and since they're conspicuously missing from the arrest lineup we've been watching all morning, I'm assuming they've taken her with them to wherever the hell they've gone.

It was part of our plan that they wouldn't be apprehended since we want to take care of them ourselves, but this... My entire body is shaking, my teeth clenched so hard that it hurts, and the only word I can find is, "Fuck!"

Maverick puts his hands on my shoulders, his gaze steady as it meets mine. "We'll find her, Skye. I promise. We will find her and she will be fine. If he contacts you, you need to let us know, okay?"

"Why would he contact me now? His network is gone. We just watched them haul the Police Commissioner out his house in his jammies, for God's sake! He's not going to try to make me his Underboss anymore."

"You'd be surprised, *mo cara*." Nix wraps his arms around me from behind and lets his head rest heavily on my shoulder. "This is a blow to him, no doubt, but you can't expect him to lie down. Wherever he is, I bet he's already putting a positive spin on it to whoever is with him. It's what men like him do. They don't just admit defeat. I'm willing to put money on it that he's already boasting about how this was all him. His idea to clean out and start fresh because he didn't know who to trust anymore."

"It would look better for him if his daughter suddenly joined him," Dylan adds from my left. "The Riviervas rising together like a phoenix from the ashes."

"Thanks for bringing me into this asshole," Nix growls at him.

Dylan shrugs, but he's not smiling and I know he wasn't trying to be funny. He really believes what he said and strangely, now that he's put it that way, I don't think he's wrong. Taking Ava was Tony's last ditch attempt at getting to me, but it's going to blow up in his face.



*Spec-fucking-tacularly.*

I narrow my eyes as I breathe through the shock. I can't go numb now. I can't stop fighting. Sterling, Alistaire, and Aaron need us now. So do Ava's moms, who gave us someplace to stay when we had nowhere to go.

My chin lifts and with it, the corners of Maverick's mouth do too. "Oh, good. She's back. Let's go, boys. We've got to find her and put a bullet in Tony and Gen's heads. Does that sound like a plan to anyone?"

Relief flashes in Dylan's tired eyes when I meet them, and I once again wonder if or when we're ever going to get a break. The guys were out all night last night wrapping up with the last of Tony's network. It took them three nights to get it done. Three nights during which they hardly slept, coming in just before dawn and then getting up again just a few hours later to do their actual work for the Triskele before heading out again at night.

My nerves have been frayed for so long now that I think I'm more than just a little bit unhinged at this point and now, Ava's gone. My heart starts racing in my chest and I find myself wanting to collapse again, but I don't. Because I can't.

I cannot go back to being weak right now, so instead, I pull back my shoulders and straighten my spine. "How do we find her?"

Phoenix grabs the remote and mutes the TV, and I'm thankful for the sudden silence even as I watch the red **Breaking News** banner still running along the bottom of the screen. "Tony recently acquired a small, private parcel of land in the Tug Hill region. It's remote. Used to be a hunting camp. He bought it in his son's name a couple months ago."

I stare at him. "How do you know this?"

"I've had to keep myself busy during the day. Besides, Colton asked me to make a list of his known properties, remember? For house shopping? I figured we could let his son keep that one, or if you wanted to, gift it to the city as a wilderness camp for kids or something."

“Okay, but how do we know he’s there?” This is Phoenix I’m talking to. He wouldn’t have brought it up without good reason.

He takes a deep breath, his smooth jawline sharpening as he looks back at me. “It’s where I would’ve gone. The terrain out there is rugged, it’s mostly owned by the state except for a few private parcels of land like this one and the core, where this place is, is over two hundred square miles of continuous forests, minimal roads and sparse population. It’s a long shot. A guess at best, but again, it’s where I would’ve gone.”

Colton’s head dips to the side as he thinks it over. “I’d have gotten my ass on a jet to Sicily, man. That’s the Riviera stronghold. He’s revered there and he’s just arranged marriages for his daughters to two of the other powerful Families out there.”

“You don’t have to play devil’s adv—” I start, but I cut myself off because of the look on Nix’s face.

“He’s not.” Nix holds Colton’s gaze. “If flying out was an option, he might’ve done that but I don’t think it is. Between the task force and the raid, they’ll be watching every airport and airstrip like hawks. I mean, sure, there’s always a way out, but this is faster and easier. It’s a place to lie low while everyone scurries around, trying to stop you from leaving on a plane.”

Dylan turns to me. “This is Ava. It’s your call.”

“Would you have done it?” I look into those worried, burning blue eyes. “Would you have left your people to face what’s coming alone?”

“No, but Tony isn’t me. He’s like a cockroach and he will do whatever it takes to survive.”

I nod slowly, taking his words onboard before I turn to Maverick. “What about you? Would you have done it?”

“No.”

Colton answers me before I even look at him. “I wouldn’t have either, but like Dylan said, Tony isn’t us.”

Since Nix has already told me that he would've gone to the Tug Hill property, I don't ask him but I turn to look at him again. "Is there any other property we're aware of that would be as good a hiding place?"

He shakes his head. "The rest are all too close to civilization. This one is the most remote. The most out of the way. That's why I looked into it. It seemed out of place."

"And it's in his son's name?" I know I need to make a decision, but if we tear off to Tug Hill and she's not there, we might lose our shot at getting Ava back *and* at catching up to Tony and Genevieve before they're in the wind. "It just feels like that's still too close to him."

The tiniest smile touches the corners of Nix's lips. "We've taught you well, and it is in the son's name, but it's not as simple as that. There are shell companies and trusts involved, but I followed the paper trail and ultimately, it does belong to your little brother."

My little brother... I don't even know what to do with that thought. I'm an only child. I've always been an only child. I've known for a while now that I have half-sisters and a half-brother, but I've never thought of them as that. It's just another thing to file away for later, though.

"That's where we're going, then." I glance at Maverick. "Call Sterling and tell him where we're headed. I'm sure they're following leads of their own, but they should know we're searching for her too."

Maverick slides his phone out of his back pocket and makes the call while the rest of us race to get dressed before we leave. We were lounging around, watching the news in our pajamas when Annabeth called Dylan.

No one bothers with a shower and less than five minutes later, we're in the Rover. As Maverick's door slams shut behind him, he glances up at me in the rearview. "Text that number Tony's been using when he reaches out to you to Aaron. He'll run it down for us. See if he can get a location."

I nod, lifting my butt and pulling my phone out of my back pocket with my heart still pounding. After I've done what he told me to, I glance at Nix. "What if we're wrong and they're not there? If he took Ava because of me, wouldn't he have called me by now?"

Dylan shakes his head on my other side. "Tony is just one man, love. Two hands and one brain. No one, no matter how connected, how rich, or how prepared, can do everything all at once. We gave the Feds the info and we didn't even know how fast they were going to move with it. Even if he knew it was going to happen at some point, which I doubt, he wouldn't have been ready for it to happen today."

"Plus, his entire organization is falling apart," Nix adds. "We've either taken down or hurt all of his main streams of income; his guys are dying; he's been without an Underboss for too long and his kids are no help. Now, everyone who's been supporting him for so long is either dead or being taken into custody. Those are the people who know where the bodies are buried. None of them can protect him with their positions anymore and given a choice between him and themselves, they're going to sing like canaries. Tony will know all that."

Colton's eyes flick to mine, warm and understanding. "We know he took her as leverage to get to you, but he also knows that you're not going to stop looking for her and he needs to prioritize. Getting out of the city and off the radar is more important than making a ransom call. Especially with everything happening so fast and all at the same time."

"Maybe, but what happens if we're wrong? What happens if he's not the one who took her?" I look at each of them in turn. "Hand of Hope has been working with the FBI for months now. She's seeing Sterling and he's front and center in that investigation. I don't want to be the naysayer here, but it's possible that this has nothing to do with Tony."

The ominous feeling that's been niggling inside since Dylan's phone started ringing blooms and panic rises within me, making me feel like it's crushing my chest and choking me. Maverick glances at me in the rearview again.

“HoH are on that. Sterling says they’ve activated every chapter in the country. Everyone is looking for her. The Feds know she’s been taken. We’re not in this particular search alone, Skye. Hand of Hope is a huge organization and they’re throwing everything they’ve got at finding her. Their reach spreads further than ours in this country and they’ve got a ton of connections of their own. We’ll find her.”

I exhale deeply before I pull in another long breath through my nostrils and nod. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. We’re not in this alone. I just feel responsible. Anything from Aaron yet?”

Nix shakes his head. “I just got a text to say that it looks like that phone is off. It’s not going to help us find him, but he’s there, Skye. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Agreed,” Dylan says, turning to face me on the backseat as his gaze settles on mine. “When we find them, which I think we’re about to, we need to decide how to proceed. This could be what all this has been steering down on.”

“The day we kill them?” My brow furrows slightly. “Shit. I thought there would be more ceremony to it than this.”

Those blues are soft on mine. “Do you still want Genevieve?”

As he says her name, memories of everything she did to me when I was the one who had been taken hostage tumble into my brain and I nod. “She’s mine. Absolutely.”

Hatred for that woman burns through me like wildfire. She arranged for me to be sexually assaulted. Those guys would’ve raped me if they had it their way. She kidnapped me, tortured me... I’m still not healed from any of that. Not really.

We’ve had too much going on for me to keep seeing that therapist, but I know the emotional wounds are still there. The anxiety. The nightmares. They’re not as constant as they used to be, but they definitely haven’t left me alone for good.

All of that... I swallow hard. All of it is because of how much she hates me. A woman who only met me after she’d given those guys the order to touch me, and she hates me so

much that she would've had my favorite professor kill me if the guys hadn't arrived when they did.

If this morning was going to be the last sunrise she saw, then it's going to be because of me. I lean back in my chair, making my peace with what lies ahead. Don't get me wrong, I fucking *hope* that we're about to find Ava, but if we're not and we only find Tony and Genevieve, then at least the world will be going to sleep tonight with one less threat in it.

CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-SIX**

## SKYE

The drive is long and the miles are crawling by even though Maverick is trying to break the sound barrier to get us there as fast as he can. With every minute that passes, I feel myself becoming more and more nervous.

More and more worried.

My heart is racing and my skin is clammy, my lungs feeling too tight to draw in a proper breath. Out there somewhere, regardless of who had taken her, my best friend is alone and scared. Possibly even being hurt.

Pain tears through me as I imagine what she's going through right now. She hasn't been gone long, so there's a decent chance she isn't being tortured yet, but we still don't know where she's been taken.

A few hours is more than enough time to lose your will to live, depending on who's got you and what they're doing. If she's not out here with Tony and Gen and she was taken to someplace closer to the HoH compound, there's every chance that they've started hurting her by now.

A soft moan falls from my lips as I remember the first few hours after I was taken, that first realization that it was really happening and the people who had me intended on causing me a world of pain.

Dylan slides an arm around my shoulders and Nix's hand lands gently on my thigh, but while I appreciate the quiet support, nothing can stem the flow of memories streaming through my brain as we race toward Tony's property.



My shoulders cave in when I remember that first time Mr. Alfonsi picked up a knife, the light glinting off the side of it when he lifted it to show it to me. I wince, my next breath shaky when I draw it in. Dylan and Nix scoot closer and I inhale deeply, trying to remind myself that I'm not there anymore.

I'm safe, but Ava isn't and the panic clawing through my insides physically hurts. She's not like me. Even back when I met her and she was so much closer to this world than I had ever been, she was innocent and she still is. So full of love and light.

Back when I first walked into our shared dorm room, I was already messed up. Dark and world-weary. Yet somehow, despite growing up in Hand of Hope, Ava still has her *joie de vivre*. Even now. It kills me to know that after this, she'll never be the same again.

We can find her before anyone even lays a hand on her, and she *still* won't be the same. She'll still have been taken from her own bed in the early hours of the morning, and that still won't make sense to me.

Someone got into HoH, into the Presidents' *home*, and into my best friend's bedroom without her moms or any of the club members being any the wiser. *How is that possible?*

I exhale deeply, trying to tamp down the storm brewing deep inside me.

Someone got in there and took her, and no one knew about it until after they woke up this morning and she was gone... It doesn't add up, but that doesn't mean we don't need to find her.

"It was Genevieve," I whisper. "It had to have been her. I know what I said before and I realize they're all caught up with the other investigation, but no trafficker would've been able to get into the compound. Genevieve, on the other hand..."

Mav glances at me, his knuckles tightening on the steering wheel as his jaw hardens and he flicks his gaze back to the

road. “That’s what I think too, but no one is willing to leave any stone unturned. Besides, let them chase down the other leads. It leaves us alone to do what needs to be done.”

Nodding, I turn toward the window, looking past Dylan as civilization slowly bleeds into forest. The further we drive, the more rural our surroundings become until it’s hard to believe that we were in the city just a few hours ago.

“Tell me where I’m going,” Maverick barks at Phoenix once we’re deep into Tug Hill. “We’re not far from the core now, so we should be getting close to this property.”

Nix nods and scoots forward, his hand still on my thigh, heavy, and warm, and comforting. “Right.” He glances down at his phone. “Make the next left.”

I keep looking out the window, at the tall walls of trees we’re passing and the dark floor of the forest between them. We haven’t come across another car for miles and we haven’t even seen a gas station for at least an hour. A shiver runs down my spine when I wonder if Ava saw this earlier today.

*Was she blindfolded? Did they let her see where they were taking her? Is she even around here at all?*

My heart is trying to climb out of my mouth by the time we slow on a much smaller road, and then we run out of road all together. Maverick grunts, the ride suddenly turning bumpy as he keeps following Nix’s directions.

With the trees so dense and tall, there’s very little sunlight filtering in from above and it’s dark and ominous down here, but it doesn’t matter. Everything in me is screaming that we should be turning around. The guys’ features are hard and tense, but no one suggests that we go back.

In fact, now that we’re here, I’m a lot more confident than I was before that Phoenix’s gut pointed us in the right direction. This place is the very definition of remote and if Tony took Ava, this is where he would’ve bought her.

Hell, even if he didn’t take her, this is where he would’ve come to hide out. According to the reporters we listened to this

morning, no one had seen a trace of him and now, I have a feeling we know why.

Tony would've known about the raid as soon as it started happening, if not before, and he would've gotten the hell out of dodge. As we keep bumping and rocking up a path so overgrown that I'm not sure another car has traveled here in, well, ever, it suddenly occurs to me that this is not only the perfect place to hide out. It's also the perfect place to hide a body.

"When you turned over all the documents to the authorities, did you include the paperwork for the shell companies and trusts that could lead them to this place?"

Nix smiles at me. "No, *mo cara*. I kept that all to ourselves. Along with a few other things. These properties are yours. You should decide what to do with them, so I didn't hand it over."

A tiny flutter of relief speeds through me. "So they'll never know?"

He shrugs. "I wouldn't say never, but it's unlikely they'll find it anytime soon."

Eventually, he leans forward and taps Maverick's shoulder. "We should go on foot from here. It's not too far and we don't want to let them know we're coming."

He nods curtly and stops right where we are, those navy blues coming up to meet mine in the rearview again as he reaches for his door handle. "I won't try to convince you to hang out here until we know if they're even in the house, but just stay behind us, please?"

"Okay," I say softly, meaning it too.

Ultimately, despite whatever is going to happen next, I need my guys to stay safe and they'll do a better job of it if they're not worrying about me. Maverick climbs out of the car and Colton follows, the humid air underneath the canopy of trees nearly suffocating me when Nix, Dylan, and I get out too.

My stomach churns as I look around, that faint, inherent buzz of the woods the only sound I hear as we all take a moment to get our bearings. Without a word, Mav inclines his head to the right and Dylan gives him a curt nod, falling into step behind him as the rest of us do the same.

Twigs and leaves crunch under our feet, but other than that and the buzz of the insects around us, there are still no other sounds. No indication the Rivas are up ahead or that they're got any of their guards patrolling the perimeter.

Although, I guess that makes sense. When you're making a quick getaway, it's probably not advisable to bring the whole army with you. A cavalcade of cars tends to attract attention, especially on a day when the underworld as we know it is collapsing.

I drag in a deep breath of thick, pungent air, wondering how long it's been since anyone else has walked where we're walking right now. If they ever have.

When a half-dilapidated roof suddenly looms just over the next rise, I banish all thoughts of everything else. Mav twists to glance at each of us in turn and Colton is suddenly smiling like he's got something to celebrate, but other than finding a cabin out here, I'm not quite sure what he's so excited about.

Hunching over on instinct, we creep closer, knowing that just bending over won't make us invisible but maybe it will help. We approach slowly, carefully, and all our eyes are on the cabin as it comes into fuller view.

Honestly, it doesn't look like the kind of place Genevieve Riviera with her perfect hair, makeup, and heels would ever set foot. There's no stream of smoke trailing from a chimney and no light on inside. No trace at all that anyone has been here in the last hundred or so years, actually.

My heart starts slamming into my ribs all over again. If this is a fool's errand, we'll have wasted hours that we could've spent searching for Ava and I'll never forgive myself if we could've gotten to her earlier if we hadn't come all the way out here.

Dylan suddenly stops and straightens up, nodding at something he can obviously see on the other side of the cabin. I squint to see if that makes it clearer, but even then, it takes me a second to see it.

The very back of a black SUV and a towbar sticking out from behind the rotting wood that makes up this cabin.

As soon as I see it, I feel faint. My heart goes crazy, my blood pressure is probably sky high because I'm suddenly dizzy and little spots dance in my field of vision.

*Someone* is here and since this place belongs to Tony, it's a good bet that it's him. I squeeze my eyes shut, gulping in deep breaths of air as I try to steel myself for what we're going to find in there. What's going to happen when we go in.

When we woke up this morning, I didn't realize today could be the day that it all ends. The very thought of it is... *discon-fuck-ulating* is the only word that comes to mind. It's been so long and we've been through so much. *Is it really possible that it all ends here, today?*

I honestly don't know and I'm too scared to hope. Besides, even if Tony and Genevieve are here, if Ava isn't, then it won't be over yet. Either way though, we need to get this show on the road.

I've been ready for all this to be over pretty much since I met the guys and those threats started coming. Dylan has big plans for the Manor and while they've already started, I know he won't really start making it the home for us that Colton wants so badly until Tony is dead. Maverick needs time to mourn all the men he's lost and Phoenix is burning to take on the next challenge of helping to take down the human traffickers.

We're all ready for this to happen, and when I blink my eyes open again, I vow to myself that if there's any possibility at all for it to happen today, then I will end it. As I open my eyes, I find all four of my boyfriends looking at me, patiently waiting for me to decide what we're doing.

A rush of gratitude speeds through me, especially toward Dylan. The Triskele is his now, but he's still honoring that promise they made me. The one they made again earlier when they said that this was about Ava and therefore, it was my call.

As I meet his piercing blues, then Maverick's navy, Colton's gray, and finally Phoenix's caramel brown, I nod. *We're doing this. Let's go.*

Maverick immediately spins and creeps up to the nearest window while Colton suddenly grins all over again. Dylan turns and quietly jogs after Mav while Nix's eyes linger on mine and he mouths, "Are you ready?"

I drag in a deep breath. "Honestly?" I whisper. "I don't know. I guess we're about to find out."

He gives me a small smile and stretches his hand out toward me. "One step at a time," he murmurs as I place my palm in his and follow him to the others.

When we reach them, there's a violent glint in Maverick's eye and he inclines his head toward the window. I have to push up on my tiptoes to look through the smudged, dirty glass and it takes my eyes a second to adjust to the darkness inside but then my heart starts doing cartwheels.

Relief and disbelief slam into me, leaving me lightheaded as they wage for dominance in the very core of my being. Right there, just a few feet away from me, is Tony, Genevieve, and *Ava*.

Tony is standing in front of an empty fireplace, talking rapidly into a phone while Genevieve is lounging on a threadbare sofa like it's some kind of throne. Where my father looks harried, his graying black hair sticking up in all directions and his face pale, Gen doesn't seem any worse for wear.

Her long, dark hair is as shiny and perfect as ever, her red pantsuit unrumpled and her gaze cool as she regards my friend before glancing at her perfectly manicured fingernails. Hate flares to life in my soul as I narrow my eyes at her, but it's Ava who grabs my attention for the longest.

My friend is sitting on a rickety chair that she's been tied to, her side facing the window. Her blonde ponytail is messy, red splotches, the kind she gets when she's anxious, dotting her fair skin. I can see enough of her face to notice that her cheeks are wet and red. Aside from the crying and the fact that she's tied up, however, she doesn't seem to be injured.

At least, not that I can make out from here. The relief wins out, pushing across the finish line strongly as the disbelief slowly fizzles out. I fill my lungs with air as I keep staring into that room, realizing that the end is finally here.

It's too difficult to wrap my head around that fact, but it's true. This is the moment I've been waiting for almost a whole year, and that my guys and so many others have been waiting for so much longer than that.

I'm still trying to process it all when someone presses something cool, metallic, and heavy into my hand and when I glance down, I see that it's a gun. Maverick nods at me when I look up and find his eyes on mine, and then he gives me just the tiniest hint of a smile.

I return it, confidence, relief, and determination a heady mix as they fuse together in my veins, intoxicating me so much that I suddenly realize I'm full-on grinning. Right now, I'm pretty sure I look completely unhinged, but fuck that.

We've all worked too damn hard to get here not to be ecstatic that we finally are. My mom and Damian might not be able to come home until Hunt manages to sort out everything with the Feds, but with Tony dead, at least Mom will be safe again. And more than anything else, we got here before they really had a chance to hurt Ava.

She won't be the same, but at least she'll stand a chance of recovering without the essence of who she is having been obliterated. My smile grows even wider and Maverick's chest swells and he flashes me an unhinged smile in return.

He doesn't say it, but I know he's proud of me. In fact, as I look around, I realize they all are. We survived a hell of a lot to get to where we are right now, and we did it together. I, for

one, definitely came out stronger on this end of things, and I can't deny that it's because of them.

Everything that we went through has led us here, to the moment when we can end this godforsaken war and a decades' old rivalry all at the same time. Dylan sweeps a hand out to his side as he draws out his own gun, showing me to lead the way.

And I do.

Head held high, I march toward the broken steps leading to the front door. Just a few minutes ago, I told Phoenix I didn't know if I was ready, but I am. I'm ready to put an end to all of this. Once and for fucking all.



CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-SEVEN**

## PHOENIX

When we first met Skye, I knew there was something to her. Something more. Something that intrigued us all and drew us to her like lost moths to a fucking flame.

As I watch her stride toward Tony's front door like she's going to kick it down without a care in the world, I realize that it's because we saw ourselves in her all along—and not in the dirty way.

She really is like us.

No matter what their past, it's not every girl who's going to walk right up to a creepy cabin in the woods with her chin in the air and her shoulders wide open, but Skye doesn't hesitate. She's holding the gun and she knows how to use it, and she's ready to put a bullet in her stepmother's skull.

I saw that look on her face when she saw Genevieve again after all this time. The hatred there was real and pure, and it was practically pouring off her as she narrowed her eyes at that woman. In that moment, I knew exactly how she felt because I felt it too, that intense hatred for the woman who hurt her.

I know she's ready for this, for us to take our revenge in the way only people like us ever do, and I'm just really fucking proud to be by her side when she finally gets to do it.

As for Tony, we'll have to see what happens. I honestly don't know whether she'll pull the trigger on him, but someone sure as shit is going to. I've already texted Aaron to

let them know that we found their girl, but by the time they get here, it will be done.

Ava will be safe and the world will be missing a couple Rivas it never really needed in the first place. *Fucking finally.*

My thoughts go quiet when Skye treads carefully up the stairs, still not wanting to clue Tony in about the fact that we're here. It won't matter that much, but it'll be better for everyone if he's not holding a gun to Ava's head when we burst in there.

She goes first, but Dylan, Colton, and Maverick are hot on her heels. I'm not far behind either. We're in this together, just like I hope we always will be.

When we reach the broken deck in front of the door, Skye turns to Mav and nods. He dips into a slight bow, nods, and then straightens up and kicks it in all the same time. No one is surprised when it splinters in immediately, practically turning to ash under the force of his kick.

A cry rings out from inside, but Skye is already there, her gun raised by the time I rush into the room, bringing up the rear. Tony has spun to face her, but there's not even a flicker of surprise on his features as he grins.

"Ah. I was wondering when you were going to get here." His dark, almost black eyes are locked on hers, and although I haven't seen this man in the flesh for years, not since I was little and he had a meeting with Damian once, even I can see the satisfaction on his features as he stares at her. "You didn't have to bring your boyfriends, my dear. You're perfectly safe with us."

Skye snorts and cuts a glance at Genevieve, who simply shrugs her narrow shoulders at her husband's oldest daughter. Tony notices the exchange, chuckling as he shakes his head and motions to the sofa Genevieve isn't on.

"Have a seat, Skye. How about a drink? Let's talk. That is why you are here, right? To negotiate Ava's release?"

At the mention of her name, Skye and I both finally turn to look at our friend. Ava's green eyes are wide and teary, ice cold terror in them as she shakes her head and screams into the gag around her mouth, fighting against her bindings.

The corners of my eyes tighten. Clearly, there's something we're not seeing here, but it turns out there's something he wasn't seeing either.

"I don't want a fucking drink. This isn't a tea party." Skye frowns as she tilts her head at him, her long red ponytail catching on her shoulder. "You think we came here to negotiate?"

Tony snorts and arches a silver brow at her. He's much grayer than he was the last time I saw him. "What did you come here for, then?" He cants his head. "You can't think I'm going to hand her over just because you're pointing a gun at me. Just sit down and have a drink with me."

"No, we don't think that," she says crisply. "We came here to kill you and to take her home. There won't be any negotiations."

His eyes light up and he starts chuckling, but Skye has obviously had enough. Cool as a cucumber and with her hands completely steady, she swings the gaze and her gun toward Genevieve, takes aim, and squeezes the trigger.

The other woman seems to realize what Skye is doing just a fraction of a heartbeat too late, and her mouth opens but before she can even scream, a red hole appears right between her eyes. She slumps over, her body sliding off the dirty sofa to the ground and hitting it in a puff of dust.

Tony's chuckles abruptly cut off and he stares at his dead wife's body for a split second before he jumps into action, reaching behind him presumably to grab a gun of his own. Maverick and Colton are on him before he can complete the motion though, and I dart to the side, dropping with a hard thwack to my knees to untie Ava's bonds. The rope cuts in under my fingernails as I work on it and as soon as there's some give, she yanks her arms out and reaches for the gag around her mouth.

She's crying too hard to say anything and I reach for her, pulling her up and into my arms, and then holding her tight as I angle her shaking, sobbing body away from what's about to happen behind her. It feels odd to have another girl in my arms after so long, completely foreign. Ava is slighter than Skye, sagging into me like I'm holding her up and she'd have fallen down if I wasn't here, which is something I've never felt with Skye. Even at the worst of times, she holds her own.

Skye is still watching everything calmly, her gun still raised as Maverick holds Tony's arms behind his back in what I know is a vice grip. Colton got his hands on Tony's gun, and he quickly ejects the magazine before kicking both items down the short, dark corridor leading away from the main room we're in.

Tony stares at her with his mouth agape and a strange emptiness in his eyes. "What have you done?"

"What I promised both of you I would," she says without skipping a beat. "Any last words, old man?"

"So many," he muses as he keeps staring at her like he's detached himself from this entire situation. That's the only thing that explains that weird emptiness. Not knowing what's going on in his head is driving me nuts. "Did you bring a pen, or perhaps a voice recorder? You're going to have to deliver some messages for me if you intend on killing me too."

Her jaw turns as hard as stone as she lifts her chin further into the air. "This isn't a joke, Tony. You're done."

"You wouldn't," he grinds out, eyes narrowing as he finally starts straining against Maverick's grip. "You're no cold-blooded killer, Skye. I know you've managed to get some shots off in all of this, which is good. If you're going to train underneath me to take over some day, you were always going to need the practice, but let's face the facts. You're not going to kill your own dad when he's not even armed."

Skye seems to weigh the weight of the gun in her hands as she nods slowly. "Do you honestly still believe there's any chance whatsoever that I'm going to *train* underneath you? Join you? After everything you and that bitch did to me?"

“That’s the only way this ends, my child. Let’s have that drink? Talk.” He glances at the rest of us before he brings his gaze firmly back to hers. “You’ve done well recruiting this lot. We’ll be able to use them in the future.”

“A future you don’t have,” she hisses as she lowers the gun, and for a tense moment, I think she’s considering taking his offer. That she might’ve changed her mind and is actually thinking about having a goddamn drink with him, but then her head shakes and she scoffs. “You are *insane* if you still think that’s the way this ends.”

Ava’s still shaking so damn hard against me that I start stroking her back, knowing her guys would’ve done the same for Skye, but I can’t take my eyes off my bad ass girlfriend and I can’t believe she’s staying as collected as she is. Ava still hasn’t said a word. Her breathing is shaky and she’s pressing her face into my chest like she’ll never lift her head again.

“What are you going to do, Skye?” Tony’s taunts, then he winces when I see Maverick’s biceps flex under his shirt. “Call off your attack dog and let’s talk. All of us. We can help each other.”

For a moment, I think Skye might actually be considering it, but then she shakes her head slowly and turns to Dylan. “There are a lot of people who have a lot of great reasons to want to end his life.”

Dylan holds her gaze, nodding while Tony looks between the two of them like he can’t figure out what’s going on. It’s then that I realize that hubris really has been this man’s downfall, his overconfidence not only dangerous, but deadly.

When he and his wife took Ava and came here, he wanted Skye to find them, which we’ve already concluded. But that’s not all. He really thought that he was going to convince her to join them. He honestly believed that her ultimate loyalty would be to him, as her father, and he obviously very much underestimated how deep her bond runs with us.

It’s fucking out of this world bizarre that this was his final plan. It shakes me to my core foundations that Tony’s life and his empire is going to end this way.

It would've been funny if it wasn't such a fucking tragedy. I drag in a deep breath and hold Ava a little tighter when a fresh wave of sobs overwhelm her. Meanwhile, Dylan and Skye are still staring at each other and Tony's still trying to figure it out.

"He's your fucking stepbrother, Skye. I'm your father, for god's sake. What are you doing?"

She ignores him, spinning her gun in her hand and handing it over to Dylan. He's got one of his own, so I think it's more of a symbolic gesture, but it's still beautiful to watch. As he takes it, he frowns at her.

"You're right. There are a lot of people who want him dead. Probably dozens who'd kill to be in our shoes right now, but we're the ones who got this far. One of us should do it. You don't want to?"

Her chest rises and falls on a deep inhale, and then she shakes her head. "I'm angry at him, sure. I don't fucking like the man and I'd love to shoot him, but I don't deserve to." She takes a few small steps closer to him, putting her hands on his chest as she peers up at him. "I was raised as a daughter without a father, but you're a son without a mother and that's on him. You weren't raised that way. There's no way she would've turned her back on you if she had a choice. *He* took that choice away from her. He took her from you. You should be the one to do it."

Colton's staring at her with wide, disbelieving eyes, but then he shrugs and nods his agreement. "She's right, you know. It should be you. Or Damian. Or Sterling, but Damian's on the other side of the world and it's going to take Sterling a couple more hours to get here. Let's just get it done. I'm hungry."

A soft snort escapes me, but it's good to know that Colton will be Colton. No matter what's happening, he is who he is. Unashamedly.

Maverick grunts when Tony really starts fighting now, obviously realizing that his plan isn't going to work out at all.

He tries twisting and when he starts screaming, Colton clamps a hand over his mouth and shakes his head.

“Do it, Blade. Let’s get out of here.”

Dylan nods, but as he raises the gun, he keeps Skye’s hand on it with his. His hand dwarfs hers, his long fingers firm as they slide between hers. He shifts so that she’s standing half in front of him, the two of them pressed together as they line up the final shot in this war. And when Dylan squeezes the trigger, the muscles in his forearm rippling to tell me it’s happening, her finger is right there, her eyes on him and Dylan’s on Tony as he shoots the man responsible for his mother’s murder.

Tony has spent most of our lives thinking he’s ahead of the pack, but really, he was just an old goat and his goose is cooked. We caught up with him, got ahead, and our research, planning, and love got us through it all safely.

In the aftermath, everything is quiet except for Ava’s sobs and for the longest time, we’re all just watching Tony lying there, his head in a pool of his own blood as we absorb the sight.

It’s finally fucking over.



CHAPTER  
**THIRTY-EIGHT**

## SKYE'S EPILOGUE

*2 years later*

I groan as I roll over in bed and end up right against Maverick's bare chest. He's already awake and he's smirking at me, his deep blue eyes soft as he lifts a hand and brushes my hair out of my face.

"Good morning, Sunshine," he murmurs, his full lips coming down to seal over mine for a hot, hard kiss. "Sleep well?"

"Always," I say softly, not wanting to wake the others just yet. "You?"

He shrugs a shoulder, kissing me again before he pulls back and smiles at me. "Like a drugged baby." His eyes search mine for a moment before he presses his forehead to mine. "So, two years today, huh? What do you want to do to celebrate?"

My heart skips as I look back at him. "We should probably go see Ava and the others tonight. The last year was really hard on her."

"The first one always is." He runs his fingers through my hair and nods. "If that's what you want, then that's what you're going to get. I'll call Sterling and set it up."

"Thanks." I close my eyes with my forehead still against his, just taking a moment to breathe him in.

Sometimes, I still can't believe that it's really over. That Tony and Genevieve Riviera are rotting in the ground where no one will ever find them and Dylan, Ava, and I really are in charge now.

As I feel the steady beat of Mav's heart against my chest, I allow the memories of that afternoon two years ago to come back in. Just briefly.

My therapist took months to convince me that I can't just keep shoving it all down. That I need to take it out every once in a while, face the truth of what happened, and then learn to move on anyway.

It was really difficult at first; to relive everything that happened that first year after I met the guys, but with time, I've learned how to deal instead of just bottling everything up.

In my mind's eye, I allow the memories of Genevieve's body slumping to the floor to invade my mind, an image of Tony's lifeless body sagging in Maverick's arms coming up next.

While the guys went outside to bury them, I sat in the car with Ava, just holding her while she cried. Eventually, when the sobs subsided, she told me what happened.

Tony and Gen hadn't grabbed her from her bed. A text from Sterling had lured her out of her house and to a park not in the compound, but nearby. Excited and thinking that she was meeting her boyfriend, she left the house quietly only to find Genevieve waiting in the SUV we found at the cabin.

The SUV we drove into the lake a few miles away.

She also told me that Tony and Genevieve had planned on drugging me, slipping something into the drink they were going to offer me. That was what she was trying to communicate as soon as we entered. She was trying to warn me that they were planning on coercing my cooperation and that of my guys' if push came to shove.

Thankfully, we never let them get that far. Just after I shot Genevieve, I wondered for a moment if I should've heard

them out, but all that hatred had gotten the better of me in that moment and I'd acted too fast.

Aaron found out later that they'd used cloning software to fake the text from Sterling, but it'd still taken the guy months to forgive himself even if he hadn't done anything. Either way, she and I had sat there and talked, cried, and when the guys and her moms had finally arrived, we followed them back to HoH.

After making sure Ava was really okay, it had been time for me to step up. Another feat that had taken some getting used to, but it turned out that all the whispering Damian and Liam had done into the ears of the Riviera soldiers had worked.

I met with some of his people the very next day at a restaurant Tony used to conduct business from. His properties had been seized and he's still considered a missing person. But I met with a few of his men and they swore allegiance to me, claiming that they were ready to stand by my side to usher in a new era in the city.

One that wouldn't be tainted by meaningless bloodshed, loss, and rivalry, but that would restore the Family to its former glory. I didn't know about that then, but now, I know better. It turns out that it's much easier to get the job done when you're not being distracted by enemies and you're working side-by-side with the other organizations in our city.

We sat down and laid out territories, main streams of income. We came to an agreement about who is going to be focusing on what, and I got Vegas—among other things—which I'm pretty excited about. Dylan and I work well together as leaders—so closely together in fact that I can still feel him inside me after last night.

I smile against Maverick's lips and open my eyes, vanquishing the memories once more and leaving them in the past where they belong.

"Memories?" Colton murmurs against my back, his arm snaking around my waist as he nuzzles the skin between my shoulders. "Good riddance, I think. We did well that day and

we've been kicking ass ever since. Especially since Ava finally came along and completed the Trifecta."

A loud whack rings out, Colton groans, and Phoenix sits up behind him. "She didn't just finally complete the Trifecta. She lost her moms, for fuck's sake. They died and that made her step up. Have a damn heart."

"It was a year ago," Colt protests as he sits up and rubs his shoulder, an apologetic look creeping into his eyes when they meet mine. "He's right, though. I'm sorry."

I give him a soft smile and nod before I push myself into a sitting position as well, stretching my arms out above my head as I yawn. Things haven't only been moonshine and roses after we ended the war.

A lot has happened. Not directly to us, but to those we love.

Like Ava. It got out that Hand of Hope was working so closely with the authorities and the fallout wasn't pretty.

But under the circumstances, she's doing well. All three of her guys have finally accepted that her heart belongs to them all and she's kicking ass as the President of the New York chapter of Hand of Hope.

Oh, and she finally learned how to ride a motorcycle. Sterling taught her. The guys and I went down to New Mexico when Ava, Sterling, and the others took their roadtrip so she could learn away from prying eyes. It was bittersweet.

Dylan breaks me out of my thoughts when he strides out of one of our four adjoining bathrooms, freshly showered and with his towel riding low on his hips. Tiny droplets of water snake down his abs and I follow them as they glide to the knot tied right above his dick.

"You're all awake," he says cheerfully. "Did I miss anything?"

"Not yet." Colton winks at him and then ducks under the covers, his tongue dragging a hot line down the length of my thigh.

I giggle, catching his chin and shaking my head when I pull the covers over his head and shake mine. “I have to get to work.”

“Work can wait,” he says as he glances at Mav.

While they have one of their silent conversations, I lift my gaze back to Dylan’s. “How is your dad? I heard your phone ringing earlier. Assumed it was them.”

He smiles. “He’s good. So is your mom. And your little brother. So is the Triskele, not that you care.”

I roll my eyes at him. “I do care. If you people disappear, someone else will pop up and I’ll have to get new boyfriends.”

He laughs. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“Thank God.” I drag in a deep breath and look around the renovated master suite at Blackthorne Manor.

It’s been our bedroom for just under two years now, and there are little traces of us everywhere. The huge bed. Our clothes hanging over every available surface, underwear, shirts, and pants all mixed up. Framed photographs line the walls and I smile as my gaze catches on the last one I added to the collection.

I actually put it up just last week. Mom, Damian, and Ant’s faces grin at me from the frame, the Irish sea and rolling green hills in the background. After Ian got arrested, Damian took over the Triskele on that side of the pond.

He and Mom also volunteered to raise Tony and Genevieve’s youngest, their son, Tony Junior—who now insists on going by Ant. The guys and I visit them as often as we can, but they haven’t been able to come back here just yet. The rest of the time, we’re making do with video calls, but I hope they’ll be able to move home eventually.

The Hunts are still trying to work something out with the authorities but for now, Damian has to lie low. So does my little brother.

His parents had a lot of enemies and not all of them are happy that the Rivas’ have vanished without a trace. When

Mom and Damian took him in, they broke a generational curse that surprised a lot of people, but I asked them to do it.

That day we killed his parents—as shitty as they were—we made my little brother an orphan. I couldn't just leave him to his own devices. We're protecting him as far as we can, but even all of our reach combined only stretches that far.

Anxiety ripples through me. Ant's not the only one in trouble.

For the last two years, things have been pretty quiet in the city, but not all the Rivas' men came to join me. A certain faction of them broke away and they've been growing their numbers. Tension has been building in the air, and it won't be long now before someone chucks another match into the powder-keg that never seems to be completely neutralized.

I sigh, running my hands through my loose hair and then refocusing on Dylan. "They'll be safe there, right?"

"Yep." He glances at Maverick. "What did you guys decide to do?"

Mav laughs just as Colton slides up the length of my torso and plants a deep kiss on my lips. "Distraction. Works like a charm. Every time. Come on, Princess. You can be late to work just this once. It happens to everyone from time to time."

Shaking my head at him, my lips part and I kiss him back when his tongue delves into my mouth. Maybe he's right. Maybe just this once, it'll be okay if I get to the office late.

CHAPTER  
THIRTY-NINE



## PHOENIX' EPILOGUE

### *Another 2 and a ½ Years Later*

**B**lackthorne Manor has been our home for almost five years, and as I stride from the garage carrying another box of decorations, it's hard to even remember what this place looked like before.

In the time we've been here, we've made a lot of changes. It started with all of the construction, but it didn't end there. We renovated the entire interior, breaking out walls to add more windows, redoing the floors, cabinetry...everything.

Eventually, Dylan sent all his dad and grandfather's stuff to a storage unit and we moved our own in, finally making the place our home. Skye went shopping and for the first time in her life, was able to buy anything and everything she wanted, and really took advantage of all the money she had at her disposal as the head of the Riviera Family.

She stopped feeling like a visitor in her own home after she had the chance to buy bedding, kitchenware and decor. Pretty much whatever she wanted to help make the place feel like hers.

As I look around now, really noticing all the color and feminine touches she added that day—about two years ago—for the first time in a long time, I smile. I never thought I'd live in a house with so many decorative pillows, knick-knacks, pictures, kids' artwork on the walls, or scent diffusers, but here I am.

And I fucking love it.

Adjusting the heavy box in my grip before I drop it, I stride into the wide open living space that used to be a collection of smaller rooms. The TV room, lounges, family room, and dining room have all been turned into one giant, warm area that we spend almost all of our time in.

Dylan puts the final touches on the pumpkin he was carving and grins as he pumps his eyebrows at me. “You’re right on time. What can I do to help?”

I set the box down on the rug in the center of the room with a heavy thud and take a look around, chuckling when I realize exactly how over-the-top all this has become. After the war, we decided to start our traditions and to go at them hard.

Holidays were at the top of Skye’s list. With every holiday, from Christmas, to St. Patrick’s Day, to Halloween, we go all out. We’ve acquired more holiday decor than some malls, and it all comes out. *Every* time.

Skye squeals and claps her hands when she sees the box. “Finally. I’ve been looking all over for the pumpkin garland. Can you help me with it while Colt finishes up with the spiderwebs?”

I nod, my gaze raking over the girl I love, my heart nearly exploding as I look at the woman she’s become. She’s changed a lot in these last few years, her rich red hair now cut into a short, sharp bob and her features sharper too, more mature. As far as I’m concerned though, she’s more beautiful than ever.

Wearing jeans and an orange Halloween sweater with the slogan *Ghouls Just Wanna Have Fun* printed over her boobs, her eyes are shining with excitement and her face is all lit up.

“Yeah, sure,” I say. “I’ll help you with it.”

I glance at Dylan and grin my understanding when he jerks his head at the garland. Both of us move fast to grab it and she turns back to us just in time to see us advancing on her. Her eyes go wide, then she laughs and spins around to start running away, but we’re on her before she can go anywhere,

wrapping the miles of garland around her while she shrieks with laughter and tries to get away.

Maverick smirks when he walks into the room, his head tilting as that wicked gleam flickers to life in his eyes. “This reminds me of that one Christmas. Think we could get away with it?”

I laugh and shake my head before dipping it back toward the windows. “Not unless you’ve had those tinted since yesterday.”

He sighs, but his gaze follows mine to the grounds outside. They’re busier than ever these days, always buzzing with activity but more so now that the Triskele kids are all helping us decorate for Halloween. There are at least a dozen of them on the patio right outside, hanging spiders and handing over more webs to Colton, who’s standing on a ladder to put it all up while he laughs and chats to them.

It’s all those kids’ artwork hanging on our walls. We started by just putting it on the fridge, but we ran out of space. Fast. And the thing is that they know which picture is theirs, as well as when they gave it us, so we can’t take any down. Well, I guess that’s not true. I guess we can. We just don’t want to.

Maverick sighs, but then he shrugs and stalks closer to us anyway. Skye is still tangled in the garland, but she smiles as she tips her head back to look into his eyes. “What are you gonna do, carry me to the bedroom?”

“I might just.” He catches her chin in his hand and bends over to press a kiss to her lips that’s so hot, I start getting hard just watching them. Although, that’s not really anything new. I’ve surrendered completely to any and all voyeuristic tendencies I’ve discovered since we started this relationship and I’m long past trying to hide anything.

Dylan groans, reaching down to adjust himself as he glares daggers at Maverick. “Decorate first, play later. There are kids watching, for fuck’s sake. Let’s just get this done.”

Mav sighs through his nostrils before he breaks the kiss, nodding and taking a step away from our girl. “Yeah, okay.

Let's get it done.”

He grabs the end of the string of garland Dylan was holding and spins her out of it, then carries it over to the banister to start wrapping it around that instead. I take a deep breath, sliding my arms around her waist and pulling her into me to nuzzle her neck from behind.

“We've got a surprise for you later. Be a good girl for us and let's get this done so we can get to the fun part of the day.”

She sucks in a sharp breath, but turns her head to send me a naughty smile. “The fun part of the day isn't that whole room full of candy you've got for the kids?”

I shake my head. “Not this year, baby. JT is probably going to be handing it out for us later. I doubt we'll be back downstairs in time to do it ourselves.”

Curiosity flares to life in those deep green eyes, but she doesn't ask. Instead, she gives me a serene smile and nods. “I've always loved your surprises. Bring it on.”

“That's the spirit.” As I release her, I smack her ass and she laughs, dashing away to go help Colton outside.

Dylan's eyes follow her out, but then they move beyond her, Colton, and the kids to the grounds beyond. Honestly, it's hard to believe that this lively, happy place was once the site of a massacre. Harder yet to believe that Dylan's grandfather and his dad lived here with only their families.

Once the war was over, Dylan really outdid himself with this place. It's no longer just Blackthorne Manor; it's a whole community. We've got slides into the pools—at Colton's insistence—family cottages, singles quarters, playgrounds, a boat shed filled with canoes, paddleboards, and all sorts of water equipment. There are boats tied to the dock with wakeboards resting on their towers and fishing rods lined up on the side of the shed.

It's like fucking wonderland around here, and it's a hell of a place to live. For us all.

It's also helped us to build a real sense of community in the Triskele. We're stronger than ever, with fewer issues

cropping up and everyone working cohesively together. We haven't had another leak. Haven't had to investigate or question our own. Our people come to us with solutions for the day-to-day problems that crop up before they even really become problems...

We've all got a sense of belonging now instead of just duty and loyalty. We want to be where we are now. We want to work hard and do our best, and thanks to all those suggestions Skye made all those years ago, we're doing just that.

But that doesn't mean we've forgotten what it took for us to get here, to the other side. Which is why, under a big old tree off to one side of the main part of the backyard, there's a memoriam wall to remember those we lost. Some of those men's families still live here, and we make sure there are always fresh flowers at the wall. We also take turns going out there and telling those kids the memories we have of their dads.

Speaking of dads, all of our own are pursuing different endeavors and none of them have tried to come back to their positions with the Triskele in New York. My parents are back together, for real this time with no arrangement having made the decision for them. They're happy too. Like really happy.

They're both still working with the Feds and Dad is helping us and Damian from time to time too. He and Liz are back in New York, hoping that there will be a wedding and grandbabies soon. Damian is now working with the authorities with my parents to combat human and child trafficking, and while that was part of the deal he made to be able to come back, he's pretty happy doing it. So are my parents.

Liam has gotten pretty much all the way sucked into HoH, but he loves it. I think he feels like he finally found his tribe. A place where he's an advisor, an enforcer, and right in the action all the time. It started because he offered to help Ava after her moms passed, but he's really made it his home. We see him often, but he's invaluable there and to be honest, we've been alright without him. I'm glad he's found someplace where he matters.

Colton's dad has completely retired. While he was lying low, he ended up in Bermuda and is now living there, visiting every so often and staying in touch but otherwise, he's gone.

It's all really sweet to think about, how well the happily ever after is going, but just as I'm about to get a toothache, Colton snatches me out of my thoughts. He strides back inside with Skye hot on his heels, obviously continuing a conversation that started outside.

"All I'm saying is that they're really cute. I know we're still young, but I think it's time to start talking about it, don't you? Or better yet, we can start practicing. How much do you want to bet I can knock you up, like, tonight?"

Skye laughs and shakes her head, lifting her left hand and wiggling her ring finger at him. "That's the one thing I'd like to do traditionally, thank you very much. When you all started dating me, it was with the view of making me your mistress forevermore. I won't have that. It may be in the past, but that doesn't mean that I've forgotten."

Maverick grunts from the direction of the stairs, the garland almost all hung but not completely. I see the impatience flashing in his eyes when they meet mine and I nod. *It's time.*

We've been planning this for months, and I'm definitely ready to get started. Dylan nods at Maverick too, and then Colton grabs Skye's hand, grinning as he starts leading her to the staircase. She frowns, but follows, then she arches a brow when she glances at me over her shoulder.

"Time for the surprise?" she asks.

I smile, nerves making my palms and feet feel cold but sweaty all at the same time. "Yep. It looks like it."

Colton drags her up the stairs and the rest of us follow. While Colt doesn't seem anything but excited, the hard set of Dylan's shoulders and Maverick's jaw tells me they're just as nervous as I am.

There's no reason to think this won't go our way, but fuck... this isn't the kind of thing that happens every day.

Colton leads Skye into our bedroom, which JT and some of the others have spent all day decorating for us.

It's super romantic with the only lights on the ones that are glowing in the orange pumpkins. They've gone all out in here too, with trick skulls, fake and real candles, and black flower petals covering every available surface—including our bed. Skye's feet stop moving as soon as he opens the door and she takes it all in.

Before she can ask what's going on, Dylan strides in and drops to one knee in front of her without skipping a beat. Colton and Maverick are right there with them. I take my place next to Mav, all of us in a loose, semi-circle around her.

Skye's eyes flare wide open and her lips part, her mouth open but she doesn't get a word out before Dylan speaks. "None of us are angels, so we figured Halloween was the perfect time to do this. We considered doing it at Christmas, but this fit better. Skye Love, you crashed into our lives out of nowhere and not only made me fall in love with you when I was determined to hate you, but you changed me. Changed my life. My present and my future. You *are* my future now. You're *our* future."

"We love you, Princess." Colton reaches into his sweater's pocket and pulls out the box with his ring in it, popping the lid open and smiling as he holds it out to her. "We had these designed so we could each give you one, but the bands are interlocking. They fit together perfectly. Just like we do. It's been almost six years and every day is still better than the one before, so will you marry us already?"

Her brows twitch, but then Maverick takes over, staring up at her from his knees and looking surprisingly comfortable there. "This has been coming for a long time, but if you're not ready yet, we'll try again next year. Then the year after that. We'll keep asking until you're ready to say yes, Sunshine."

I smile when he goes quiet, digging into the pocket of my sweater and producing the ring. While they were talking, I took it out of the box and I pinch it between my thumb and index finger as I present it to her.

“We know it won’t be legal, but that doesn’t matter to us. A piece of paper from the State when your parents got married didn’t stop you with Dylan before and we’re hoping it won’t stop you now either. But we can wait. Like Mav said, if you’re not ready, or if you want to do some research into this, we’ll wait. For now though, we at least had to ask. Will you marry us?”

She moves her watery gaze from mine, to Maverick’s, Colton’s, and then to Dylan’s, her lips still parted as she stares at us with wild eyes. My heart trips over itself when she nods, then strides over to Dylan first, holding out her hand for him to slide the ring onto her finger.

When he’s done, he beams up at her, his short blond hair shining when it catches the light as he stands up and pulls her into his arms. He takes her face in his hands, slanting his lips over hers in a kiss that leaves even *me* wanting more.

But she lets go of him and moves on to Colton, nodding at him next with the tears now streaming down her face as he slides his ring into place beside Dylan’s. He rises and kisses her too, picking her up and laughing into the kiss as he lifts her off her feet and spins her around.

Maverick does the same, except that after his ring is on her finger, he picks her up but doesn’t spin her. Instead, he just crushes her to him, kissing her until her legs wrap around his hips before he groans and puts her on her feet in front of me.

“Yes,” she breathes before she holds out her hand, and everything in me goes crazy.

My blood is pounding in my ears, my heartbeat erratic, and my cheeks flushed as I stand to kiss her. My fingers remain on hers though, my fingertips running along the four intricately designed platinum bands now sitting where I’ve been envisioning them for the last five years—at least. Maybe I even started picturing our rings on her finger the very first time I realized we were all into her. I don’t know, but it’s been a long time and now, it’s finally happening. It’s here, and I’ve never felt the kind of joy that goes off like an explosion deep inside of me.



We thought our happily ever after started that day when we put Tony's body in the ground, but as Skye's tongue strokes mine and her arms loop around my neck, I realize that we were wrong. Our real happily ever after starts right here and right now. And me? I can't fucking wait for us to really start living it.

THE END