

THE RUTHLESS BOYS OF RIDGEWAY

PRETTY

Vile

R.A. SMYTH

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PRETTY
Life
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PRETTY VILE

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Pretty Vile

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*I've been dead inside for such a long time that I'd forgotten
what it felt like to be alive... Until I met her.*

Emilia Harrison. The woman I swore to protect. The one putting cracks in my walls and threatening to undo all my hard work keeping the ghosts of my past at bay.

She was only meant to be a job. I never anticipated that everything would get so complicated, but there's no denying the effect she has on me.

One kiss had me coming undone, feeling alive for the first time in years. I was finally ready to put the ghosts that haunt me to rest... Except, now she's missing.

Surely, fate can't be so cruel as to deal me the same hand twice? I won't lose her. Not now when she's finally working things out with Hawk, and she and Wilder still have so much left to resolve.

The pain of my past hasn't been this raw and exposed in a long time. I thought I'd come to terms with what happened, but I won't survive this a second time.

TRBOR PLAYLIST

DiE4u – Bring Me The Horizon

Voices In My Head – Falling In Reverse

Stitch Me Up – Point North

Misery – Memphis May Fire

Empty – Letdown

Take Me Away – New Medicine

Erase You – Point North

All The Ways I Could Die – Arrows In Action

Hell And Back – Self Deception

Damaged People – Connell Cruise

Only Place I Call Home – Every Avenue

Reflections – We Are The In Crowd

Shapeshifting – Taylor Acorn

Blacklist – Lost Stars

[Play Now](#)

TROPES

- SECOND CHANCE ROMANCE
- FRIENDS-ENEMIES-LOVERS
- FORCED PROXIMITY
- BEST FRIENDS BROTHER
- SECRET SOCIETY
- STALKER
- COLLEGE ROMANCE
- FAKE DATING
- EX-MILITARY / BODYGUARD

TRIGGER & CONTENT WARNINGS

This is a dark romance, and as such may contain uncomfortable content. Please ensure you are comfortable with the below list of possible triggers before going any further.

- Kidnapping
- Noncon (not by harem and only kissing)
- Stalking
- Mind fuckery
- Graphic sexual scenes
- Violent content
- Dark themes
- Several of the characters have traumatic pasts which are discussed
- This series is a reverse harem, meaning the FMC ends up with more than 1 love interest

The Ruthless Boys of Ridgeway is a spin off series to Pacific Prep. Characters do overlap, however the series can be read independently of Pacific Prep.

If you wish to read Pacific Prep first, you can do so [here](#).

If you aren't interested in reading Pacific Prep but want to read Emilia, Hawk, and Wilder's origin history before going further, you can read their novella [here](#).

It is not necessary to have read either Pacific Prep or the novella before starting into this book!

This is a 3 book series that will ultimately end in an HEA.

Join my reader group, [Rachel's Rebel Rehab](#), for exclusive bonus content.

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PROLOGUE

ANONYMOUS

“Cappuccino!” the young woman behind the counter yells.

Since I entered the room, I haven’t been able to stop staring at her. I’ve never been a huge believer in fate, although I’m starting to reconsider it now.

I’ve been wandering around aimlessly without a specific destination in mind since leaving my asshole family behind on the East Coast, until today.

The moment I laid eyes on her, I knew I had found what I was looking for. That broken look in her eyes beckons me. The beast within me hears her cries for help and rattles its cage in response.

Obviously, I have no interest in helping her. After all, why mess with perfection?

As I approach the counter, I reach for the awaiting coffee. “Thank you,” I say, my gaze falling to her name tag, “Emilia.”

She gives me a weary, professional smile. “You’re welcome. Have a great day.”

Instead of leaving with the coffee as intended, I settle into a seat at a table at the back of the busy cafe and observe her for the remainder of her shift.

When her shift is over, I sneak out the door as she goes to grab her belongings and clock out of work. I keep my distance when she finally emerges, stepping outside into the balmy summer evening and strolling down the street. Since I was only passing through when I stopped for coffee, I have no idea where we’re headed. Hell, I don’t even know the name of this place.

As we approach a college campus, I look up to read the name of the university inscribed above the metal gates. Halston University. I make a mental note to Google it as I follow her across a deserted campus. *I wonder why she’s*

staying here? It's gotta be three or four more weeks before classes start for the semester.

I follow her all the way to her room, shrugging off the question because I don't really care why she's here, only that she is. I watch as she enters a code before disappearing through the door. A slow grin plays along my lips.

For the first time since putting my family in the rearview mirror, I feel like I have a purpose, something to look forward to. *Someone* to look forward to seeing again very soon.

CHAPTER I

KAI

As I sprint down the hallway toward Emilia's classroom, the sound of my hasty footsteps reverberates off the walls. I'm five minutes late to pick her up because of the goddamn cyclone that is blowing a gale outside. Which isn't actually a problem, except I have this nagging feeling that something is wrong. I can't quite explain it. Call it a sixth sense, Marine training, or even superstition, but that feeling is heavy in my gut, propelling me forward.

It's the reason I called her—not that hearing her voice put my fears to bed. The reason why I blasted my horn repeatedly and flew dangerously around slow drivers, battling the wind and rain to get here as fast as possible. Why I yelled at Hawk to get his ass to her classroom.

And *still*, that nagging feeling gnaws at me.

It might simply be the storm. The thick, oppressive feeling in the air, like a bolt of lightning about to strike, complete with the sour aftertaste of electricity. Perhaps it's simply the dark clouds creating shadows everywhere I look that's making me feel uneasy. Hell, maybe it's my own failure to find her stalker that's eating away at me.

Only I don't think it is.

Approaching her room, I catapult through the open doorway, my shoes squeaking against the tiled floor as I skid to a stop. Any hope I'd been clinging to that I'd find her here, safe and sound, vanishes in a puff of smoke when I spot Hawk kneeling on the floor beside a body.

Even though I can't see their face, I can tell it's a man based on his apparel and body type. *Not Emilia, then.* Grateful for small mercies, I guess. Hearing me, Hawk glances over his shoulder, his face pulled tight. I step to the side to get a better view and immediately recognize the person as one of the men protecting Emilia. My chest tightens even more as my eyes flit

about the space, hoping—though not expecting—to see her standing somewhere close.

“She’s gone,” Hawk states, putting words to what I already knew.

Fuck.

Fuck!

“Nigel is breathing but unconscious. I can’t see any obvious signs of injury, but it seems like he was knocked out with some kind of drug or tranquilizer.”

My voice is husky as panic tears at my insides, “When did you get here?” Fortunately, years of training keeps my head clear as I take in the scene with a critical eye.

“Only a minute or two before you.”

I nod. “Okay. Good. I just spoke with her five minutes ago. Whoever this guy is, he was *just* here. She could still be on campus.”

“Yeah, but where?” Hawk asks, pushing to his feet. “We have no idea where to search, and with the storm, everyone will be holed up inside or rushing to get out of the rain. They aren’t going to notice some guy dragging a struggling woman or carrying an unconscious one.”

Stupid fucking storm. I have no doubt it provided this asshole with the perfect opportunity to strike.

I don’t have answers to Hawk’s question yet, so I ignore it. “Have you called Wilder? He didn’t answer me, however we need all hands on deck.”

Hawk shakes his head. His face is set in a deep scowl, anger radiating from him. “He didn’t answer my calls either.” Still, he pulls out his phone, dialing Wilder’s number, and puts it on speaker. I’m only half listening to the sound of Wilder’s phone ring as I put together a plan of action.

The call rings out, and we hear Wilder’s voicemail before Hawk curses and hangs up. “Why is he never around when we fucking need him?” He immediately redials.

This time, it only rings once before someone answers, and Hawk is growling down the line before Wilder can get a word in. “Where the fuck have you been?” Shaking his head, he must decide he doesn’t care. We don’t have time for whatever bullshit Wilder has been filling his time with while he wallows in self-pity or whatever the fuck he’s doing. “Where are you?” Hawk demands instead, still not waiting for his response before barreling on, “Get to Emilia’s classroom. *Now*. She’s missing. Her stalker has her.”

“I’m coming,” is Wilder’s only reply before hanging up, and then Hawk meets my gaze, ready and waiting for my orders.

Hawk may be my boss, but he knows shit like this is what I’m trained in. Hell, managing shit like this is why he hired me. I’ve just never had a personal attachment to any of our clients. The last time someone I cared about was in danger...

No. Don’t go there!

I curl my hands into fists to hide the tremor as I force all thoughts of that day to the back of my head. *That* won’t happen to Emilia. I’m not a foolish teenage boy anymore. I’m a highly trained Marine, specially qualified to deal with this exact situation. This time, I won’t fail.

“Okay,” I say, getting my head in the game. “Go to security and search the recordings for any sign of her. Call if you find anything.”

Nodding, he asks, “What about you and Wilder?”

“We’ll start in this building and work our way across campus.”

“You think she’s still here?”

“Maybe. The bad weather certainly makes it easier for this psycho to get her off campus, but there are still people in classrooms and surrounding buildings. It would only take one person to see him and call campus security or the police. If I were him, I’d hide out until it was dark and then move her.” I wave toward a still-unconscious Nigel. “He clearly has access to something to keep her subdued. If he waits until classes are

finished for the day, then anyone who sees them will probably think he's just carrying a typical drunk student back to her dorm."

"What do we do with him?" Hawk asks, gesturing to Nigel.

"I'll call someone to come get him." I pull my phone out to do just that as Hawk takes off to check the security tapes.

By the time I'm finished with my phone call, Nigel is starting to come around, and I bend down to check on him as I hear hurried footsteps rushing toward us. Placing my hand on the gun at my hip, I watch the door until a drenched, muddy Wilder appears frenzied and haggard, with his wet hair sticking up all over the place, dirty clothes suctioned to him, and bloodshot eyes. The fucking idiot has obviously been out partying or doing god-knows-what since he stormed out of the house two days ago.

"What happened?" he asks breathlessly, stepping into the room and staring down at Nigel.

I scowl as I give him a quick once-over before focusing on the man lying in front of me. Nigel opens his eyes, and I allow him a few seconds to come around until his eyes focus on me hovering over him.

"Emilia!" he gasps, sitting upright too quickly. "Ugh, it feels like a marching band is stomping on my brain, and why does my mouth taste like someone stuffed it with cotton?"

"You were drugged," I explain.

He does a quick search of the room before meeting my stare. "Emilia. Where is she?"

"He took her. Can you tell me what happened?"

Nigel slowly pushes to his feet, and I help him stand up. "Yeah, I stayed behind after class as per protocol. She got a phone call from you,"—he waits until I nod before continuing—"then the lights went out, and the next thing I know, your ugly mug is in front of my face."

“Okay. Stay here. I’ve got someone coming to pick you up.”

He nods, leaning against the desk and clutching his head in his hands, while I walk over to a scowling Wilder. “What do we do?” he asks impatiently. He looks like shit, but he’s here, so I guess that counts for something.

“Hawk went to talk to security. You and I are going to split up and check the building and work outward from there.”

He gives a curt nod and turns to exit the room, pausing when I call out his name. “Do you know how to use this?” I ask, holding out a small handgun I had strapped to my ankle.

Wilder stares at it for a moment. “I’m really more of a knife person. Don’t suppose you have one of those hidden somewhere on that body of yours?”

I don’t... have any words. The shit Wilder says confuses the fuck out of me. I’ve learned to ignore most of what comes out of his mouth.

“No,” I deadpan.

“Of course you don’t,” he grumbles, taking the gun without answering my question and tucking it into the waistband of his jeans before he strides from the room.

“Be on your guard,” I shout after him, “and call if you find anything.”

He gives me a two-finger salute in return. Cursing him out under my breath, I turn and stride in the opposite direction, ready to find Emilia and eliminate this stalker once and for all.

AS I’M FINISHING up clearing the top floor of the building, my phone buzzes, Hawk’s name appearing on the screen. I haven’t seen any sign of Emilia yet, and the few students I saw just looked at me like *I* was the crazy one when I asked if they’d seen someone carrying an unconscious girl with black hair.

I can feel myself spiraling. That's the thing about trauma. It makes no difference how much training I have or how much distance I've put between myself and that night. What happened is always there, festering in your mind and waiting for the most inopportune moment to taunt you with the memories and bring you crashing to your knees.

Except I can't allow it to do that. Emilia is counting on me.

My ability to think logically and treat this situation like any other is already compromised. The truth is, I'm too emotionally involved. With every room I searched, I kept expecting to see her lying on the floor, slouched in a chair, or draped over a desk. Dead. Her lifeless eyes staring at me, silently demanding to know why I let her down.

My stomach heaves, and I close my eyes against the suffocation of failure. As soon as I do, the memory of blood smeared across the walls and seeping into the floors assaults me, and I snap them open.

No. That won't happen this time. I won't let it. I can't.

A coldness has settled into my bones, making my fingers stiff as I finally answer Hawk's call.

"Yeah?" My voice is hoarse, and I cough to clear away the last cobwebs of my past. Dwelling on that shit won't help me now. It'll only further impair my judgment, and then we might not find Emilia in time.

"Nothing on the tapes," Hawk growls down the line. "No sign of her anywhere on campus. Whoever this guy is, he knew enough to stick to the blind spots."

Fuck. It's entirely possible he could have gotten her off campus without being caught on any of the cameras. In which case, we might never find her. He could take her anywhere in the city, in the state. Hell, in the goddamn country.

"I've reached out to the tech team," he continues. "They're scouring traffic camera footage as we speak."

Dammit. I should have thought of that. Maybe I would have if my head was clearer and I wasn't behaving like a frantic boyfriend.

Forcing my teeth to unclench, I spit out, “Smart.”

“What now?” Hawk asks when I don’t say anything else because I’m still caught up in the fact that Emilia might not even be on campus, and we don’t have a single lead as to where she is.

The question reminds me that *I* am supposed to be in charge. The one he’s looking to for direction because situations like this are where I thrive. Because Hawk’s job is mainly conducted from behind a desk, and mine is keeping people like Emilia safe.

People *like* Emilia.

Children who need rescuing from abusive parents; men and women escaping their violent exes; women running from obsessive stalkers.

People who the legal system has failed. Who the law can’t protect. Cops who won’t intervene until it is too late. By which time, an innocent person has become just another statistic, nothing but a half-hearted political speech about how we need to do better. Only nothing will ever change.

It’s my job to extract these people from their precarious situations and take them to safety.

It is *not* my job to develop feelings for them and mess with their already delicate emotional states. When I enter their lives, these people are in highly volatile situations, making them vulnerable. I’ve had more than one woman develop feelings for me because they viewed me as their savior.

Nevertheless, *I* have never developed inappropriate feelings for one of them. If anything, I’ve kept every one of my charges at arm’s length, treating them with clinical proficiency. My top priority was ensuring their safety, and I refused to let anything interfere with that.

Until Emilia.

I don’t know if it’s because Hadley approached me and asked for my help as a personal favor or because this job has lasted longer than most, resulting in Emilia and I spending *a lot* of time alone together. Or maybe it’s because she reminds

me of Laura when I catch her in a particular light, or the way she chews on her lip when she reads, or how her nose wrinkles when she laughs. In those moments, I find it impossible to glance away.

It's been a long time since the pain of my past has been this raw and exposed. I thought I'd come to terms with what happened. All my guilt and grief have been channeled into something positive, something that ensured others didn't suffer the same fate as Laura. However, since Emilia stumbled into my life, I've begun to notice similarities between the two of them. Each one I find picks at that long-buried wound, prying it apart. Today has been the last catastrophe to rip it wide open.

Every repressed feeling, every smothered memory, is now bubbling to the surface. It won't be long until they overflow, and if we don't find Emilia, there will be no stopping the explosion.

I'm startled out of my trance by the buzzing of the phone in my hand, and as I wade through the murky waters of my disorganized thoughts, I murmur, "Hold on, Wilder's calling."

With the touch of a few buttons, I add Wilder to my phone call with Hawk so we can all hear what each other is saying.

"Anything?" I ask.

"No. You?"

"No."

"The security cameras didn't catch anything either," Hawk informs him.

"Now, what?"

"We were just discussing that," Hawk says.

I force my head back into the game. "We need to explore the entire campus before doing anything else," I remark.

Hawk, who is more familiar with the school than I am, says, "Okay, well, the English department, where you are, is on the east side of campus. The west side is where sorority row and student dormitories are located."

“Hawk, you take the west side of campus,” I instruct. “I’ll remain on this side, and Wilder, you search the center of campus.”

With everyone in agreement, we hang up, and with renewed determination and agonizing pain shredding my soul, I continue my search.

CHAPTER 2

EMILIA

Blinking, I stare up into a face I'm familiar with. *Very* familiar with. A face I've looked at nearly every day for the last four years. The person whose face I sought, after receiving a B on my freshman year English essay, which detailed the empowerment of significant female figures of the past and how they were ahead of their time, because I was convinced the male teacher was a closet anti-feminist.

The person on whose shoulder I sobbed after having sex for the first time since Hawk and Wilder and discovering it did nothing to erase them from my heart and mind.

The person who I celebrated with when I got my dream job offer.

The person with whom I confided all my hidden fears about Richard and our relationship.

The person who is both my best friend and a stranger.

Although, as I peer up at the chilling gleam in her eye and the detached smile slowly playing along her lips, I come to the realization that I never actually knew this woman I shared a dorm with for four years.

"I don't understand."

There's barely enough strength behind my words to make them audible. Nevertheless, in the small, otherwise silent space, she hears me.

Reaching out a hand, Mel strokes her fingers along my hair before tucking it behind my ear and brushing my cheek. It's an oddly gentle and caring gesture, but instead of comforting me, it sends a skitter of chills down my spine.

"That's okay. You will."

Stepping into the middle of the room, she holds her arms out to her sides and does a little twirl, a maniacal grin brightening her features. "I did all of this for you. What do you think?"

I take another look around the room in confusion. We are in what appears to be some sort of storage space. There are no windows; the only source of light is a fluorescent bulb hanging overhead. That, together with the musty odor of disuse, only reinforces my initial suspicions that we are in a basement.

Mel, however, has redecorated, choosing an out-there theme featuring my every private moment from the last few weeks. Everywhere I look, I'm confronted with photos of myself with Hawk, Wilder, and Kai, each one serving as a reminder that none of those intimate moments we shared were the private, impassioned touches I believed them to be. That they *should* have been.

Anger bubbles low in my gut, even as it's overshadowed by fear and confusion in my struggle to make sense of everything I've just learned and try to understand what it is Mel wants.

When I choose not to respond—because, seriously, what am I supposed to say to that? I love what you've done with the place?—she looks away from her handiwork. She must catch the astonishment etched on my face.

“I see everything you've been forced to do.” She crouches in front of me, placing her hands on my knees, and for a second, I catch a glimpse of the Mel that I know. “I carry your pain with me.” Turning her head, she scowls at a picture of me on the kitchen floor, tears running down my cheeks as Wilder thrusts into my mouth. From an outsider's perspective, I suppose it might look like I'm being forced.

She turns back to me and says, “I understand that you were only doing what you felt you had to. You thought you needed their protection, but you can see now that you don't, right? There isn't anyone after you.”

I don't, though somehow I don't think telling her that will go over well, so instead I give a shaky jerk of my head.

She smiles, and it's so reminiscent of the old Mel that it's jarring. “I don't want to hurt you; you understand that, don't you?”

I pick up on her subtle phrasing. Not, *I won't hurt you*. But, *I don't want to*. Two very different meanings, particularly when in a precarious and potentially violent situation such as this.

Despite how dry my throat is, I manage to croak, “You killed Richard.”

She frowns. “He got in the way with his stupid proposal. He couldn't just be happy with what he had with you. Oh no, he needed more.” Her face is lined with disgust. “I knew you'd say yes because you felt you should.”

“So you killed him?” Hysteria tinges my words, making my voice come out an octave higher than usual.

She waves a languid hand. “You didn't even like him that much.”

Maybe I wasn't in love with him, nevertheless, he was still a friend. Someone I enjoyed spending time with and who I confided in. Someone I cared enough about that I was terrified of the hurt I'd cause by ending our relationship.

Somehow, I doubt Mel will understand that. Is she even capable of that level of empathy? Her actions would suggest no. Which means her infatuation with me is just that: an obsession. Contrary to what she would have me believe—as perhaps she herself believes—it is not some toxic, twisted kind of love.

I get the impression I'm walking over broken glass. One misstep, and I'll slice open my foot. Once that occurs, it's near impossible to regain your sure footing, and you end up limping along while pleading with a higher power to spare you another cut.

Mel will shut down the moment she gets even the slightest hint that I'm against her or that I disagree with whatever the fuck this is. She'll flick faster than a switch from the soothing, comforting friend in front of me and become the Mel that could kill a man we've both known for years.

Even as she runs a hand over my leg in what I assume is meant to be a reassuring gesture, Mel has abruptly transformed

from the distant version who dismissed Richard's death to my familiar friend.

"I saw what you were putting yourself through, and I knew I had to find a way to get to you."

Except this isn't all adding up. Finding some deeply buried courage, I dare to ask, "What about that note you sent to the house? You sounded pretty angry when you wrote that."

Her lips purse before her expression smoothes out. "I was. You have no idea how difficult it was for me to watch you with *them*. How the weird one used you; the way the surly one looked at you." My thigh is being squeezed by her hand as she talks, and it's challenging for me to keep my discomfort to myself as her nails bite cruelly into my skin.

With another discomfiting flick of the switch, her hand relaxes and her anger dissipates. Rolling her eyes theatrically, she sneers, "However, then I saw you with the one with a hero complex, and I understood everything you were doing was because you were trying to keep yourself safe. You were submitting to their whims in exchange for their protection."

Nope, it still doesn't make sense. Then again, crazies aren't known for their rational thinking. If they did, then the FBI wouldn't have a whole division devoted to understanding the inner psyche of psychopaths.

She huffs out a sigh, the first crack in her composed demeanor that's directed at me. Like it's my fault that I can't understand her logic. I guess it's my bad I'm not fluent in crazy, but oddly enough, Halston didn't offer that course.

"I can tell you still don't understand, but you will." She peers down at her watch before flicking her gaze to something behind me. The act alone implies we're on a time limit, only what happens when that time runs out? *Please let that be when one of the guys will bash through the door and rescue me!*

"I knew you were special from the first moment I laid eyes on you." Her voice turns wistful, her gaze unfocused as she recalls the first day we met, when we were assigned as

roommates. “I knew there and then that you were going to be mine one day. I simply had to bide my time.

“So, I sat on the sidelines, patiently waiting for you to open your eyes to what was standing right in front of you. For you to realize that I was your center. It was *me* you came crying to, *me* you shared your good news with, *me* who comforted you. I might not have had all of you, but knowing that one day I’d be your whole world, I was content to wait.”

Her voice has turned soft as she reflects on the past, the lines on her face smoothing out. It’s a past that I now view in a very different light. All those nights we spent on the couch, watching movies and eating ice cream while laughing or crying, I now see through a completely different lens. It’s like every memory of us is coated in a sticky, oily film, tarnishing everything it touches and souring any comfort I drew from them.

“I knew I was done being your little sidekick when Richard told me he was going to propose. I had already told you that it was almost time for us.”

“There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. That will be our beginning,” I murmur, not even realizing I’ve said the words aloud until I catch Mel’s wide grin.

“You remember!”

Impossible not to when it crept the fuck out of me, but whatever.

The smile disappears from her face swiftly, and her demeanor changes. “Of course, I hadn’t anticipated some would-be hero to be waiting in the wings, ready to swoop in as soon as Richard was out of the picture.”

She leaps to her feet and begins pacing, clearly quite pissed off by Kai’s interference.

“I was the one who was meant to be by your side. The one you’d lean on. After his passing, you’d decide there was no use in continuing to date men, and after a while, you’d realize that I was all you really needed.”

She whirs around to face me, her eyes aflame with yearning. “You’d see that I could be everything you were searching for. That I am all you will ever need.” Stepping up to me, she cups my cheeks in her hands. For a brief moment, I fear that she’s going to kiss me. “I just know if you stopped chasing after boys and really thought about it, you’d feel the same way I do.”

I have a split second to wrap my head around the fact that she *is* in fact going to kiss me when she leans in, her eyes locked on mine as her breath fans my lips. I resist the temptation to retreat as my entire body tenses. Not only can I not do that because I’m tied to a goddamn chair, but I know if I rebuff her advances, it will ruin whatever semblance of peace we have going. She currently seems to believe that I’m unsure but open to the possibility of there ever being an us. Still, the instant she discovers that I’m not, I have the distinct impression that this will turn nasty and violent.

So instead, I maintain my composure and convince myself it’s no big deal. Wilder has done far worse to me over the last few weeks, and yet, this feels like a far greater violation.

I guess that’s because, deep down, I always wanted him, even when I was mad at him or felt rejected, crushed by his treatment of me, even if I could understand his reasoning. As long as he was touching me, I’ve never cared if it was out of resentment or rage.

Even when he practically forced me to my knees on the kitchen floor, I never felt as helpless as I do at this moment. Good or bad, I craved every second of Wilder’s attention. Until I saw them strung up on the wall, those intimate moments between us never once felt dirty or disgusting.

When Mel’s lips meet mine, that foul, unclean feeling intensifies until I’m practically choking on the lump of vomit resting at the back of my throat, and sweat lines my skin.

She moans against my lips, her tongue probing at the seam. I momentarily resist before forcing my lips to part, granting her entry. A soft sigh falls into my open mouth, sounding entirely at odds with the battle raging within me. It’s

the sound of utter bliss. Of someone who has finally worked up the courage to do something they've dreamt of, and it's surpassed their every expectation.

It's not dissimilar to the noise I made when Kai kissed me for the first time on that dance floor.

Now, it's just one more thing she's stolen and tarnished.

I'm at war with myself. With every swipe of her tongue against mine, I battle every instinct that screams at me to pull away. That ball of bile at the back of my throat climbs progressively higher with each passing second, intensifying until I'm choking on the putrid taste, positive she can smell it on my breath. Seconds away from puking all over her, I panic.

A buzzing sound interrupts the tense moment and forces her to break the kiss. She does not, however, make any move to check the vibrating phone in her back pocket. Standing before me, she zeroes in on my swollen lips, before her dilated pupils drop to take in the damp dress clinging to my body. She can undoubtedly see my heaving chest and the sharp peaks of my nipples, drawn taut from the cold—*not* her.

She traces the silhouette of my body with her eyes. How it tapers in at my waist before flaring out at my hips, the outline of my lean thighs, and the prominent V emphasizing my pussy through the wet fabric. A primitive hunger enters her eyes, one that's far more dangerous than the heat from a moment ago.

It speaks of promises I don't want to see fulfilled. Promises that will break me more than a kiss ever will. Break me more than Wilder ever could.

Her eyelids close, and I study her as she wrangles herself under control. When she opens them again, and that hunger has abated, I inwardly sigh with relief.

Chilly air replaces the nauseating sensation of her body pressing against mine when she eventually pushes herself out of my personal space. It feels amazing against my clammy skin, and while her back is turned, I suck down a greedy gulp of air and try to block out the hammering of my heart against my chest.

She sighs, pulling my gaze to her. “Our time is up.”

What does that mean? Is one of the guys close to finding us? Or is it time for her to move me somewhere else? Please, *God, let it be the former.*

She comes back over to where I’m restrained to the chair and looks down at me with an unreadable expression. “I’m giving you time to get on board with this, but I won’t be kept waiting much longer. Now that you understand there’s no actual threat to you, you don’t need those *boys’* protection. Although I would prefer if you came to me on your own, I will personally come and get you if you don’t.” Stepping away, she grabs a small knapsack from the floor and tosses it over her shoulder.

She pauses as she passes me. “I’ll be watching.”

Her words are laced with a threat, one I’d be wise to heed, yet I don’t have the capacity to process them. Instead, I file her words away to deal with later, when I’m not alone and chained to a chair in a creepy basement, with no idea how the hell I’m going to get out of here.

I listen as she climbs the stairs. Unadulterated fear seeps into my bones with each thundering footfall. It was horrible enough being trapped alone with her, but the prospect of being imprisoned down here alone is unbearable.

Twisting in my chair, my breaths come in quick spurts as panic descends like a heavy mist. Moments later, I’m plunged into darkness as the door slams shut with a foreboding clang that reverberates off the brick walls and vibrates its way into the very core of my soul, leaving nothing behind but brutal, icy horror.

Oh god, what if the guys aren’t on their way? What if I’ve been put on a timeout, left to sit and stew down here in the dark until Mel deigns to return?

CHAPTER 3

WILDER

I charge across campus with as much fervor as the surrounding storm. My exhaustion is all but forgotten in my search for Emilia. Not even the cold seeping into my bones from the wet clothes sticking to my skin can deter me. Emilia may be the bane of my fucking existence right now, but that doesn't mean I want to see her hurt—well, by anyone other than me.

This crazed motherfucker already killed her ex-boyfriend. What the hell might he do to Emilia if she says or does something to piss him off? I highly doubt he will hold his hands up and say, *oh, my bad*, when she tells him she isn't interested.

As I walk by, I cast a glance across the central quad, trying to guess where he might be keeping her. Assuming she is even still on campus—which is a big fucking assumption. For all I know, they could be halfway to Timbuktu by now. A fact that doesn't sit well and only serves to confuse the fuck out of me.

Why the hell does the thought of not seeing her bother me? I've been torturing her—okay, both of us—this entire time *because* she had the audacity to blow back into my life. Why, then, would I suddenly give a shit if she left again?

Shaking those thoughts out of my head, I return my attention to the task at hand. It's not like this asshole will be passing time until he can whisk Emilia off campus by lounging in an empty classroom or chilling in the food court where anyone could come across him.

No, if I were him and I finally had the object of my desire, I would want to take her somewhere private. Someplace where we can be alone—just the two of us. A place where no one will hear her scream. Where I would have all the time in the world to explore her body's every curve and valley, to intimately acquaint myself with the hollow at the base of her neck, and bury myself between her sweet thighs.

Aaaand now I'm fucking hard. *Great.*

With a growl, I yank my thoughts out of the gutter. There is no fucking reason for me to be jealous of the fact that this psychopath is sequestered somewhere nearby, alone with the object of *my* obsession, partaking in all the pleasures I've been denying myself for the last few months.

It dawns on me then. If this freak knows enough to avoid being seen on any of the security cameras, then does he know about the secret tunnels that run all over campus?

I didn't even know they existed until this year. Robbie enlightened me to the fact that the school is riddled with secret passageways and tunnels after the King's Elite dragged me down into them. Not that I've had the chance to explore them yet.

Robbie claimed that the main university building was formerly a Gothic mansion that belonged to some eccentric old man who built tunnels so his staff could move about the house and grounds covertly.

God forbid one of his exorbitantly wealthy house guests discover the house and gardens didn't magically take care of themselves. Talk about rich people problems.

In any case, it was later converted into a refugee camp during the war, with the passages serving as both storage for goods and emergency exits in the event of a bombing.

Now, their presence is only known by a select few and is strictly off-limits to the majority of the student population.

I don't know if this person knows enough about the history of this place to know about the tunnels. Still, it wouldn't have taken much digging for them to uncover the bomb shelters that were strategically constructed during the war so they interconnected with the tunnels leading to the property's boundary.

Pulling out my phone, I do a quick Google search of the campus' history. A few web pages later, I've learned that the brand-new dining hall built the year before we started at Ridgeway was constructed on top of crumbling outbuildings

dating back to when the house was first built. Buildings that used to be the staff quarters and then the main lodgings for those whose homes had been decimated during the war.

If a bomb shelter is going to be anywhere, it's gotta be there, right?

Heading in that direction, I decide to skirt around the outside of the dining hall before heading inside. I'm relatively certain the bomb shelter's whereabouts would be more widely known if it were in a public area, so either it's in a part of the building where students rarely go, or it's hidden outside, somewhere nearby.

I circle around to the rear of the building, not seeing anything that screams *psst, hey you! You know that secret bomb shelter you're looking for? Well, it's over here behind this bush!*

The industrial side of the university, which students rarely see, greets me at the back of the dining hall. Dumpsters line the back wall, and the smells and sounds from a busy kitchen filter through a cracked window. With my back to the building, I stare out over the stretch of grass that disappears into a thicket of trees and try to narrow down my search.

The bunker was likely constructed away from the main structures so that the entrance wouldn't be buried under debris if one of them fell during a raid. What are the chances that the developers of the new dining hall decided not to build on top of the bunker?

I mean, with terrorism and school shootings at an all-time high, it would make sense to have somewhere on campus where students could hide. Having the entrance to that safe space somewhere outside would make it much more accessible than hiding it inside a building.

My gaze narrows in on the thicket of trees in the distance, and with a gut instinct pulling me forward, I head toward them.

I don't know if it's because the treetops block out the waning sunlight or because the rain is more muted, but as I

step under the canopy of leaves, a chill spreads through me. I pull the handgun from the waistband of my jeans as I glance around, listening intently for the slightest sound.

It's times like this that I really wish I carried Marie, my Marine Recon Bowie knife, with me. You just never know when a situation might arise that can only be resolved with a sharp blade. *From this moment on, I hereby declare that I shall never leave the house without her strapped to my person ever again.*

I mean, it just makes sense to be armed at all times. It was foolish of me to let my guard down, especially after everything that happened at Pacific Prep. However, if there's a new psycho going around kidnapping the people I... care about? No, that doesn't sound right. I don't *care* about Emilia.

I care about Hadley; I cared when she went missing. Enough that I refused to sit back and twiddle my thumbs while her boyfriends and brother rode to the rescue. Hell no, I donned my own black stallion and went riding in with them.

Nonetheless, I'm not looking to ride to Emilia's rescue and do that White Knight shit this time. That's more Kai's style.

Yet instead of sleeping off the forty-eight hours from hell at the frat house, I'm out here amongst these creepy-ass trees. And that jolt of emotion I experienced when Hawk informed me of Emilia's abduction... It sure as fuck means something other than the cold, hard hate I've been clinging to for the past few weeks.

Gritting my teeth, I push back branches with renewed energy. Not because I *care*, but because...

She's mine.

That stupid fucking voice in my head pipes up, only infuriating me more.

"She's mine to break. Mine to tear apart and destroy. To make her regret ever walking away. To wish she'd never even fucking met me," I snap at the voice in my head.

If that's what you need to tell yourself. I still stand by what I said: She's ours—in every way, good and bad.

“Oh, fuck off,” I snarl, making a commotion as I stomp through the trees.

You can't deny she makes us feel better, the stupid fucking voice continues to argue. Even now. You're just mad at her for stealing the light.

That thought brings me to a standstill.

Is that why I'm angry?

I shake my head, refusing to fall for that bullshit. Regardless, she stole the light *because* she had left.

I'm so busy trying to outrun my thoughts that I trip over a root and go sprawling.

Hahaha, my inner voice cackles. Serves you right for trying to ignore me.

Disregarding the asshole, I shove myself upright and turn to scowl at what I fell over. Instead of cursing out a root, my eyebrows raise in surprise when I discover my foot caught on a metal ring. Next, I notice the metal door it's attached to, which I'm currently lying half on top of.

Guess I found that secret bunker. Pushing to my feet, I survey the area, noting several outlines of footprints leading to and away from the bunker door. Does that mean I'm in the right place? Why else would anyone be out here?

I lean forward and tighten my grip on the gun's handle before pointing it at the door and encircling the metal ring with my hand.

Before I can pull it open, though, I hear a twig break to my right, and I swivel around, aiming my gun in the direction of the sound as I squint into the shadows.

A beat of silence stretches into infinity as I hunt out the shadows for the slightest movement, not seeing anything unusual.

“Who's there?” I shout.

Unsurprisingly, I get no response, and after another drawn-out moment of peering into the trees, I turn away and focus

back on the trapdoor at my feet.

Reaching out once again, my finger hovers over the trigger as, with ample force to have my muscles straining and the metal creaking loud enough to alert the undead to my presence, I force the metal door open.

I'm greeted with a set of stairs that have been pulled right out of a horror movie, and I stare down into the dark abyss, wondering if I'm right in the head. I might not be the typical dumb blonde girl that goes to check out the weird noise in the middle of the night, but that doesn't mean I'm not the idiot who dies at the beginning of the movie.

"Well, here goes nothing," I mutter to myself as I take my first step into the black pit, not entirely convinced that Emilia is worth dying for.

You keep living in that delusional world of yours.

Snarling under my breath, I descend into the musty interior. The wooden steps creak beneath my boots, and just before the inky blackness swallows me up, I notice an old light switch off to my left.

I don't expect it will do anything when I flip it, so I'm pleasantly surprised when a low buzz is followed by a dim light flickering. I squat low to get a better look at the basement below as I slowly descend the stairs, gun still tightly gripped in my hand.

The weak light does a poor job of illuminating the space, but it's enough for me to identify the familiar black-haired girl strapped to a chair in the middle of the room with her back to me.

"Emilia?"

She startles at my voice, her head whipping to the side as she cranes to see me over her shoulder. "Wilder?" Her tone veers between hysteria and relief. I can see the fear in her eyes, and knowing I wasn't the one to put it there has me hurrying down the last few steps.

"Is anyone else here?" I suddenly think to ask as my boots meet hard concrete.

“N-no. She left.”

Satisfied, I cross the room toward her, noticing that her hands and ankles are restrained with zip ties. Yet another instance when a knife is superior to a gun. Marie would have been through these in no time.

I turn my back on her, intending to find something sharp to slash through them, and halt as I come face-to-face with a photo of myself deep-throating the girl behind me.

“What the actual fuck?” I gasp, surveying the wall of photos. Talk about the creepiest fucking art gallery ever.

“Wilder, please,” Emilia hiccups. Her tone steals my attention as I do my best to ignore the *very* graphic photos in front of me and scour the shelves for something I can use to get her out of that seat.

I find a pair of rusty scissors that will have to do the job and turn back to Emilia. Her entire body is trembling, and I’m not even sure she realizes she’s crying as I slip one of the blades between the zip tie and her wrist and use my strength to rip through it. Doing the same to her other wrist, I hurriedly move on to her ankles, and as soon as the last zip tie falls away, she launches herself into my arms.

The momentum sends me falling onto my ass, not that she cares, as she buries her face in my neck and wraps her arms around me like she’s an octopus and I’m the first viable food source she’s seen in days.

I sit there on the cold, hard floor with my arms locked at my sides, unsure of what to do as her warmth creeps beneath my icy skin. The me from four years ago wouldn’t have hesitated to wrap her up in my arms and ease her fears, only that’s not the relationship we have anymore. Recently, every touch has been born of anger. One intended to hurt, to inflict pain.

But I don’t want to hurt her right now.

The longer I sit there, the more I feel those shadows constantly surrounding me start to pull away. Emilia’s

presence shines a bright light and forces them to retreat into obscurity.

A warm beam glosses over me, not only chasing away the ghosts but also filling that dark, empty hole in my chest with something warm and comforting. I simultaneously lean into the touch and rebel against it.

It's only when a sob wracks her body that I give up the fight, and my arms curl around her petite frame, tucking her tightly against my body. The motion is both familiar and alien, and oddly, it feels right. Like coming home after being away for a long time. As though being in my arms is where Emilia is supposed to be.

I guess that's my lingering feelings from before talking. After all, this *is* where Emilia was supposed to be. And yet, after all this time, you'd think those feelings would have dissipated. It shouldn't feel as though it was only yesterday that I held her like this.

Except it does. It's as though no time has passed at all. I can feel the shriveled-up organ in my chest unfurling like a flower petal to the sun. Can feel the heat infusing my skin, warming me from the inside out as though I've just stepped in from the bitter cold.

Some of that ice around my heart thaws, diminishing the anger I've carried, but it doesn't erase everything that's happened. The remaining bitterness is still caustic and intense, competing with the newfound warmth and leaving me more conflicted than ever.

I push her back in an effort to create some physical and emotional distance between us. My eyes scan her tear-streaked face. How come I love the way she looks when she cries for me, but right now, I don't feel satisfaction or glory at seeing her upset? Tears are tears. It should be about the pain and the humiliation. After all, isn't that what I wanted to do when I first saw her in my kitchen?

I wanted to see her hurt and broken. I wanted her to feel the aching loss and devastation I felt at her rejection, at her callous goodbye, and at the sudden distance she forced

between us. And yet, somehow, that doesn't quite feel true anymore.

Maybe it was never true.

If I really think about it, I wanted her to feel even an inkling of that soul-sucking nothingness that constantly consumes me. The shadows that she unknowingly chased away. The ones that came rushing back, greeting me like we were old friends the second she dropped out of my sphere of existence.

Don't get me wrong; I definitely want to hurt her, to make her regret the choice she made, but I want her to feel all that at *my* hands. *I* want to be the one doing the breaking. Right now, seeing her like this just feels wrong.

"I, uh, need to inform the others."

She snuffles, giving a faint nod but making no effort to get off my lap. I'm torn between lifting her off and working around her to dig my phone out of my back pocket. Because this bunker is doing fucked up things to my emotional state, I end up keeping one arm around her waist, trying not to jostle her too much as I wiggle my phone out of my pocket.

Of course, it's all futile when a notification pops up telling me I have no signal, and I end up lifting her off me anyway. "I need to go outside to get a signal," I say absently. "Wait, he—"

"No!"

At the blind terror in her voice, I lift my gaze from the phone screen. "I-I can't stay here," she pleads.

A rare sense of conflict slashes across my chest as I stare into her wide, scared eyes. *She's never looked more stunning.* It's probably fucked up that that's the first thought to cross my mind.

Rather than telling her to suck it up like I should—like the twisted, fucked-up part of me wants to—different words spill out without any forethought. "I'll be right up there." I point to the top of the stairs. "And I'll only be a minute. You'll be perfectly safe. I won't let her get to you again."

Her eyes widen almost imperceptibly at my promise, and the vehemence in my tone equally takes me by surprise. Yet, I know I meant them. I can feel the conviction all the way to the deepest, darkest depths of my soul.

Unsettled by this abrupt change, I wave my hand at the walls and hurriedly tack on in a more brusque tone, “They’re going to want to see all this before we dismantle it, so you may as well stay here.”

I wait for her shaky nod before moving toward the staircase. As I’m climbing the steps, I notice how she wraps her arms around herself for comfort. The act has me pausing halfway before I shake myself out of the stupid notion that I shouldn’t leave her alone when she’s upset and on edge like this, and continue until I’m greeted by the smell of damp moss and sharp, cool air.

The second I have a signal, I dial Hawk’s number.

“I found her,” I blurt out before he can get a word in.

“You did? Is she okay? Where are you?”

“She’s fine. She was in some underground bunker, but, man, you need to see this.” I give him directions to the bunker, and he says he’ll call Kai and come right over. With that done, I head back into the musty gloom, feeling strangely apprehensive about being alone with Emilia.

The dynamics between us have been pretty clear-cut until now. Every interaction I’ve had with her has been intended to break her a little, except I can’t do that to her now, which leaves me feeling uncertain. It’s been a long time since I’ve reacted to Emilia with anything other than harsh loathing. As I descend the stairs, finding her standing in front of one of the walls of photos with her back to me, I pause, taking a moment to simply observe her while I adapt to this new dynamic between us.

Of course, the creaking of the floorboards announces my presence, and after a moment, Emilia’s soft voice fills the bunker, breaking the spell I was under. “She took pictures of everything.”

I approach slowly, raking my eyes over the photos.

“It’s like she was watching us every minute of every day.” She reaches out to brush her finger over a photo of her and Kai on a dance floor. I’m guessing that’s from their date night. I stare at the photo, noticing for the first time how relaxed Emilia’s smile is as she stares up at Kai. To an outsider, they look like two people lost in one another, oblivious to everyone around them. Hell, even to me, they look like that. The whole dating thing was supposed to be a ruse, but the passionate way they are staring into one another’s eyes looks anything but fake.

“Not a single moment was left untarnished.” There’s a melancholy in her voice that bothers me and makes me want to rip every goddamn photo from the wall if only to make her feel better, but I refrain—barely. Kai will want to see everything exactly as it was before we take it all down.

I watch as she slowly moves along each of the walls. I’m unsure why she looks like she’s trying to commit every photo to memory. She’s in most of them. They’re her memories. Still, I stand and silently watch her as she systematically makes her way around the room, until the pounding of footsteps reaches my ears, followed a second later by Hawk’s panicked, “Em?”

At the sound of his voice, she spins toward him. The same smile she wore in that photo lights up her face, even as fresh tears form in her eyes. She’s rushing toward him before he even hits the bottom step, diving into his open arms.

There’s no hesitancy in his embrace. His arms envelop her, and he buries his face in her hair like he half expected to never see her again. *I guess my attempt to drive a wedge between them was unsuccessful.* Everything about the moment is private and intimate and charged with so much emotion that I can practically taste it on my tongue. I shouldn’t be intruding, and yet, I can’t look away.

It bothers me that it’s so much easier for him. How he was able to simply forgive her. Then again, Hawk doesn’t carry the same demons I do. He hasn’t had to endure what I have and

wasn't crushed the same way I was. Back in high school, Emilia was just a hole to stick his dick. Although, how he couldn't see the potential that I could is beyond me. How he didn't just completely lose his freaking mind after that threesome renders me dumbfounded. Didn't he feel what I did? That sense of rightness? Like the three of us could do that every night for the rest of our lives and be happy?

I knew the second she took my bait and ran toward Hawk—toward her deepest, darkest desires—that I would always want more of her.

But apparently, I was the only one.

Hawk saw it as just sex, and Emilia... Well, I don't know what Emilia thought of it all, but she obviously wasn't on the same page as me.

Now look at how the tables have turned. He's realized what I knew all those years ago, and somehow he's ended up with the girl. Meanwhile, I'm stuck out in the cold, bitter and alone, watching from afar as they rekindle what they once had and deepen that connection.

Talk about life fucking you up the ass—and not in a good way.

I watch as an intrigued and forgotten bystander while he pulls her in for a breathtaking kiss that rivals one of a man who survived the battle of Normandy and made it home alive would have given his lover. Definitely not intended for a public audience, but here I am, soaking up every second as though it's my lips she's kissing.

“Are you okay?” he asks when they finally break apart.

“I'm fine,” she assures him, her hand on his chest. “But Hawk, it's—”

The thud, thud, thud of nearing footsteps cut through her words as Kai makes his presence known. Legs, followed a moment later by his torso and head, appearing as he descends into the bunker. His eyes immediately find Emilia, raking over her before his shoulders relax.

She steps out of Hawk's arms and moves toward him, but instead of the comforting embrace she received from Hawk, Kai's arms remain at his side as his expression fluctuates between concern and relief. *Interesting.*

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice coming out stiff and emotionless.

His tenor makes Emilia stop in her tracks. A flash of something that looks like confusion passes across her face so quickly that I almost wonder if I imagined it. "Y-yeah."

He does another scan of her body, clearly searching for injuries despite his posture remaining aloof. "Good," he says sharply before shifting his focus to the room. I watch as he steps closer to the photos taped to the wall, although my attention steers back to Emilia and the way she follows him with her eyes, trying to understand his detached demeanor. Have to say, I'm confused myself. I half expected him to confess his undying love as soon as we found her.

Any idiot with half a brain must realize he has feelings for the girl. Even before I looked at the photos on the wall, I knew he liked her. I don't know if it started because they spent so much time alone in the house together, bonding over trying to catch her stalker, or if it was the fake dating—that sure as fuck doesn't look fake anymore—but he started falling for her.

So why is he now keeping her at arm's length? And, more importantly, why do I care?

I don't, obviously. I'm just intrigued by whatever is going on.

Yeah, sure you are.

Ugh, I really need to stop having conversations with myself.

Hawk moves forward to inspect the walls as well, before Kai takes out his phone and starts taking pictures of all of it. When he's done, he orders, "Take it all down, but don't get rid of the photos. I want to look at them in better lighting."

"Why?" Emilia asks, her arms once again wrapped around her waist. "They're photos of us. Can't we just burn them? It

feels like a violation to know they exist.”

“There might be useful clues in them,” Kai explains, his focus remaining pointedly on the wall. “We can destroy them once I’ve had a chance to analyze them.”

“Oh, okay,” Emilia says in a small voice.

Evidently done inspecting the walls, Kai finally turns to face her, his expression unreadable. “So, who is it?”

Hawk and I immediately focus on Emilia, and I feel like there should be some sort of drumroll before she tells us. It’s like all this hype and suspense, all for this one dramatic moment where we find out who the illusive stalker is. I still have my bets on the Steven dude from the band or one of the other guys from the tour she went on that summer. Although perhaps that’s just my own jealousy talking.

Drawing out the moment, Emilia looks at me then at Hawk before meeting Kai’s eyes. “Mel.”

Her words are met with a stunned silence, and all I can think is, *Who the fuck is Mel?*

Talk about a letdown. It’s about as disappointing as the final season of Game of Thrones.

“Your roommate from college?” Hawk questions, sounding about as confused as I feel.

Emilia nods, and I faintly remember her name being mentioned in passing at one point or another. “Isn’t she a girl?” I question, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Yes,” Emilia states again.

“Your stalker is a woman?” I try to clarify, struggling to wrap my mind around the concept.

“Women can be stalkers, too,” Hawk snaps, before turning his glower on Kai. “Didn’t you check her out?”

“Of course I did,” he argues. “No red flags showed up, and admittedly, because she was a girl and a friend, I dismissed her as a potential threat.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t Steven?”

This time, everyone turns to scowl at me, but *come on*, I was wholly convinced it was Steven.

“Pretty sure,” Emilia deadpans.

“It’s rare,” Kai explains, “though not unheard of for a woman to be the stalker. Mostly, it’s a woman stalking a man, but there have been several unprecedented cases where a woman has stalked another woman.”

“Why?” I question.

“Why does anyone stalk? They want a relationship with the person, jealousy, envy. It isn’t always logical,” Kai explains.

“She said she’s wanted to ask me out since the first day we met,” Emilia confesses in a quiet voice. “Except that it wasn’t the right time, so she waited. And when she found out Richard planned to propose, she was done waiting.”

“So, what, she played at being your roommate and friend for four years until she got sick of Richard and offed him?” I question, only realizing the callous way I phrased that when Emilia blanches.

With her gaze fixed on the floor, she shrugs, not having a better answer. I guess, as Kai says, their motives and actions aren’t always logical.

“We should get out of here,” Hawk says when Emilia shivers. I’m not sure whether it’s from the cold or the events of today. Both, probably.

Each of us takes a wall, carefully removing the photos and bundling them into piles. When we’re done, we exit the bunker into the ongoing hurricane without a backward glance, battling the wind and rain as we hastily cross campus toward the parking lot.

“You two take Emilia,” Kai shouts over the gale before running toward his abandoned car. Emilia watches him go until Hawk tugs on her hand, and the three of us jog over to where he parked his car when he arrived on campus this morning.

I feel like someone has put earmuffs over my ears as I slam the car door shut behind me, blocking out the raging storm. With our combined body heat and heaving breaths, the windows quickly steam up until Hawk starts the engine and blasts hot air at the windshield.

A moment later, we're reversing out of the space and heading away from campus. Now that I've finally stopped and the adrenaline has worn off, my exhaustion is making itself known, and several times, my eyes droop, threatening to close.

"Where the hell have you been?" Hawk barks, jolting me from my near-sleep state.

"Nowhere," I grumble, wiping my hand down my face. "Just letting off some steam."

I can feel Hawk's eyes on me in the rearview mirror, but I deliberately don't meet his penetrating stare, instead focusing on the stack of photographs I'm still holding in my hand. In an effort to keep myself awake, I begin to flick through them, not spotting any of those so-called *clues* Kai was talking about.

That is, until I reach a photo about halfway through the stack, taken the night I found Emilia in my bathroom. In the picture, she's on her knees on the floor, with her head hanging and her shoulders slumped. She looks so small and defeated, and for a second, it's that dejection which grips me. I'd already walked away by that point, so I never saw the aftermath. I stroke my finger over her small frame. *Now, that is a beautiful sight*, I think to myself.

However, it's not the photo itself that caught my attention—although, when Kai's done with it, I'm definitely keeping it for myself. It's the fact that it exists at all. I tilt my head to one side, then the other, trying to figure out the angle, before shoving my hand through the gap between the front two seats.

"Hey, where was this photo taken?"

Emilia barely spares the photo a glance before cringing and turning to look out the window. Hawk huffs out an irritated sigh before casting a quick look at it. "The bathroom," he deadpans.

“But there’s no window in the bathroom. And look at the angle. It’s too high up.”

Hawk’s eyes dart back down to the photo, staring at it for a dangerously long moment, considering he’s driving, before muttering, “What the fuck? How is that even possible?”

That gains Emilia’s attention, and she deigns to give the photo another questioning look. “What?”

“That’s been taken from the security camera in my bedroom.”

The second he says it, I realize that’s what it is. The angle is from above, as though the photographer was clinging Spiderman-style to the ceiling.

Emilia’s eyes scan the photo again before she frowns. “How did she get a screenshot of security camera footage?” Emilia questions, putting words to my exact thoughts and obviously Hawk’s.

“That’s exactly what I want to know.”

I continue to flick through the pile of photos while he presses a few buttons on his steering wheel. A moment later, the sound of a phone ringing echoes through the car, followed by Kai’s gruff, “What?”

“Mel has access to our security cameras.”

“That’s not possible,” Kai states with conviction.

“Well, the photo I’m looking at right now says otherwise,” I drawl.

“What the fuck is he talking about?” Kai growls. *Ah, he’s so much fun when he’s in a pissy mood.*

“There’s a photo here of the main bathroom. Given the angle, it could only have come from the security camera.”

“More than one photo,” I tell them. “It looks like most of these have been taken from our cameras.”

My words are met with silence before Kai curses under his breath. “Send me a picture of the photograph. Don’t go inside

the house when you get there.” With that, the line goes dead, and I snap a picture of the bathroom photo and send it to him.

There’s an extra weight pressing down on all of us as we head toward the brownstone. On the one hand, we have the answers Emilia and Kai have been searching for, but on the other, it feels like shit is just getting started. Somehow, I don’t think this can end simply by calling the police and getting them to arrest Mel. She’s proven herself to be intelligent and resourceful. Cunning and determined.

In order to beat her, we will have to be better.

The good news is, I’m the kind of guy sane people know not to cross. Because not only will I fuck you up, but I’ll leave you irreparably damaged. Mel isn’t sane, however. She may be just as crazy as I am.

And we all know what happens when crazy collides with crazy.

Cataclysmic destruction.

CHAPTER 4

HAWK

I'm numb by the time I pull up outside the house. Staring up at the structure I've thought of as a home for the last three years, it suddenly feels cold and foreboding. It's incredible how knowing someone has been inside your house—even if it is just through the eyes of security cameras—can change the whole feel of a place.

It no longer represents a quiet, safe place to come to at the end of the day, where I can block out the outside world and relax in peace. Knowing that sick fuck has been using the very system we put in place to protect ourselves—to protect Em—to spy on us sickens me.

Is this our fault? Did we unintentionally give her the access she needed to keep tabs on us by installing cameras? I guess this explains how she somehow managed to be everywhere at once. She didn't need to keep actual eyes on the house because our system did that for her. Leaving her free to stalk me, Wilder, and Kai every time we left and still keep tabs on Emilia and the goings-on inside these four walls.

There's literally not a single thing that went on behind those doors that she wasn't privy to. That she didn't decimate by stealing for herself and plastering them all over that wall to taunt us.

None of us make an effort to get out, and why would we? We can't go inside, and our only other option would be to stand out in the downpour. May as well sit inside the heated, comfortable car and listen to the loud pelt of rain all around us, making it sound like we're trapped inside a tin can.

Ripping my gaze away from the house, my eyes land on Emilia. She has withdrawn into herself since we left campus, becoming even more subdued after discovering the extent of Mel's violation. I wish I knew the right thing to say to her, but even if I did, she'd hardly be able to hear me over the battering of rain against the car, and I don't think whatever I'd have to say would come across the same if I had to yell it.

So instead, I slide my hand onto her knee and give it what I hope is a reassuring squeeze, keeping it there until Kai's car pulls up behind mine.

We watch as he throws open his car door, storming up the steps and through the front door of the house like the human embodiment of the typhoon raging around us.

"What's he doing?" Wilder yells after several long moments when Kai hasn't reappeared.

"No idea."

Another ten minutes pass before his broad frame fills the doorway. He is carrying a cardboard box as he marches down the steps and over to his car. Popping the trunk, he practically throws the box inside before slamming the lid shut.

Guessing that it's okay for us to go inside now, I open my car door, and the others follow, all four of us hurrying out of the rain.

"There isn't a single camera left inside this house," Kai informs us when we're all inside. "And I've checked the whole place for listening devices and any other kind of bug. The place is clean."

My eyes automatically rise to where the hallway camera was situated, finding a hole in the plaster from where Kai must have literally ripped it from the wall.

Emilia shivers beside me, drawing Kai's attention, and despite his less-than-warm greeting when we found her earlier, his stance relaxes somewhat, and his voice is softer when he says, "We all need to shower and change, get warmed up, then we need to work out what the hell we're going to do."

All of us nod in agreement before we sullenly tread through the house with squelching footsteps. Wilder goes to the kitchen, mumbling something about needing food before he passes out, and Kai follows. I already know, while Kai told all of us to go change and freshen up, he'll be sitting at the island in his soaking, wet jeans. With the laptop out, he'll try to uncover everything about Mel and attempt to figure out what he missed.

For a moment, I contemplate going after him. Today must have been traumatic for him, too, and I'm certain that the distance he's trying to put between him and Emilia is because of how raw he's feeling. I know he cares about her, but I also know what happened the last time he cared about a girl.

PTSD can be a bitch, and I have no doubt it's rearing its ugly head right now. He needs time to process. To deal with the demons of his past and realize that this is not that. Just because the situation is similar doesn't mean history is bound to repeat itself.

When Emilia shivers for a second time, I pull my focus from the kitchen doorway and wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in against me. "Come on, let's get you warmed up."

Once we reach my bedroom, I leave Emilia to strip out of her wet clothes as I run a bath. While the water is running, I drop in a lavender-scented bath bomb to help her unwind—now thankful that I purchased a pack after Emilia's last bath fiasco—and perch on the edge of the tub. I can't help staring at the spot on the bathroom floor where Emilia was kneeling in that photo. I remember that night so clearly. It was one of many that proved to be a turning point for me.

One of many instances in which I fought my feelings for her. Where I denied just how badly I wanted her. How much I secretly needed her. It's only been a couple of days since I gave in to those feelings, and despite everything that's happened today, I feel lighter for doing so. Like something has settled inside me. I feel calm, and at peace.

Even now, with all this chaos around us, I feel reassured knowing she's here—with me. And when she steps into the bathroom, one of my oversized t-shirts hanging from her petite frame, that feeling only intensifies. I can't suppress the smile that gains strength as it lifts my lips.

"Come here, Little Sparrow," I purr, reaching out my hand toward her. She slides her palm into mine, allowing me to reel her in. When she is standing between my spread thighs, I

slowly run my hand over the soft, chilled skin of her calves and thighs, my gaze following.

“She didn’t hurt me,” she states in a voice devoid of any real emotion when she realizes what I’m doing. Still, I continue my perusal, not only checking for any bruises or marks but also needing to simply feel her skin beneath mine; to know she’s safe and unharmed.

I pause when I find three sets of curved nail marks indented into the skin on her left thigh, brushing the pad of my thumb lightly over them. “What did she do?” I ask, careful to keep any hint of anger out of my voice.

“Talked, mostly.” When she doesn’t continue, I lift my head and glance up at her. When my eyes meet hers, I know there’s something she’s holding back.

“And?”

“She kissed me,” she confesses after a second.

My eyebrows jump in surprise, but it’s the way her face scrunches that really gets to me. The revulsion instigates a full-body tremor.

“I’ve never felt so violated,” she says in a quiet voice, barely above a whisper. “Which sounds crazy, because... Wilder.”

“No,” I insist, getting to my feet. “What you have with Wilder isn’t even comparable. Yes, you both have a lot to work through, and although not the healthiest, everything has always been consensual. You always wanted him, right?” I wait until she nods before continuing. “He would never force himself on you, even if it was something as simple as a kiss.”

She lifts her hand, brushing her index finger along her bottom lip. “I can still feel her lips on mine.” She sucks her lips between her teeth, as though hoping to scrape any remnants of Mel from them.

Reaching up, I use my thumb to tug her lip free. “Here?” I question, running my thumb along her lip in a mirror image of her movement.

When she nods, I tuck my finger beneath her chin and tip her head back. I wait until she stares at me before leaning in and caressing her lips with mine. I start with a brief touch. A graze. First to the left corner of her lips, then the right, removing any traces of Mel and replacing them with something sweeter, richer. Something that will make Emilia's toes curl and her body tremble.

Comforting others isn't really my strong suit, and in this moment a new surge of gratitude hits me for having Hadley in my life. I was all jagged, sharp edges before her. No one other than my three best friends made it past my defenses, and I hadn't realized how cold and shut off I'd become.

Hadley helped to soften those edges somewhat. For her, I tried to become a better person, a better brother because, after everything she'd survived, she deserved that from me. I wanted to show her I was worthy of carrying the same blood in my veins as she did.

Don't get me wrong, I am still very much the asshole I was when I first met her—something Hadley will attest to, but I have also learned that it's okay to let people in sometimes.

I feel Emilia softening me further, blunting the remainder of those sharp edges. I want to prove myself worthy of having her just as much as I did with Hadley, but where Hadley had my three best friends to comfort her and help pull her out of the darkness when she was struggling, I now want to be that for Emilia.

I want to be the one she turns to. The one who makes her feel better and eases her pain. I don't care if Kai and Wilder are also in the picture—though they're both acting like idiots right now, so I'll take all the one-on-one time I can get with my Little Sparrow. So long as I'm there too, right beside her, her pillar to lean on when she's weary.

As I finally press my lips flush to hers, I'm transported back to the first time I kissed her, when she launched herself into my arms and claimed me for herself. I'd been stunned at the time, unable to comprehend that the hellcat I'd spent most

of the year dueling with was actually in my arms, her lips suctioned to mine.

Now, I savor every brush of her skin against mine. Drink in the soft sigh that slips between her lips when I part them; the warmth of her breath as it tickles my skin. My tongue slides into her mouth, gliding along hers in soft, languid strokes until she melts against me.

I feel her body finally begin to heat up as the tension bleeds out, and when I pull back, that emptiness has receded from her eyes. “There she is,” I say softly, stroking her cheek.

“Thank you.”

Smiling at her, I grasp the hem of her t-shirt in my hand and slowly inch it up. “Bath time,” I say by way of explanation.

A playful smile teases her lips, and it’s then that I know for sure that everything will be okay. “Sure. You just want to get me naked.”

“Mmm, I do like it when you’re naked.” I find myself returning her smile before helping her into the tub. Once she’s submerged beneath the layer of bubbles, I strip out of my damp clothes and toss them into a pile, before sliding in behind her.

She shifts until she gets comfortable, her back to my chest and her head resting on my shoulder.

We’re enveloped in a peaceful silence while I stroke one hand up and down her arm and wrap the other around her waist, holding her to me.

“Tell me about the program you started,” she says softly after a while. “The one you hired Kai for.”

I continue running my hand along her arm, reflecting on those early days.

“Those first few months after we finished high school, Nocturnal Enterprises was a mess. After we ousted everyone from the board and dismantled the mercenary side of the

business, I knew we needed to do something good with what remained.”

“I wanted to help people like Hadley. I felt like I’d let her down, even though I knew there was nothing I could have done to prevent her from the childhood she had. Nevertheless, there are so many others out there, trapped in shitty situations, and I guess...”

I trail off, suddenly feeling too raw, too exposed. I’ve never confessed my guilt to anyone. I’ve barely even admitted it to myself.

“You thought that by helping them, it would make up for the fact you didn’t save your sister sooner,” Emilia correctly deduces. She always was too smart for her own good.

“I didn’t save my sister at all,” I amend. “But yeah, I guess so.”

She turns in my arms so she can see my face. “Except you did save her.” I open my mouth to protest, but she barrels over the top of me, her expression taking on a fierce *don’t even think about interrupting me* demeanor.

“Maybe you didn’t get her out of there the first time, but when that asshole dragged her back there, *you* went after her. *You* got her back. *You* saved her. But more than that, you saved her every day by simply being the brother she needed you to be. You were a complete asshole until you discovered she was your sister—and even for a little while after.” She gives a small smile to ease the blow of her words, even though we both know she’s right. “But as soon as you found out, you went into big brother protective mode, although I’m not actually sure which one of you is older.”

“I am. By about thirty seconds, but it still counts.”

“The point is, you *were* there for her. You couldn’t have prevented her from ever experiencing what she suffered, but you were all-in the second you learned the truth.” She smiles to herself. “It was watching you become the brother she needed you to be that drew me to you.”

“Is that so?” I purr, squeezing her tighter.

She nods. “Before then, I just thought you were another rich, arrogant asshole who thought he was better than everyone else.”

“I was.”

Her grin widens. “You were. I hated you.”

“You were terrified of me.”

She chuckles, teasingly batting me on the chest with the back of her hand. “I was not.”

I cock a brow. “Okay, fine,” she relents, rolling her eyes. “I might have been slightly scared of you, although can you blame me? You and the others were the formidable *Princes*. I’d heard stories of how people who had crossed you had left school because you’d made their lives a living hell, and I just wanted to keep my head down and get through high school.”

Now it’s my turn to roll my eyes. “Half of those stories were exaggerated.”

“Still. When Hadley started making it her mission in life to piss you off, I was terrified. I made some stupid choices based on that fear, and I wasn’t a very good friend to her at first.”

Hating the frown etched on her face, I tuck a finger beneath her chin and tilt her face up until I can plant a kiss on her lips. “However, you found your lady balls and became the friend she needed you to be.”

“Hadley deserved that,” she murmurs.

“It was because you were such a good friend to her—especially when I was still being an asshole—that drew me to you,” I murmur against her lips, echoing her statement from a moment ago.

Her smile reaches her eyes, making them shimmer in the bright light of the bathroom. “Are you confessing to having actual feelings for me back then, Hawk Davenport?”

I chuckle at her playfulness. “Maybe.” Pressing another kiss to her lips, I pull back only enough to whisper, “I’m confessing to having actual feelings for you now.”

I feel her smile against my lips. “Good, because I have actual feelings for you, too.”

CHAPTER 5

EMILIA

I must have dozed off at some point, leaning against Hawk in the tub, as the water is now tepid, and only a few bubbles remain on the surface. I can feel the steady rise and fall of Hawk's chest against my back, indicating he must have fallen asleep, too. However, I note all this absent-mindedly, cataloging the information but not actually processing it since all of it is overshadowed by the six-foot-five man crouched beside me, his honey-brown eyes staring at me like I'm a puzzle he can't solve.

"Wilder," I murmur. Already, the soothing effects of the bath have drained away. Simply his close proximity has my body tensing, chasing away the last remnants of peace from my nap. However, it's not his nearness that has me on edge. I'm used to feeling off-kilter around Wilder; I even get some sick sense of enjoyment from it. It's the wild look in his eye that has me momentarily fearful.

I know Wilder isn't like other people. He feels things more fiercely. Clings to those feelings like they're his favorite childhood toy. It can make him unpredictable. Dangerous, even.

Only this look in his eye is new and terrifying. In part because it's directed at me.

What the heck could I possibly have done to anger him now?

Is he pissed that he had to put aside his hatred toward me to come save my ass? Because I didn't ask him to do that. Don't get me wrong, I'm so goddamn grateful that he did, but if he thinks I'm going to just lie back and let him punish me for that, then he's got another thing coming.

I've been placating. I've been understanding. I've let him use my body and take what he needs in order to feel better because I know I'm the one who burdened him with his pain,

though there's a limit to what I'll endure. And after today, I'm not feeling very accommodating to *his* needs.

"What are you doing?" I ask in a tired voice, watching him warily.

His eyes search my face, a candidness visible behind the wild veneer that I'm not used to seeing. His demeanor today has thrown me off kilter. Back at the bunker, when I expected him to be cold and stand-offish, he wasn't. He was a surprising comfort in my moment of panic.

It was... weird, yet it was also exactly what I needed from him.

Seeing him like that, the promise he made, gave me hope that we can resolve our issues. However, it also shifts the ground beneath my feet, and now I don't know where I stand with him.

He reaches out a long, thin finger and presses it to my lips, silencing anything else I might say. "I still hate you," he says quietly, being careful not to wake Hawk.

I guess that's where I stand, then. That's great to know. Just the reminder I needed.

His finger is still against my lips, which is the only reason I don't give voice to my sarcasm. However, the words disappear in a puff of smoke as his hand lowers, his finger slowly coursing a path down my throat and along my collarbone before moving to the tops of my breasts, visible just above the level of the water.

Everywhere he touches burns, as though his finger is a live wire, shocking my system back to life. All I can do is watch him while his eyes hungrily follow the path of his finger as it dips beneath the water.

A soft sigh escapes me when he cups my breast in his hand, kneading the skin with his fingers. The noise catches his attention, drawing his gaze to mine, and something unexplainable passes between us. I can't quite figure out what it is, but it feels as though it encompasses everything unsaid between us. It's deep and meaningful, inflated with *what if's*

and *could be's*, but coated in sharp thorns that will readily draw blood if you go too close.

Whatever it is becomes charged with heat and passion when Wilder's fingers move to my nipple, working it into a taut peak and pinching it in a way that brings my pussy to life and makes her realize she's starving.

His own gaze darkens at the rapture on my face as I drop my head against Hawk's shoulder and push my breast more firmly against his hand, begging for more. A voice at the back of my head warns that I must stop this now. It can only end the way it always does with Wilder, and I'm in no position to handle that right now. And yet, I don't stop him. Perhaps it's because Hawk is here—albeit asleep—but something about this time feels different, and it's enough to fill me with hope.

A hope that drives my movements as I part my thighs in a silent invitation. Wilder greedily eyes the gap between them, though he doesn't immediately move to give me what I'm asking for. Rather, he moves to my other breast, teasing it until I'm fighting not to squirm in Hawk's lap, barely containing the sounds of my pleasure and growing need.

When his hand finally dips between my thighs, my hips buck. My ass pushes against Hawk's crotch, and I sense the second he wakes. His breathing hitches, and his arm that's loosely wrapped around me tightens.

"Mmm, what do we have here?" he asks, his voice coming out deep and gravelly. He pulls his arm back so his hand slides along my abdomen, while Wilder's thumb brushes over my clit. I can feel Hawk growing hard as he nuzzles my neck and kisses his way along my shoulder.

Our body heat alone must be enough to increase the temperature of the bathwater as heavy breaths, soft moans, and the sloshing of water fill the bathroom. When Wilder's fingers push their way inside me, I cry out, fireworks exploding behind my eyes as I grind against him.

However, Hawk's arm coils around me, restricting my movements and leaving me with no option but to accept the

pace Wilder sets while Hawk grinds his hard length into my ass.

“I love how fucking needy you are for us,” Hawk growls in my ear.

My only response is a whimper when Wilder scissors his fingers. My hands are clutching the rim of the bathtub so tightly that my knuckles have turned white. I’m so goddamn close and the fear that Wilder will stop at any second clashes with the ecstasy of my building climax.

“Please don’t stop,” I plead, writhing in Hawk’s firm grip.

“Oh no,” Hawk chuckles in a dark and dangerous tone. “There’ll be no stopping until you’re boneless and telling us you can’t take any more. Isn’t that right, Wilder?”

I flick my eyes to Wilder, expecting him to argue. Instead, he holds my gaze and says with conviction, “It is.”

As if to prove his point, he curls his fingers at the same time he presses his thumb against my nub, and the combination detonates the ball of fire that had been steadily gaining traction in my lower belly, releasing all that energy as red-hot pleasure courses through my body.

A single moment of clarity breaks through the lusty fog. A moment of realization, and my body tenses.

“Shh,” Hawk soothes, as if he instinctively knows what has me on edge. “She can’t see us. Kai took all the cameras out, and look, the doors are all closed.” I glance at the closed doors, needing visual confirmation. “There aren’t any windows. You’re safe.”

His calm reassurance has the tension immediately dropping from my shoulders, and I allow myself to sink into the endorphin rush that still has my muscles feeling heavy and relaxed.

Noting the change in my posture, Hawk shifts me in his lap. Aftershocks are still wracking my pussy as he easily slides into my channel. With his face buried in the juncture between my neck and shoulder, as though he needs a moment to compose himself, he grounds out, “Fucking hell, you feel so

good, Little Sparrow.” The words come out strained and muffled. “Never getting to feel your tight little cunt wrapped around me again was all I could think about today.”

His words might sound crass, but the levity in his tone speaks of his true feelings, adding a sentimentality to the moment. A sentimentality that falls by the wayside as he begins to move. Wilder’s fingers rub my swollen clit, and the two quickly have me climbing up that cliff again.

“That’s it, baby,” Hawk growls. “I can feel you clenching. Come for us.”

My eyes meet Wilder’s—who has been a relatively silent partner in all this—and the second they do, a second orgasm crashes through me, making me scream. Hawk fucks me the entire way through my release, while Wilder’s fingers continue to rub circles around my overly sensitive nub.

The combined stimulation immediately has my body winding up for the third orgasm of the night, even though I’m still reeling from the last one. I’m simultaneously on edge, needing to come again, and utterly drained.

My tired eyes meet Wilder’s. “You want us to stop, Angel?”

I sigh at the nickname. I hadn’t realized how much I missed hearing him call me that until I heard it again. Despite the fact that he’s been throwing the name in my face any time he’s said it recently. Sneering it in his despised tone. Tonight, there’s none of that malice behind the name.

“Yes. No.”

Hawk chuckles, the sound reverberating through his chest. “I think you’ve got one more in you.” He taps his finger against my hip in a silent gesture. “Ride my cock, baby. I want to watch you chase away the demons of today while you fuck me.”

I once again meet Wilder’s eyes, searching for approval. Somehow it feels significant that this moment includes the three of us; more than that, I’m just not ready for him to leave yet. I sense he’s not going to do anything more than touch me,

but that's okay. For whatever reason, he's putting the hate he currently feels toward me on hold, and all of this feels very reminiscent of the old us. I want to cling to it for a little longer.

He nods, and the two of them help me readjust without sending water sloshing over the sides of the tub. With my knees pressed against the bath on either side of Hawk's hips and my center hovering over him, I lower myself back onto his jutting, angry-looking cock.

As I feed him deeper into me, his hands come to rest on my hips, pushing me down further until his insanely large dick brushes against my cervix. It borders on painful, the way sex with him always does, but it's the sort of pain I relish. The kind of hurt that feels oh so good.

I'm still adjusting to his size when Wilder leans further over the tub behind me, and I turn my head to watch him over my shoulder. His attention is focused on my ass, and a second later, I gasp as he pushes a finger inside.

When I involuntarily clench at the intrusion, Hawk slides one hand between my thighs, stroking along my clit with his talented fingers, while his other hand lifts to cup my breast, playing with my nipple.

"Do you remember how good it felt to take both of us?" Hawk asks, and I can tell from his lust-soaked tone that he does—and that he's totally up for a repeat performance. He lifts his hips in a shallow thrust while Wilder stretches me before adding a second finger. "Me in your perfect pussy and Wilder in your tight ass. You looked so fucking hot taking the two of us. So fucking sexy with our cum dripping out of you."

I shiver at his dirty words and the memory they dig up. That night was everything I'd hoped it would be and more. And yes, I'd very much like to do it again. That night changed everything between us, and I'd love to think that if Wilder just let himself forget for a while and lose himself in this—in us—that perhaps a repeat would change everything again.

And this time, I wouldn't let my fear fuck everything up.

Not that it matters. It's all wishful thinking. I already know I won't be getting that repeat performance tonight. Wilder may want me; want this; want us, but he's not going to let himself—or me—have it. Not yet, at least.

And that's okay—for now. I'll settle for whatever he is willing to give, and since he's in the mood to repay me for some of those orgasms he's denied, then that's what I'll happily accept.

“Fuck me, Little Sparrow,” Hawk demands, and while Wilder fingers my ass, I do just that, riding Hawk hard and fast until the restraint on his control snaps. He then takes over, grabbing my hips hard enough to leave bruises as he thrusts up into me, deep enough that I swear I feel it in my lungs.

“Oh fuck,” I groan, when my third orgasm of the night encroaches.

“Fuck, yes,” Hawk growls.

Wilder snakes a hand down between mine and Hawk's bodies so he can rub my clit and finger-fuck my ass at the same time. It's stimulation overload, and I erupt with an orgasm so intense that I think I must have blacked out for a moment, because the next thing I know, I'm wrapped in a towel and bundled up in someone's arms as I'm lifted out of the bathtub.

I'm not sure who; my eyes are too heavy to peel open, and by the time I'm tucked into bed, sleep has dragged me under.

“I'VE BEEN LOOKING INTO MEL,” Kai says early the next morning. I ended up crashing after the bath and didn't wake up until this morning. Hawk and Wilder also look like they got some rest; however, Kai looks even worse than yesterday.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he slept at all last night, but I bite back the words, sensing he might only allow himself to get some rest once he knows all the facts.

All four of us are seated around the kitchen table. Well, Hawk and I are sitting on one side of the table, with Kai sitting opposite, making me feel like this is more of an interrogation than a simple chat. Wilder—who has barely looked at me all morning—is leaning against the kitchen counter, as far away as he could possibly be, while still being included in the conversation.

“And?” Hawk asks. “Was there something we missed?”

I tense, waiting anxiously for Kai’s response. Now that some of the initial shock has worn off, I haven’t stopped wondering what I missed. I mean, how could I not know that Mel was her own special brand of crazy? I lived with her for *four years*. Apart from Hadley, she was my closest friend. I *had* to have missed something. Some sort of sign. Something obvious that I overlooked.

“No. I couldn’t find anything.”

“What does that mean?” Wilder asks, frowning from his perch.

“I mean, there was nothing to find. She has no criminal record—sealed or otherwise—and no documented history of having stalked anyone before Emilia. No red-flag behaviors, either. She was a model high school student. Average-Joe parents. Happy childhood.”

“Is it possible that everything you found was falsified?” Hawk queries. When I give him a questioning look, he explains, “If she’s capable of hacking into our security system, then it’s entirely plausible that she’d hack in and change her school records or delete any evidence of her criminal history. Hell, she could have made up this entire persona. Perhaps Mel isn’t even a real person.”

“What are you saying?” I question, wide-eyed.

“I’m saying that Mel might not even be Mel. She could be anyone, from anywhere. Her entire life could be a fake.”

I gape open-mouthed at him before swiveling my gaze to Kai, raising my eyebrows in a silent plea for him to confirm or deny what Hawk is saying.

He nods slowly. “It’s entirely possible. I’ll make a few phone calls today and see if I can talk to someone who actually knows her.”

“This is all so fucked up,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around my middle in some semblance of comfort. How is it possible that the woman I thought I knew almost as well as I know myself is a virtual stranger? I don’t know her at all.

“You didn’t know she had the ability to hack computer software?” Kai asks. There’s no accusation in his tone, only curiosity.

“No,” I state, incredulous. “I mean, she was always able to help me out when my laptop crashed, and she’d make a bit of money helping other students retrieve unsaved work they’d lost.” I frown as I try to recall if she ever indicated she could do more than fix basic computer problems. “She had this big laptop she’d carry with her everywhere, but she just said she liked to play online games. Maybe she was able to YouTube how to get into our cameras?”

Kai shakes his head. “These were military-grade cameras. Not some cheap home security setup you can purchase on the internet. It would have taken real skill to get past the firewalls.”

All I can do is helplessly shrug my shoulders as I stare at a knot in the wooden table, too lost in my thoughts to actually see it. It’s just more proof that I genuinely didn’t know the girl I’d been living with.

“Tell us what happened yesterday,” Kai says softly.

I lift my eyes to his, and despite his brush-off yesterday and this strange gulf forming between us, I find comfort in his warm gaze.

“She was standing over me when I woke up in that basement....”

I rehash everything that happened yesterday with Mel, and by the time I’m finished, Kai is tapping his finger absently against the table, lost in thought.

“So what do we do?” Hawk asks when Kai doesn’t show any signs of sharing his thoughts with us.

His lips purse. “I’m not sure yet.”

“She seemed to think I was only getting close to each of you,”—cue bright red cheeks—“for protection,” I muse aloud. “She said she was giving me a chance to realize we’re supposed to be together.” Meeting Kai’s eyes, I state, “I think she’s hoping I’ll come to her on my own.”

“Except you don’t know how to reach her,” Hawk says, pointing out the obvious.

“No, but she’ll be watching.” Kai leans forward, and I see a plan taking shape behind his eyes. “I think we should play her game—for now. Let her think Emilia is doing what she wants. That she might be coming around to her way of thinking.” His stare bounces between the three of us before settling on me. “No more fake dating.” He flicks his gaze at Hawk and holds it as he states, “No real dating.” When he focuses back on me, he continues, saying, “You live your life here with minimal input from us. The temp teaching job is yours for the year, so continue with that. Plus, it gives her a window of opportunity to reach out to you.”

“Hold on a second,” Hawk barks, smacking his hand against the table. “You’re talking about using Em as bait for this psycho?”

“Can’t we just call the cops on her?” Wilder drawls, sounding bored with the entire conversation. It’s as though yesterday never happened. Today, there is no sign of whatever forward progress I thought we were making, and any time he talks or moves where I’m reminded of his presence, the hurt scraping at my chest intensifies.

“No,” Kai growls, frustrated. “The cops won’t do jack shit. We have no proof. We don’t know where she’s staying, and if she catches wind that Emilia called the cops on her, it will only serve to piss her off. Not to mention the fact that if what Hawk suggests is true, this woman is a ghost. There would be no way for the cops to track her down.”

Kai's incessant rant is met with silence, and I get the impression his dislike of the police is about more than just any professional dealings he's had with them.

"There's no other way to play this," Kai states, turning to Hawk. "Anything else will only antagonize her. For now, she believes Emilia just needs time to... I don't know, fall in love with her or some shit. We want her to believe that Emilia is heeding her words. Then, when she gets in contact, we'll be ready."

"Basically, we're luring her into a trap," I summarize.

"Exactly."

"Yeah, with Emilia as the bait," Hawk snaps, shooting to his feet.

"It's fine," I say, trying to reassure him.

"No, it's not fucking fine, Em. You're not doing this." He turns his glower on Kai. "She's not doing this."

The unrelenting demand ringing in his words gets my back up, and I push to my feet. Admittedly, the move doesn't have quite the desired effect, as instead of bringing us face-to-face as I'd imagined, I end up staring at the bottom of his chin. Tilting my head back diminishes the effect I was going for, but I still try to incinerate him with my gaze.

"Excuse me," I snarl, shoving my finger into his chest. I remember doing the same move once before—back when we were at Pac—and being absolutely terrified that he was going to tear me to pieces for daring to touch him.

This time, I'm not afraid. I'm fucking angry.

We might be sleeping together. Dating? I don't know, but whatever it is we're doing, it doesn't give him the right to dictate *my* life.

"The old, jerk-face version of Hawk must have inhabited your body," I snark, ignoring Wilder's snort of laughter. "Because you did *not* just tell me what I can and cannot do."

"I won't let you put yourself at risk to catch this freak," he spits, his nostrils flaring.

“I believe that’s my call to make.” He opens his mouth, no doubt to spew more asinine protests, except I cut him off. “And if Kai thinks this is the best way, then I trust him. Don’t you?”

Hawk appears as though he’s chewing on something disgusting before he hisses, “Of course I do.”

However, still not done arguing his point of view, he turns to Kai. “But you know you wouldn’t condone this sort of move if this were a job.”

“No,” Kai agrees. “I wouldn’t. Nonetheless, the majority of our jobs are extraction. We’re removing the client from the situation. If you prefer, I can set Emilia up with a false identity and hide her up in the outer reaches of Alaska.”

“No,” Hawk and I—and shockingly, Wilder—all blurt at once.

“No,” I repeat. “That’s not an option. I’m not running again. I…” I chew on my bottom lip before assuredly saying, “I want to stay here.”

Kai nods, accepting my decision—because, unlike Hawk, he is a *reasonable* adult. “Then, I think this is the best plan.”

“How are we going to keep an eye on her?” Hawk argues, still unconvinced. “We’re going to have people tailing her, right? And is she going to be able to stay here? I don’t want her living alone somewhere!”

“We can probably keep the plants we already have in her class, but if we have someone following her 24/7, then Mel will likely notice that,” Kai reasons. “And yes, I think she should stay here—for her own safety more than anything else. If Mel questions it, then Emilia can just say that we wouldn’t let her move out or something else that shifts the blame from her.”

“But if we’re supposed to be keeping our distance and we can’t have anyone tailing her, how are we supposed to keep her safe? We’re not going to know if she’s in danger!”

“I’ll get her a bracelet or something with a tracker in it. And I didn’t say I wouldn’t have anyone tailing her. I said we

couldn't have someone *following* her." My brows scrunch together in confusion, not understanding the difference. "We'll take a page out of Mel's book and use the cameras," Kai explains. "Set up a round-the-clock team to constantly monitor the security cameras on campus, as well as the traffic cams from here to the university."

Hawk must be appeased by that, as he has no comeback. Although, based on the thin line of his lips, he still isn't pleased about the whole idea.

"That settles it then," I say, forcing a cheery optimism into my voice. "We're doing this."

Nerves rattle my insides, but what bothers me most is the fact that I have to keep my distance from all of them. No more fake dates. No more evenings on the sofa with Hawk or nights curled up around him in bed. Even Wilder will have to stop his edging torture.

We'll have to appear as nothing more than reluctant housemates until this is all over. A task that feels near impossible.

"Good," Kai agrees with a curt nod. "Now that's settled, I need to get into the office. I've got a fuckton of paperwork still to get through."

He gathers his laptop without sparing me a single glance or bothering to say goodbye before heading out.

"Yeah, I'm heading out, too," Wilder states, pushing off the kitchen counter.

"Seriously?" Hawk asks.

"Yes. I have stuff to do."

"What stuff? What is it that has you so busy these days?"

Spinning, Wilder's eyes narrow on Hawk. "Nothing that concerns you, brother. Besides, didn't you just listen to Kai? We're supposed to be returning to our regularly scheduled programming before Emilia graced us with her presence. Which means going back to the frat house."

With that, he storms off, the front door slamming shut behind him.

Perhaps it will be easier than I think to behave like reluctant housemates. Wilder and Kai are certainly playing their roles well.

CHAPTER 6

EMILIA

“Shouldn’t you be going, too?” I direct to Hawk, the two of us left alone in the kitchen.

“I’m not leaving you here by yourself.”

“But—” I begin to protest, my words trailing off when Hawk’s gaze turns heated, wicked intent making one side of his lips lift in a panty-melting smirk.

“I forgot how hot that was—watching you stand up to me.” He takes a predatory step forward that jolts my heart rate into a faster rhythm. “Makes me want to piss you off just to see how you’ll react. How far I can push you before you snap.”

He follows up his statement with another threatening step toward me.

“Although I do miss the fear I used to see in your eyes. Miss watching you fight to overcome it.”

There’s a feral gleam in his gaze now, one that does actually send a skitter of panic down my spine, even as a strange kind of excitement thrums through me.

“Ah, there it is.”

“We can’t,” I squeak, struggling to grasp a coherent thought.

“Oh, but I think we can.” His eyes rake over my body before lifting to my face. “You better run, Little Sparrow. Unless you want me to fuck you in this kitchen,”—he gestures toward the large kitchen window—“and show *Mel* who you really belong to.”

A strangled yelp climbs up the back of my throat and pushes past my lips a second before I turn tail and run. Fear and excitement consume me, pushing and pulling as they war for dominance while I race out of the kitchen.

It’s ridiculous because I know Hawk wouldn’t put me at risk like that; however, this is the perfect distraction from the

unanswerable questions plaguing me since I woke up.

“You better make sure you’ve found somewhere private before I find you!” Hawk shouts. I put on a burst of speed, sprinting toward the stairs.

Instead of heading up them, I make a split-second decision to go down to the basement level. Call me paranoid. Even though it should be impossible for Mel to see through the windows on the third floor, I feel like she would find a way. A room with no windows is much more preferable, and the basement should have at least one of those.

I fly down the steps, smacking my hand over my mouth to stifle my scream, when I hear Hawk charging behind me, taunting, “I’m coming, Little Sparrow.”

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, I look left and right as I run along the corridor, skipping past the gym room containing floor-to-ceiling windows that lead out to the back lawn.

His heavy footfalls smack with every step as he leisurely descends the stairs behind me, the deafening boom seeming to vibrate through the walls and make it feel as though he’s right on my tail.

I half expect to feel his breath on the back of my neck at any second, his fingers brushing against my skin; his arm encircling my waist.

The thrill of the chase is intoxicating in a way I’ve never experienced before. It pounds through my veins, invigorating me, breathing life into my soul. All my stress and anxiety go up in a puff of smoke, and not just the worries I carry regarding Mel, but *everything*.

None of it matters at this moment. Nothing matters except evading Hawk; giving him a worthy chase so he will hopefully reward me once I’m pinned beneath him.

At the next doorway, I grab ahold of the door frame with the tips of my fingers and propel myself into a darkened room.

It takes a second to adjust to the lack of light enough to make out the outline of a large U-shaped sofa, which takes up

most of the room. I have no time to take in anything else as I hurry to the far side of the room and duck out of sight.

I can hardly hear the sound of him approaching over the racing of my heart and my own heavy breathing. So, when a large shadow fills the doorway, I clamp both hands over my mouth, staying deathly still.

“Where, oh where, could my Little Sparrow be?” Hawk taunts, sending a shiver of fearful anticipation through me.

Not daring to peek around the side of the sofa, I listen intently to the soft pad of his footsteps as he slowly walks across the plush carpet, moving further into the room.

Just before he moves into my line of sight, I jump up and catapult myself over the arm of the sofa, intending to run across the couch cushions and out the door. However, he pounces on me with all the grace of a cheetah, his arms enveloping me as his weight pushes me down onto the cushions.

With my arms pinned at my sides, all I can do is stare up into his shadowed face. Only a little bit of light from the hall streaks across one side of his face, giving him a macabre appearance. Particularly when his lips curl into a wicked grin.

“Gotcha.”

My chest heaves, partially from exertion, but mainly with exhilaration.

Keeping me pinned beneath the bulk of his weight, he shifts just enough to wedge his arm between our bodies. He easily pushes beneath the elastic waistband of the soft cotton shorts I’m wearing, dipping his finger into my panties and moving lower. He strokes along my sex before pushing inside, releasing a strained groan as he slides through my slickness. “You really do enjoy being chased, don’t you, Little Sparrow?”

Pulling his hand free, he pushes away from me. “Good thing you picked this room. Do you know why?”

Climbing off the sofa, he backs up toward the door, never looking away from me once.

I shake my head, and he smirks. “Because when the door is closed, it’s completely soundproof. No noise in; no noise out.” Closing us inside, he switches on the wall sconces, the dim light chasing away the shadows and adding some ambiance.

“Which means...” He prowls toward me with all the gracefulness of a predator circling his prey. “You can be as loud as you want.”

He crawls over the sofa until he can reach out and curl his fingers into the waistband of my shorts and panties, tugging them down my legs before discarding them on the floor. Pushing my thighs apart, he inserts two fingers inside me.

“So wet and ready for me,” he purrs. “Good. Because I need to be inside you. Now.”

Pulling out, he hastily pushes down his sweats, just enough that his beautifully large, engorged cock springs free from its cage. One tug with his hand is all he allows himself before he lines himself up with my entrance and slams into me in one hard, deep thrust that drives all the air from my lungs. Despite how ready I am, a sharp sting of pain clashes with the pleasure as he stretches me.

“Fucking hell, Emilia,” he groans. “I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of this.”

The sex is hard and fast, but the way his eyes drink in every moment of my pleasure as they roam over my face provides a deeper layer of intimacy. This isn’t just sex. It’s something far more profound. Something I can’t put a name to. I’m unable to find the right word that encompasses the complexity of this feeling.

All I can do is stare up at him as he pounds into me like he’s attempting to split me in half. This man whom I once despised coaxing noises from me that I’d never heard before. He’s both the same boy he was back then and also so very different. He still has the same hard edges and prickly personality, but he’s also grown as a person. I don’t doubt that that’s thanks to Hadley. He maybe didn’t realize it at the time, but he needed her as much as she needed him.

I would hate to think what sort of man he'd be now if the two of them had never found their way back to one another. That hate and distrust he held would have bubbled and festered until it ate him alive. Without Hadley's love, he'd be cold. Cruel.

He's still very much capable of being those things, but they don't rule him. And it turns out, I like when his dominant, terrifying side is allowed out to play. I like playing with that fire, stoking the flames, and waiting to see if I'll get burned. I want to wear his bruises, to feel the ache in my pussy with every step, to feel the tenderness in my scalp from him pulling my hair.

Huh. Maybe I'm a masochist.

Our sweaty bodies slide and grind against one another, demanding more and more, until his pounding thrusts send me free-falling over the edge, and he grunts out his own release.

As soon as he pulls out, he flips me over, showing no signs of slowing down. "On your knees," he orders, using his grip on my hips to lift me up before spreading my ass cheeks. "I want to eat my cum from your pussy before filling you up again."

Holy crap. I don't think anyone has ever said anything so dirty to me before.

He proceeds to do exactly that, sending me headfirst into another screaming orgasm as he licks and sucks, making a five-course meal out of my pussy. As soon as I come, he pushes my hips against the arm of the sofa, the upper half of my body perched precariously over the side as he slams back in, already hard again.

At this angle, his cock pushes impossibly deeper, and I swear I can feel it brushing the back of my throat. My battered pussy is in overdrive, simultaneously needing more and unable to handle the assault it's currently taking.

"God, your pussy is the sweetest addiction," Hawk grunts between thrusts. "Let me hear you sing, Little Sparrow."

As though his words are the trigger, my release crashes through me with all the force of a tidal wave. My eyes squeeze shut, a scream rips from my throat, and my whole body convulses as wave after wave of pleasure courses through me.

Incapable of moving, I collapse against the arm of the sofa until Hawk lifts me, rearranging me into a more comfortable position. Pulling off his top, he uses it to clean me up before helping me into my panties and shorts. Then he settles us on the couch, with me sprawled on top of him, and grabs a blanket from the back, draping it over us.

Reaching for the remote, he presses a button that has a projector screen lowering until it covers the entire wall opposite the sofa. He scrolls through the selection of movies, until a recent action one featuring Ryan Reynolds pops up.

“Oh, that one.” Glancing down at me, he raises an arched brow, and I sheepishly confess. “I may have a teeny tiny crush on him.”

“Is that so? Well, now I’m not sure if I should let you watch it. I wouldn’t want you to accidentally scream his name the next time I’m making you come.”

I snort. *Yeah, there’s zero chance of that ever happening. I can’t even think straight when Hawk’s cock is buried inside me.*

“It’s not one of those shitty rom-com you love so much, is it?” he asks, reading the movie blurb.

“No, it’s an action movie.”

“Oh. Alright then,” he relents, pressing play. He presses a kiss to the top of my head as we settle in to watch, sated and content with reality all but forgotten outside of our happy bubble.

WE’VE SPENT the entire day in our cocoon, learning insignificant random details about one another and catching up with each other’s lives. Hawk has told me all about his classes

and his future plans for Nocturnal Enterprises, and I filled him in on what life was like at Halston and the job I had in the city—I guess, still technically have? I've barely spared my job, or old life, a second thought, and I'm surprised to realize I'm in no hurry to go back. Assuming my job is still there. I should probably check with Kai regarding that.

We've kept the conversation light, skipping around any mention of Mel, and mostly avoiding talk of Wilder. We opened the cinema room door a while earlier to allow some light in, and as dusk settles outside and the room grows dark, reality seeps back in.

"Today's been nice," I tell Hawk, needing him to know how much I appreciate the temporary distraction.

"Why do I sense a but coming?" he teases.

I give him a small smile. "Because we can't do this. It's too dangerous."

"What if I'm willing to take that risk?" he asks, pulling me closer.

"Tough, because I'm not willing to let you." Despite my statement, I don't fight him as he hauls me onto his lap.

He gives me a filthy smirk. "Like you could stop me. One kiss, and you're weak-kneed and up for helping me act out all the dirty thoughts in my head. You'd cave so easily." As if to prove his point, he slides his palms up my sides. His thumbs brush along the bottom of my breasts and cause my breathing to hitch. He notices, as his smirk only seems to widen.

Goddammit.

"I mean it, Hawk," I insist, drilling him with my eyes.

"Well, I'm not willing to let you go through this alone. While Wilder is being an ass and Kai is working through his shit, *I'm* going to be here for you every step of the way."

Tears sting my eyes at the sincerity in his tone, and right here and now, I forever hand the part of my heart that belongs to Hawk over to him. I trust that he will safeguard it with his life—just as I know he will do the same to me.

Likely seeing the emotion playing on my face, his hand comes up, and he strokes his thumb along my cheek. “I’ve agreed to keep my distance when we’re on campus, and we’ll be careful when we’re in the house. However, I can’t stay away from you altogether. I *refuse* to.” He stares deeply into my eyes. “We’ve already wasted enough time, and I don’t want to go back to the way I felt before you showed up in my kitchen.”

“What way was that?” I ask, my voice coming out a tad breathless.

“Cold. Robotic. Like something was missing, only I didn’t even realize it.”

My eyes widen, since that’s exactly how I felt, too.

“And, uh, how do you feel now?”

I like that he doesn’t immediately answer. That he takes a moment to find the right words. “Lighter. It’s as if I was carrying this heavy load before. One I’d been lugging around for so long that I’d gotten used to the weight, but it still weighed on me, still dragged me down. But I don’t feel that weight anymore.” He lifts a hand to cup my face. “When you’re around, my life is better. Lighter. Brighter. More vibrant. More alive. You’re the splash of color in my world, and I don’t want to go back to living in the gray.”

His gray eyes bore into mine. Usually stormy and chaotic, today, they appear peaceful. Cementing the truth behind his words. “I promise you we’ll be careful. I won’t do anything to put you in danger.”

“It’s you I’m more afraid for,” I confess in a breathy tone.

Sliding his hand into my hair, he fists the strands just enough to make me aware that his next words are important. “Outside of this room, we’ll act as though there’s nothing between us. However, when we’re here, I’ll worship your body the way it deserves. I’ll learn your mind until I can read you with a single glance. I’ll unearth every dream you’ve ever had for yourself, so I can help you realize them one day. Inside this room, we have the relationship we both want. The

relationship we've been denying ourselves. The one I believe will make everything we've gone through worthwhile."

My breathing is labored as I gaze into Hawk's eyes, completely lost in the sincerity of his words and the depth of their truth shining in his eyes. So lost that I startle when I hear the sound of the front door slamming shut, ruining the moment.

"I have Chinese food," Wilder calls out.

"I thought he was going to the frat house?" I ask Hawk, whose only response is a *who the fuck knows* look paired with a shrug.

"Do we have a deal?" he asks, still regarding me intently.

"Yes, we have a deal."

He pulls me in for a quick kiss, which is interrupted by the embarrassing noise of my stomach grumbling. Laughing, Hawk pulls me up, and we follow the delicious smell of warm food up to the kitchen.

Wilder is pulling out plates when we arrive, and Hawk moves over to the bag of takeout food, beginning to open containers and peering inside.

"How come you're not at the frat?" he asks, scrunching his nose up at whatever he finds in one of the food boxes before setting it aside and moving on to open the next one.

I notice Wilder shrug from the corner of my eye as I grab utensils from the drawer, mostly so I have something to do with my hands instead of just standing here like an idiot. "Didn't feel like it," he says vaguely, swatting Hawk's fingers away as they were about to dive in for a piece of pork.

"That's not yours," Wilder grumbles, snatching the box from Hawk and shoving a different one into his hands.

Hawk frowns as Wilder sets the box, along with another one, on one of the plates and pushes it toward me. I stare at the plate, shock freezing me in place. *Is Wilder being nice right now, or is this some sort of trick?*

Cautiously, as though a snake might jump out of the Chinese takeaway container and bite me, I peer beneath the lid.

“Sweet and sour pork,” Wilder says.

“Why is that one hers?” Hawk complains. “I like sweet and sour, too.”

“I got you Kung Pao chicken, so don’t complain.”

Hawk mumbles under his breath but helps himself to the chicken, piling it all onto his plate.

Wilder does the same, but all I can do is stare at my plate. Hawk might not know why the sweet and sour pork is just for me, but I do.

Because it’s my favorite.

And Wilder remembered that.

“Is Kai home?” Wilder asks, and it’s then that I realize there is food for a fourth person.

“Not yet,” Hawk answers, carrying his plate over to the table.

Wilder and I join him, and the three of us have a surprisingly pleasant meal. Wilder even talks to me like I’m a human being, and not the bane of his existence.

With a full belly and the stress from the last few days taking its toll, I soon find myself yawning. Barely able to keep my eyes open, I excuse myself and call it a night.

It’s a struggle to summon enough energy to even make it up the stairs, though somehow I do. Not even bothering to change out of my shorts and t-shirt, I climb underneath the covers. I don’t know if it’s the toll of everything finally catching up with me or what, but suddenly all I can think about is sleep, and my eyes drift shut the second my head hits the pillow.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” I yell, jackknifing out of bed. Blinking groggily, I bring a hand to the back of my neck, where it feels like I’ve been bitten. *If I have bugs in my bed, I’m burning everything in the whole damn room.*

I flick on the bedside light before turning to inspect the bed. However, I pull up short when I find a massive pest lying on top of it, staring at me with a faux innocence that I don’t buy for one second.

“What the hell are you doing in here, Wilder?” I demand, folding my arms over my chest and glowering at him.

“Can’t I just come and check that you’re alright?”

“No.” The back of my neck still stings from whatever the hell he did, and as I lift my hand to once again feel the area, I warily ask, “What did you do to me?”

“It’s probably best that you don’t know.”

Oh well, okay then.

“Best for who? You, because you know I’m going to be pissed at whatever you’ve done?”

The infuriating asshole just shrugs as he languidly climbs off my bed.

I track his movements with all the wariness of a chicken watching a fox approach its coop. As I do so, my mind reels, trying to figure out what he’s up to.

One thing sticks in my head, and on a whim, I ask, “Did you drug me?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it drugging.”

“So yes, then,” I snark.

“If you call putting a couple of crushed-up antihistamines in your food, drugging,” he drawls, making me itch to wrap my hands around his neck.

“I think by most people’s definitions, that’s called drugging,” I retort, only half paying attention as I try to work out *why* he would drug me.

I ignore him standing at the other end of the room in favor of focusing on identifying exactly where the sting is coming from on my neck. My fingers still as they come across something that feels harder than the surrounding tissue. Something rod-shaped and foreign.

“Wilder,” I growl out with barely contained rage. “What the hell is this in my neck?”

He gives another maddening shrug. “A tracker.”

The words are said so casually that it takes a second for them to penetrate, but when they do, I shriek, “You put a tracker in my neck? What the hell is wrong with you, Wilder? Why would you do that?”

“Are you seriously asking that?” Wilder growls, getting angry. “So we can keep tabs on you. So, if that whacko drugs and kidnaps you again, we can find you.”

His face is like thunder as he takes a menacing step forward, though I get the sense that, for once, his anger isn’t directed at me. Is Wilder... concerned *for* me? I peer past the fury simmering in his feature until I spot the torment buried underneath. His anger is a front, but why? Because he doesn’t want me to see his true feelings, or because he himself isn’t ready to acknowledge them?

In a tone born of darkness that sends delicious shivers trickling down my spine, he declares, “You belong to me, and I won’t let that bitch steal what’s mine.”

I’m left dumbstruck, gaping like an idiot at him as I struggle to wrap my head around all of it—the extent of his invasion, the crazy logic he’s using to defend himself, and the hidden emotions I’m almost positive I see concealed beneath layers of mistrust and insecurity.

“Kai said he’d get me a tracker bracelet.” It’s the only thing I can think to say, my brain too strung out as I try to wrap my mind around all of this. Besides, it’s not like he will see reason with anything I have to say or about how wrong it was for him to put something in my body without my knowledge or consent—which is ultimately the underlying

issue here, regardless of why he did it or the emotions behind his actions.

Wilder scoffs. “Bracelets can be removed, Em.”

I throw my hands up in exasperation. “Then I could have sewn it into my clothing, tucked it in my shoe, or... I don’t know, but there are steps between a bracelet and putting a tracker in my fucking neck.”

“Well, it hardly matters now. It’s done now.”

So help me God, it takes everything in me not to smack him across the face.

“You had no right to do that without asking me first,” I snap.

His lip curls up in disdain as he snorts, staring down at me like I’m a disgusting bug on his shoe. “Just like you had no right to make decisions for me. *You* made the executive decision to leave without saying goodbye. *You* made the executive decision not to give us a shot. Those were all decisions involving me that *you* made on your own. So, yeah, I think I’m entitled to this *one*.”

“I left you a letter,” I say meekly, unable to meet his gaze as guilt and remorse threaten to tear me to shreds.

“I didn’t want your excuses and apologies,” Wilder cries, his voice breaking as he storms closer, using his hard chest to drive me backward until my body hits the wall. “I wanted *you*.”

Tears are streaming down my face now, and I shake my head, not wanting to accept how royally I fucked everything up for us. “What difference would it have made if I’d said yes to your summer plans? Whether I left right after school ended or at the end of summer, it would have been the same outcome. Only our feelings would have then been even more hurt.”

“It would have changed everything,” Wilder snarls, spittle flying from his mouth and landing on my cheek.

“How?” I question, my voice catching. Finally finding the courage to raise my eyes to meet his, I say, “I was never going to change my mind about Halston.”

“No, but I would have gone with you!” he roars, stunning me into silence as he slams his palm against the wall beside my head. “I would have fucking gone with you, Emilia.”

All I can do is blink up at him, watching as he unravels before me. I’m unraveling, too, our broken parts on display for each other to see. There’s no pretense, no barriers—just raw, cutting pain.

“But, Wilder, that would have been insanity. We hardly knew each other. We’d only just...”

“*That’s* why I asked you for the summer. To give us more time. To make certain.” His features darken, and he pulls that pain back behind its shield as the cruel uptick of his lip appears once more. “But you chose to go fuck those Spice Boys instead.”

“Wilder, I—”

“Forget it, Emilia.” Any hint of his hurt is gone now, his tone chilling as he shoves away, turning his back on me as he moves toward the door. With his fingers wrapped around the handle, he says in a quiet voice, tinged with disappointment and anguish, “What’s done is done. It’s too late for us.”

Before he can slip into the hallway, I speak up. “Is it? Too late for us? Because you just put a tracker in my neck and called me yours.”

“Not in the way you once were. Don’t read too much into it. We’ll never have what we once could have,” he counters without turning around.

“That’s your hurt talking, and I’m sorry for what I did to you, Wilder. But this time, I’m not going anywhere.”

I’m not entirely sure exactly when I made that decision. Right now, I guess. However, it feels like the right choice. I don’t care about my job or my apartment. I’ve barely given either a second thought since leaving it all behind. I can feel it

in my bones that here is where I belong. I've done more living in the last few weeks than I have since leaving Pac.

Sure, it's been messy and complicated. I've cried and felt like I'm coming undone at the seams, but I've also laughed and smiled and just lived in the moment. And at the end of the day, isn't that crazy chaos what life is all about?

Life is for living, and I've decided it's past time I start doing that. And here is where I want to live it. With Wilder, Hawk, and Kai, but also Hadley and her guys. Here is where I'm meant to be; where I belong. Maybe it's where I've always belonged, or maybe I had to lose myself in order to truly find my way home. Whatever the reason, I'm here now, and I'm here to stay.

So, Wilder will just have to get on board with that.

"It doesn't matter what you do to me," I continue when he remains silent. However, he's still in my room, so that's got to count for something, right? "Give me all your pain, Wilder. Let me carry it for you. I can take whatever punishments you dole out. I'll accept whatever parts of you I can have. I'll hold them close and protect them, and maybe one day, I'll earn back your trust and love."

He stands there for one, two, three heartbeats, staring at the door no matter how much I will him to turn around. To say something. To do something. Anything.

Except he doesn't.

And after a moment, he slips out into the hallway and disappears into the night.

CHAPTER 7

EMILIA

I'm waiting for my toast to pop up from the toaster the next morning while I absently stroke the tracker in my neck with the pad of my index finger. It's completely fucked up that instead of being furious with Wilder, I feel all warm and giddy over what he did. I shouldn't be looking at it as a sign that he still cares—in his own over-the-top, crazy-ass way.

I mean, most men—*normal* men—would give a woman they liked jewelry or flowers. Not implant trackers beneath their skin without their consent.

The pop of the toaster pulls me out of my thoughts and, sighing, I reach out to grab the warm slice of bread. Perhaps that is why I never felt content with Richard or any other man. Since I'd rather have my men imbed me with a tracking device to protect me from a crazy stalker than bring me red roses.

When did I veer away from the idea of the perfect man being someone kind and gentle? Who would never raise his voice or get angry with you. Who surprised you with flowers and nights out and made slow, sweet love to you.

Was it when I met Wilder? Before then? Maybe I've always been this way, and that image was one ingrained by society. One that I just assumed I wanted because I was taught that it's what I *should* want.

At eighteen, the thought of being with someone as volatile as Wilder was unnerving. Not that I ever felt scared of him. Not really. Nonetheless, you could see in his eyes that he wasn't like everyone else. And when I was around him, I felt as though I had no control. Like I was on a merry-go-round with no way off—I was simply along for the ride, clinging on and hoping I didn't go flying. It was exhilarating, yet also terrifying.

It was so far from what I'd read about love and what I'd expected it to be that I didn't know what to do with it.

Whether to embrace the darkness or run from it.

At the time, I ran, but I'm done running now. I don't care if this brand of love is dangerous and all-consuming. I'd rather feel that than nothing at all. I'd prefer to burn beneath Wilder's heated glower than sit in the cold loneliness of my old life. I know now that no one will ever make me feel the way Wilder does. The way they all do.

Wilder.

Hawk.

And Kai.

“Morning.”

I jump as Kai's gruff voice disrupts my thoughts, and I have to take a second to make sure my face doesn't betray any of my internal contemplations, before I turn to face him with my plate and mug in hand. Offering him an unsure smile, I walk over and sit on one of the island stools.

Things have been tense between Kai and me since the kidnapping, and I don't understand why. It's not that he's said or done anything specific, although I can feel the distance expanding between us—this vast canyon opening up and forcing us further and further apart.

For whatever reason, he's put up walls and pushed me away. I can practically feel the cool brick beneath my hands.

I watch while he fixes himself a morning coffee, and I can already tell by the tense set of his shoulders that he's planning to escape my presence as soon as he's filled his mug.

Something in my chest pinches as I recall the last time we stood in this kitchen. Before that wretched day ruined everything.

“AS FOR YOU AND I...” His hand moves so his thumb rests along my collarbone and his fingers curl around my shoulder. “I'm not doing anything I don't want to. I know the risks. I know what's at stake. I want to protect you. I want to catch this guy. And I definitely want to kiss you again.”

HE DID, and it was oh, so delicious—a toe-curling, mind-altering, world-tilting kind of kiss.

The kind that becomes an addiction you crave. A sort of high that you want to experience over and over. Except I can't. I only got one teeny, tiny taste. A sample, before it was ripped away.

The pinching in my chest is painful, a heavy weight settling over me as I blink away the threatening tears in my eyes.

Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I tentatively ask, “Are we okay?”

“Why wouldn't we be?” he asks after a moment. His voice is stiff, and he keeps his back to me, so I can't read his facial expressions.

“Because the other day you were saying all these things, and you kissed me, and now you can't even look me in the eye.”

He sighs before finally turning to look at me. His face is an unreadable slate. Somehow, that's even worse than staring at his back. “I'm trying to be professional, Emilia.”

“You were being professional before without being an ass and hurting my feelings.” His eyes drop to the floor, but I don't miss the regret that flashes across his face—there and gone in a second.

“I'm not trying to hurt you.” For the first time this morning, genuine emotion bleeds into his words, giving away his inner conflict.

For a moment, I observe him, attempting to understand what could be running through that head of his. Hazzarding a guess, I push back my chair and round the island toward him.

“You realize what happened wasn't your fault, right? Wasn't that our plan all along? To fake-date hoping to lure her out? It worked! It pissed her off and forced her out of the woodwork.”

“You weren’t supposed to get kidnapped, Emilia,” Kai snarls, anguish lacing his tone and softening his eyes. He drops his gaze to the floor, shaking his head. “I couldn’t think straight when I showed up at that classroom and found you gone. Knowing you were in danger impeded my ability to do *my job*. Rather than thinking objectively, all I could focus on was *you*.” He sighs, his anger deflating as his body sags forward. “I let you down.”

“What?” I ask, stunned. “The very last thing you have ever done is let me down, Kai. The only reason I wasn’t freaking all the way out when I was in that bunker was because I knew you’d come for me. I knew you’d know what to do; how to find me.”

“Except I didn’t, did I? Wilder found you. I didn’t do a damn thing to help, and perhaps if I’d had my head on straight, *I* would have been the one to find you.”

Taking another step forward, I place my hand on his forearm. “It doesn’t matter who found me. You all worked as a team. I see how Hawk looks to you for advice, and I bet he—and Wilder—followed your direction. I’d hazard a guess, too, that you were the one who said to search the campus instead of assuming I’d already been taken off the premises. You might not have been the one to find me in that bunker, but it’s because of you that Wilder was able to.”

Lifting his head, he searches my face. He doesn’t appear to believe me, but at least he’s looking at me now. His eyes drop to where my hand still rests on his arm, and he reaches up to place his hand over mine. The warmth of his palm seeps into my skin, and I have to fight not to let my eyes drift closed at the contact.

I want nothing more than for him to pull me in for one of his steady, reassuring hugs. However, when he simply sighs, I know he won’t. Gently, he extracts my hand from his arm, holding it in his for a second longer before letting go.

“We still can’t. Not when Mel is out there and you’re in danger.” I want to stomp my feet and scream about how unfair it is. How this bitch shouldn’t be allowed to take anything else

from me. But the regret mixed with longing in Kai's eyes ceases me. "It's not you, Emilia." He says it so sincerely—desperately, almost—that I believe him. Definitely not the standard, *it's not you; it's me*, brush off speech. There is sincerely something more preventing him from just saying *fuck it* and giving in to his feelings.

Perhaps it is the same thing that drove him to work tirelessly in his search to identify Mel. That *still* drives him to uncover everything he can about her and work out how to stop her once and for all.

He opens his lips wanting to say more, except no words come out, and after a second he closes them and shakes his head. My eyes roam over his face, seeing past the dark rings and the tired lines surrounding his eyes. Sadness clings to him like drizzle on a damp day. A dark cloud of loss following him wherever he goes.

He moves to grab a flat, black box from the countertop that I hadn't noticed him carrying when he walked in, holding it out to me. I glance up at him before taking it from his outstretched hand and lifting the lid. Nestled inside is a beautiful silver bracelet with little charms attached, and my finger brushes over one showing a stack of books.

"It's beautiful," I murmur, unable to look away.

"It has a tracker attached to it," he explains.

For a moment, I simply run my eyes over the bracelet. There was absolutely no need for him to buy something this sentimental. It's obvious he put some thought into it—picking charms that he knew I would like. I even notice an angel charm, and another one is a bird.

I smile when I spot one that looks like a waterfall, remembering our day out. This feels like a reminder of his promise to take me back there one day, and hope ignites that perhaps one day we'll get over this distance he's forcing between us and get back to that.

Remembering that I don't actually need the bracelet anymore—even if I am reluctant to part with it—I close the

lid, grimacing as I look up at him. “Uhh, yeah, that might not be necessary anymore.” He gives me a quizzical look, and I point to the back of my neck. “Wilder beat you to it.”

His eyes bounce back and forth between mine until the penny drops and they widen. “He implanted a tracker in you?!”

Setting his mug on the counter, he places a hand on my shoulder and turns me enough that he can get a good look at the back of my neck. His fingers run along the skin until he finds where the tracker is embedded.

I know he just told me we couldn’t be anything, but I still drink in every second his skin touches mine. I bottle up the sense of safety and protection I experience when he’s around, storing it away for safekeeping, though ready to uncork at a moment’s notice should I need it in the future when he’s no longer around. However, even the thought of him not being here brings unbidden tears to my eyes, and I have to blink them away before he notices.

“What the hell is wrong with him?” Kai growls in a low tone. I imagine that’s the question many psychiatrists have asked themselves. “Did you allow him to do this?”

I snort. “I don’t think anyone *allows* Wilder to do anything. He does what he damn well pleases. Screw the consequences.”

He brushes his finger over the area where the rod is. “I can remove it for you.”

“No,” I blurt far too quickly. I bring my hand up as if to protect the implant, and I ease away from his touch. “That’s okay. It’s there now, so may as well keep it. Besides, Wilder made a good point that physical trackers like that”—I raise the box in my hand—“can be removed. And it might make Mel suspicious if she sees it and knows what it is.”

Kai nods his head, reaching out slowly—almost reluctantly—to take the box from my hand. “Only if you’re sure you’re okay with this?”

“I am,” I state emphatically. It’s true. I really am okay with it. I was taken by surprise by Wilder’s unexpected assault. Still, strangely, I feel reassured knowing that they can all find me if something happens, and unless Mel is poking around at the back of my neck or has some device to find trackers—does such a thing even exist?—then she’ll never know I have it.

AFTER SPENDING the day cuddled up with Hawk in the cinema room, I’m back on campus today. We’d all agreed that it was best if I got myself to and from the university. Mel will be watching vigilantly, and any sign that suggests I’m still turning to the guys for protection could be perceived as me denying Mel’s love or some such shit. I should probably sit in on an abnormal psych class. Although if Mel caught me doing that, she’d think I believed her insane—which is, of course, the truth. Even though it’s probably best that she doesn’t know that.

When I first step out of the cab, nerves threaten to send me diving head-first into the backseat and plead with the driver to take me anywhere but here, but I hold firm. It’s probably just my paranoia, but I swear I can feel Mel’s eyes on me as I make my way through campus to my classroom, and I keep darting glances into every dark nook and shadowy bush as I walk past.

If this is what it’s going to feel like every time I leave the house, I’m going to be exhausted by the end of the week. I know her watching me isn’t new. I bet she’s watched me make this journey from the parking lot to my classroom every day since I started here, yet somehow Kai’s presence was like a barrier, deflecting her scrutiny. Without him as a shield, I feel exposed, on display for her to gawk at like a zoo animal.

However, I refuse to let her scare me away. If this is where I’m planning to stay for the long term—which it is—then I need to hold my ground. Mel is nothing but a pestering fly. One Kai will soon zap out of existence, and then... Well, I have no idea what the hell happens then. Regardless, *until* then, I just need to stay strong, put on a believable show, and

somehow keep my distance from the guys. Something Hawk and I have already failed at.

It's one thing for us to go sneaking off in a dark corner of the house, but we have no idea how long this could go on for, and I know if my feelings for Hawk grow any deeper, Mel is going to read it all over my face and body language. Especially if I'm around him in public.

Daylight is blotted out as I step into Burney Hall, where the literature and journalism classes are held. As though triggered by the loss of light, my heart rate picks up, and I cast an anxious glance around the dark, wood-paneled hallway as if expecting to find Mel lurking in a dark corner.

Of course, she isn't.

My anxiety only heightens the closer I get to my classroom, and by the time I'm standing outside the door, my hand is shaking. It takes all of my willpower not to turn around and run away.

Memories from the other day surface and attack. The loud crack of thunder as it cut off my lecture, the heavy pelt of rain against the windows as the wind howled outside. I should have known then that it was a sign from the gods that Mel was on the prowl. A blatant warning that I ignored.

Stupid, foolish me.

I jolt as, in my mind's eye, the power cuts off, plunging me into darkness. My body is trembling as I recall the sharp sting of a needle breaking skin, the uncomfortable press of it slicing through muscle, and the pressure of an unknown substance filling my veins.

"Miss?"

I jump clear off the floor, failing to swallow the yelp that escapes my throat as I spin to face a concerned-looking student. "Are you okay?" he asks, staring between me and the closed classroom door in front of me.

"Y-yes," I stutter, struggling to regain my composure. I force out a strangled laugh. "Just a little jumpy this morning."

Working my lips into a tight smile, I turn away from the student and hastily unlock the door.

Despite his lingering presence behind me, I pause in the doorway. My shoulders drop with relief as I scan the classroom. Today, it's bright and airy. No trace of the storm or Mel's presence. Everything is... normal.

I get myself set up at my desk as students filter in. A few minutes before the class is due to begin, I glance up, noting that most of the students have arrived and we're nearly ready to begin. I spot one of Kai's plants amongst the awaiting students. Their presence and the knowledge that even though Kai can't physically be here, he's still watching over me. It chases away the last of my fears, and pushing to my feet, I get started on my first lecture of the day.

"I'll see you all on Friday," I call out an hour later, as students file out of the classroom. Students for my next class are already waiting outside the door, ready to come in.

While I wait for the classroom to empty and refill, I open the top drawer of my desk to grab a pen. I want to take note of some of the discussion points students made so we can go over them in more detail next time.

However, any thoughts of my students and classes are snuffed out like a breeze to a flame when I pull the drawer open and find a dried peony lying inside. Staring dumbfounded at it, I blink, then blink again. Its soft pink petals look beautiful against the green leaves and stem. But this is anything but an innocent flower.

For a long moment, I can't hear anything over the rushing of blood in my ears as I continue to stare at it, before my head whips up, my eyes scouring the room with a fine-tooth comb. Of course, it's stupid. It was obviously placed here before I arrived this morning, and if Mel is somehow currently watching me, it won't be from a chair inside my classroom.

With that thought, my eyes snap up to the ceiling, glaring into each of the corners as I search for any cameras or recording devices. Not seeing any, my attention turns to the windows, only it's impossible to know for sure if Mel is out

there, hiding in a bush or behind a tree. She could be watching me through a telescope from a frigging mile away.

Dropping my gaze back to the open drawer, I realize my hands are trembling and my breathing is ragged. I'm on the verge of a panic attack in a classroom full of students. *You need to get your shit together*, I chastise myself.

Slamming the drawer shut so I don't have to look at that fucking peony, I lower my head so my students can't see what a wreck I am, and close my eyes. I suck in a deep breath, holding it for the count of three before slowly exhaling. I repeat the action until I feel like I am once again in control of myself, and the cacophony of noise from students talking with one another has replaced the whoosh of blood rushing through my veins.

As the students begin to settle down, their voices growing quieter, I push all thoughts of Mel and the peony born from a nightmare that's residing in my drawer to the back of my mind and get to my feet.

"Okay, class. Today we're looking at Victorian gothic literature..."

I manage to make it through the rest of my morning classes without completely losing it. My eyes only drift to the drawer every five minutes or so, and the second the last student leaves my classroom, I rush from the room like a cackle of hyenas is on my ass.

CHAPTER 8

EMILIA

As I'm powering across campus with no actual destination in mind other than to get as far away from that fucking drawer as possible, I hear my phone vibrate in my handbag.

Digging it out, I glance down at the screen of my new phone. Kai handed one to each of us this morning before we all went our separate ways for the day. Apparently, it's some special type of phone that's entirely unhackable. Even Mel, super secret computer expert that she is, won't be able to access it, meaning the four of us can communicate freely.

The comfort I get from seeing Hawk's name is indescribable. It eases the panic that's been coursing through me since I found that flower.

HAWK: Meet us for lunch.

WISHING I could do just that, I chew on my bottom lip while I type out a quick reply.

EMILIA: I'm not sure that's such a good idea.

ESPECIALLY GIVEN THIS MORNING. I mean, that peony can only be a warning that Mel is watching, right?

Immediately, dots form on the screen, followed a second later by Hawk's response.

HAWK: It will be fine. Everyone is here, so Mel can't get angry. Besides, we've already discussed this. Stop worrying.

DESPITE HIS INSISTENCE, I'm still worrying my bottom lip, hesitating over whether to join them, when another message comes through from him.

HAWK: If you don't, I'll track you down and make you regret not doing as I say. Don't forget, I can find you at the press of a button.

IT'S disturbing that a thrill races through me at the thought of him hunting me down on campus, but *no*, that would not be okay. It's one thing for us to sneak around inside the house, but on campus? After receiving Mel's warning this morning? Hell no!

I guess that means I'd better get my ass to the dining hall.

Honestly, I didn't put up much of a fight. I *want* to go to the dining hall; I want to be surrounded by everyone, where I can feel safe. Even if I can feel Mel's eyes on me, she can't do anything when I'm surrounded by others, and I need that comfort right now.

Changing course, I'm walking toward the dining hall when my phone buzzes, signifying another message. I pull it out and actually blush at the words.

HAWK: That's my good girl.

WHO KNEW four tiny words could be such a turn-on? And instead of being creepy, knowing that he's tracking my movements is actually erotic. As though he could just show up out of the blue because he knows where I am. Hmm, maybe I'll keep the tracker once Kai has gotten rid of Mel.

Yup, it's official. I've lost my freaking mind.

Entering the dining hall, I queue up to get my food before scanning the room for Hawk and the others. A broad grin

stretches across my face when Hadley jumps up and begins waving at me like a lunatic.

Immediately, I feel safer. The crowded hall doesn't stop the paranoia of feeling like I'm being watched, but it bolsters my confidence. Instead of feeling like a mouse trapped in a maze, I push back my shoulders and jut out my chin, silently daring Mel to step out of the shadows and face me.

I hadn't realized until just now, but over the course of the last month, my entire world has shrunk until all that existed was my stalker. I only started this job because of Mel. Every time I was on campus, my thoughts were on her. Spending time with Kai—because of Mel. Even my interactions with Hawk and Wilder outside of the house revolved around her. She dictated my entire life.

Since gaining back the tiny bit of freedom offered by leaving the confines of the brownstone and coming to work, I haven't had a chance to actually enjoy being out of the house. To breathe in the energy that comes from being on a college campus, with students eager to learn and make the most of their limited youth before they're forced to find jobs and grow up.

Even when I spent lunches here with the others, my eyes constantly roamed the surrounding tables, lingering on every student and wondering if one of them was my stalker. Even surrounded by friends, I was never able to relax fully. To shake the weight of Mel's presence.

However, as I wind my way across the room, taking in the smiling, happy, carefree faces around me, anger begins to boil in my veins, burning away my fears and anxieties. It wasn't all that long ago that I wouldn't have cared about missing out on having new experiences and making new memories, but now... now, it really pisses me off. I refuse to let Mel steal anything more from me, and as I approach the table, I make a promise to myself not to let her tarnish anything else. Not my lunches with everyone, not my private moments with Hawk, and definitely not my relationship with Kai.

Of course, I have to be careful not to look as though I'm too happy, or Mel might go after Hadley or one of the guys. Something I am *not* okay with. We've already discussed that it's okay for me to spend time with Hadley and the others, but not too much. Enough that Mel sees I'm making an effort to distance myself from the guys, though not so much that I put a target on Hadley's back.

God, talk about a difficult balance to obtain. With not enough distance, Hawk, Wilder, or Kai could become Mel's next victim; too much time spent with Hadley, and it could be her that Mel targets next. Of course, I'd love to see her try and take on Hadley. Mel might know her way around computers, but Hadley is a fierce fighter. Her skills and training mean she'd have Mel knocked out in less than a minute.

On second thought, perhaps I should subtly encourage Mel to go after Hadley. It would be one sure way to get rid of her once and for all.

Except, I'd never put Hadley at risk like that. Certainly not without telling her, but I also wouldn't ask it of her. No, Mel is my battle to fight. I want her to know it was me who got the better of her. That I played her like she's played me all these years.

"Hey!" Hadley greets when I arrive at the table. Everyone is already here—Hadley, three of her boyfriends, Hawk, and Wilder.

I smile, even as nerves flutter in my stomach. I used to feel so at ease around all of these people. They were as close as family to me at one point, but now I feel like an outsider. I know it's my fault. I'm the one who put the space there by going off to a different college and refusing to come visit, other than the couple of times Hadley guilted me into it.

My eyes bounce over everyone, noting the dark scrutiny in Wilder's eyes as his gaze drills into me, and the frown lining Hawk's face. I must not be doing a very good job of hiding how frazzled I've been all morning.

"Come, sit." Hadley waves me toward her. Although the only spare seat is the one at the end of the table, beside Wilder.

“Cam, move so Em can sit beside me,” she tells him, shoving him in the shoulder.

“What?” he splutters. “Why do I have to move? Make West move!”

“West wasn’t the one who thought it would be funny to put red food dye in the showerhead, so it looked like blood was coming out of the shower this morning.”

I can’t help but snort. Their easy camaraderie is like a balm to my frayed nerves. I’m not the only one, as others around the table burst into a fit of laughter.

“I thought an animal had gotten into the water tank and *died*,” Hadley snaps, faking anger as she glowers at him.

Even Cam smiles, obligingly getting to his feet. “Yeah, but then I wouldn’t have been able to come in and save the day,” he states, pressing a quick kiss to Hadley’s lips before grabbing his tray and vacating the seat.

“Does it count as saving the day if he’s the one who instigated it in the first place?” Hadley grumbles as we both sit down.

I chuckle, already feeling ten times lighter than I did when I left my classroom. “I don’t know.”

“Anyway, how are you? How are you finding your first day back?”

Her eyes rake over me, and I can tell she spots the strain on my face, but thankfully she doesn’t ask about it.

“It’s fine,” I say, the words coming out tight. “It helps that I’m loving my classes.” At least that is the truth.

“Oh, yeah, Miss Harrison?” she teases. “Thinking of becoming a professor?”

I chew on my bottom lip before admitting, “Yes, actually.”

My seriousness has Hadley’s eyes widening. “Really?” Her gaze darts back and forth between mine. “Here? Or back at Halston?”

“I think I’m done with Halston.”

I pick at my food while I wait for her to say something. “What are you saying, Em?”

Our voices are low enough that the others can't overhear us, especially over the din of their own conversations. Which is why I feel brave enough to tell her what I've been thinking about constantly since I blurted it out to Wilder last night.

“Once everything with Mel is sorted out, I want to stay here.” I glance up at her through my eyelashes, only relaxing when a smile spreads across her face. I didn't think she'd be against it, but I know she's protective of her brother and even Wilder, and she's probably wondering what my permanent return might mean for them.

“For real? That would be fantastic!”

“Yeah?” I question.

“Of course, it would! Why wouldn't it? I'd love to have you around more.” She smirks, her eyes flicking across the table to where Hawk is talking to Mason. “And I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one.”

I have no idea if Hawk has told her anything about whatever is going on between us, although I know I haven't, so I keep my mouth shut. I don't want to say anything to her just yet. Not with everything so up in the air at the minute. So instead, I simply roll my eyes and finally take a bite of my food, ignoring the heavy press of Wilder's eyes into the side of my head.

Hadley gets pulled into a conversation with West, and the second she turns away, my phone buzzes in my bag. Since everyone else is seated around me, the only person it could be is Kai, probably checking in on me. Despite his newfound inability to look at me, I know he worries, especially now that he has to keep his distance.

Seeing that it's not Kai but a text from Hawk, I flick my gaze across the table toward him. He's chewing on a fry and listening to something Mason is saying, paying me zero attention.

Confused, I open the message.

HAWK: What's wrong?

EMILIA: Nothing's wrong. I'm fine.

HIS REPLY COMES through a few seconds later, despite his attention never seeming to waver from Mason.

HAWK: Don't bullshit me, Little Sparrow. I can clearly see something is wrong. What happened?

I HUFF OUT A BREATH, glowering at my phone as if it's his face, and I aggressively type, *I found a dried peony in my desk drawer this morning.*

FEELING HIS EYES ON ME, I dare glimpse at him. His gaze is filled with concern—although rage simmers just beneath the surface—as he searches my face. I only rip my eyes away when my phone vibrates with a new message.

HAWK: You think it's from Mel?

EMILIA: Who else could it be? She sent me one before.

HAWK: Was there anything else with it?

EMILIA: I'm not sure. I kind of freaked out and closed the drawer as soon as I saw it.

HAWK: Okay. Take some photos and bring everything home with you so we can have a look at it tonight.

HAWK: You're not alone, we'll get through this.

HIS FINAL MESSAGE eases the tension weighing on my shoulders, making me feel bolstered. I peer up at him, catching his eye, and nod my head. He gives me a reassuring smile. It's all he can offer, and I soak up his confidence in me like a wet sponge, needing it to bolster me and get me through the rest of the day.

PEONIES HAVE BEEN DELIVERED to my classroom every day this week. They're either there when I arrive in the morning, or they show up any time I step out during the day. The thought of Mel moving around campus so easily, coming and going from my classroom whenever she pleases, freaks me out. I'm gathering a collection of peonies, and I'm terrified that I'll have a whole bouquet very soon.

Flowers aren't the only thing being delivered. A letter was stuffed in my staff mail cubby yesterday, and today, a photo album was delivered to the house, filled with photos of Mel and me over the last four years.

It's officially reached the point where I'm scared to discover what new horror the next day will bring. So far, none of it has been threatening, but it has been unnerving. Her letter was filled with memories from the past. All of them from her perspective—a perspective that is far more sinister than what I'd pictured.

I'm left questioning every smile I tossed her way, every complaint about a guy I was dating, every time I suggested the two of us stay in and watch a movie instead of going to a party. Suddenly, none of our moments together seem innocent and cemented in friendship. She perceived every single

moment, every look, every laugh as something *more*. Something deep, shared only between us.

Kai is currently flicking through the photo album while wearing a latex glove. Meanwhile, I couldn't even look at the photos without feeling sick to my stomach. Every picture captures a moment that has now been tainted and ruined. A fine film of grime coats each one, souring the memory.

It adds a new sense of reality to all of this and makes me realize just how profound Mel's obsession is. She didn't simply wake up one day and decide to kill Richard and claim me as her own. This... infatuation has been building for years. Since the first day we met. She's harbored these feelings, stoked them, and built them up to be something I can never compete with.

Unexpectedly, I find myself wondering if this is somehow *my* fault. Did I miss the signs that she was into me? Did I somehow lead her on with the way I behaved and acted around her?

I didn't behave any differently than how I would around Hadley, though is it possible that my general friendliness comes off as flirty and Hadley just never noticed? I mean, something I did must have drawn Mel to me and made her believe she had a chance. I had to have said or done something to instigate all of this.

Lost in my thoughts, I don't notice that Wilder has rounded the kitchen island until his fingers are digging into my cheeks, as he directs my head back until I'm staring into the swirling vortex of his dark umber eyes. I've never noticed the gray flecks in them before. They look like ice chips, only adding to Wilder's chilling effect.

"What were you just thinking?" he snarls.

I meet his anger with pursed lips, not having realized just how closely he was watching me.

In response, his force turns bruising as he pulls me toward him. My jaw begins to pulse from the pressure, my eyes flaring with pain.

He brings his face within an inch of mine. So close I can feel his warm breath on my cheek. “Tell me what was just going through that pretty little head of yours, *Angel*.” His voice is so low it sounds almost demonic.

I meet his eyes for another few seconds before I cave, dropping my gaze as I force out through squished lips, “It’s my fault.”

With his hand still wrapped around my jaw, he pushes me away. I stumble against the island as he turns away from me with a rabid snarl. I watch him warily as he storms across to the other side of the kitchen, confused by his outburst.

“None of this is your fault, Emilia,” Kai says softly, drawing my attention to him.

Not agreeing, I shake my head as I pick up the letter and wave it. “All these memories she’s talking about. They mean something to her. Something different than what they meant to me. The only reason that could be is if I made her view them differently.”

Dropping the letter, my eyes land on the photo album, open on a photo of us at a football game at Halston. We’re dressed in Halston school colors of black and gold, with streaks on our cheeks and broad grins that reach our eyes.

“I had to have said or done something to make her think there was more between us than friendship. I had to have led her on in some way, made her believe there was a possibility of *us*.”

This time, it’s Hawk’s turn to storm toward me. However, his touch is much more gentle—although still firm—as he lifts my chin.

“You didn’t say or do *anything* wrong, Sparrow.” He holds my gaze, his gray eyes boring into mine as if he can dig deep enough, then he can bury the sentiment in my soul and force it to take root until it eradicates all of my doubts. “You are not to blame for some psycho bitch misinterpreting a friendly hello or deciding that because you smiled at her you’re obviously meant to be together.”

“This woman is obsessed with you, Emilia,” Kai states. Although Hawk doesn’t release me from his hold, so I can’t turn to look at him. “Obsessions are, by definition, irrational. They don’t require a solid foundation; they don’t make logical sense. They just are.

“It probably took root the second she laid eyes on you, before you even so much as uttered a word to her, and escalated from there. There was no one thing you said or did that triggered this. She interpreted every interaction between you in a way that suited her. Saw whatever it was she wanted to see; believed what *she* wanted to believe.

“Short of being cold toward her or blatantly telling her to get lost, there’s nothing you could have done to change the outcome.”

“And if you had rebuffed her, she probably would have stabbed you in your sleep,” Wilder unhelpfully tacks on, still looking like he’s one wrong word away from exploding.

Kai doesn’t disagree, so I’m assuming that would have been a very real—and terrifying—possibility. *Yikes.*

Hawk continues to hold me hostage until he sees I understand what Kai’s saying. Only then does he release his hold, lightly stroking his thumb along my cheek before dropping his hand and turning away.

Without him obscuring my entire field of vision, I find Kai no longer analyzing the photo album but rather watching me closely, his lips pressed in a tight line and concern etching his face. When he catches me looking, he glances away.

Sighing, I gesture toward the letter and photo album. “Then what is the point of all this? What is she trying to communicate?”

“I think she’s wooing you,” Kai answers, his voice as clinical as ever.

“*Wooing* me?” I question with a raised brow.

“Who the fuck says wooing anymore, man?” Wilder interjects with rolled eyes.

We all ignore him.

“What makes you think that?” I ask Kai.

“The way she talks. Her letter is all about how she felt the first time she saw you, how much your time together meant to her.” He sets aside the letter in his hand to push the photo album toward me. I cringe away from it like it’s moldy bread. “And these photos. You’re smiling in every single one.” He looks up at me, his features severe. “I think she’s taking you on a journey of how she fell in love with you. Now that she’s got your attention, she’s trying to show you how good she thinks you would be together.”

“Well, it’s having the opposite effect,” I state. My expression probably makes it look like I’m about to hurl, which isn’t actually all that far from the truth.

“Have you had any luck finding anyone who knows Mel?” Hawk asks Kai.

Kai’s shoulders drop and he shakes his head. “No one. It’s as though she didn’t exist before Halston. Everything is fake—her home address, the high school she attended, emergency contacts.”

“How is that possible?” I ask, shocked and a little alarmed at how deep this all goes. Who the hell is this woman I shared a dorm room with for four years?

“Her hacking skills go far beyond what we anticipated if she’s been able to erase—or at least deeply bury—her existence. Nowadays, that should be next to impossible to achieve. There should be some lead or digital trace, but she’s done an amazing job of covering her tracks.”

My stomach sours at Kai’s words and I feel physically ill. “So, where do we go from here?” I ask in a defeated tone. With each passing day, it feels as though beating Mel becomes more and more insurmountable. Her sick gifts and our lack of progress are getting to me.

“We need to stop worrying about who this bitch is and where she came from, and focus on getting rid of her once and

for all,” Wilder seethes, all eyes snap to him, and my eyebrows raise in surprise at his outburst.

“You’re right,” Kai calmly agrees. “Which is why I think we should stake out your classroom. It’s the only place she’s going to repeatedly, and the fact that she knows when you aren’t there means she’s keeping a close eye on it.”

“What, like set up cameras?” Wilder asks, skeptical.

Kai shakes his head. “No. Mel’s already proven she can manipulate them. We can’t rely on camera footage. What we need are eyes on campus. Send more people undercover, and have a team surrounding the building.”

Hawk nods in agreement with Kai’s plan. Turning to face me, he promises. “We won’t let her slip through our fingers this time.”

I believe they’ll do everything they can, but chewing on my bottom lip, I dare to ask, “And if she does?”

“She’s going to keep doing what she’s doing until she gets a response from you,” Kai states somberly.

My eyes widen in horror. “She wants me to respond to her? How? I have no idea how to find her—not that I have any desire to do so, unless it’s to wrangle her crazy ass into handcuffs and watch her get carted off to the loony bin.”

Kai shakes his head, his focus once again on Mel’s *gifts*. “I’m not sure,” he says absently, visibly deep in thought. “Nevertheless, she’ll be looking out for some sort of reciprocation, and if she doesn’t get it”—his eyes lift to mine, worry buried in his emerald depths—“her infatuation could turn deadly.”

CHAPTER 9

WILDER

The door handle turns soundlessly in my hand before I step into her room. Her jasmine scent immediately overpowers me. It draws me in like a bee to honey, whispering in my ear to come closer.

So I do.

I pad on silent feet toward her sleeping form, oblivious to the threat that has entered her room. She's so vulnerable-looking in her sleep. So innocent. It would be so easy for me to take advantage...

Hmm, it's a tempting thought.

However, that's not the reason I'm here tonight. Although my dick clearly disagrees, as he strains to get to her—the way he always does in her presence.

Fighting my baser instincts, I move to perch at the foot of the bed, where I can still see her face, but she's less likely to wake beneath my gaze.

Everything feels... different since I found her in that bunker.

No, that's not quite right.

Everything has been different since I watched her come in the bath.

That's what it is. *That's* what changed everything. Watching the way the lines smoothed out on her face and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. Her captivating green eyes, how they shimmered with need and were blown wide with desire. I'd forgotten just how mesmerizing watching her find her release was. It's the only time Emilia drops all of her barriers. The only time she lets anyone see all of her. Perhaps even the only time she allows herself to truly let go.

And it's fucking spellbinding. Enthralling. The eighth wonder of the world—and honestly, the only one worth

witnessing. Certainly, it's the only one I'm interested in seeing.

Except that's the fucking problem right there.

The fact I *want* to watch her fall apart all over again. More than that, even. I want to *feel* her come apart beneath my touch. My fingers. My tongue. My cock.

My teeth are gritted so hard, it's a surprise that I don't crack a tooth.

I'm in a vicious war with myself. The love-sick puppy version begs me to forget the past and do what he's wanted since she first arrived—fill every single one of her holes until she remembers who the fuck she belongs to.

But that part of myself is nothing more than a teenage horn dog. The semi-reasonable adult in me knows she'll do it again. She'll either leave because she runs scared like before or because I send her sprinting for the hills. Either way, she'll be gone, and I'll be alone.

I think that's the way it was always meant to be—me, alone. It's only fitting, given the blood that stains my soul. How can a man who still smells the charred remains of his friends ever find love? Especially in the arms of someone as sweet and innocent as Emilia.

She chooses that moment to roll onto her back, a soft moan slipping past her lips that pulses new life into my dick and reminds me just how good it felt to feel her moaning around my length that night I pushed her to her knees on the kitchen floor.

God, I'd love a repeat of that.

It's been so fucking long since I've come inside her. So fucking long since I've watched her greedily lap up every last drop of my cum.

The crash of battle axes still clangs in my head as I climb to my feet and prowl toward her. Towering over her, I lower my zipper and push my jeans and boxers low on my hips, the sharp hiss of metal teeth breaking like a thunderclap in the otherwise silent room.

I sigh in relief as my dick springs free, bobbing in front of me with its head directed at Emilia's face, knowing damn well where he wants to be buried.

Not tonight, buddy, I tell him wistfully.

A precum tear beads in response, but I quickly swipe it away with the pad of my thumb, hissing through my teeth as I picture waking her with my cock buried deep in her throat.

My eyes are glued to her face, even though all I can picture are her wide, terrified eyes. The pathetic attempt she'd put up to overcome me. The scrape of her nails as they dig into my skin. I can practically taste her panic on my tongue, feel the erratic beat of her pulse beneath my fingers.

Her fear is an aphrodisiac. A potent one at that. It takes only a few minutes before sparks shoot up my spine and my balls draw up. String after string of cum shoots out of me, landing on her chest and neck, and I'm left breathing heavily and feeling fucking euphoric.

Why the fuck have I been jacking off into a sock for the last however many weeks when I could have been coming all over her sleeping form? Other than that first time, I've refused to let myself give in to her allure. Not in her presence, anyway.

Instead, I drink in every second of her pain and replay it for myself when I'm alone. When she can't claim any of the credit or know just how much power she still wields over me.

But right now, I'm the one in control. *I'm* the one wielding all the power as I swipe my finger through a rope of cum and bring it to her lips, smearing it like lipstick.

Her tongue flicks out, and she hums contentedly.

The sight makes me smirk as I tuck myself back into my jeans. *That's it, Angel. Lap up every bit of me while you can.* Because no matter how I might feel, I have to break her. For her sake and mine.

Brushing a strand of hair away from her face, I linger for a minute longer before I pull myself away.

I'm no longer sure whether it's a case of she doesn't deserve me or I don't deserve her. Regardless, I know now that she was never meant to be a permanent fixture in my life.

She was right to run away from me all those years ago. I would have destroyed her in the worst way if she'd stayed.

ON FRIDAY, I walk into my ethics class and falter. There's a white envelope sitting on the desk in front of my usual seat. I'm not sure why its presence triggers an ominous feeling in my gut. The fact that I'm hearing anything should be a good thing, right? It means I've passed my tasks. That I'm moving on to whatever the next stage is.

Perhaps that's the issue—I don't know what's next. How many more hoops do I have to jump through before my family lets me in? I don't care about the King's Elite. All that bullshit means nothing to me. It's the family that deems this whole farce necessary that I'm interested in. The family that I should have been a part of since birth. And now I have to work my way back into their good graces, even if I wasn't the one who fucked up in the first place.

Although if they know anything about my past, I should probably just be grateful they are willing to give me a shot at all. I'm not so sure they do. If they did, they'd have turned me away at the first opportunity. I highly doubt murderers are welcome in the Clearwater family.

My eyes remain glued to the envelope as I make my way over to the desk and slowly sit down, dropping my backpack on the floor beside me. I haven't heard from the King's Elite since they booted me out of their car on the day Emilia was kidnapped.

I haven't even had a chance to give them a second thought—until now.

Scanning my eyes over the envelope, there is, once again, no name written on the front. How do I know it's even for me? And yet, I just know. I'm guessing this is about the

inauguration that asshole was talking about, so I must have passed the tasks they set for me.

Most of them were relatively easy. Well, two of them. The information I stole from Hawk's laptop still doesn't sit well with me, even though Robbie assured me the tasks were for our benefit—not to fill some King's Elite agenda. If that's the case, then it was probably worth it. Worth it if it means I'll become a member of the King's Elite, and my family will think I'm trustworthy enough to allow in.

Pushing aside any lingering guilt, I slide open the tab and pull out the thick, expensive-feeling cardstock. My gaze lingers on the embossed emblem at the top—a snake coiled around a crown. There's something empowering yet deadly about the striking image. Or perhaps I'm simply picking up on the symbolism of the snake and crown.

Power and death.

Not ominous at all.

Dismissing it, I slide my gaze down to read the actual message.

MIDNIGHT. Kappa Epsilon Library.

I ROLL MY EYES. Are these letters capable of saying anything different? They're going to lose their sinister vibe if they don't start switching up the text.

I spend the rest of the class mulling over what's going to happen tonight, not listening to a word the lecturer says. Who needs ethics anyway? Every time he poses an ethical dilemma, I always choose the opposite response to everyone else. I'm clearly not cut out for making ethically sound decisions. Not that I needed to take a class to learn that. That's a lesson I learned long ago.

I've come to accept that I'm a morally gray person. Learned to embrace it even. Knowing you're not confined to the same social boundaries as others is freeing. You're

unburdened, knowing you don't have to make the socially acceptable choice in any given situation. You'll just do whatever the fuck you want and screw everyone else.

Half of the idiots in this class are too busy looking around them to see what choice their classmates will agree with so that they can choose the same one. Meanwhile, I'm picking whatever option will be best for me and mine.

Besides, what sort of ethical dilemma is it when posed with the option of killing your hospitalized father before midnight to get his health insurance, or letting him live but still having to deal with your family's financial difficulties?

Obviously, you kill Daddy Dearest.

It's a no-brainer. Dad's an asshole who never gave a shit about you anyway. Why the fuck wouldn't you kill him? Hell, I'd kill him even without the monetary incentive. I'd do it just for shits and giggles.

Weirdly, though, I was the only one with that opinion, and the rest of the class looked at me like I was an axe-murdering maniac coming to slaughter them all.

Bunch of fucking sheep.

The only reason I'm in this class is because I closed my eyes and blindly selected what ones I'd take this year. I really couldn't give a fuck so long as I passed them. I was genuinely only here for the girls and parties and because of Hadley, Hawk, and the guys. College itself was never my game plan.

Something my guidance counselor seems to have a hard time wrapping her head around. I seriously thought her brain was going to explode when I refused to pick a major. She went on and on about how that wasn't done and that I wouldn't get a job after college if I didn't declare a major.

Like I give a fuck.

The scrape of chairs as students get to their feet signifies the end of class and jolts me out of my reverie. I push back my chair and grab my backpack, shoving the envelope into the outer pocket before exiting the classroom.

Walking across campus, I let myself into the admin building located in what was originally the main house before the property was converted into a university. Making my way through the building until I reach Robbie's room, I knock on the door and push it open when he calls out.

He lifts his head when I enter. "Hey."

"What's tonight?" I ask, getting straight to the point as I drop into one of the chairs opposite his desk.

He rolls his eyes at my poor manners. "You know, I'm really loving this aggrieved version of you. What the hell happened recently that has pissed you off so much." He arches a brow. "Is it about a girl?"

My eyes narrow in warning before I glance away. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm the same as I always have been."

Robbie snorts, shaking his head as he leans back in his chair. "You were always brusque, but you've been particularly crabby this semester. Something tells me it's not the increased workload that's getting to you."

Pursing my lips, I change the topic and repeat, "What's tonight?"

He watches me for a second before steepling his fingers and resting his forearms on his desk. "The inauguration."

I just stare blankly at him. "I don't know what that means."

"You passed your tasks," he says with a shrug. "Tonight, you'll officially become a King's Elite."

It still means nothing to me.

What the fuck does it actually mean to be a *King's Elite*? Why would I want to be one? What's the incentive? Excellent social standing and the entitlement of thinking you're better than everyone else? In that case, sign me right up (cue sarcastic eye roll).

One side of his lips lifts in an aloof grin. "And grandfather wants to meet you."

Now, *that* I'm interested in.

Intrigued, I lean forward in my chair. "When?"

"Next Saturday. A car will pick you up."

"What—" The ringing of the phone on his desk interrupts me, and he raises the receiver to his ear while holding up a finger to silence me.

He listens for a moment before saying, "Put him through, Masie." Glancing my way, he places his hand over the microphone. "I need to take this."

"But what about tonight?"

"Just show up. I can't tell you anything else."

"And Saturday?"

He huffs out a frustrated breath, running his eyes over my luminous yellow Ridgeway U hoodie and violet pants. Nose scrunched in disapproval, he says, "Wear a suit—something less... in your face and try to put your best foot forward. Grandfather was impressed with your performance during the tasks. He is willing to give you a chance. Don't blow it."

So no pressure then. Frowning, I leave him to his phone call.

As the door snicks shut behind me, apprehension settles in my stomach. I'm finally getting the chance to meet my family. To find out if I truly belong with them. And if I don't... then I guess I don't belong anywhere. If I don't fit in with my own flesh and blood, then I must be a lone wolf.

Which is fine. I've been alone most of my life. I had friends once. Well, I had guys I drank alcohol and did drugs with, but at the time, we were friends. Close friends. It wasn't until Pac and Hadley that I understood what it meant to form a real connection with another person. In ways I'll never understand, I was drawn to her, and she showed me what it was like to have others around you who mattered.

And they do still matter to me—all of them. I'm just not sure that it's where I belong. Not anymore, and not if I'm to believe Emilia's words that she's back for good.

What happened the other day changed nothing, despite what she might think. Sure, I said she was mine—mine to *break*. Once she's broken, I'll have no interest. Once she's sufficiently felt that same raw, gnawing darkness that festers on your insides like an infected wound that just won't heal, then we'll be even. I'll have gotten what I wanted from her, and she can feel free to gather the remaining pieces of herself and fuck back off to wherever she came from.

I can guarantee that by then, she won't want to stay.

She'll have seen just how vindictive I am, witnessed the malicious intent I keep carefully tucked away from prying eyes. Seen the monster that lurks beneath my skin. She'll not only leave but run so fast that there will be nothing but dust left in her wake.

I told her we would never have what once was. At the time, I was furious at her for ruining what we had, though perhaps it was a good thing. Perhaps her leaving was the *right* thing. That wasn't the real me—the Wilder who was so in love with her that he'd become whoever she needed him to be. But I'm not that person. She might have placed a bandaid over the darkness residing inside me, but for how long would that bandage have stuck? Eventually, it would have peeled off, and then the slick depravity would have come oozing out.

I'd have morphed into a different person right in front of her eyes. She would have been terrified. She would have run. Just like she did at the end of the school year.

Perhaps I was never destined to have Emilia Harrison. I was only permitted to spend a little time in her bright light. My past transgressions consigned me to a fate where I was to know, briefly, what it was to bathe in her purity and to live alone in the dark for the rest of eternity with that knowledge.

However, misery loves company, and I don't want to be the only one walking around dripping with the blood of their internal scars. And perhaps, because I'm a sick bastard, I want to tarnish some of Emilia's light. Put a black smudge on her goodness. Forever change her the way she has forever wounded me.

Two shooting stars, never destined to be together yet who recognize one another's pain when they occasionally pass in the night. Until they eventually burn out, alone as they fade into the infinite expanse of space. Forgotten for the rest of time.

AT MIDNIGHT ON THE DOT, I'm standing in the Kappa Epsilon Library wearing a stupid-ass black robe I found in my room earlier. The fact that one of these entitled pricks snuck into my room pisses me off, but not as much as the thought that I'm about to get knocked the fuck out again. Which is why I'm eyeing the vent like it's about to break free of the wall and attack me.

The sound of something unlatching has me spinning around, my eyes running warily over the bookcases on the far wall until one begins to open with the squeaking of a hinge.

"What the hell?" I murmur as a hooded figure dressed in the same freaky black robe as me frames the doorway.

"Your presence has been requested at the King's conclave," a deep timbre voice states, before turning on his heel and being swallowed up by the darkness.

Squinting, I peer into the tunnel behind the secret doorway, unable to make anything out. It would be stupid as fuck for me to walk myself in there, right? Despite Robbie's claims that it's my birthright to become a King's Elite and it's the only way to become part of the family, I still have no fucking idea *what* the King's Elite is. For all I know, it could be some blood-drinking, cannibalistic, satan-worshipping cult.

And I'm just supposed to walk myself to my likely death?

As if sensing my inner turmoil, the bookcase begins to creak closed. I swear I hear it taunting me with *tick, tock* as the gap grows narrower.

Just before it can cross that final distance, I slip into the darkened interior. I catch a glimpse of steep, spiraling stairs

that fall into the earth beneath me before the last fragments of light are snuffed out, the secret door snicking shut. The cool air sends a chill through me, goosebumps pebbling on the skin beneath my robe as I'm robbed of my sense of sight. An earthy, damp, musty smell invades my nostrils, and I immediately miss the clean air of the library. This feels too close to being buried in a coffin beneath the ground. Too close to my impending death at the hands of these elitist cannibals—assuming I don't trip and fall down this stairwell to hell.

My hand brushes over cold, uneven stone as I cautiously descend the winding staircase. The smell of death and doom only becomes more potent the deeper into the earth I go. I swear it didn't smell this bad last time.

Just when I'm beginning to feel like the darkness is never going to spit me out, a flicker of light from somewhere farther below reaches me, and slowly the world comes back into view as I hurry down the rest of the steps.

When my foot finally hits the hard rock of solid ground, I look up, taking in the tall stone walls rising high above me until they form a pitched roof. We must be far underground now, which would explain the biting cold of the stale air. I recognize the chamber as the one I woke up in the last time. The room where they seemingly hold their conclaves and perform any other nefarious secret cult acts.

“Welcome, new initiate,” a deep, booming voice calls out, seeming to echo off the walls and rattle in my ears as though it's coming from everywhere all at once.

Tearing my gaze from the ceiling, I immediately spot the black sea of cloaks as they spill into the room from various other secret entrances, until I'm surrounded on all sides.

Turning in a full circle, I realize I'm alone in the center, the other two seniors from before apparently not having made it this far.

“You have passed the three trials. Are you ready to dedicate your life to the vision of the King's Elite?”

Ehhh, what now?

I turn to face the same black cloak with gold stitching as last time. The guy is clearly in charge of running this show. Like before, all I can see are shadows beneath his hood, although I can feel his penetrating stare boring into me, along with the pinprick sensations of everyone else's eyes on me. It's disconcerting, to say the least.

His inauspicious question is met with a ringing silence, and I realize everyone is waiting for me to answer.

Well, fuck. This feels like one of those defining moments in life. Say no, and you return to your safe, regular life; however, I'll miss out on the opportunity to ever meet the rest of my family. Say yes, and—assuming I'm not murdered and feasted upon—I might finally learn why I am the way that I am.

“Yes.”

It's that quest for answers that pushes the word from my mouth, even though I have no idea what the hell I'm signing myself up for.

“Then come forward and vow your allegiance to the King's Elite. Vow to trust in your brothers. Vow to dedicate your life to your King.”

Jeez, this is just getting more sinister by the second, but I've already said yes, so there is no backing out now.

Tentatively, I step forward until I'm standing in front of Mr. Gold Cloak.

“Bow before your King.”

I grind my teeth, getting increasingly pissed off with this pretentious bullshit. Who the fuck is this guy? Calling himself a king, yet he's hiding out in underground caves, cowering behind his mask of shadows. I keep my head bowed so he can't see exactly what I think as I kneel at his feet.

“Do you, Wilder Clearwater, hereby pledge to do your duty of carrying out the mission of the King's Elite henceforth? To obey your King's orders without question, and to put the King's Elite and our goals above any personal endeavors?”

“I do.”

“And do you swear to uphold our laws? To abide by our rules and carry out our bidding as our faithful servant?”

As their what?! This is just getting fucking ridiculous now.

“I do,” I grit out.

“Then, with the sealing of a blood oath, I welcome you into the open arms of the King’s Elite.”

One of the silver-stitched cloaks hands him a small, ornamental-looking blade while the other holds out some sort of golden chalice.

Holding his hand over the cup, he slices a small line into his palm. Once enough blood has dripped into the cup, he holds the knife out for me.

I stare confounded at it for a second, before reaching out and taking it, repeating the action as a sharp sting of pain flares to life. It barely feels like more than a papercut. Nothing in the grand scheme of the pain I’ve endured; that I’m currently suffering.

The chalice is held out toward me, and I hold my hand over the top of it, my blood joining his.

Satisfied, the gold-cloak guy swirls the chalice, mixing our blood.

“Drink the blood and seal your oath so that we may all welcome our new member into the fold.”

This time, I do blanch. *Is he for fucking real? I fucking knew this was some sort of cannibalism club. And he wants me to drink his fucking blood like I’m a vampire? What if he’s got some blood-borne disease? I don’t know who this fucking asshole is!*

The cup is thrust toward me, practically forced into my hand when I don’t take it of my own accord.

I stare down at the deep well of blood, so dark it almost looks black, wrinkling my nose as the metallic scent hits my nostrils and makes me recoil. *This is so fucking gross.*

I swear I'm going to murder Robbie for not warning me about this. Closing my eyes, I bring the cup to my lips, tilting my head back and swallowing the cupful in one go. I gag as the coppery taste slides down my throat and settles uncomfortably in my stomach. Sweat breaks out across my skin, and it feels like my whole body is revolting against the foreign liquid I just ingested.

The gold-cloaked psychopath raises his arms in the air, and it's only then that I realize the room has broken into a round of applause.

“Go forth now and perform your duties with the aspirations of the King's Elite in mind.”

Apparently, that concludes tonight's entertainment as everyone breaks up, disappearing back into the walls like ants that crawled out of the woodwork in search of crumbs to take back to their anthills.

I watch from my knees as the golden-cloaked man and his two silver-cloaked comrades disappear into the crowd, losing sight of them before I can see what secret entrance they used. I'm hoping Robbie will emerge so I can yell at him. However, the chamber empties in a matter of minutes, and I'm alone.

CHAPTER 10

EMILIA

Hadley: *Be ready in 5. We're going out for the day.*

I STARE AT THE TEXT. *Be ready for what? Going where? Ugh, Hadley. You couldn't have given me a bit more information, could you? And time, for that matter.* Not all of us are happy to just fling clothes on and head out for the day.

Although, with only five minutes until she's here, that's precisely what I'm going to have to do. I guess I should be thankful that I'm not waking up with fucking cum all over me this morning. To say I was livid when I woke up yesterday morning to the salty taste on my lips and the potent smell assaulting my nostrils, is an understatement.

I was ready to rip Wilder's goddamn head off—because I know for a fact that he was the culprit—but the asshole wasn't in his room, and he's been mysteriously absent ever since.

Shoving all murderous thoughts of Wilder to the back of my mind, I hunt through my meager belongings for something to wear today. Kai got me a few new outfits when I started teaching at Ridgeway, but the only other stuff I have is what I haphazardly threw into my bag the day I left my old life—which was mostly pajamas and sweats. I clearly wasn't in my right mind when I packed.

All of that to say, I have basically nothing to wear. It wouldn't matter if Hadley had given me more time or information; I still would have ended up wearing the same worn jeans and ratty t-shirt I'm currently wearing because it's the only damn outfit I have that's suitable for the public to see me in.

Sighing, I throw my hair up in a ponytail and apply the lipstick and mascara I thankfully had the foresight to pack.

Satisfied I've done my best, I head downstairs to wait for Hadley.

My nerves are frayed, and I'm wrung out after an exhausting week of receiving heinous gifts. A girls' day is exactly what I need. After coming home to find the photo album on the front porch, I haven't received anything from Mel since. Somehow, that has been even more worrisome. I'm constantly on edge, waiting for the doorbell to ring, announcing the delivery of another fucked-up present, or for Mel herself to pop up out of nowhere and hand deliver a bouquet of peonies. Hell, dead fucking peonies are even invading my dreams. She's slowly driving me insane, and I'm beginning to think *that's* the point of all of this. Not the wooing bullshit Kai suspects. She's trying to make me as crazy as she is so I'll merrily skip off into the sunset with her. And hell, if it stops these disturbing gifts and the constant wariness that presses down on my shoulders, I might just fucking do it.

Between her psyching me out during the day and Wilder now haunting my nights, I'm going to be gray in no time. I swear this whole ordeal has already taken five years off my life.

Kai looks up from where he's sitting at the table as I step into the kitchen, and I give him a tight smile. He runs his eyes over me, probably noticing the stress lines around my eyes and the weariness dragging down my shoulders.

Even though I most definitely look like shit, his gaze lingers, sparking a deep-seated warmth in me, before he finally manages to tear them away. I quietly sigh. I hate this... whatever the hell this is... that's between us now. I miss the Kai that made me feel welcome and safe when I walked into a room. The Kai who would greet me with a warm smile and offer to make me a coffee or ask how I was doing.

This Kai, with walls so high I can't see the top of them... I hate him.

I just want *my* Kai back.

"Morning." I have to force the word out past my constricted throat, tearing my eyes away from him as I move

to the other side of the kitchen, rearranging the toaster and canisters purely for something to do.

“Morning.”

That one word, followed by silence, slices through my chest. I want to scream at him. Want to demand that he stop whatever the hell he’s doing. Only instead, I just close my eyes and let that hurt wash through me. I don’t understand why he’s pulling away, but if it’s what he needs or what he thinks he has to do, I need to let him work through it.

When I feel calm enough, I turn to face him. “I maybe should have told you this, but Hadley messaged. We’re going out today.”

“I know. She already told me.”

“Oh.”

I chew on my bottom lip, and when I say nothing more, Kai finally deigns to look up from his laptop.

“You have your tracker, and you’re more than safe with Hadley.”

I nod. Obviously, I know that. There are probably very few people I’d be safer with.

He stares at me for a moment longer. It’s there in his eyes. This unshakeable pain that I’ve seen before. Is that the reason for all these newfound walls? Did he get scared when things got real with Mel? Something that day spooked him. Everything was fine—better than fine—until then.

I watch him for another moment as he focuses intently on whatever he is working on. “You can talk to me, you know... If you ever need to.”

His eyes dart up to meet mine, holding my gaze before he swallows roughly. His lips part and I hold my breath, hoping—pleading—that he’ll say something. *Anything*. Give me any clue that this thing between us wasn’t a momentary blip. A fleeting meeting of two souls. For I don’t know if I could bear that.

Perhaps my feelings are born from the trauma I've experienced these last few weeks. What I'm feeling may simply be some sort of hero worship. Infatuation rather than true, deep, meaningful emotions, but I don't think it is. These feelings definitely aren't one-sided. He might be pushing me away now, but he was as invested in this as I was.

No, I firmly believe what we have is as real as what I have with Hawk and Wilder.

It feels as though my lungs are about to burst as I wait for him to speak, but the creaking of the floorboards in the hall has his lips slamming shut, and he looks to the door as Hawk enters.

“Hey.” A grin spreads across his face when he sees me, making my own light up. I can't help it. I properly swoon when he's around. Hawk has always had that ability to make me feel like a teenage girl. Of course, for most of that time, I *was* a teenage girl. One who tried exceedingly hard to hate him, but in retrospect, I think a lot of that hate was me deflecting. It was covering up the fact that underneath the surface-level fear and wariness, I felt in his presence, I actually liked it when he speared me with his lethal gaze and hit me with his sharp barbs.

I got off on sparing with him. Liked going toe to toe with him. Enjoyed walking that dangerous line between love and hate and wondering which side I'd fall on. I still delight in it. Even more so now because he thoroughly works out all that tension afterward.

My skin heats beneath his roaming gaze, and I take a minute to simply appreciate the beauty that is a half-naked Hawk Davenport. He must have been down in the gym, working out, as he's only wearing a pair of basketball shorts, showing off the vast expanse of his upper body. Broad shoulders that taper to a trim waist, and the phoenix tattoo on his chest a symbol of pride that demonstrates Hawk's commitment to the people he loves.

I remember being envious of his unconditional love toward Hadley the first time I saw it. I wanted that—someone who is

always in your corner, who will always have your back. At the time, I didn't believe I'd ever find that sort of unequivocal devotion—but seeing the pure adoration in his steely hues, there's no question he'd go to the ends of the earth for me, the same way he would for Hadley.

My gaze roams over his skin, noticing the light sheen of sweat. Every inch of him is downright lickable. I wish we were alone, so I could run my tongue over the hard ridges of his abs and feel the flexing of his muscles beneath my palms.

Spotting the filthy intent in my eyes, he prowls toward me. “Better get that mind of yours out of the gutter, or you won't be leaving the house today,” he growls in my ear, his voice low enough that only I can hear.

Warning delivered, he steps away, and I instantly miss the heat of his skin against mine.

“Helllllooooo?” Hadley's voice rings out from the hall, startling me. I was so wrapped up in dirty thoughts of Hawk that I hadn't even heard the front door open.

“We're in here,” Hawk calls out, and a moment later, Hadley joins us in the kitchen. She looks killer in a pair of jeans that mold to her thighs and ass, a trendy sweater, and the combat boots she's worn almost every day since I first met her.

“Hey,” she greets, smiling at Kai and her brother before spinning to me, “Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” I turn my head to look at Hawk, but his entire focus is on his sister, his face set in a harsh mask.

“You're not to let her out of your sight, Hadley, you hear me?” he growls, his soft tone from a moment ago nowhere to be found. “Eyes on her at all times. I take it you have a knife stored in those stupid boots of yours?”

Hadley's jaw drops open in fake offense. “That hurts, big brother. It's like you don't know me *at all*. Of course, I'm armed, and Emilia was mine before you realized how amazing she is. So I'm not about to let some whacko get their hands on her.”

Hawk simply continues to glare at his sister, in much the same way as he did four years ago. His cutting glare might be lacking the hatred it once held for Hadley, but it would still have most people trembling in fear before him.

Not that it fazes Hadley, who simply dismisses her brother like he's an annoying fly buzzing in her face.

I smother a laugh at their antics, and when they both look at me, I raise a brow at Hawk. "Good to see you can still be the same old dickhead you were back at Pac."

He smirks arrogantly. "You better believe it."

Hadley rolls her eyes, clearly having had enough of her brother for one day. "The air in here is stifling, let's get the fuck out."

"I'll see you later?" I say tentatively to Hawk.

Gone is his ice-hard glare, his features softening just for me. "Definitely. You've got your phone on you?"

I pat the back pocket of my jeans. "Yup."

"Okay." His gaze zeros in on my lips, and I can tell he wants to kiss me. Except he can't. Not here, where there are windows, and Mel could be watching our every move.

As if my thoughts alone might summon her, my gaze darts to the window, searching the back lawn for any movements.

I swallow my fear and pull my gaze away, forcing a tight smile to my lips. I hate this. All of it. I hate every single moment of what she's doing. The suspense, the waiting, the fucked-up games. The wedge she's driving between Kai and me, the distance she's forcing between Hawk and me.

As for Wilder and I... Well, I haven't worked out what impact she's had on that relationship yet. I don't see how she could make it any worse. If anything, there's maybe been a change for the better since she kidnapped me, but honestly, it's hard to tell with Wilder. I'm not sure he even knows where his head is at the minute, so how the hell am I meant to work it out?

The only thing keeping my sanity intact has been the private moments Hawk and I have stolen. He has kept me thoroughly distracted most nights. The theater room downstairs has become our go-to place as soon as we get home, and by the time he's finished doing everything he wants to do with me, I'm exhausted, and Mel is the furthest thing from my mind when I crawl into bed, worn out and sated.

"Everything will be okay." I startle at the sound of Kai's voice, and when my eyes snap to his, I find he's no longer glued to his laptop. Instead, he's apparently been watching me while I was lost in my head. "We'll all be here when you get back." He seems conflicted, as though he didn't want to say anything at all yet couldn't stop himself from offering that reassurance I've come to rely on him for.

Most likely seeing that his words have had their desired effect, he returns his attention to his laptop. Turning to say goodbye to Hawk, I find him staring out the same window I was, also searching for some hidden threat. Feeling my eyes on him, he returns his gaze to mine. There's something profoundly reassuring in his expression. I can't quite put a name on the emotion, but it soothes the last of my tattered nerves.

"Be safe," he says in a deep baritone that makes it sound more like he's reassuring me I *will* be safe rather than telling me to be vigilant.

"I will."

Our eyes hold for a moment longer before I step away, pausing as I pass the kitchen island where Kai is sitting. "See you later, Kai."

Not waiting for his response, I follow Hadley out of the room.

"Where are we going?" I ask as we exit the house and make our way down the front steps to where her car is parked.

"Shopping."

"But you hate shopping."

"Yeah, but you love it, and this day is about you."

I'm so grateful that I hug her, even though I know she's not a hugger. "Thank you," I murmur against her ear.

"OOH, THIS IS CUTE," I say, holding up a white, off-the-shoulder sundress.

"It is." Hadley's voice holds none of the enthusiasm mine does, and I can't help but smile. She really does hate shopping. Especially if it's for clothes. Somehow, I bet she'd be just as enthused as I am if we went knife shopping or hideous boot shopping.

"I can think of at least one person who wouldn't mind seeing it on their bedroom floor, though." She smirks, and I blush, casting a cautious eye around the shop to make sure no one can overhear us.

"You realize one of those someones is your brother, right?"

She shrugs a shoulder. "Hard to be too disgusted when he actually seems happy for once." Her nose wrinkles. "Although that doesn't mean I need all the gross details."

I can't help but laugh. "You mean, you don't want to know how he does this thing with his tongue—"

"Oh my god!" Hadley squeals, truly horrified. "Emilia, stop! I'm going to vomit."

I can't help cackling, enjoying the easy banter, and how normal all of this feels. I've missed this more than I even realized.

With the smile still lingering on my lips, I glance at the price tag on the dress. I wince before setting it back on the clothes rack. Letting out a sigh, I turn my back on the clothing. I'd just gotten used to having spare money in my bank account, and now I'm back to being broke. I haven't been able to touch any of my bank accounts in case my stalker was able to track the money, and I haven't received my first paycheck yet from Ridgeway. Although, now that I think about it, I don't

see why I can't use the money in my bank account. It's not like I'm in hiding anymore. Mel already knows where I am.

I wish I'd double-checked with Kai before I left the house.

"Can I use my bank cards?" I ask Hadley while pushing clothes aside on the rack in front of me.

"Umm. I don't see why not, but you should probably check with Kai first."

Sighing, I turn to glance at her over my shoulder. "I should have checked with him—What are you doing?"

I frown at the stack of clothes in Hadley's arms, noticing the white dress at the top of the pile. And are those the jeans I picked out earlier? And the pink fluffy cat pajamas with pointy ears and a tail protruding from the butt?

"I can't afford all that."

"This is my treat, Em."

"What? No, Hadley. I'm not letting you do that."

She cocks a brow, appearing so much like Hawk at the moment. "If my best friend is having a crappy time, and I want to make her feel better by buying her some clothes, then I'm damn well going to do it," she snarks. "Besides, I'm the one who invited you out today, so it's only fair that I pay for it."

"You know that's not how it works," I grumble.

She just shrugs, clearly not giving a shit.

"You can fight me on it, but you know it's a fight you'll lose, so it's probably just better for you to give in now and let me buy you whatever I want."

I purse my lips, hating feeling like a charity case. Although I know that's not what Hadley's trying to do. She's not buying me stuff because she feels sorry for me. When I first met Hadley, we were both scholarship students. She had no idea Hawk was her brother or that she was from a wealthy family. Ever since she found out, she's hated the money aspect. Won't spend a dime of it on herself unless she absolutely has to, but she loves to spend it on those she cares about. Over the years,

she's offered to fly me out here countless times. Other than a couple of times when she guilted me into it, I've turned her down, and not just because I didn't want her to pay for me.

Besides, that hasn't stopped her from spending her money, paying for trips for us elsewhere, and paying for everything when she had come to visit me. If she weren't still the same old Hadley, I'd probably hate it. However, since spending her money makes *her* happy, and we can *both* enjoy ourselves, it's hard to argue.

Which is why I just roll my eyes and continue perusing the shelves.

We go from shop to shop until we're carrying bags full of more clothes than I could possibly wear in an entire year, and I'm sure Hadley's bank is beginning to suspect she's had her card stolen. I'm surprised they haven't already been on the phone or blocked her card.

"Let's dump this in the car and grab some food, yeah?"

"Sounds good," I agree, shaking out my weary legs. It's been a while since I've spent the whole day shopping, and my feet are protesting.

We throw all of the shopping bags in the trunk of Hadley's car before deciding on an Italian restaurant that's only a couple of blocks away.

As soon as we walk inside, I know it's the right choice. It's busy enough that we should be able to chat without being overheard but not so busy that we won't notice if Mel makes an appearance. Not that I think she will. She seems to prefer to watch from the shadows. Still, I feel better knowing she won't be able to hear everything we're talking about.

A hostess shows us to our seats and hands us a menu, both of us placing our orders when a server arrives.

"So," Hadley begins when we're alone. "I actually invited you out today for a reason."

I raise a brow. "You mean a reason other than to buy me everything I so much as glanced at."

A smirk appears on one side of her lips. “Yes.”

Her grin widens, although she continues to fiddle with her napkin as though nervous, and I tilt my head, trying to get a read on her. “The guys proposed.”

My jaw drops open, and my eyes widen. “They what?!” My voice reaches a pitch only dogs can hear. “When? How? Oh my god, tell me everything!” I’m practically bouncing in my chair with excitement, making Hadley laugh.

“It was a while ago,” she says, biting down on her bottom lip. “We’d planned to tell all of you at dinner last month, but...” She trails off, and I filter through my memories of that day before it clicks.

“But Wilder threw his hissy fit, and I ran off.” I wince. “I’m sorry, Hadley.”

“No.” She reaches across the table and places her hand over mine. “There was a lot going on. It wasn’t the right time. And I know it still isn’t the right time, but”—she shrugs—“I just really wanted to tell my best friend.”

I sniffle, swiping at the tears in my eyes. “I’m glad you told me. And I’m so happy for you.” She smiles, and it’s warm and genuine. “Does Hawk know?”

She nods. “I told him a couple of weeks ago. I knew Cam wouldn’t be able to keep his mouth shut around him for too long.”

We both chuckle, and she spends the rest of lunch telling me all about the proposal and their plans for the wedding—not that she seems to have done much of that yet. It’s safe to say Hadley will *not* become a bridezilla. If anything, someone will have to make sure she truly books things and goes to look at wedding dresses; otherwise, the five of them will end up getting married in jeans and t-shirts in the middle of a field.

Actually, that’s probably exactly what Hadley is hoping will happen.

“... obviously you’ll be my Maid of Honor, so—”

“Wait, what?” I’d been so lost in wedding dress daydreams that I’d stopped listening to her.

“You’re my Maid of Honor.”

“I am?”

She just looks at me like I grew three heads. “Of course you are.”

My face splits in two as a wide grin breaks out across it. “Oh my god! We’re going to have the best time. We should start looking at wedding dresses. Oh, do you have a venue in mind? What color scheme are you thinking of? Have you thought about flowers?”

“Woah, hold up there, skippy. We haven’t even worked out *when* we’re going to get married, never mind anything else.”

I wave a dismissive hand. “That’s fine. We can totally work around that.”

She just laughs, shaking her head as I descend into full Maid of Honor-zilla mode.

Once I’ve pestered her about everything wedding-related, we talk about my job at Ridgeway, her college classes, and plans for when she graduates.

It’s one of the best days I’ve had in a long time. One of the most normal, and by the time she drops me off at the brownstone that afternoon, I’m smiling like a loon as I carry all of my shopping bags into the house.

CHAPTER II

EMILIA

“A few of us from the English department are going for drinks later, if you want to join,” Carrie, one of the English professors, says. I have an hour between classes and was on my way to the library to check it out—since I haven’t had a chance yet to explore much of the campus—when we ran into each other.

We’ve spoken a few times in between classes, but with my life being a literal shitstorm since I came to Ridgeway, I haven’t had a proper chance to get to know anyone in the department.

“I’m not sure,” I say hesitantly. It would be great to get out and meet some new people and get to know those I work with better. Except my life isn’t my own at the minute, and I can’t just make spur-of-the-moment decisions without thinking them through.

Carrie shrugs. “No pressure. I just wanted to extend the invite. Since you are new this year, I figured you probably haven’t had the opportunity to meet many people in the department yet.”

She’s right about that, and after going out shopping with Hadley last weekend, I’m already craving to do something else that’s mundane and *normal*. Something that isn’t hiding in the house, looking over my shoulder, or wondering when the next taunting peony will appear.

Besides, wouldn’t going out with work colleagues give the impression that I’m putting distance between myself and the guys? It would show Mel that I’m keeping them at arm’s length and that I heard her when she said I didn’t need to rely on them for protection.

“You know what, I will come,” I state, having made up my mind. “It would be great to get to know some of the others.”

Carrie smiles. “Fantastic. We usually meet at The Globe after the last class of the day.”

“The Globe?” I laugh.

“I know,” she says, smiling. “We’re all a bunch of nerds. It’s one of the quieter college bars. Most of the students prefer the sports bar on the other side of campus. That is, if they can drag themselves away from the frat and sorority parties.”

“Sounds good,” I tell her, still laughing. “I’ll see you there.”

“Looking forward to it.”

We go our separate ways, and I spend the rest of my free hour checking out the English department’s library. It’s small, but from the moment I step into it and the scent of old books prickles my nose, I feel like I’ve entered an alternate world. One steeped in history, lined with rich, wooden bookshelves and small, individual desks with green lamps. It reminds me of the many nights I spent cramming for an exam in the library at Halston. Allowing myself to travel down memory lane, I wander up and down the aisles, occasionally pulling out a book to look at before tucking it away again.

I’m so lost in my own world that I lose all track of time and barely make it back in time for my next class. The rest of the day passes uneventfully, and as my last class filters out the door, I send a text to the group chat, letting the others know that I’m heading out for drinks with a few colleagues after work.

I’m weirdly excited about the whole thing. I’d go for drinks once a week with some of the girls I worked with at the publishing house, but I was never terribly enthusiastic about it. I tagged along more because I felt like I ought to than because I wanted to spend time with them.

Not that there was anything wrong with them. The problem was with me. Without realizing it, I was pulling away from life. Going through the motions without actually engaging or even trying to enjoy myself.

That’s no longer the case. I’m fully awake now, and ready to embrace everything life throws at me. Except for Mel—that was a shitty curveball, life. I want to participate and build a

life for myself, which involves getting to know the people in it—like my colleagues. I love teaching. It's not something I ever envisioned myself doing, and since I have no actual experience in it, I'm completely winging it. I'd love to talk to some of the professors here and gain some insight from them.

I stop by the bathroom on my way out of Burney Hall, freshening my lipstick and running my fingers through my hair while I attempt to calm my nerves. There's no reason why I should be this nervous. I'm generally not socially anxious, though this feels important for some reason. I want to like these people. I want them to like me and accept me as a fellow educator.

I pause for a moment to consider why that is. Why this means so much to me. The dawning of realization comes out of nowhere—because I want to stay here. I want to make Ridgeway my home. I can envision a life here—one where I spend my days lecturing and watching my students grow and learn, and my nights curled up with Hawk in front of the TV, laughing over a glass of wine with Kai while we prepare dinner, and being tortured to death by Wilder between the sheets at night.

Although I've been contemplating a career in teaching for some time, and I know I told Wilder I was staying, saying it and actually envisioning it are two different things. I know I'm finally on the right track because I can now vividly imagine that future in my mind rather than the hazy fog I always saw when I visualized a future with Richard. I'm where I was always meant to be, doing what I was meant to do.

Still daydreaming about what my life here could look like, I exit the bathroom and make my way toward The Globe. On my way, I check the group chat for the guys' responses. I know Hawk and Kai won't be thrilled—and who knows what Wilder's reaction will be. Nevertheless, we all know that in Mel's eyes, this will demonstrate that I'm heeding her warning. Besides, it's not like I'm going to be left alone. Plus, Mel has been careful to keep her distance from me physically since the storm. Whatever she has planned, it's greater than lurking in wait for me to lower my guard.

KAI: I've sent someone to keep an eye on you. Be on your guard, but try and have some fun.

HAWK: Message every hour so we know you're okay.

UNSURPRISINGLY, there's no response from Wilder, and satisfied that the guys aren't on their way to haul my ass home, I tuck my phone back in my pocket as I reach the bar.

Heat envelops me as soon as I step inside, my eyes drinking in the dark wooden tables and bar top, the comfy-looking brown leather armchairs and booths, and checkered tweed cushions. It's precisely how I'd imagine a bar called The Globe would look —olde-worlde, rustic, and cozy, like how I picture a typical small English pub.

An open fire burns in the grate, chasing away the cold winter weather and immediately inviting you further into the room.

“Hey, Emilia,” Carrie calls out, spotting me in the doorway. A crowd of five people are packed into a booth beside the fire, and I give Carrie a small wave as I maneuver around the tables toward her. Except for the bartender, no one else is here. Although, I guess it's still too early for most students to be out drinking. Plus, I can absolutely understand why Carrie said most students don't bother coming here.

It's an acquired taste, not one most college students who just want to get wasted and party would be interested in. In any case, it's absolutely my kind of vibe. I can picture myself here with a glass of red wine, reading a book by the fire, or grading papers at one of the tables.

“Hey,” I say when I've made it to their table, giving everyone an awkward wave.

“Emilia, this is Daniel, Isaac, Alice, and Louis,” Carrie introduces, working her way around the table. “Everyone, this is Emilia. She's filling in for Francis this year.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Emilia,” Daniel says as I take the empty seat beside him. “Tell us about yourself.”

“Oh, uhh.” *Crap, why didn't I anticipate this?* “I only moved to Ridgeway at the beginning of the academic year. I worked in publishing before.”

“Oh, wow,” Louis, who is sitting opposite me, says. “I’m sure that was completely different from teaching.”

I wasn’t in publishing for all that long, and I was a grunt at the bottom of the food chain, working all hours of the day, but since it would probably look suspicious for someone straight out of college with zero experience to get a job teaching here, I lie through my teeth. “Oh, yeah. Vastly different.”

“And how are you settling in? Are you finding the course load manageable?” Alice asks. “I know I felt in over my head when I first started. It can take a while to get into the swing of things.”

“I’m definitely a little out of my depth,” I say self-deprecatingly.

She gives me a knowing smile. “Well, if you ever need any pointers or want to run a lesson plan past me, my door is always open.”

“Right, that’s enough work talk,” Louis states loudly, raising chuckles from us all. “Emilia, you need a drink. What can I get you?”

I ask for a glass of wine, and the six of us fall into easy chatter. Everyone in the department seems close, and they soon fill me in on the details of their personal lives so I never feel left out. I laugh and chat with them, not noticing the time until the bartender walks over to tell us it’s last call.

We all bundle into our coats, and I call a taxi before we head out into the cold night.

“It was nice to meet you,” Isaac—an older, polite gentleman—says.

“Yeah, we’ll grab coffee next week,” Alice tells me, the others saying their goodbyes before everyone breaks off and

heads toward their cars.

I notice Louis hanging back, and when I turn to look at him, he says, “I’ll wait with you.”

“Oh no, you don’t have to do that. I’m sure the taxi will be here any minute.”

“It’s not a problem,” he says easily as we amble toward where I’m supposed to meet the cab.

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy working here,” he says casually. He—everyone—has been nothing but pleasant all evening. “It’s a great place, and the department has a great team.”

“Everyone seems so nice,” I agree.

He laughs. “You should see us on our monthly quiz night. Alice is ultra-competitive. She’ll rip your head off if you get an answer wrong.”

I chuckle along with him.

“The next one is in a couple of weeks—you should come with us.”

“Yeah, I think I will.” This time, I don’t agonize over the decision; I simply do what I *want* to do for a change.

Louis is nothing but friendly as we stand and chat, waiting for the cab. “Well, I hope we didn’t scare you off tonight,” he jokes when headlights light up the parking lot.

“Not at all.” I laugh. “I had a great time and really enjoyed meeting you all.”

“I think you’ll fit in here fine, Emilia. Welcome to the team.” He pulls me in for a quick hug before I jump in the cab, giving him a finger wave through the window as the car pulls away from the curb.

THE NEXT MORNING, there’s a skip in my step as I make my way through Burney Hall. Despite Mel breathing down my neck, life has never been better. For the first time in years, I

feel like I belong. Like I've found somewhere I can call home and be truly happy.

It's ironic that I had to lose myself to find myself again, but I'm beginning to think it was a necessary evil.

I'm still floating on my morning high when I walk into my classroom. My steps slow as my gaze falls on the desk. My good mood is swiftly snuffed out when I spot a rectangular wooden box sitting there.

With measured steps and trepidation beating an irregular rhythm against my chest, I approach the table until I'm standing over the wooden box.

My gaze roams over the engraved pattern. It looks deceptively innocent, yet its mysterious appearance says otherwise.

With a lump in my throat, I cautiously lift the lid. A gasp falls from my lips, the cover falling shut as my hand claps over my mouth, smothering any further noise. I've been here before—in this exact scenario.

It wasn't all that fun the first time, and it's no different now. Although I'm proud to say I manage to keep my cool this time.

Digging deep for courage, I haltingly reach out and pry the lid open. *Yup, definitely didn't imagine it the first time.* Two eyeballs are literally staring back at me. There's an eerie blue tinge to the whole eye; the pupils are unnaturally wide and cloudy with death.

A strange numbness envelops me, distorting my sense of reality and making all of this feel like some weird dream. That detachment enables me to think more clearly than I did the last time I was confronted with a body part, and my voice comes out eerily calm when I call Kai.

He answers on the first ring. "What's wrong?" he barks, but I can hear a tinge of panic in his voice.

"Mel sent me a new gift," I state in a monotone voice.

"What is it this time?"

“Eyes.”

There’s a moment of silence before a stunned, “What?”

“There are a set of, uh, eyes on my desk.”

“Jesus, fuck,” Kai mutters. “Do you know who they belong to?”

I scoff, but it comes out unhinged sounding. “No. Can you just please come get rid of it?”

He sighs heavily. “I can’t. Mel will be watching.”

Hysteria starts to settle in as I ask in a high-pitched voice, “What am I supposed to do with it then?”

“Put it in your desk drawer for now. Bring it home with you tonight.”

“You expect me to teach all day with a pair of eyeballs in my desk?”

“I could get one of the plants to pick it up this afternoon,” he suggests.

“No, it’s fine,” I grumble, unable to comprehend how it somehow manages to surpass my expectations every time I think life can’t get any worse.

Ending the call with Kai with the promise that we’ll keep in touch, I snap the lid shut on the box of eyeballs and stuff it in my desk. I’m still staring at the closed desk drawer when my phone buzzes. Thankful for the distraction, I pick it up.

***KAI:** We’ll get to the bottom of this. Call if you need me.*

HIS TEXT REASSURES ME A LITTLE, however it doesn’t stop my eyes from repeatedly drifting to the drawer. Evidently, out of sight does *not* mean out of mind, and I end up obsessing over who the fuck they could belong to all morning.

An ex-boyfriend who Mel decided to target?

If I hadn't seen all three guys this morning, I'd be terrified that they belonged to Hawk or Wilder.

There's no reason for Mel to have gone after anyone other than them.

The arrival of students for my first class of the day gets me out of my head, and I force a smile, greeting them as they take their seats.

I go through the motions of teaching and interacting with students while half of my mind is focused on the creepy-as-shit box locked in the top drawer of my desk.

As soon as my last class before lunch finishes, I grab my bag, ready to get as far away as possible from the secret hiding in my drawer. Before I can make my escape, Daniel pops his head through the classroom door.

"Hey," he greets casually—far too casually, considering the day I'm having.

"Hey, Daniel," I return, trying my hardest to act normally. "How are you?"

"I'm good." He moves further into the room, closing the door behind him. For the first time, I notice the stiffness in his posture, the furrow in his brow, and the tight press of his lips. Instantly, alarm bells start ringing. "This is, uh, a little weird, but did Louis stay with you until you left last night?"

There's a rapid uptick of my heart, a flare of panic as puzzle pieces begin to fall into place. My mouth is bone dry, and I have to lick my lips before forcing out, "Yeah. Why?"

At my answer, his face pinches. "Did you see where he went after you got in the cab?"

"No, sorry. Daniel, what is this about?"

"He, uh, didn't make it home last night, and he hasn't shown up for work today."

A sinking pit forms in my stomach and a clear picture is beginning to form. "H-have you tried calling him?" I ask, trying to keep the tinge of panic out of my voice. There's no

reason to suspect his disappearance has anything to do with Mel. Perhaps he got into a car accident and is at the hospital.

God, I can't believe I'm hoping someone was in a serious enough car wreck that they've been unable to contact anyone. But being in a coma at the hospital is better than being dead without any eyes, right?

The fact that I'm capable of dark humor right now speaks volumes of how quickly I am adapting to this fucked-up game.

"Yeah, but it just goes to voicemail, and he hasn't shown up at any of the hospitals nearby."

I swallow roughly, careful to keep any emotion off my face. "Have you called the police?"

Sighing, he swipes his hand through his hair. "I'm going to do that now. I just wanted to see if you knew anything before I did."

"I'm sorry," I say again, the apology tasting rotten in my mouth. "I didn't see anything. He stayed with me until the taxi arrived and waved goodbye as it pulled away. I never saw where he went after that."

"It's fine. It was a long shot, anyway."

"I hope you find him," I call lamely, truly hoping he does but somehow knowing he won't. With his phone already in hand, he gives me a two-finger wave as he heads out of the room.

As soon as I'm alone, I dig my phone out of my bag, and with shaking hands, I call Kai.

"I think I know who they belong to," I blurt out the second he answers.

"Who?"

"Louis Perez. He's one of the professors here. He was one of my colleagues I was out with last night."

"Why do you think it's him?" Kai asks, not because he doesn't believe me, but because he's the kind of guy who needs to understand the complete picture.

“Another professor in the department—one I was out with last night—just told me he never made it home last night, and hasn’t come in today or called anyone. Apparently, no one can get in touch with him.”

“Yeah, but what makes you think the eyes belong to him? Why would Mel target him instead of one of the others you were with last night?”

Guilt gnaws on my bones as I confess, “He waited with me after everyone else left. He... he hugged me goodnight.” My head hangs as remorse sickens me. I thought nothing of it at the time, yet now I can’t stop replaying that moment over in my head, viewing it the way Mel would have from whatever secret spot she was hiding in.

How she must have misinterpreted the two of us talking alone; how she overanalyzed that brief hug. Just like she did with all of my interactions with her, she misread those few moments alone with Louis, built them into something more, then took all her sociopathic rage out on him—over absolutely fucking nothing!

“Okay,” Kai says calmly and confidently, his unruffled demeanor somewhat consoling me. “I’ll see what I can find out about Louis’ whereabouts.”

I can hear what he’s not saying—that he believes, just as I do, that he’s not going to find him anywhere. He’s not trapped in a car at the side of the road. He’s not lying unconscious in a hospital bed. Hell, he’s not even a dead John Doe in the morgue. He’ll have vanished off the face of the earth, fallen into Mel’s clutches. All because he hugged me.

It’s a cold reminder of just how callous and twisted she is.

“This is not your fault, Em,” Kai says softly, somehow knowing exactly where my thoughts were. “Leave it with me. I’ll look into it and get back to you.”

“Kai, one of the professors here is calling the police.”

“Don’t worry,” he reassures. “They won’t do anything for twenty-four hours.”

I'm not sure if that assures or sickens me, but I feel better knowing Kai is looking into it—even if I already know it won't change anything.

The rest of the day passes in anxious turmoil where I check my phone constantly, frequently opening the chat with Kai and debating on asking for an update. I only refrain because I have back-to-back classes. Although, if I'm being honest, I know any update will only confirm what I know deep down—that Louis is dead.

CHAPTER 12

HAWK

“This is getting out of hand,” Emilia exclaims as she continues pacing back and forth across the cinema room. She’s been on edge since she got home—not that I can blame her. Kai’s confirmation of the death of her colleague has freaked her out. Guilt shines in her eyes, regardless of how many times we try to tell her that none of this is her fault. “It’s only a matter of time until she comes after one of you.”

“We’ve all done far more than hug Emilia, so why hasn’t she come after us?” Wilder asks. He chose a seat as far away from Emilia as possible when he walked in, but his gaze has been following her all night as she paces a hole in the floor.

I no longer have any idea what’s going on between them. I saw the way he watched her that night in the bathtub. A bomb could have gone off, and he still wouldn’t have been able to tear his gaze away from our girl as she came. Not to mention the fact that he implanted a tracker in her without her consent. You don’t do that unless you care about someone on some level.

Yet he’s been avoiding her ever since, mostly staying at the frat house and only showing up for house meetings.

I know we’re all meant to be acting like we can’t stand the sight of one another, but I’d been hoping he might have gotten over his hurt feelings when he found out Em was missing. It looked like he might have...

Damn idiot needs to wake up and realize Em isn’t the root of all his problems. The opposite, in fact—she was the one who kept him sane while we were at Pac. He went completely off the rails after she left. At first, I thought it was heartbreak—and no doubt that was part of it—but it wasn’t the sole reason for his deterioration. Even a broken heart doesn’t account for how crazed he was.

Wilder was always a little unhinged, but after Em left, he let his demons swallow him whole. At times, he barely appeared human, and other times he was no better than a zombie—barely around, and even when he was, he didn't care to participate in anything.

Until Em came back into our lives, I haven't seen him look so... himself since our days at Pac. He thinks he hates her; he thinks he's pissed at her because she left, only I think it's more. He'd have caved by now and fucked her if that's all it was.

Whatever the reason he's holding back, I seriously hope he figures his shit out soon. Thoughts of a repeat of that night from four years ago fill my dreams. I'm dying to get my Little Sparrow between us, naked and needy for our cocks, begging for relief as we fuck that sweet pussy and tight ass, filling her so full she won't be able to handle it.

And if Wilder isn't going to come to his senses, then Kai better. I don't care which one of them is the other slice in my Emilia sandwich, so long as there *is* an Emilia sandwich. It's been too fucking long since the last one, and I have a craving that won't go away until it's sated.

"My guess is we're harder targets for her. We know who she is, what she looks like, and what she's capable of. It was easier for her to get beneath Louis' guard."

"So what do we do now?" I ask, looking at Kai. I might own a private security firm, but this is well beyond my wheelhouse.

"Police won't look into Louis' disappearance for another day, probably. I'm guessing Mel will have covered her tracks,"—he flicks his gaze toward a still-pacing Emilia—"much like she did with Richard. They might want to question you, Em, but just tell them the truth about that night. You didn't know the guy, so they have no reason to suspect anything."

Emilia stops long enough to consider what he's saying before nodding in acknowledgment. "And what about Mel? We've tried going along with what she wanted, but she never

shows her face. We have no idea where she's staying or even who she really is. We're getting nowhere; meanwhile, she's..." she waves her hand in the air, returning to her pacing, unable to finish her sentence.

"We need to set up our sting operation ASAP," Kai states with finality.

"So long as Emilia doesn't end up fucking kidnapped again," Wilder growls menacingly. All three of us stare at him in surprise, but he just stares right back.

See? It's shit like that that proves he fucking cares. If only he'd listen to himself.

We spend the rest of the night putting together a plan, and it's late by the time we call it a night and leave the cinema room to head to bed.

"Do you hear that?" I question when we're out in the hall.

Conversations cut off as we all fall silent, listening.

Tap, tap, tap.

"What is that?" Emilia asks in a quiet whisper.

I share glances with the others before turning my head toward the source of the sound and following it up the hall. Kai tells Emilia to stay back before I hear footfalls behind me.

The tapping sound gets louder as I approach the open doorway into the gym, and before I can step through it, Kai puts a hand on my shoulder. I glance down, finding him holding out a small handgun. Darting my gaze up to his face, he murmurs, "Take it."

Showing me his other hand, where another one is nestled, I nearly snort. Kai gives the impression that he's the perfect boy scout, but he's always armed and ready. I take the proffered gun with a sharp nod of thanks, checking the safety is off before lifting my arm and stepping into the darkened gym.

Kai flicks the light on behind me while I quickly scan the room. Nothing immediately jumps out at me. My brows furrow as I do another sweep.

“There’s nothing here,” Kai states, keeping his voice low.

I’m aware of Wilder and Emilia entering behind me as I move further into the room. The *tap, tap, tap* comes again, and I spin to face the bifold glass doors that lead out to the back lawn.

The interior light reflects the room back at me, preventing me from seeing anything outside. “Flip the lights off,” I order, focusing on the glass doors leading outside.

Someone turns out the lights, and when my vision has adjusted, I squint at the strange object hanging on one of the doors, illuminated by the faint moonlight.

“What is that?” Emilia asks.

Kai and I move toward the doors at the same time. He flicks the lock and slides the door open while I step out, scanning the yard before giving my attention to the item hanging on the door.

In the dark, all I can make out is the general shape. However, when Wilder turns the gym light on again, it provides a backlight, revealing the object in all of its horrifying glory.

“What the fuck?” I gasp, staring at the item in horror.

“Holy shit,” Kai murmurs.

“What is it?” Emilia calls, stepping closer.

Kai immediately throws out his arm. “Don’t.”

“Why? What is it?” she repeats, stopping in her tracks.

“Uhhh.” I have no idea how to explain what I’m looking at.

Pulling up the flashlight on his phone, Kai takes a closer look. Rather him than me. I’m happy enough standing right here, where I can see the grisly scene in as much detail as I care to. In fact, I’d rather view it from where Em and Wilder are standing. I’m not easily turned by blood. I spent much of my youth getting into fights, and I’ve shed blood in Hadley’s name, but this is just cold-blooded, deranged violence.

The flashlight only serves to add a glaring light to the horror decorating the door. The red blood glistens, making the ashen color of the skin glaringly obvious.

“Guys!” Wilder calls. “Don’t leave us hanging in suspense here.”

My gaze flicks to Emilia’s wide eyes, filled with questions. She catches me looking at her, and I grimace. “I’m pretty sure it’s more of Louis.” The blood drains from her face, hand clamping over her mouth as she stares at me in shock. “His hands, to be precise.”

She stumbles and Wilder grabs her. Wrapping his arms protectively around her middle, he pulls her in against him as he glowers at the object on the door with a deranged expression. One that promises violence and death. It’s a look I haven’t seen since Hadley was kidnapped and he was hellbent on tagging along to rescue her. One that clearly says *I’ll happily rip off every one of your fingernails before gutting you and leaving you for dead if you go near my loved ones again.*

It’s a look that he wouldn’t be wearing if he wasn’t in fucking love with Emilia.

So why the hell is he still fighting it?

I smirk to myself, knowing it’s only a matter of time before Wilder snaps.

“There’s a note attached,” Kai states, carefully reaching out to lift it. “No one touches what’s mine. Now he can’t see, hear, or touch you. Anyone else who dares will meet the same end.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Emilia groans from behind her hand. Except she doesn’t bend over or hurriedly vacate the room, so she must still be holding it together.

Passing me the piece of paper, I take it as he reaches out to grab the string tying the two hands together and pinning them to the door. With all the delicacy one might transport an explosive device, Kai carries it into the room so we can look at it under better lighting.

Emilia gasps when she sees the whole ensemble. “Oh my god!”

“That is fucking twisted,” Wilder states. However, instead of the shock and horror Emilia is currently expressing, the sick bastard looks... impressed.

“Are those ears?” Emilia squeaks.

Now that I can see the whole thing more clearly, I can see that she’s right. It’s a twisted wreath composed of chopped-off ears and hands tied together with string.

“Jesus Christ,” I murmur, staring at it in shock.

“This is just because he gave me a hug goodbye?” Emilia asks, a tremble in her voice. Otherwise, she’s holding up well. She’s still caged in Wilder’s arms but standing strong on her own two feet, looking pissed off rather than scared. “It didn’t even mean anything. He was just being friendly.”

“Mel clearly didn’t think so,” Kai retorts, still inspecting Mel’s latest gift.

“We seriously need to catch this whacko,” Wilder growls. “What if it’s one of us next time? Or Em?”

“This is why you need to be careful,” Kai says sternly, giving me a pointed look. “We can’t give her any reason to come after *any* of us.”

“Are we still sticking to the plan?” Emilia asks.

“Yes,” Kai answers definitively. “We need to stop her before someone else gets hurt.” The way Kai’s gaze lingers on Emilia, it’s clear what he truly means is *before she gets hurt*. A sentiment I wholeheartedly agree with. Mel has staked her claim and is done letting others touch what she believes is hers. It won’t be long until she comes after Em, and what then? What happens when she discovers Em doesn’t return those feelings?

“You should go up to bed,” Kai tells her. “We’ll deal with this.”

Emilia gapes at him, but before she can find her words, I interject. “He’s right. Go on up to bed. We’ll sort this out, and

then I'll come join you."

She looks at me for a long moment, and I can see the internal debate raging before she finally acquiesces, giving a slow nod.

"Okay," she says, biting on her lower lip as she glances at Kai and then Wilder.

As if he can't help himself, Wilder reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear before dropping his arms and allowing her to leave.

She stares up into his face, confusion swirling in her green depths before she takes a step back and moves toward the door. In the threshold, she glances over her shoulder, her eyes meeting mine. "I'll see you up there."

We wait until her footsteps have disappeared up the stairs before Kai speaks up. "Don't suppose either of you has any experience with getting rid of dead body parts?"

I snort, hysterical laughter bubbling up inside me. The fucked-up thing is I do have experience disposing of dead bodies. It's been a while, but I've found dumping bodies in lakes to be an effective method.

Darting my gaze between the two of them, I ask, "Anyone up for a drive?"

"WILL YOU SIT DOWN," I grumble. "You're stressing me out."

Emilia simply tosses me an aggravated look and continues her pacing back and forth across the kitchen while wringing her hands.

It's been three days since Mel's latest gift, and Kai is currently leading a team of people as they stake out Emilia's classroom, waiting for Mel to show her face. We have men and women undercover as college students stationed at every entrance into Burney Hall, plus surveillance cameras set up outside her classroom since the university doesn't have any.

Kai insisted on being nearby, so he's keeping a low profile, hiding out in an empty classroom.

The police contacted Emilia yesterday, asking her to recall the night Louis disappeared. Thankfully, given the fact that Emilia has no association with Louis, and security footage shows her getting in the cab and leaving, they aren't considering her a suspect. They'll investigate Louis' disappearance, and when their trail runs cold, and they don't come up with any suspects, they'll move on to newer cases. He'll be forgotten about. It's the sad reality of the justice system, even if it works in our favor. The last thing we need are for the cops to become aware of Mel.

I know Wilder is hungry to deliver Mel's retribution himself, and I'll be standing there beside him when he does. I've no doubt Kai will be too. Our form of justice will be permanent and very much illegal.

"What if she doesn't show up before my classes begin?" Emilia asks, sounding panicked. "She's going to know as soon as she sees my face that something is up."

"Breathe," I tell her, trying to calm her down. "The team will be in place all day. Forget they are even there and just go about your day as normal."

She scoffs, throwing another unappreciated glare my way. "Sure. I'll just pretend I don't have a stalker who wants to lock me away in a tower and that Kai and your men aren't out there risking their necks to catch her."

"That's the spirit."

She rolls her eyes at my sarcasm but thankfully comes to sit beside me at the kitchen island.

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then we'll go back tomorrow. And the next day. And the next, until we catch her. And if we still come up empty-handed, we'll devise another plan," I state confidently. Even though we're in full view of the kitchen window and Mel could be lurking outside if she isn't on campus, I reach out and

clasp Emilia's hand with my own. "We won't stop until she's no longer a threat. You hear me?"

I hook my foot around the leg of her barstool and drag it toward me. She lets out a squeak as the chair scrapes along the floor, until it butts up against mine, and Emilia's jasmine scent invades my nostrils.

"If we don't catch her today, then it will be someday soon, because I can only keep my hands off you for so long."

Emilia snorts, but at least there's a smile on her face now. "Your hands were all over me last night."

"Mmm," I hum, remembering the feel of her soft skin beneath mine as I bent her over the arm of the sofa downstairs and fucked her until she was screaming my name. "And if Mel wasn't an issue, I'd have you spread out on this island, fucking your brains out before we both went our separate ways for the day."

I love how Emilia's breathing hitches, and a soft pink floods her cheeks, as though she's picturing me doing exactly that. The uncomfortable tightness in my crotch has me wishing I could.

Soon.

Soon, that will be exactly how we start every day. I'll eat her for breakfast before heading to class or work, and she'll go off to teach with the feel of my tongue in her pussy and a just-fucked glow that will remind all of those fuckboys on campus that she's off-limits.

Emilia shifts on her stool, squeezing her thighs together and making me smirk. "Does that get you wet?" I purr huskily, caring less and less by the second if Mel is standing outside watching this. Let her watch. Let her see exactly how Emilia responds to my voice, my dirty words, my touch.

Let that crazy psycho see what she will never have. Because even if she manages to snare Emilia and keep her all to herself, she will never, ever experience what I do. Emilia will never melt beneath her touch. Never drop her inhibitions

and let loose the wild girl who resides deep inside her. She will never know Emilia as intimately as I do.

“Answer me,” I demand in a low growl I know gets her hot. “Do you want me to start every day by making you come before sending you out the door with my cum dripping down your thighs and the stench of sex on you, so every guy that enters your classroom will know you’re mine?”

Her eyes snap up to mine, flaring with lust. “Yes.”

Smirking, I reach a hand out and fist the fabric of her long skirt, bunching it until the soft, creamy skin of her calf is exposed.

“Hawk,” she pants, arousal and fear tinging her voice.

“Shhh,” I soothe, continuing my task of pulling up her skirt. “She can’t see us here, but you’ve gotta keep a straight face. Can you do that, baby?”

My hand slides up her leg, my fingers trailing along the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, until I reach the fabric of her panties. I teasingly brush my thumb over the front of them, loving the way she gasps at that simple touch.

“You gotta give me an answer,”—another teasing brush over her clit—“Or I’ll have to stop.”

“No, don’t stop,” she pleads, her hands wrapping around the edge of the table and clinging to it as though her life depends on it. “Please.”

God damn, I do love it when she begs.

“Then you have to promise to keep a straight face.”

“I promise. Please, just don’t stop.”

Smirking, I push the fabric of her panties aside and sweep my fingers through her gathered arousal. “So wet already,” I purr smugly. “Is all of this for me?”

“Yes,” she moans as I massage her folds. I want nothing more than to get on my knees, push her thighs apart, and stare at her glistening wet pussy lips that are dripping solely for me. Nevertheless, with Herculean effort, I manage to restrain

myself. That would definitely be a dead giveaway as to what we're up to.

Rather, I content myself with watching her fight her body's instincts, biting down on her lower lip and struggling to keep any sign of what I'm doing to her beneath the table from showing on her face.

Sliding two digits inside her tight cunt, I groan, struggling to contain my own reaction as her slick heat wraps around my fingers.

"God, Em, you've got no idea how badly I want to watch your pussy swallow my cock right now."

She moans, her face scrunched. I still my fingers inside her, and she growls in frustration, working to smooth out the lines. When she's once again composed, I restart the rhythm, curling my fingers with every thrust, until she's breathing heavily.

Every time her face goes slack, or she scrunches her eyes shut, I stop until she's a strung-out, pent-up mess.

"Goddammit, Hawk. I need to come," she barks.

Smirking, I shift in my seat. "Put your head on the counter, baby. I'll give you what you want."

Doing as I say, she rests her head on her forearms, hiding her face in the crook of her arm. From an outsider's perspective, she probably looks upset or stressed out; hell, maybe she even seems like she's taking a nap.

Now that her face can't give away what I'm doing, I rub my thumb over her clit as I continue to thrust deep into her pussy, eliciting sweet little moans that go straight to my dick.

"Fucking hell, Little Sparrow, you feel so good," I groan as she begins to clench around me. "I can feel how close you are. I wish I could see your face, watch as you come apart beneath my fingers. You look so beautiful when you're shattering for me."

"Oh, god, Hawk." My name is the sweetest sound as she goes tumbling over the ledge, her whole body shaking with her

release.

She doesn't lift her head from the table as I remove my fingers with a wet suction sound, wiping them on my trousers before fixing her panties and skirt.

"Feel better?" I ask smugly.

"No," she growls, her voice muffled. Lifting her head, my eyes linger on the redness of her cheeks. "That was like offering me a kernel of popcorn when the whole bowl is sitting right there." She waves toward my crotch, her lower lip pushing out in a pout.

It takes a second before I throw my head back and burst out into raucous laughter.

"Did you just compare my dick to a bowl of popcorn?"

"Really delicious, buttery popcorn that you practically inhale before the opening credits have finished rolling, and that leaves you wanting to lick the bowl when you're done."

I can't stop laughing as tears build in my eyes. God, I can't remember the last time I laughed like this, or if I ever have.

Emilia's carefree attitude—her quirky sense of humor, the hilarious pajamas she loves to wear, and the fact that she doesn't care what others think about her—always rubs off on me when she's around. It leaves me feeling less burdened and more easygoing, which isn't me at all.

I am the farthest thing from easygoing. I'm uptight, moody—not my word, but Hadley sure does like to toss it around—and a general all-round asshole.

Except when I'm around Emilia.

As my laughter peters out, my eyes drop to her lips, my voice coming out low and awed. "I want to kiss you so badly right now."

Cheeks still glowing, she looks up at me through her eyelashes, smiling coyly.

"You know, now that I've mentioned it, I could totally go for a bag of popcorn." When I continue to stare at her in

confusion, she tacks on, “Could you grab me some from the pantry?”

I cock a brow, not sure what she’s getting at. While I’d well believe Emilia is a popcorn for breakfast, ice cream for dinner, and stay in pjs all day kinda girl, today just isn’t one of those days.

Still, I get up and make my way to the walk-in pantry to get her popcorn. Grabbing the bag from the shelf, I turn around, but I don’t make it a single step before Emilia flings herself at me.

Her lips crash with mine, hungry and desperate. Forgotten, the bag of popcorn drops to the floor as I haul her into my arms. She wraps her legs around my waist, and with one hand on her ass, I sink the other into her silky, soft hair, holding her still while I kiss her with equal vigor.

“Fucking hell, Little Sparrow,” I growl into her mouth. “I’ve never been one to lose myself to drugs or alcohol, but I am fucking addicted to you.”

Pulling back so she can stare into my eyes, our heavy breaths mingle in the air between us. “I’m addicted to you, too, Hawk Davenport, and I don’t ever want to find a cure.”

“Baby, there is no cure for what we have.” I capture her lips with mine in another passionate kiss, and we lose ourselves in one another until the faint ringing of a cell phone penetrates through the thick cloud of lust.

“Shit,” I pant, dropping her to the ground before digging my cell out of my pocket. We both glance at Kai’s name flashing on the screen before sharing a tense look. As we crash land back in reality, the heat and passion of a moment ago are already forgotten.

Holding her gaze, I answer the phone and put it on speaker. “Yeah?”

Kai’s resounding sigh is the only thing I need to hear to know this morning didn’t go as planned.

“We didn’t get her.”

I can't look away from Emilia as her shoulders drop and her eyes close, needing a moment to collect herself.

"What happened?" I bark, harsher than intended.

"She paid some freshman twenty bucks to deliver the flowers. Claimed it was a game her sorority was playing, where they had to deliver flowers to a teacher they had a crush on, and she didn't want to get caught." A moment of silence fills the room while we process what he's saying. "My guess is she's been pulling the same scam on other students."

"So she's never actually been inside my classroom?" Emilia questions.

"Doesn't look that way, but she must be lurking nearby to know when you aren't in the room."

"What now?" I ask as Emilia rubs at her temple.

"We all go about our day as normal. I'll keep the team in place, though I doubt we'll get anything."

"And what about Mel?" Emilia asks, sounding frustrated.

"We'll have to devise another plan to get her to reveal herself."

Emilia blows out a breath as I hang up the phone and pull her in for a hug.

"I'm sorry," I murmur against her ear.

"It's not your fault," she says despondently. She clings to me for several long moments before untangling herself. Despite the sadness in her eyes, her shoulders are pushed back, and she appears more determined. Her ability to shoulder bad news and bounce back astounds me. Most others would crumble, but not Emilia.

She smirks, the tug of her lip drawing my attention. "However, I am holding you to that promise when this is all over."

My brows furrow as I stare at her in confusion.

"Orgasms for breakfast every morning."

I chuckle, pulling her back in for a quick kiss. “Deal. And in exchange, you can inhale my cock and lick it clean any time you want, Little Sparrow.”

CHAPTER 13

KAI

The flashing red and blue neon lights from the police cars and ambulance dance across the night sky, but I barely register their disturbance. I can hardly even see them over the graphic image so embedded in my mind's eye that it blocks out everything around me.

All I can see is her white Converse, streaked with blood. Blood that sticks to the soles of my boots, making that tacky sound when you walk on it. The same blood that I can still taste coating my tongue, that is also caked under my fingernails and drying on my skin.

We learned in biology last year that the human body contains approximately five liters of blood. I remember thinking it wasn't that much. When you weighed it all out, it didn't seem like enough to circulate around the entire body. But seeing it spread out over the floor tonight, it seemed like far more than five liters. Far more blood than I ever could have imagined one person contained.

How can one tiny, five-foot-two girl have that much blood inside her? It just doesn't add up.

I pull the gray polyester blanket tighter around my shoulders, but it does nothing to combat the cold that has taken root in my core. A cold so numbing that you know it will never fully go away. A cold so rooted in guilt and remorse that it would readily devour you and leave your frozen remains to be broken down by the elements if you let it.

Something I might just do.

What purpose does my life have now?

She was my everything. My all.

And I let her down. Let her down so completely that there's no way I should be allowed to go on living. Not without her.

Unless my punishment for not taking her seriously, for not listening to her concerns when she tried to tell me something

was wrong, is to live the rest of my days with this aching loss eating away at me.

“Son, is there anyone I can call?” a paramedic asks, kneeling in front of me.

I shake my head, scraping out a no.

My throat is raw, my voice hoarse. I vaguely recall screaming. Screaming and screaming until the sound of sirens eventually drowned out the racket. Or perhaps I lost my voice at some point. I don't remember.

All I remember is how her honeyed eyes stared up at me, lacking their usual warmth and charm. None of the vibrancy that made her her. I couldn't take my eyes off her, but she wasn't looking at me. She couldn't see me.

Because she was already gone.

LEANING AGAINST MY DESK, I watch my team hard at work. There are eight of us. All men and women I've worked with numerous times before. Some of them have done stints in the military, like myself, while others are simply excellent with computers or finding information. The one thing they all have in common is that I trust each and every one of them implicitly.

They've all been pulled away from whatever case they were working on to focus on Emilia. Even I'm not technically back at work. I've been doing paperwork and consulting on cases, but the majority of my time is spent here, in this room with these people, trying to find out everything we can about Mel and keep Emilia safe. I've already told Hawk I won't be taking on any other cases or going out in the field until Mel has been caught.

He easily agreed. In fact, I'm pretty sure he was planning to tell me exactly that if I hadn't beat him to the punch.

“Give me an update,” I order my team, crossing my arms over my chest and staring around the room. After our failure

yesterday, I'm desperate for some progress. I see the strain all of this is taking on Emilia, and it infuriates me that I can't seem to help. At every turn, I'm outsmarted by this woman, and it's pissing me the fuck off.

"I can confirm that Mel isn't her real name," Connie, my tech girl, says. "Her application to Halston was forged. I'm not even sure if she actually applied or hacked their system and just gave herself a place."

I frown, taking in what she's saying. That information raises new possibilities, such as: did Mel know Emilia before she started at Halston? Or did she just so happen to be going there and end up as Emilia's roommate? Was Emilia simply unlucky enough to get the roommate from hell?

"Any leads on her real identity?"

Connie shakes her head. "Not yet."

"Okay, keep looking. Let me know if you find anything."

She nods and gets back to work.

"Does anyone have eyes on Mel now? Do we know where in the city she's staying?"

My question is met by murmured no's.

"Most of the time, she's a ghost. However, we have seen her in a couple of cameras," says John, the man in charge of tracking Mel. He pulls up several screenshots from security footage. All of them show Mel. I recognize one from one of the cafes on Ridgeway's campus. Another is from a traffic cam near the restaurant Hadley and Emilia went to on Saturday.

"She seems to know where the cameras are as we only get partial views of her face, and in most of them"—he pulls up the traffic cam of the street outside the restaurant—"she keeps her face down, so it's not caught on camera. However, you see here in this one"—he flicks to the tape of the screenshot—"she lifts her head."

He plays the moment where Mel lifts her head to stare brazenly into the camera on repeat, and on the third time, it

clicks with me. Furious, I slam my hand down on the table. “She’s taunting us,” I growl. “She knows we’re watching.”

I’m just not sure what that means.

She’ll know by now that Hawk owns Nocturnal Enterprises and that I work here, but does she know about yesterday’s stakeout? If she knows we’re watching her, does she suspect Emilia is involved, too? Or does she presume Hawk and I are acting on our own initiative because Emilia has distanced herself from us? She deluded herself into thinking Emilia was only staying close to us for protection, but did she really believe that we’d just turn our backs if she pushed us away? Hawk, perhaps, given his and Emilia’s complicated past, but me? I have to give Mel more credit than that. She might have a blind spot where Emilia is concerned—thank fuck—but she’s not stupid enough to think I’d wash my hands of her.

As possibilities swim around in my head, I leave my team to it and head to my office, intent on distracting myself by making some headway with the ever-growing pile of paperwork on my desk.

The words are all blurring together on the pages, when a knock interrupts me, and I call out, “Come in!”

“Afternoon,” the man who distributes our mail greets. Walking into the office, he sets a small stack of white envelopes on my desk.

I thank him without taking my eyes off the case report open in front of me.

“One sec, there’s one more.”

He hurries back to his mail cart and grabs a larger, thicker, brown envelope before setting it on my desk and wishing me a good day as he strides out the door, closing it behind him.

I barely spare the package a second glance before returning to the case report, finishing my read-through of it before signing off that everything was conducted as it should be.

Dropping the report in my outgoing tray, I take a break to go through the mail. Reaching for the stack of smaller

envelopes first, I sort through them before moving on to the larger package. The first thing I do is look for the postage stamp to see where it came from, but when I turn the envelope over, there are no postage stamps. No address, either. Simply a name: Kai Benning.

Wariness begins to seep in as I slowly turn it over, pulling back the tab. Nothing official would have been delivered in such a way, meaning the contents have nothing to do with Nocturnal Enterprises, and no one I know would send anything personal to my work.

My foster parents moved to Florida the same year I joined the Marines, and my mom always calls to let me know if she's sent me something because she's convinced the US Postal Service will lose it otherwise. She hasn't called. Besides, she wouldn't send it to my place of work.

I rent an apartment nearby that I've been checking in on every couple of days to grab my mail and ensure there are no issues. I haven't stayed there since before Hadley asked me to go to Springview to keep an eye on Emilia. And every time I check on the place, it feels less and less like home.

Meanwhile, Hawk and Wilder's house has become the place I think of when I tell my team I'm heading home at the end of the day. I'm not stupid enough to think that's not because of a certain black-haired beauty currently residing in the room opposite mine.

Pushing thoughts of Emilia aside before I can fall down that rabbit hole, I focus back on the suspicious envelope in my hands. Careful not to touch the inside, I tip it upside down until a folded note falls onto the desk.

I can tell something larger is stuck inside, but setting the envelope aside for now, I pull out a latex glove from my top drawer and use it to unfold the piece of paper.

The first thing I notice is the handwritten scrawl—the *familiar* handwriting that confirms my initial suspicions, and it's with a heavy sense of foreboding that I focus on Mel's words.

I KNOW you're watching me, Mr. Ex-Marine. That little operation you set up yesterday wasn't very nice, was it? I was wondering, have you learned anything about me yet? I bet it's driving you crazy, not being able to figure out who I am... where I'm from... what makes me tick.

I know your type. You fancy yourself the hero—the savior in Emilia's story. But you and I both know that's not who you really are, is it? You might be able to safeguard the people you save as part of your job, except when it comes to those you care about most, you're just not capable of protecting them, are you?

It was such a violent death. You were there, right? How did that feel, knowing you let down the one person who meant everything to you? I read that she knew she was in danger, only no one believed her. Not the police or her parents. Or you.

That poor little girl was all alone when she died.

I'm sure you don't want to go through that again. I doubt you'd survive it a second time. After all, how many deaths can you have on your conscience before you realize the humane thing to do is eliminate yourself from the equation?

Watch me all you want, Mr. Looking-For-A-Second-Chance, but keep your hands off what's mine. Unless you want her to meet the same end as the last woman you fell in love with.

MY HANDS ARE SHAKING by the time I'm finished reading. Nausea warring with the uncontainable rage coursing through me. Practically throwing the letter onto the desk, I snatch the envelope and rip it in anger as I yank out the folder stuck inside.

The second I open it, I know what it is. That wave of nausea turns into a roiling sea that clogs the back of my throat and has sweat beading along my forehead. Air is robbed from

my lungs as I stare at the unsuspecting suburban house that dominates my nightmares.

The picture isn't from that night, so it doesn't depict the horrors I know are hidden inside the walls. The fear that's forever embedded in the foundations and the blood that probably still coats the underside of the floorboards.

Ripping my gaze away, I flick through the pages of the police report from that night. Words jump out at me: *stabbed one-hundred-and-fifty-three times; exsanguination; body found by boyfriend; suspect DOA.*

An outline of a body has X's depicting every one of those one-hundred-and-fifty-three stab wounds. Do you know how much strength it takes to stab someone that many times? How much adrenaline has to be coursing through your body to maintain that momentum?

I tried it once on a dead pig. I was breaking a sweat and barely keeping my grasp on the knife by thirty. By fifty, I could hardly raise my arm above my head. I never made it to one hundred.

Next are the photographs. First, the ones taken at the morgue by the medical examiner. I do my best not to look at them too closely—particularly those of her face. I want to remember her smiling and happy. Not the way she looked that night. Not the way she would have looked on that examination table.

Turning the page, the report moves on to detailing the crime scene. Now, these are photos I can't look away from. Images that attach themselves to long-buried memories and drag them uninvited to the surface.

Photos of the entryway, with a smeared handprint along the wall, as though someone was running and stumbled, putting their hand against it for support. I remember the way the tangy taste of blood singed my nostrils and forced its way into my mouth as soon as I crossed the threshold. I still shiver, remembering the sense of foreboding that washed over me as soon as I stepped foot inside that house. Before I'd even seen a single sign of what had happened, I knew it was something

horrific. Something there was no unseeing. No coming back from.

It would change the very fabric of my being. Forever alter who I was. From the moment I stepped through that doorway, whatever path had been laid out for me at birth was changed forevermore. My life was set on a new, darker course.

Another photo shows her white Converse lying discarded on the floor with a blood droplet that had dripped onto the top and smeared a line down the side of the shoe. To this day, I still can't work out why it was just lying there in the hall. How did it fall off? She always tied them so damn tightly so they wouldn't slip off her feet.

With photo after photo, I lose myself in the past. To the memories I never let myself revisit but will never forget, until I get to the end of the report, and there's nothing left but the gaping hole in my chest.

They say time heals all wounds, but that's bullshit. You find a way to stitch them shut and navigate around the pain, but they never truly heal. The tissue doesn't sew itself back together; the skin never fuses. A sharp knife or pair of scissors is all it takes to pry it open again.

The scissors that Mel hand delivered are razor sharp, and I can still feel them buried deep beneath my skin when, hours later, I numbly gather everything together and stuff it back in the envelope.

Pushing to my feet, I grab the envelope and make my way to Hawk's office in a daze.

It's only when I hear him call out, "Come in," that I realize I didn't even stop to think about whether today was one of his days in the office or not. I'm grateful, though, that it is. I do *not* want to discuss this at the house, where Emilia might overhear or demand to be part of the conversation.

He looks up from his computer as I enter, and I don't know what he sees in my expression, but it has him straightening in his chair as he turns fully to face me.

"What's happened?"

Unable to think of the right words to convey the shitshow that has been my day, I simply drop the envelope on his desk, along with the latex glove I used to prevent any fingerprint contamination.

He stares up at me for a moment longer, his eyes bouncing back and forth between mine, before he slowly lowers his gaze to the envelope, probably noticing the same initial giveaways that I did—the handwritten name on the front and the lack of a postage stamp.

After a long moment, he lifts the glove and carefully removes the contents. Not needing to see any of it for a second time, I move to stare out the window overlooking the city of Ridgeway. The sound of paper rustling and his muttered curses reach me as though through water—muffled and distant.

I'd already been plagued with memories of that night since Emilia disappeared, and having this psychotic bitch taunt me with my past mistakes isn't helping me separate what happened to Laura from Emilia's situation.

Spiraling deeper and deeper into the dark pit of guilt, grief, and regret, I don't hear Hawk get up from his desk or move toward me. It's only when I feel his firm grip on my shoulder that I manage to claw my way back to the surface.

Blinking back into the moment, Hawk, who seems to understand, gives me a moment to gather myself.

“She's trying to get under your skin.”

I huff out a humorless laugh. “She's succeeding.”

“You know what she's saying about Emilia is bullshit. She won't harm her.”

Pursing my lips, I tear my gaze away from the window to look at him. “Not unless Emilia gives her a reason to.”

Hawk's eyes flash with murderous intent. “We won't let it get that far, but I need your head in the game in order to keep Emilia safe.”

I blow out a long breath, attempting to force the strain from my muscles.

Hawk's eyes search mine, before he says, "You should take the rest of the day off. Clear your mind."

I immediately shake my head. "No, I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Hawk argues, staring me down. "And we don't make emotional decisions, so go clear your head so we can work out what this means and deal with it."

His tone is non-negotiable—a superior giving his employee an order. Usually, we move seamlessly between our professional relationship and friendship, but right now I'm struggling to respect that boundary.

With Mel too deep in my head to see reason, I glower at him. I don't need to take the day to obsess over how badly I fucked up all those years ago. Hawk shouldn't be wasting time by putting me on a motherfucking timeout. But as the seconds tick by and the tension between us escalates, he doesn't back down.

"I mean it, Kai. You're no good to anyone here, and you're a liability when it comes to Emilia while you're in this state. Take the day."

Nostrils flaring, I snarl before stomping over to the door and flinging it open before storming out.

However, I don't leave the building. I don't want to go to my empty apartment, and I can't go to Hawk and Wilder's. Emilia will immediately know something is wrong when she gets home and sees me, and I can't tell her... I can't shatter her confidence in me. She's trusting me to keep her safe, and if she knew this... it would destroy all of that.

Instead, I spend the rest of the day sitting behind my desk, staring at the wall while I steadily make my way through the bottle of expensive scotch Hawk bought me for Christmas last year.

By the time I deem it safe to head home, it's after two a.m., and my thoughts are a blur; the pain is nothing but a dull, heavy weight sitting on my chest.

Pushing open the front door of the brownstone, I find the hall light has been left on for me. Stumbling into the kitchen

for a glass of water, I find the lights beneath the cabinets have been left on too, bathing the kitchen in a soft glow. That tightness catches in my chest, knowing Emilia left them on for me.

Grabbing a glass, I fill it with water from the tap and down the whole thing before refilling it. As I'm taking another gulp from the glass, I notice a post-it stuck to the fridge and move to read it.

WASN'T sure if you'd eaten, so there's a sandwich in the fridge in case you're hungry. Emilia. X.

I READ THE NOTE AGAIN. And then again. Her thoughtfulness threatens to shatter all the hard work I've put into numbing myself with alcohol. Pulling open the fridge door, I spot the plate with the sandwich wrapped in cling film to keep it fresh and lift it out. I carry it and my glass of water over to the island. I don't remember the last time I ate, but I'm suddenly starving, and in the morning I'll be thankful that I used the bread to soak up some of the alcohol lining my stomach.

Once I've scarfed the food down, I set the plate and empty glass of water in the sink and climb the stairs up to my bedroom.

Cresting the top step, I pause and stare at Emilia's closed door before moving toward it. Reaching out, I slowly turn the handle and quietly slip into her room. I immediately find her curled up on her side in the middle of the bed, sleeping peacefully with a book lying open upside down beside her.

It amazes me how, despite the horrors surrounding her, she's able to sleep at all. Is her faith that we will protect her that strong? Emilia's a worrier. If she didn't feel safe, she would be pacing the room, cleaning the bathroom, or doing other meaningless tasks to keep herself distracted.

She definitely wouldn't be sleeping so soundly.

Seeing her so at ease is like a salve to my wounded soul. I feel like I can actually breathe for the first time all day. I can't take my eyes off her sleeping form as I step up to her side. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the bracelet with the tracker. I've been carrying it around everywhere I go since she gave it back to me, unable to let it go. I know she's got Wilder's tracker embedded beneath her skin, but after today, it doesn't feel like that is enough. Mel is smart, and she's proven she knows us—me—better than I thought. She'll expect me to have some way of keeping track of Emilia. I'd rather she believe me to be naive or stupid than find the true tracker in Emilia's neck.

After carefully fastening it around Emilia's wrist, I run my thumb over the waterfall charm as I recall her carefree smile from that day. She was so relaxed and at ease... free. With a sigh, I move to the adjacent wall and sink to the floor. Leaning my back against the wall, I bring my knees up and rest my forearms on top of them.

Watching the steady rise and fall of her chest, I vow to see her smile like that again one day soon. To do that, I have to make sure she doesn't end up like Laura. Even if I have to destroy everything between us to achieve that.

CHAPTER 14

EMILIA

“I haven’t seen your boyfriend around recently,” Jacob, one of the students in my senior literature class, says, pausing at my desk on his way out of the classroom.

Containing my frown, I glance up at him. He’s one of the more boisterous students. A typical jock, here on some sort of sporting scholarship, and barring achieving a passing grade in class, he doesn’t care about what I’m teaching him—and he makes it known by acting out and making jokes.

He reminds me of this guy who went to Halston. Quarterback. Cocky. Thought he was a god on the playing field and off of it. He’d stroll around campus with his two best friends like they owned the place. Of course, they all had trust funds large enough to feed a third-world country, so they probably did own the place.

They specifically targeted a freshman girl in our senior year. I don’t know the complete story, choosing to focus on my studies rather than get caught up in school gossip, but from what I heard, they made her life miserable.

Just like that guy, Jacob is also a relentless flirt, and unfortunately, he latched his sights on me when Kai started showing his face every day. Of course, now that Kai no longer meets me after my last class of the day, this presumptuous asshole has picked up on his absence.

“He’s been busy,” I state vaguely.

Somehow, that only makes one side of his lips hitch up in a haughty smirk. “Damn, here I thought the hottest teacher on campus might be available.”

I force my face to remain blank, even as my cheeks heat. “Even if that were the case, I wouldn’t go out with one of my students.”

“Because it’s against the rules?” he purrs, his eyes sparking in delight at that. I’m guessing obtaining the

unattainable is his kink. Sadly for him, that whole forbidden romance thing doesn't do it for me. At least, not if it's with him. I'd definitely be up for some naughty student-teacher roleplaying with Hawk or Wilder.

Sighing, I lean back in my chair. "Did you have a question about today's lecture, Jacob?"

He racks his brain, and I'm fairly certain he would fabricate a question if he could recall a single detail from today's class. But it seems he can't remember anything that was discussed. I'd roll my eyes if it didn't come across as unprofessional. Instead, I point toward the awaiting students currently filling up my classroom.

"No? Then, if you don't mind, I have another class to teach."

He frowns, annoyance flashing across his face, there and gone in a split second before he pastes on a coy smile. Biting on his lower lip, he rakes his eyes over me in a lascivious way that just leaves me feeling gross. "I'll be seeing ya, Miss Harrison." The way he says my name, like he's picturing calling me that while he's dick deep inside me, makes me shudder. A move that he completely misinterprets based on the hunger that sparks in his eyes before he turns and strides out the door.

Fucking cocky college students, I grumble internally before pushing all thoughts of Jacob aside and diving into my next lecture.

At lunch, I head to the small library in Burney Hall. It's empty as I take a seat at one of the computers, logging in and pulling up my emails. There's no hesitation or second-guessing as I type out the email.

DEAR VANESSA,

THROUGH THIS EMAIL, I hereby announce my resignation from the editorial assistant position effective immediately.

I GREATLY APPRECIATE the opportunity you have given me and the understanding you have demonstrated these recent weeks. I genuinely enjoyed my time with the company. Unfortunately, my life has changed drastically, and it has taken me in a new direction.

SINCERELY,

EMILIA HARRISON

ALTHOUGH BUTTERFLIES FLIT NERVOUSLY in my stomach, a broad grin plays along my lips as I hit send. For the first time in a long time, this decision feels right. I feel as though I'm finally where I'm supposed to be. I'm finally at peace; at home. There's a lot I still need to achieve to obtain the future I want here—most notably getting Kai and Wilder on my side and eliminating Mel—but as I finger the bracelet I woke up to around my wrist, knowing Kai placed it there for unknown reasons, I am cautiously optimistic and excited for this next step.

I'M EXHAUSTED by the time I get home that evening, and I'm so thankful that it's Friday. However, my self-pity reaches new heights when I remember that I'm alone in the house tonight. Well, technically, not alone. Hawk and Wilder are staying at the frat house tonight, and Kai is around here somewhere—probably sequestered in his room. He has been even more distant this week. Living here seems as though it's become an obligation to him. *I* have become an obligation. The only time he's here is when he absolutely has to be—i.e. when Hawk isn't around.

I fucking hate it!

Even when he is here, he's more closed-off and resigned than before. I don't know what's happened, but I'm worried. And pissed off. And just so sick and tired of all this bullshit. I feel like I'm fighting fires on all fronts—Mel, Wilder, and now Kai. The apocalypse must be coming any day now if Hawk is the only one *not* pissing me off on a daily basis.

The only way things could be worse is if Wilder were the only sane one left. *God, I hope we never see that day, because then we truly are fucked.*

Grabbing leftovers from the fridge, I heat them up in the microwave and pour myself a large glass of wine before sitting down at the island with my sad little meal for one.

The fact that I'm even acknowledging how pathetic it is that I'm eating alone shows how much I've changed since arriving here. Dinner-for-one used to be my go-to; now, it just feels lonely. The house is eerily quiet, and I hate not having someone to talk through my day with. I've become so used to Kai and then Hawk asking about my day as soon as I walk through the door and filling me in on theirs.

I want to know what happened at Nocturnal Enterprises today. I want to hear about Hawk's expansion plans and try to get Kai to trip up and divulge which celebrities they've worked for—he's never fallen for my tactics, however.

I miss the camaraderie. The laughter. The easy flow of conversation.

I miss *them*.

Kai hasn't appeared by the time I've finished eating, so it would seem he's not planning on showing his face tonight. The thought only sours my mood further.

In full-on pity party mode, I down the rest of my glass of wine before filling it to an indecently high level, and, after changing into my new kitty cat pajamas, I take my party for-one down to the cinema room. It's the only room I can properly relax in without worrying about Mel peering in at me through the window.

After getting settled in, I spend the rest of the night watching documentaries about psychopaths because, if there's one thing I hate more than anything, it's not feeling like I'm in control. Which is precisely how Mel has me feeling. I'm a spinning top, spiraling out of control and completely at her mercy.

The only way for me to gain that control is to understand her. To learn what makes her tick, her weaknesses, and her vulnerabilities. Mel knows everything there is to know about me, but I know absolutely nothing about her.

And I think it's past time I changed that.

I soak up as much information as my brain can handle, and despite the gruesome stories, my eyes grow heavy until I can no longer keep them open. I fall asleep listening to a criminal explain to the television camera crew how he was innocent and that it was Daemon, his alternate personality, who actually violently murdered seven men.

IT'S the building intensity in my core, along with the weight on top of me, that has my body jolting awake. My eyes snap open, yet with only the weak glow of the projector for light, all I can make out is the outline of someone hovering above me.

On instinct, I go to scream, but a large hand clamps over my mouth.

“Now, now, Angel,” Wilder purrs. “You don't wanna wake the whole house before I make you come, do you?”

The fire he's stoking in my core grows stronger as his words penetrate, and I realize he's already got two fingers inside me, pumping lazily while he coaxes me into consciousness.

He keeps his hand over my mouth as he steadily picks up the pace, and although I can't make out his eyes, I can feel them raking over my face.

“Wilder,” I moan when he takes his hand away. I’m not sure if it’s a question or a plea.

“Come for me, Angel. I need to watch while you come for me.”

There’s something in his voice. It’s more than just an order. His tone is almost... imploring. As though he’s begging me to do what he wants. As if he *needs* to watch while I fall apart beneath his touch.

Unable to deny him, my body obeys like it was born to comply with his every whim. My release sneaks up on me, not dissimilar to the way Wilder snuck in here without my knowing. My eyes drift closed as it takes possession of me, but the second they do, a hand fists the back of my head. I snap my eyes open.

“Look at me when you come,” Wilder growls.

He leans in, his breath fanning my lips, as the light reflects in the gray chips in his otherwise umber eyes. Even as my lips part in a low moan, I want him to eliminate the scant space between us and press his mouth to mine.

He doesn’t, and I cry my release into the room while Wilder continues to pump into me, dragging it out until I’m shaking.

When I can’t handle any more stimulation, I close my legs, begging him to stop. A firm hand wrenches them apart as a vicious snarl leaves Wilder’s lips. “No! Another.”

“I can’t,” I implore.

“Yes, you can, Angel. Think about all those orgasms I’ve denied you... don’t you want me to repay them?”

He almost sounds as though *he* wants to repay them, but my brain is too hopped up on endorphins to wade through what he *isn’t* saying.

A suction sound fills the room as he slides his fingers out of me. Using his shoulders to keep my legs open, he yanks down my pajama bottoms and panties before moving to rub hard, fast circles around my clit. The sensation would have

had me jumping off the sofa if it weren't for the large palm planted on my lower belly, pushing me back into the couch cushions as he coaxes my body toward a second release.

"Maybe we can set up some sort of repayment plan," I moan, shaking my head from side to side as I try to fight my body's desire.

"Nah, I think I'd rather give them all to you at once."

I groan, knowing I'm in for a night of painful pleasure, but it's one I already know I'll willingly endure every second of.

I'm already barreling toward a second orgasm. I wiggle an arm free to grab hold of Wilder's arm, my fingernails digging into his skin as my release takes hold. Our eyes clash, and the intensity I see in his burns me from the inside out.

"Oh god, Wilder," I moan, not even daring to blink as pleasure crashes over me.

There's no change in his facial expression. No smug pleasure, no sense of satisfaction. Just that same intensity, as though he can't look away, but he doesn't know why he's so entranced.

His fingers plunge back inside, sliding in easily, and I cry out.

"Please, Wilder, I can't."

"You can," he growls ferociously, causing me to whimper.

There's no slow, lazy pace this time. He rams three fingers into me with all the force of a wrecking ball, destroying my pussy in the best way possible. Half delirious, I hurtle headfirst over the edge, screaming as tears leak from the corners of my eyes and run down my cheeks.

My body hums with pleasure, sighs with satisfaction, and burns with desire.

My muscles give up the fight, going lax as my legs fall open. Wrung out and sated, my head falls back against the arm of the sofa as I try to catch my breath and lower my heart rate to a less dangerous beat.

I groan as Wilder slides his fingers out, still unable to lift my head to look at him. Only when I feel something cold pressing against my swollen pussy lips, does my head snap up. Just in time to gape as I watch Wilder push a small, oval-shaped vibrator inside me.

“What the—” My words trail off as I watch him stare, hypnotized, at where the vibrator is disappearing. Licking his lips as though he wishes he could trade places with it.

A second later, a slow vibration begins, and I groan, half in pleasure, half in pain. “No, Wilder.”

His gaze snaps to mine. “Yes, you can.”

As if to prove his point, he increases the intensity until I’m mewling and writhing, mumbling pleas and curses, all of which go unanswered. My body feels like it’s on fire. I can’t tell if I want to come or run away from the overwhelming sensations. Unable to sit still, I push myself upright, forcing Wilder to sit back on his haunches.

I cling to Wilder, desperate to grab ahold of something before I’m swept away. My fists clench the front of his t-shirt, my legs wrapping around his waist as I drag him to me. He doesn’t resist, seeming as lost in the frenzy as I am.

“Wilder,” I cry, uncaring of the tears streaming down my face. “Please.”

Please, what? I have no idea. Words have lost all meaning.

He wraps one of his strong arms around my back, pressing me flush against him while his other hand slides into my hair, holding me a few inches away from his face so he can capture every second of my pleasure—or pain. I’m still not entirely sure what he’s getting from this. Is this a new method of torture, or is it something more?

“Shh,” he says surprisingly softly, silencing any more of my pleas. “Just let me look at you.”

Covered in a sheen of sweat while I grind against the hard erection in his sweats, I don’t know what it is he sees, but he stares at me with such reverence that all I can do is stare back. It’s as if he’s trying to memorize my every reaction to the

pleasure he's deriving. Soaking up each second of this connection between us as if he needs to feel this closeness between us as badly as I do.

The seconds tick by while I continue to incinerate, lost in the endless depths of his eyes.

"You look so beautiful when you're coming apart in my arms," he murmurs so quietly that I wouldn't have heard if I wasn't practically sitting on top of him.

I have no idea what's happening. This is a newer version of the same sort of torture as before, but it's also different. There isn't that same hatred burning in Wilder's eyes. Instead, he just looks lost. So very lost. And the way he's looking at me, it's as though the tables are turned, and I'm preventing *him* from being swept away. Like I'm the only thing keeping him grounded, preventing him from giving in to whatever demons constantly nip at his heels.

In a desperate moment of need, I surge forward, needing to feel the firm press of his lips against mine. It's been so long since I've completely lost myself in Wilder Clearwater, and I'd give up just about anything to do exactly that. To drown in him. To be consumed by his fury. To fall into his madness and give myself over to his demons. If Wilder is lost, I want to be lost with him. I want to walk alongside him down whatever dark and dangerous path he's on.

I feel the tantalizing brush of his lips against mine, but before it can become anything more, he uses his hold on the back of my head to pull me back.

"I can't let you do that, Angel."

I don't understand why, but a feral glint has entered his eye, making me realize I'm walking a precarious line. Wilder's barely holding himself together; if I push too far, he'll unleash upon me. An inner instinct warns that I'm not ready for that yet. So, I hold back despite how desperately I want to give myself over to him.

"Just come for me one more time. Please." His voice cracks and shadows rise up to blot out the color in his irises.

“Let me bask in your light once more.”

His words are lost on me, but my body is tuned to his demands, and she gives herself over willingly. For Wilder, I completely let myself go. I give myself over to my inhibitions and lose myself in the overwhelming pleasure that spreads outward from my center, racing toward my fingers and toes, obliterating my brain cells and any common sense.

Wrapped around Wilder, I cling to him as if he were my life raft in the middle of a turbulent ocean—which is precisely what it feels like as I’m ripped apart. The onslaught of my orgasm shreds my body, my soul, my very essence.

When I finally blink back into reality, everything looks different yet the same. It takes me a moment to realize it’s not the world around me. It’s *me*. *I’m* different. While Wilder had to watch me fall apart in order to find himself, I had to give myself over to him—completely and wholeheartedly.

Searching in the depths of Wilder’s gaze, I find a stability there that I haven’t seen since my return. I’m not sure what he sees in my returning gaze, but I know I’m different. Stronger. More complete. I’ve regained a vital part of myself that I lost the second Wilder walked away from me on that dance floor four years ago.

“Wil—”

“Shh.” He presses a finger to my lips. “That’s enough for tonight.”

Removing the vibrator, he grabs my pajamas and panties before tightening his arm around me. I wrap my arms around him and bury my face in the juncture between his neck and shoulder as he stands and carries me up the stairs. By the time we reach my room, I’m half asleep, barely capable of cracking open an eye as he tucks me beneath the covers and brushes a strand of hair from my face before leaving without saying a word.

CHAPTER 15

WILDER

The black sedan pulls off the main road, stopping at a set of towering iron gates. We've been driving for about thirty minutes and left the city limits behind a while ago. Skyscrapers and bustling streets gave way to tall trees, green hedges, and sprawling mansions, which only grew in size the further out of the city we traveled.

A partition has been up between the driver and me since I climbed in, removing any opportunity for discussion and leaving me with nothing except my thoughts and the lingering feel of Emilia pressed against me last night.

I wouldn't have minded, except for the hard-on it's brought to life, which I'm struggling to talk down. I seriously don't want to have to meet my grandfather for the first time with tented pants. Nor do I want to spend the rest of the day uncomfortable and debating whether to excuse myself to the bathroom to jack off.

I don't know what the hell I was thinking last night.

No, that's a lie. I *wasn't* thinking.

When I snuck into her room to watch her sleep and maybe leave her with another reminder that I was stalking her nightmares, and found her bed empty... The fear that flooded my system was indescribable. It was the same level of dread I felt that day on campus when Hawk told me she was missing.

The kind of terror that stuns and paralyzes most people but stabs at the dark, black hole in my chest and sends me lurching into action, ready to tear apart the entire house, the entire city, to find her. My thoughts were downright murderous at the notion that Mel had gotten her psychotic little claws on my girl again.

I might not know what the hell I'm doing with Emilia anymore, but I do know she's mine. I didn't survive the flames licking at my skin and crawl my way out of the inferno that ate its way through that house just so some deranged bitch could

steal my girl before I've even finished with her. Emilia is my toy. I'm nowhere near done playing with her, and I absolutely don't share. Not with a psychotic whack job who thinks Emilia is hers simply for smiling at her in the wrong way.

Emilia is *mine*. She has been since she first saw my scars and said they were beautiful, then built a pillow wall when I crashed in her room for the night and point-blank refused to sleep on the floor.

Maybe even before that night, though it was then that I knew for sure. The way she looked at me... No one has ever had that reaction before. I don't exactly make a theme of drawing attention to the burns that lay waste to the left side of my torso. Not because I'm embarrassed, but because I don't need the probing questions or the swirling storm of memories accompanying them.

I'm used to people's noses wrinkling in disgust or giving me sympathetic stares. Hell, even the odd kinky chick who thinks fucking a guy with scars and the associated emotional trauma is hot. But Emilia wore none of that. There was no disgust, no sympathy. Okay, so there was maybe a little bit of heat in her eyes. I knew I'd stunned her when she saw me in that towel, especially since she stopped talking mid-sentence.

However, it was what was beneath the desire that drew me in. The awe. Most people see the ugliness in this world and turn their noses up, but not Emilia. She sees beauty in the imperfect. Artistry in the damaged. She understands what it is not to crumble beneath unbearable pressure. She might not know what it means to fight for your life, to battle for every inhale, but she does know what it is to struggle. To fight. To strive for more.

It wasn't even a quality I appreciated about her back then. I just fell into her unquestioning acceptance of who I was and allowed myself to be blinded by the light that radiated from her.

However, no matter how accepting she was of my physical scars, she would never have—and never will—truly accept

me. For a while, I deluded myself into believing she would. But who could ever love a murderer?

I'm pulled out of my thoughts as the car rolls to a stop outside an extravagant red-brick, Georgian-style mansion. I grew up with money. Have been surrounded by it my entire life, although this is insane. It makes the house I grew up in look like a tiny cottage in comparison. Hell, the brownstone I share with Hawk would probably fit in the foyer of this monstrosity.

Despite the beauty of the place, with its sprawling lawns, manicured hedges, and pristine flowerbeds, I feel unsettled as I climb out of the car before the driver can open the door. He looks surprised, but I don't pay him much attention. Perhaps the Clearwaters he's used to dealing with want their doors opened for them, but I don't play by the same rules.

Which is why I'm not wearing the suit Robbie suggested. I've already jumped through enough hoops to get here. I gave up a part of myself by betraying Hawk, and who knows what the fuck I've sold to the devil in those vows I made last week. I'm not giving up any more of myself. No more sacrifices will be made until I deem my flesh and blood worthy.

Although I did make some effort, as I'm wearing a pair of deep red pants, rolled at the ankles, white tennis shoes, a white shirt, and a beige scarf. Stylish yet me. See? I'm not a complete scoundrel. I could have rocked up in sweats and a dip-stained tee.

"Master Clearwater," someone greets, drawing my attention toward the open doorway, where a butler in a penguin suit stands. "My name is Frederick. I am the house manager here at Clearwater Manor. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Okay, well, the dude must need the steel rod up his ass removed because his pinched expression is at odds with his formal words.

"If you'll please come inside, Sir Edward Samuel Gregory will be with you shortly."

Sir Edward Samuel Gregory? Seriously? Talk about a mouthful. I can only assume he's referring to my grandfather. *Who the fuck makes people call them by all three of their names?* I can already tell he's as pretentious as his name.

With nothing else for it, I step past Frederick into the expansive foyer. He directs me to a sitting room that looks like it has never been used—seriously, there isn't even a butt indentation in the couch cushions or a single thing out of place—and tells me to wait for my grandfather.

The second he leaves me alone, I drop onto the sofa, giving my ass a good wiggle to ensure it gets in there nice and deep before I stand. Turning, I grin down at the perfectly imperfect butt impression before surveying the rest of the room.

There is a stack of magazines on the coffee table that I bet has never even been flipped through. As I walk past them, my finger brushes against them, accidentally skewing the stack. *Oopsies.*

After rearranging several decorative cushions, I feel more at peace. I dislike order. Especially when everything is set up to appear flawless, as if whoever lives in this house has never made a mistake in their lives. As if they don't shit and bleed like the rest of us.

All of this perfection only screams that they have something to hide. It makes me distrustful, suspicious. I was already wary before stepping into this sterile house. As much as I want to meet and get to know my family and, ideally, find a place where I belong while hopefully coming to understand why I am the way I am, I'm not an idiot. And I won't be taken for one. I'm not so goddamn desperate for a family that I'll give up everything to become one of them. I've already crossed uncrossable lines.

At the time, my hatred for Emilia blinded me, providing the justification I was searching for. Nonetheless, that reasoning is slowly becoming murkier by the day. I started down this path because I believed there was no longer a place

for me with Hadley, Hawk, and the others; since Emilia made me feel that way.

Although, if I'm being blatantly honest with myself, that's not exactly true. I've always been sitting on the outskirts. Hadley has the guys, Hawk is her brother, and then there's me. Not connected to them in any way other than the fact that I decided to hang around after high school ended.

I guess I was just searching for something more stable. Something more secure than the thin threads that tie me to their family, since that is exactly what they are. The six of them are a family, and I'm the weird uncle who visits for Christmas, clogs the toilet, eats all the food, then just never fucking leaves.

I'm *that* friend. The one you reluctantly put up with because you have no other choice. The pathetic one you take under your wing because where the fuck else is he going to go? And no halfway nice person kicks a sad little puppy out into the snow.

Maybe I blamed Emilia initially, and perhaps she's the reason I finally found the balls to actually make an effort to reach out to my family. Still, she's not the sole reason why I'm standing in this creepy-ass immaculate house. I've known Robbie since freshman year, yet I never really asked him about the rest of the line. There was the odd question, but I never asked to meet them. Never enquired about who they were or if I had any other cousins, nieces, nephews, aunts, or uncles.

I didn't care to know until Emilia stepped back into my universe, and the King's Elite gave me the out I was hoping for to escape her.

Maybe I still don't care to know where I come from.

Although, one thing I have come to realize is that I *do* want to be part of a family. A *real* family. I don't want to be the weird uncle you can't get rid of. I want to be an integral piece.

And I don't know if that is with Hadley, Hawk, and the others. I don't know if it includes Emilia or if my place truly is

here, with these clean freaks.

Wherever it is though, I want to find it.

The sound of a throat clearing has me turning toward the doorway. Frederick's astute gaze takes in the havoc I've wreaked with a frown. "Master Clearwater, Sir Edward Samuel Gregory will see you now."

He gestures for me to follow him.

"My name is Wilder," I inform him as he leads me through the house. "Not Master Clearwater." I even squeeze my buttocks, pretending I have a pole shoved up there, so I can flawlessly imitate his uptight tone.

Despite my superior acting abilities, his not-so-subtle wry side-eye implies he's not impressed with my impression. *Huh, tough crowd.*

I shrug it off, and apparently not a fan of conversation, we continue in stilted silence. I'm expecting him to direct me to my grandfather's office, so when he opens the doors to a bright solarium, I'm taken by surprise.

The sun streams in through the glass ceiling and large windows, giving the room a warm and welcoming feel that contrasts with the sterile waiting room.

"Well, come here, boy. Let me get a look at you," a deep, croaky voice cracks through the room.

Squinting through the sunlight, I spot the older gentleman walking steadily toward me. Assuming this is my grandfather, my eyes run over him, taking in his tall, solid frame and his mostly gray hair that is interspersed with the occasional darker strand, hinting at his youthfulness. His time-worn face is creased with wrinkles, and peering back at me are shrewd eyes that look like they belong to a man twenty years younger.

Despite his aging body, I can tell without even having a conversation with him that his mind is still sharp as a tack. He assesses me with keen scrutiny, giving nothing away. However, knowing that he's ancient and roams around this giant house in a full suit as though he just got home from a day

at the office, and with my casual attire, I'm guessing I've already failed to meet his expectations.

Not that I was necessarily aiming to meet them, but it's always good to know where you stand.

"Do you remember me?" he asks, ambling toward me.

I cock a brow. "Should I?"

The numerous frown lines across his forehead deepen as his lips tug down. "I guess not. You were only a little one when I last saw you."

The fact that we've met before is news to me.

Stopping in front of me, he holds out his wrinkled, thin-skinned hand for me to shake. Despite the way I behave most of the time, I do actually have manners, so I reach out to grasp it in a firm handshake. However, my gaze catches on the signet ring sitting snugly on his pinky finger.

Or, more specifically, the snake and crown emblem engraved into it—the insignia of the King's Elite.

Given what little information I have about the King's Elite, I highly doubt it's some class graduation ring that he's all sentimental over. The King's Elite are a hell of a lot more than some secretive college club that men like my grandfather look back on with fond memories. However, that ring doesn't mean he's an active member of the society. Although, it has me wondering how high up in the ranks you have to be before you're rewarded with a gold ring. I certainly don't recall finding one at the bottom of my glass of blood at the inauguration.

"Frederick, I'll take lunch out here today," he says to the butler, who was doing a wonderful impression of blending in with the furniture. "My grandson will be joining me."

"Yes, Sir."

MY HEAD IS all over the place as I step into the brownstone and make my way up to my bedroom. The rest of my visit was uneventful. Grandfather mostly talked about himself, his work before he retired, and the massive wealth he has acquired. Dotted in amongst all that were questions about me—how I was enjoying Ridgeway, what my plans were after graduation. He definitely wasn't impressed when I didn't spout off some in-depth five-year plan that ended with me being made partner in a law firm, building my own investment management empire, or becoming CEO of some Fortune 500 company.

Yeah, I'm honestly surprised my '*I haven't thought that far ahead*' answer didn't give him heart palpitations based on his affronted expression.

Throughout the whole afternoon, he never once mentioned the King's Elite, despite the fact it was a hurdle I had to overcome in order to meet him. Another topic that seemed to be off-limits was my father. Any time I tried to ask him what happened twenty-odd years ago that resulted in my father being kicked out of the family and me along with him, he would change the topic.

Even though I'm not sure he was terribly impressed with me, he invited me back for lunch next Sunday to meet the rest of the family. I said yes because, well, what else was I supposed to say? So far, I haven't gotten the warm and fuzzies, or the *this is where I belong* vibe. Although, perhaps next weekend will yield better results.

All thoughts of my grandfather are pushed aside as I walk into my bedroom and pull up short.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask, narrowing my eyes on Emilia as she spins to face me.

My eyes drop to the white envelope in her hands, my nostrils flaring.

Goddammit. I lifted the damn letter out after I put Emilia in her bed last night and forgot to put it away. I don't even know why I held on to it all these years. I should have tossed it in the trash the second I found it on my bedroom floor at Pac.

Instead, I've carried it around just to torment myself, never actually reading what is written inside.

With pursed lips, I snap my gaze up to her face. Hurt flashes in her eyes.

"You never even opened it," she accuses, that same hurt bleeding into her tone.

"I told you, I didn't need to hear—or read—your apologies."

She holds the envelope out toward me. "Read it."

"No," I growl, not taking it from her outstretched hand.

She glowers at me for a long moment, the two of us in a silent standoff. Eventually, she huffs out a frustrated breath and lowers her arm.

"Maybe you didn't need my apologies then, but I think you need them now, because you're the only one still holding onto the past." Hesitantly, she steps toward me, her eyes searching mine—although for what, I'm not sure. Her face scrunches, pain and heartache lining the crevices. "It physically pains me to see how much I hurt you." Her words are followed by another step forward, steadily closing the distance between us. "That was never my intention. I never wanted either of us to suffer like this."

"Emilia," I groan as she takes another step forward. I could easily reach out and pull her against me, and my arms tremble with the urge to do just that. "Stop."

She shakes her head. "I need you to hear me this time, Wilder. I need you to accept what I'm telling you because, as much as we might want to, there's no changing the past. There's no undoing what was done. However, the hurt can stop right here, right now. *You* have the power to make it stop. For both of us."

Brazenly, she reaches out and places her hand over the erratically thumping organ in my chest. That single point of contact breaks my resolve, and in a whirl of movement, I grab her and spin us, pushing her against the wall and caging her in.

My forearm is pressed against the wall above her head, my other hand sliding easily around her throat as though it belongs there. My thumb rubs over her pulse point as I stare down into her jade-green eyes, wide with shock.

“I don’t need your apologies,” I growl, “You never had anything to apologize for.”

Her lips part on a silent O, momentarily snagging my attention.

Fixating on them, I murmur, “I understand why you left. You’re so damn stubborn. So strong-minded. So smart and determined. You were right to go out and forge your own way in this world. I was pissed because, when you left, I realized you’d been keeping the ghosts of my past at bay. Without you around, they came roaring to life, pulling me down into the darkest pits of hell.”

My eyes seek hers, noting the sheen of tears, as my thumb continues its soothing path back and forth across her pulse. “And then you came back, and simply being around you quieted the voices. One look at you and my pain was dulled.” My fingers dig into her skin, but I don’t tighten my hold. “I wanted to hate you. *Needed* to. It didn’t seem fair that you could just waltz back into my life and chase away the demons I’ve been battling ever since you walked away.”

My muscles are rigid, straining to curl around her and give in to that unbearable need I’ve been fighting futilely for weeks now.

As a compromise, I press my forehead against hers, drinking in her soft, jasmine scent. Staring straight at her, I drop those walls that keep the demons at bay. The ones that keep the worst parts of me shackled behind bars, hidden away, so the world doesn’t see that I’m not like everyone else.

Angel gasps, finally understanding the ferocity of the beast she’s been tangoing with. Still, the way her chin lifts as she steadily holds my gaze shows me that although she’s surprised, she’s not afraid.

Her hand snakes up between our bodies until it eclipses the dark hole where the wretched organ in my chest resides. It thumps traitorously at her touch. “You won’t ever have to battle them alone again. From this moment on, I’ll be here to help you drive them out. There isn’t anything you can do to scare me away.”

Conviction rings with every word, even as I smirk cruelly at her. Pretty words from pretty lips, and no matter how much I may want to believe in them, I need to remain the vile monster that I am.

“You were right to run when you did.” There’s a sinister ring to my words as I slide my fingers along the back of her neck, seeking the spot where her tracker resides. Finding the correct place, I press my index finger over the implanted rod, liking the feel of it beneath her skin and knowing that it’s there and that she didn’t remove it.

She sighs blissfully as I move my finger over the implant, as though its presence is a comfort and my touch is a pleasant reminder of the lengths I’d go to for her. Which, I realize now, is exactly what I meant by drugging her and ensuring she couldn’t shoot me down before I embedded it beneath her skin. That was me deciding she was mine, and I wasn’t going to let her go—not to some bitch who thinks she owns her, and not because she decided to run again.

She should have stayed gone while she had the choice. She forfeited her freedom by coming back here. Relinquished her right to live unencumbered by me or my demons.

Unable to help myself, I lean in until my lips brush hers. A bending of my resolve, however I refuse to give in completely. Refuse to give either of us what we both so badly need. Because, despite every molecule in my body demanding that I do so, I’m not ready to wholly give myself over to Emilia Harrison, just yet.

I can’t let her go, but equally, I can’t claim that I’ll forever be hers.

I’ve decided she’s mine, but I’m not yet ready to be hers. The only thing I do know is that I’m not done with her yet. I

don't think I ever will be.

“If you were smart, you would have stayed gone,” I warn in a low growl. My voice barely sounds human, my demons rattling the bars of their cages. They can taste the promise of freedom on their tongues, and they're demanding release. “I didn't chase after you before, but if you leave me again, I'll hunt you to the ends of the earth.”

CHAPTER 16

EMILIA

If you leave me again, I'll hunt you to the ends of the earth.

My body shudders, except not with revulsion or alarm like it probably should.

No, every dark, depraved part of my being that I never knew existed is submitting beneath Wilder's dominance.

Hell, I'm too afraid to even speak in case all that comes out is a contented purr.

His words may be intended to instill fear, but they have the opposite effect. In the absence of that fear, I find myself falling irrevocably in love with Wilder Clearwater. With every single one of his demons. With all of his ghosts. With the monsters nipping at his heels and the voices in his head. With his quirky sense of style and the weird shit he says. With his hateful glares and heated glances.

I have no doubt that his threat is real, but I'm not afraid. I don't need to be, because I'm done running from him. It's a mistake I won't make twice, no matter how hard he may try to push me away.

I've seen all of him, and I'm not scared. I'm not intimidated. I don't feel the need to cower, because, as ruthless as Wilder may be, he would never actually hurt me. He's already proven that—not that he even needed to for me to know.

Wilder is the antithesis of everything I thought I wanted in a man, although he's everything I'll ever need.

And I want to be everything to him, too.

Since he hasn't moved, I press forward, intent on closing the scant space between us and pressing my lips firmly to his. Except the second I move, his hand tightens around my throat, holding me in place.

My lips pull down in a frown as I glower at him in annoyance. My gaze darts back and forth between his, probing until I realize he's still holding back.

Stubborn fucking asshole.

Glowering, I bring my hands up and shove at his chest. Because he's as solid as a brick wall, he doesn't budge, but I keep hitting and pushing and shoving until he backs the fuck up.

Slapping the letter that's still grasped in my hand against his chest, I snap, "Read the letter, Wilder. It might give you the closure you're looking for. And when you're finally ready to accept this,"—I point my finger back and forth between us—"I'll be here. I'm not fucking leaving. Not of my own accord and not because you think you can scare me off."

Storming out of his room, I stomp down the stairs in search of Kai and Hawk, which had been my initial mission before I got sidetracked as I passed by Wilder's bedroom. I hadn't seen him all day, and after last night, I wanted to check on him.

I feel like something fundamentally changed between us last night, though I needed to know if I was the only one who felt that way. Of course, today's run-in has only left me more confused. Wilder is still fighting. He still refuses to give in, but I feel like he's close to breaking. However, I get the distinct impression that when he finally cracks, it's going to be explosive. We'll both be shredded in the resulting blast, and in the aftermath, when we're left to gather the remaining pieces of ourselves off the floor, it will be impossible to distinguish the parts that belong to him.

When I put myself back together, I'll forever be embedded with fragments of Wilder. And him, me. For the rest of our lives, we'll be intertwined. Connected. Linked together in the most primitive of ways. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

I want to feel his brand of crazy pumping through my veins. I want to absorb every ounce of his pain and swallow down every bit of his anger. Most importantly, I want to know the man hiding underneath it all. The man I caught a glimpse

of back at Pac. The man who is both ruthless and unfailingly loyal. The man who cares deeply for the select few people he allows into his life. The man who completely altered the course of my existence. Who demolished every notion of what I thought I wanted for my life and instead made me desire all the things I shouldn't. Made me want to reach for more.

If Wilder hadn't pushed me; if he hadn't invaded my heart, mind, and soul so thoroughly, I'd probably be engaged to Richard right now. And I'd be happy, in an abstract sort of way. But I would never have experienced the all-consuming passion that comes from loving Hawk. Or the heated tension that crackles in the air when I'm around Wilder. Or even the peaceful, quiet, yet no less potent, affection Kai elicits.

The complication that is my relationship with Wilder gets put on the back burner as I reach the bottom of the stairs and hear Kai and Hawk's hushed whispers coming from the kitchen.

I creep closer, keeping my steps light as their voices become more distinct and I can make out what they're saying.

"Dude, you look like shit. You need to stop letting her get to you," Hawk chastises. His words have me frowning. Let who get to Kai? Me?

"You know it's not that simple," Kai grumbles, sounding simultaneously pissed off and exhausted. "Now that it's open, I can't just pop the lid back on that box."

I hear someone sigh before Hawk says in a softer tone, "I know, man."

Thoroughly confused and worried I'll overhear something I shouldn't, I push open the door into the kitchen.

Both men turn to face me, but it's Kai who immediately snags my attention. "Kai," I gasp. My eyes roam over his face as I stride toward him. His hair is disheveled, his clothing rumpled, and his bloodshot eyes make it clear he's barely slept all week. "What's wrong?"

The Kai seated before me right now looks nothing like the man who took charge in my apartment and who diligently

worked day and night to track down Mel.

I hate that he was there for me when I needed him, yet he won't let me return the favor. I might not be able to help in the same way he can, but I wish he could talk to me. He listened to me divulge my entire history and pour out my heart regarding my complicated past and ongoing feelings for Hawk and Wilder, all without passing judgment. He was the sounding board I needed when I had no one else to confide in—the steady pillar in a chaotic storm of upheaval. I can be all of that for him, too, if he'd only let me in.

My fingers reach out to brush his cheek, but before they can feel the warmth of his skin beneath them, he pushes out of his chair and backs away. Masking my hurt with a frown, I glance toward Hawk in search of answers.

Completely useless, he just shrugs and gives a slight shake of his head, silently telling me to drop it. Fuck that. Something is seriously wrong with Kai. If the roles were reversed, he wouldn't let me bottle it all up until I exploded—which is very clearly what will happen to Kai if no one intervenes.

With hands on my hips and brows furrowed, I shoot glances back and forth between the two of them. Of course, the primary suspect for Kai's foul mood and lack of sleep is most likely Mel. It would also explain why he's so adamant about not talking to me about it and why he's reinforced those walls he's built with concrete.

Fixing him in my gaze, I demand, "What did she do now?"

He blanches as though I slapped him across the face, then his expression shutters, and I know I've hit the nail on the head.

"Nothing," he blurts. "You don't need to concern yourself with it."

So not nothing, then.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I cock a brow and stare him down, determined that neither of us is walking away until I have some answers.

“You should just tell her, man,” Hawk interjects. “She’s like a dog with a bone when she gets like this. She won’t leave it alone until she has all the information.”

Kai snaps his gaze to Hawk, glowering at him while he presses his lips firmly together, as though attempting to stop the words from slipping out.

“Did she send another letter?” I speculate when it is apparent he’s not going to freely tell me. “Or a gift?” My brows lower, my tone growing dangerous as I ask, “Did she threaten you?”

“Not quite,” Kai reluctantly admits.

“Okay.” I don’t quite understand what he means by that. “Well, as long as she didn’t send any more body parts or kill anyone else, then we can deal with the rest.”

As the seconds tick by, Kai continues to stare at me, his features attempting to say something that his mouth won’t put to words. It takes a moment before understanding dawns. “She threatened me.”

His lips flatten, still not answering me.

When I flick my gaze to Hawk, he confirms my suspicions. “She did,” he states, his expression drawn.

“But I don’t believe there’s any real intention behind her words,” Kai quickly assuages. When I give him a questioning look, he sighs, defeat dragging his shoulders down. “She’s saying that to toy with me.”

I search his eyes for a moment before holding my arm out and asking, “Is that why you gave me this?”

He nods. “Mel knows the lengths I’ll go to protect you. It’s a decoy, should something happen.”

“She’ll spot this and think it’s the tracker, so she won’t go searching deeper for Wilder’s,” I deduce, earning a nod.

“But, why?” I ask. “Why would Mel specifically toy with you? Why wouldn’t she direct her threat at all three of you, or you and Hawk, at least?”

She..." he trails off, rubbing his hand along the back of his neck and staring pointedly at the floor.

After a moment, he blows out a hard breath, and still not looking at me, he storms over to his laptop bag and pulls out a manila envelope.

Holding it out toward me, he explains, "She found out about something that happened in my past. It was a long time ago, but..."

All I can do is stare at the envelope, unwilling to accept it. If there's something in his past that he wants me to know, then I'd prefer Kai tell me himself when he's ready. Not because his hand was forced.

"Just take it, Emilia," he sighs. "You have a right to know."

Lifting my head, I stare into his bright green eyes that are shadowed with tragedy. Somehow, they become even more pained when he says, "And afterward, if you change your mind about me protecting you, I'll understand."

I frown, not understanding why he would even think that. There's no one I'd trust more to look out for me. A fact I firmly believe Hawk and Hadley agree with, and I'm guessing, based on things they've said, that they know all about his past. If they don't think it's an issue, then I certainly don't.

And yet, Kai obviously views it as a problem.

Something in his tortured gaze has me reaching out and taking the envelope from him. With a small nod of his head, as though confirming with himself that this is the right thing to do, he steps past me and walks out of the room without saying a word.

Confused, I look at Hawk. He offers me a small, reassuring smile, although there's something significant written in his eyes that I can't understand. I want to ask him what this is all about, only the words are stuck in my throat as Hawk sets a box of tissues in front of me and strokes his thumb along the back of my hand before following Kai out of the room.

Alone in the kitchen, an unsettling sense of foreboding sits like lead in my stomach as I take a seat at the table. For a long

while, I simply stare at the non-descript envelope, speculating about the secrets it conceals and debating whether I should actually set them loose in the world.

Kai gave me permission to, yet it still doesn't feel right not to hear it from him. Getting the details about whatever the hell happened from a file just feels wrong. However, recalling that look in his eyes, I'm not sure if he's even capable of telling me what happened. Whatever it was... it broke him—left him irreparably damaged. And it might just be the reason why he's been pulling away from me.

Still feeling uncomfortable but also determined, I lift the envelope off the table and pull out a thick folder.

That feeling of unease turns to dread as I flip it open and begin to read. I inhale every word on that report, even as bile climbs higher up the back of my throat. By the time I reach the photographs from the morgue, my heart is racing, my hands are shaking, and I have to look away.

I can't read anymore. I've read enough. If there's anything else to know, I want to hear it from Kai. Unable to look at the images for another second, I slam the folder shut and suck in heaving breaths until I no longer feel like I might throw up all over the table.

The photographs and snippets of the report swim behind my eyes, and I recoil further away from the table as I try to put myself in Kai's shoes. Try to imagine what it must have been like to step into that house and find his girlfriend like that.

According to the file, Kai's high school sweetheart was stalked by a classmate. Evidently, she filed several police reports, reported the guy's behavior to the school, and mentioned it to her friends and Kai. Everyone had dismissed it as an awkward kid who had a crush on her. No one believed it was anything serious, until one night, he broke into her house when her parents weren't home and murdered her before killing himself.

Knowing this explains so much about Kai that I didn't comprehend before—why he joined the Marines, his reluctance to go to the cops, his dedication to identifying Mel.

It also adds a new layer of insight into how he must have felt that day on campus when he found out Mel had taken me. How difficult that must have been for him—the reminder of *that* day. No wonder he's pulled away since.

Except that none of this changes anything for me. It doesn't make me question his abilities or doubt his capabilities. He was eighteen years old—a kid. The police and the school are the ones who bear the brunt of the responsibility for what happened that day. They are the ones who should have safeguarded Laura and looked into her claims. Even her parents dismissed the situation. I understand why Kai feels he's to blame, but he's not.

At least, in my mind, he's not.

Jumping to my feet, I hurry out of the room in search of him. I check the living room, finding it empty, before rushing up the stairs to his bedroom. There's no sign of him there, either. I have to think for a second before I head for the gym instead.

I'm winded by the time I make it down to the basement—I really should make an effort to work out more often, or at all. Regardless, the sound of music blasting from the gym makes me think I'm in the right place.

When I push open the door, the noise gets even louder, practically deafening me. However, my bleeding eardrums are minimized by my suddenly parched throat. Honestly, I'm not aware of a single thing except the two half-naked men sparring.

I'm not sure who to focus on first. Instead, my eyes flit back and forth between Hawk and Kai as they circle one another. Sweat clings to their hair and drips down their backs, painting one hell of a picture for me to drool over. I drink in the veins bulging along Hawk's muscular forearm as he drives his fist into Kai's kidney, followed by the tensing of Kai's back muscles as he returns with a fierce punch of his own.

The two are like a work of art, dancing around one another and striking with precise, powerful hits. Neither one holds

back; the two of them are going at it like boxers in the ring on fight night.

After several moments—and not nearly enough time—Hawk notices me standing in the doorway and brings their joust to an end. Stepping back, he pulls off his gloves and gestures toward me with his chin.

Not realizing I was there, Kai turns in my direction. Immediately, he tenses, that peacefulness from a moment ago disappearing into thin air.

“I’ll let you two talk,” Hawk says, grabbing a towel and moving past me toward the door. He deliberately steps close enough that I can smell the sweat from his workout, and his shoulder brushes mine, making me wish we were all in a different headspace.

As the door clicks shut behind us, I focus back on Kai, noticing that he’s been watching me the entire time. An electric charge jumps between us, tasting like air moments before an impending downpour and signifying a change in the weather. A pivotal moment in my relationship with Kai.

I can see it on his face. He thinks I’m here to tell him to leave. After everything he’s done for me, I don’t understand how he can believe that. Needing to set the record straight, I stare him straight in the eyes and say, “That report didn’t change anything for me.”

I watch closely as Kai’s chest rises and falls with heaving breaths; his whole body is still frozen in place as his gaze bores into mine, and he hangs onto my every word as though they were a lifeline. Taking a step toward him, I continue, “Not regarding your ability to keep me safe. You are not at fault for what happened that day—”

A cold, harsh laugh erupts from his lips, more reminiscent of Hawk or Wilder than the protective man I’ve come to know and care for. Kai shakes his head. “I’m not at fault?” he argues incredulously. “She fucking told me he was making her uncomfortable. That she thought he was taking photographs of her. Hell, she even made a comment about her underwear

disappearing, and do you know what I fucking said to her?" He doesn't wait for an answer.

"I told her she was fucking paranoid. He was an oddball kid, always carrying his camera around and watching everyone. Laura was popular, a cheerleader. She had the eyes of half the school on her every time she walked through the hallways. Just because one kid made her uncomfortable didn't mean he was *stalking* her." His scoff is dripping with self-loathing.

Kai's entire demeanor crumbles, and he falls to his knees, his head bowed. Staring at the floor, his voice comes out ragged. "If I'd just listened to her. Maybe everything would have been different if I'd taken her seriously."

My heart breaks at the sheer agony pouring from him, and not giving a flying fuck if Mel is watching us from outside the windows, I close the space between us until I'm on my knees in front of him, my hands on his face as I tilt his head up until he's left with no option but to look me in the eyes. Rimmed red, unshed tears shine in his emerald depths, only deepening the fissure in my chest.

"It wouldn't have changed a thing," I tell him earnestly. "The cops, the school, her parents... *they* are the ones who should have investigated her claims. The ones who could have made a difference. What would you have done? Watched her every second of every day? You know that wouldn't have changed a damn thing. You're the one who told me people like this would do anything to get to the object of their obsession, and at eighteen, you didn't have the knowledge, experience, or training to make a difference.

"Except you do now. You couldn't save Laura—and I am *so* sorry for that—but look at all the other men and women you have been able to save. You're the type of man who learns from his mistakes, and that guilt you're carrying ensures you'll never let what happened to her happen to anyone else. Me included."

"Only I did let Mel get to you," he argues, sounding so broken and defeated.

“You didn’t *let* her do anything,” I bite out angrily. “She waited for the perfect opportunity to make herself known. She took advantage of that storm, and there was nothing you could have done about that. What you *did* was work with Hawk and Wilder to ensure my safety. She knew she was on a time limit. She knew you’d come, and that’s why she didn’t attempt to do anything more that day.”

“I let you down,” he continues to argue.

“The last thing you have ever done is let me down, Kai. In all of this insanity, you’re the only one who has kept me sane. You’ve bolstered me, reassured me, and picked me up off the floor every damn time I’ve wanted to give up. You’ve taken care of me and nurtured me through all of this. It’s because of you that I’m still fighting. I trust you. I trust your judgment. I can’t do *any* of this without you.”

As I say it, I realize I’m not only talking about dealing with Mel. I’m talking about *everything*. I can’t handle Mel without him. I can’t fight Wilder or manage Hawk without him. I can’t do *life* without him.

He’s the reliable, stable piece in this relationship. The one who keeps everything ticking smoothly. The voice of reason. He puts up with Wilder’s craziness. He knows how to handle Hawk when he’s in a mood. And he makes me feel grounded, optimistic, hopeful. When Kai’s around, I’m not afraid; I’m not wondering about the *what-ifs*, *buts*, and *maybes*. I just am. He makes me feel as though anything I want is within my grasp, and he gives me the courage to reach for it.

That courage has me leaning in and pressing my lips to his. His lips remain unmoving against mine, and I can feel the tension coiling beneath his skin, but I refuse to let him push me away. I know what we have is real. There was no faking that kiss on our date. There was no faking how we lost ourselves in each other, unconcerned about the world around us until we found our release against the side of his car.

I know he feels it too, and as I move my lips over his, prodding at the seam with my tongue, I encourage him to let

go. To freefall over this cliff with me, because with him by my side, I'm confident I won't crash and burn at the bottom.

It takes a long moment, where my heart feels like it's lodged in my throat, and I start reconsidering the sanity of my actions, but fucking finally, he relaxes beneath me. His lips part, granting me the entry I've been dying for, while his hands move to rest on my waist.

Our kiss starts out sweet and gentle. Light and encouraging imbued with grief though flooded with hope. He divests himself of the guilt-laden thoughts weighing him down, and I lap up every single one, taking his hurt as my own. With every sweep of my tongue, I tell him how much I trust him. I silently show him that I'd readily lay my life down at his feet. I trust him to look out for me. To keep me safe. To always come for me when I need him.

Those sweet promises give way to more wicked ones as his sage scent infuses my senses and starts messing with my head, scrambling my thoughts until all I can think about is how it would feel to be trapped beneath him, writhing and needy.

The kiss turns heated and dirty, a clash of teeth driven by desire. His hands on my hips slide around to my ass before moving lower. Palming the back of my thighs, he drags me into his lap, my core pulsing as it comes to rest above his growing erection.

My hands dive into his hair, pulling him needlessly closer as I fall head over heels for everything that is Kai Benning. He consumes me. Devours every essence of who I am until I no longer know which way is up. There's no beginning and no end. Only us.

A desperate whimper slips past my lips, breaking the moment as he pries his mouth from mine. Our eyes connect, his blown with lust and shining with a vibrancy that wasn't there earlier. He's breathing as heavily as I am, and I can tell he's holding himself back.

Unintentionally, my eyes dip to his swollen lips.

His hands move to grasp my upper arms, holding me back. “Don’t,” he growls, sounding pained and barely restrained. His fingers press into my skin, guaranteed to leave bruises, and I get the impression he’s holding *himself* back as much as he is me. “I can’t kiss you. Not here, and not like this.” I watch his internal struggle play out across his face, his teeth gritted as he grapples with his self-control. “I’m so close to losing it. One more touch and I’ll...” I desperately want to know what he’ll do, only he doesn’t even allow himself to finish his sentence, instead shaking his head to dispel the thoughts.

Still sounding agonized, he forces out, “I refuse to let my feelings interfere with my responsibility to protect you, and I know if I give in to you right now and we go where this is headed, that’s all I’ll be thinking about when I’m around you.”

That doesn’t sound so bad.

He must see that exact thought written on my face as he tightens his grip on my arms to gain my attention. “I can’t think like that with all of this shit going on. I can’t *protect you* if I’m thinking like that—if I’m distracted—and I refuse to let you be another casualty in my life.” His eyes search mine, filled with a potent mixture of fury, lust, fear, and awe. “You mean too much to me. I will not give myself over to you and make you mine until I can be guaranteed that I will not lose you.”

My heart skips a beat, a smile tugging at my lips despite the fact he’s basically acknowledging his feelings but saying he can’t be with me. “You want to make me yours?”

His fingers tighten around my upper arm once more, his eyes flashing with primal possession. “In every way a man can,” he growls in a deep voice that sends tremors right to my very core and threatens to snap the weak clasp I have on my self-restraint. “You’re everything I never knew was missing from my life. You’re strong, resilient, and smart as hell. You’re not afraid to stand up to Wilder and go toe to toe with Hawk. You’ve handled everything with Mel with grace and determination.” His eyes search mine, softening at the edges. “I’ve been dead inside for so long that I’d forgotten what it felt like to be alive. I’d decided that my life ended the day Laura’s

did, only you've been slowly reminding me that's not the case. I think it's time I reclaimed my life and started living it, for the both of us."

Goddammit, I want to kiss him so badly, right now. It must be written all over my face, too, because he tacks on, "*After we deal with Mel.*"

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes as I mentally talk down every muscle in my body screaming at me to surge forward, to claim his lips, to own his body, snatch his soul and shove it into mine where it belongs. Only when I'm confident that I have myself under control, do I open my eyes and meet his stormy gaze. "Fine, so long as you know that I've already decided that you're mine, and after we've dealt with Mel there will be no more reprieves."

Carnal desire burns in his emerald depths, and the corners of his lips quirk up in a smug smile. "Trust me, Blackbird, once Mel is taken care of, I'll be all over you, in you, on you. You will *never* get rid of me."

CHAPTER 17

EMILIA

We spent the rest of the day brainstorming ways in which I could communicate with Mel. Without a phone or knowing her location, it's pretty tricky. However, according to her, she is always watching. So, instead of using my words, I have to communicate with her through my actions.

Which is why I'm awake before the sun is up, stress-cleaning the kitchen in a hideous, mauve-colored dress. In fairness, the dress is actually really pretty. It's silky soft and accentuates my curves perfectly, even if it does show more cleavage than what I'd generally wear while teaching. Still, I resent it, because I'm wearing it for Mel. Because purple is her favorite color, and this was the best idea we could come up with to get her attention. Although if it works, I don't care. At this point, I'd dance around in purple panties if it gave Kai the opportunity to capture her.

I'm wearing bright yellow marigold gloves that go all the way to my elbows while I scrub at a stubborn stain in the sink when a bleary-eyed Wilder walks in.

"I've been looking for you," he grumbles.

"Well, you found me," I snark, scrubbing furiously at this stupid fucking stain. "However, if you're here to give me shit, I don't wanna hear it, Wilder."

Obviously not giving a crap, he storms around the island toward me. His brows furrow as he runs his eyes over me. "You look fucking ridiculous."

Though, I'm not paying attention to what he's saying because my attention has snagged on the sheet of paper in his hand.

"You read it," I murmur, half in shock. I expected him to fight me tooth and nail, to refuse to read it out of pure stubbornness alone.

“Yeah, I fucking read it,” he growls. His sharp tone has my eyes flicking up to meet his wild ones. For the first time, I notice they’re bloodshot, and he’s got dark rings under his eyes. Was he up all night reading that letter and debating what to do? If that’s the case, I can’t figure out what conclusion he came to. He looks pissed, haggard, and unhinged. I’m guessing that can’t be a good sign for me.

His shoes eat up the space between us as he strides toward me, and I drop the brush in my hand, turning to face him as he cages me in against the sink. I have to crane my neck to stare into his stormy eyes.

“Did you work out what you want in life?” he snarls viciously.

“Yes,” I say breathlessly. “Unsurprisingly, it was the people I left behind to go find myself. Hadley and the guys, Hawk... You. *You’re* what I want in life.”

His features give nothing away as he bites out, “And are you done *finding* yourself?”

“No,” I respond honestly. “All I succeeded in doing was losing myself. I only started to find myself again when I came here. I’m not complete without you or Hawk. You both took pieces of me, and I can’t function without them—without you.”

Wilder’s chaotic brown eyes dart back and forth between mine. “You better be goddamn sure about that, Angel, because there’s no fucking escape. There will be no fleeing this time. You’re mine, now. Not even death will separate you from me.”

His lips slam down on mine with all the force of a sledgehammer, smashing through all the fractured pieces of my soul that I’d delicately put back together and sending them scattering across the floor. We were already intertwined after the other night. Yet, as his tongue sweeps into my mouth, devouring everything in sight and claiming every crevice for his own, I know we’ll forever be inseparable from this moment on.

Wilder has laid claim to my heart, and with every clash of my tongue against his, I lay claim to him. Every dark, rotten part of his soul belongs to me. It's mine to nurture, mine to tame. Mine to make whole.

"Say it," he growls against my lips.

I may have written that letter four years ago, but it may as well have been yesterday, for I remember it clear as day. And I know exactly what he's demanding.

They aren't difficult words to say, and despite the hardships of the last month, they come effortlessly to me.

"I love you."

A rumbling growl reverberates through his chest as he moves to trail a scorching path of kisses along the column of my neck. "Again."

"I love you," I say breathlessly, tilting my head to the side and granting him better access.

He courses a journey over my collarbone and between the valley of my breasts, before lowering to his knees. "I need to taste you. It's been driving me fucking insane thinking about it."

Pulling up my skirt, he wastes no time pushing my panties aside. Slinging one leg over his shoulder, he dives right in, and my entire body jolts at the contact.

"Fucking hell." The words are said in an awed rasp, as though he's been living off tap water all these years and suddenly remembered what it is to have a strawberry milkshake. "You taste even sweeter than I remember."

He devours my pussy the same way he did my mouth—by carving his name into every inch of it and ripping an orgasm from my lips. It's not unerringly pleasurable, but something about it feels like it drains us both of the resentment we're carrying for one another. In its place, it leaves space for long-forgotten emotions to foster and grow.

Drained, I fall to my knees and press my lips to his, uncaring of the ridiculous yellow gloves I'm wearing as I fist

his shirt in my hand. Unlike his kiss, mine is soft and gentle, loving. The planting of new seeds. He allows me to dictate the pace, keeping the kiss light and heartfelt as he pulls me into his lap. It's like the mending of a bridge; the closing of a gap. I can feel those seeds taking root and sprouting as we begin to heal.

Our kiss slows, coming to an end, and he buries his face in the juncture between my shoulder and neck, breathing heavily as though he's struggling to get himself under control. I wrap my arms around him and stroke his hair, drinking in every second of being in his arms. After years of being adrift at sea, it feels like finally coming home.

Tears bloom in my eyes, and I sniff as I hold them back, returning his bruising hold. "I've missed you," I whisper against his neck. "So damn much."

He doesn't respond, but he squeezes me tighter, and the two of us remain in comfortable silence, basking in the closeness of one another without all the hate and resentment, until we hear footsteps approaching. Even then, neither of us makes a move to pull away.

"Well, this isn't weird at all," Hawk drawls when he finds us on the floor beside the sink, me wrapped around Wilder like a spider monkey while wearing bright yellow gloves. When I glance up at him, I find him smirking down at us. "I knew you were into some kinky shit, Wilder, though I didn't think fucking the cleaner was a roleplay you'd really be into."

I snort out a laugh, untangling myself from Wilder, who glowers up at Hawk. "You don't know half the shit I'm into."

Well, that earns a quirk of my eyebrows.

Hawk's smirk only widens as he holds out a hand toward me. Wilder places his hands on my hips, and the two of them help me to my feet.

Glancing back and forth between us, Hawk cocks an eyebrow. "Can I presume this means you're done torturing the *both* of you?" he asks, the question directed at Wilder.

"Yes," Wilder confirms while rolling his eyes.

“Good,” Hawk returns with an easy grin. “About fucking time.” Shifting his attention to me, his eyes rake over my outfit, flaring with hunger. “As weirdly sexy as this whole thing is,” he states, gesturing to my ridiculous getup, “I’ve gotta go.”

Nerves flutter in my stomach as I bite on my lower lip. “Okay.”

“Everything will be okay,” Hawk reassures, seeing my uneasiness. “Kai’s already there, and I’ll be nearby.”

“So will I,” Wilder tacks on, earning a raised brow from Hawk. “Although someone needs to fill me in. I’ve got no idea what the fuck is going on.” He wasn’t here when we discussed today’s plan, but a warmth fills my chest at knowing he’s committed to helping. No longer willing to turn a blind eye and pretend that me and my stalker don’t exist.

“Here.” Hawk holds out his hand, showing me a small, skin-colored earpiece. “It’s a Bluetooth earpiece, so we’ll be able to stay in constant communication.”

Tugging off my rubber glove, I reach out to take it from him. Just as I do, he wraps his hand around mine, giving it a squeeze. “You won’t be alone.”

I give him a tight smile. “I know.”

“You’ve got this, Little Sparrow.”

I watch with trepidation as they both walk away, the closing of the front door sounding like a death knell.

NERVES BEAT a steady rhythm against my chest, making me feel nauseous as I step out of the cab onto the Ridgeway campus. I only left thirty minutes after Hawk and Wilder, but it feels like it’s been ages since I last saw them. Time is ticking by too slowly and too fast all at once.

This has to be the day we catch Mel. I can’t go through this again. At this rate, I’ll be gray before I’m thirty. Plus, I

suck at regularly remembering to get my hair cut, so I definitely won't keep on top of dying it every few weeks. Which means I'll end up with gray strands peeking through, and everyone will think Hawk and Wilder are dating a MILF.

"I can hear you spiraling," Hawk chastises in my ear.

"How? I didn't say anything."

"Your breathing changed."

"Oh."

"Just breathe," he reminds me.

"I don't want to go gray," I whine.

There's a moment of silence, followed by, "What?"

"Nothing," I huff. "What are we supposed to do once we catch her?" I ask, suddenly realizing how stupid it is that I haven't questioned that before.

I'd just assumed we'd hand her over to the police to deal with, but it won't be that simple. As Kai said, there's no proof that she's been stalking me. Even if there was, all that would earn her is a slap on the wrist and a restraining order. She hasn't hurt me or done anything to warrant a prison sentence.

We could try to pin Richard's murder on her, although other than his severed finger delivered to my door, there's nothing to tie her to the crime scene. And even the finger won't link back to her.

Hell, we don't even know who this woman is. She certainly isn't my friend or the girl I shared a dorm room with for four years. Is Mel even her real name? Probably not. She's a stranger—a ghost.

"We kill her, obviously," Wilder is quick to say, unaware that his words have me tripping over my own feet. "The psychotic wackadoodle isn't going to stop any other way."

"Shut up, Wilder," Kai growls. "It's not your decision to make. Emilia," he says more softly, "you can decide what you want to do once we've got her."

The back of my throat burns with the weight of that decision. Honestly, I'm not sure it's one I want to make. One I'm capable of making. Sure, Mel has terrorized me, but she was also my best friend at one point. I can't be objective. It's not a decision I can make rationally.

One thing is for certain, though; this won't end by going through the justice system.

"It's not a problem for today," Hawk states when I don't say anything. "Let's just focus on today's plan, yeah?... Em?"

"Y-yeah, okay."

My classes go by in a blur. I teach on autopilot, too caught up in looking for any sign of Mel to truly focus on what I'm teaching. I know she's watching. I can feel her eyes on me, but so far, she hasn't reached out or acknowledged my outfit—no flowers, no notes, no photographs. Nothing.

At this rate, I'm going to have a heart attack before the end of the day. In between classes, my mind runs off in a hundred different directions, wondering where she's hiding, what she's doing, what her next move will be.

The guys and I keep our conversations to a minimum, not wanting to draw unwanted attention or alert anyone to our communication. If Mel caught a whiff of our plan, she'd be in the wind, and whatever thin thread of trust she's placed in me would go up in smoke.

"Damn, Miss H." Jacob wolf-whistles, snagging my attention back to the classroom that's quickly filling with students for my next class. "Lookin' good today."

"Who the fuck is that?" Wilder snaps through the earpiece.

I grit my teeth, ignoring Wilder's question and Jacob's roaming gaze as he takes a seat in the front row—definitely not his usual seat in this class. I remind myself that it's the last class of the day. *Just get through this, and then you can go home and have a glass of wine.*

Huh. I'm not sure when I started thinking of Hawk and Wilder's house as home, but that's what it has become. My

sanctuary at the end of the day—even if that sanctuary does come with its own chaotic storm in the form of Wilder.

Running my eyes over the classroom, I firmly make a point of avoiding Jacob, before getting to my feet. “Okay, class. Today we’re going to talk about...”

I lose myself in the art of teaching, ignoring Jacob and the cocky smirks he keeps giving me when I look toward his side of the room. Forgetting about Mel and the fact that I’m practically waving a purple-colored flag in her face. Refusing to think about Wilder and whether he’ll still be resisting the inevitable between us, and definitely not thinking about Hawk and the dirty things we got up to in the cinema room last night.

“Don’t forget to read T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*. We’ll be discussing the distinction between the experience of modern man and spirituality in next week’s class,” I call out as students filter out of the classroom.

“I’m guessing this was a failure,” I say into the earpiece when the final student has left the classroom.

“It’s still early days,” Kai reassures, but I know we were all hopeful for a quick response from Mel. All of us are anxious to resolve this so we can move on with our lives.

“Who was that asshole?” Wilder interjects, obviously still hung up on Jacob.

“No one. Just a student.”

“A soon-to-be dead student,” he growls. “Give me his name, Angel.”

I roll my eyes, and thankfully Kai comes to my rescue, preventing me from having to either piss off Wilder by not giving him Jacob’s name or be responsible for whatever torment he planned on unleashing on the cocky quarterback. “Head home,” Kai says. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Feeling defeated, I schedule a taxi using an app on my phone and gather my things before exiting the classroom. I’m lost in my thoughts as I walk across campus. If this didn’t work, then what will? What is it that Mel wants? How does she expect me to communicate with her? Does she need me to

hold up a sign in the middle of campus declaring my love for her before she shows her face?

The entire journey to the parking lot, I scan the surrounding area, staring into students' faces and peering around trees, wondering if she's watching from afar. I'm so busy looking around me I don't even notice the student I'm barreling toward until we collide.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say, apologizing.

"Don't sweat it. It's my fault," he says with an amiable smile before moving around me. He continues on his way, and so do I, spotting my cab already waiting for me.

"What was that?" Kai asks as I close in on the cab.

"No one. I accidentally walked into a passing student. It was nothing."

In the car, I subtly pop out the earpiece so I don't make the mistake of responding to anything the guys might say and appear like a crazy person to the cab driver.

As the cab pulls out of the university gates, I lean my head against the window and watch the city flash by without really seeing it, too lost in my own thoughts.

Now that Wilder has come to his senses and stopped fighting the chemistry between us, Mel is the last hurdle we need to overcome. I'm confident that once she's eliminated as a threat, Kai will come back to me, too.

When the taxi turns onto Hawk and Wilder's street, I dig in my pocket for my house keys, only my fingers brush over a piece of paper that wasn't there earlier alongside my keys. Confused, I pull the crumpled note out of my pocket and frown as I unfold the edges.

Air stalls in my lungs as I'm confronted by familiar messy handwriting: *Bitter & Twisted. Now.*

"Here you are," the cab driver says through the divider. His voice breaks through the trance I was in, and I snap my head up to look out the window and realize we're parked outside the brownstone.

“Uhhh...” I bite on my bottom lip, trying to decide what to do before making a split-second decision. “Change of plans. Do you know a place called *Bitter & Twisted*?”

“Sure do. It’s on the other side of town, though.”

“Take me there, please.”

He nods before pulling back onto the road, and forgoing the Bluetooth earpiece, I pull my phone out and dial Kai’s number with my stomach twisted in knots.

He answers on the first ring, as though he was expecting a call from me. I guess after we spent the day baiting a psychopath, he was probably expecting something like this.

“Em? Where are you? Why aren’t you using the earpieces?” he immediately asks, his tone low and deadly.

Overlooking his questions, I explain, “I found a note in my pocket.” My statement is followed by a round of murmured curses that sound like they belong to Hawk and Wilder. “It says to go to some place called *Bitter & Twisted*.”

“No,” Kai interjects. “Absolutely not. You must be nearly home by now. Stay there. We’re leaving campus now.”

I wince, bracing myself for a reprimand. “Ehhh, yeah, about that... I’m on my way there now.”

“Fucking hell, Em. Go home!”

“I have to go, Kai,” I try to reason. “It will only make her suspicious if I don’t.”

Silence follows my words, letting me know that he is at least taking in what I’m saying. I can hear the three of them whispering on the other end of the line.

“Fuck,” Kai snarls before speaking to me again. “Fine. We’re on our way. Hawk is maneuvering the team into position as we speak. *Do not* go into that bar until we’re in place.”

“She’s going to know I tipped you off if you go storming in there,” I argue. “She must have known you were staking out

the campus, which is why she waited until I was leaving to send me a message.”

“That won’t matter if we catch her,” he growls.

“And if you don’t?” I counter. “What then? Then she’ll know I’m not on her side, and we’ll be completely screwed.”

I can hear his furious huff of breath, but his resounding silence says that I’m making a good point—one for which he has no reasonable argument.

“As long as she believes I return her feelings for me, then I’m not in danger.” Kai scoffs, but I continue talking. “I can use this to get close to her. If I can get her to lower her guard, then we could find out where she’s staying, or she might divulge her plans. We’re not getting anywhere by sitting and waiting for her to come to us. She knows you’re watching, waiting for her.” I sigh. “This game of cat and mouse could go on forever. I’m done with it. I’m finally ready to start living my life—with you, Hawk, and Wilder—and I’m sick of her standing in my way.”

There’s a moment’s silence before Kai says, “The three of us, huh?” His voice is softer than before, and I swear I can hear the smile in it.

“Yes,” I state assertively. “The three of you. I know you have your demons, but if Wilder’s don’t scare me, then yours definitely don’t. You blew up my world when you strolled into my apartment that day. It felt like everything was falling apart at the time. Only now do I understand that it was actually falling into place. I was always meant to end up with Hawk and Wilder, but I also need you. This whole thing between the four of us doesn’t work without you. I need you to keep me sane when they are driving me nuts; Wilder needs someone to keep him in line, and Hawk needs someone to wallop him over the head when he’s being an insufferable asshole.

“All of us need you, Kai. We need *each other*. This only works if we’re all in agreement. I’m done sitting on the sidelines of my own life. As soon as Mel is out of the picture, we’re doing this—all of us.”

“Mmm. Who am I to argue with that, Blackbird?”

Smiling to myself, I say, “So we’re in agreement?”

“Fine.” He sighs reluctantly. “Nevertheless, we’re still heading to that part of town, so we’re nearby. Wilder’s already got the app open with your tracker on it. We’ll be watching it closely. You have ten minutes. Then if we don’t hear from you, we’re coming in.”

“Deal,” I agree readily, not wanting a repeat kidnapping. Once was more than enough, thank you very much.

“Don’t push too hard, or you might spook her,” he continues. “For whatever reason, she thinks you’re in love with her, but you haven’t realized it yet. You need to convince her that she’s right.”

Nervous jitters flutter futilely in my stomach, fear stealing the confidence I displayed earlier as I wonder how the hell I’m going to pull this off. How am I supposed to make a psychopath I despise believe I’m in love with her? Shock bought me some leeway the last time I came face to face with Mel, though it’s not going to gain me any favors with her now.

“I’ve got it,” I tell Kai, forcing self-assurance into my voice.

When he responds, “I know you do,” he does so with such conviction that it more than makes up for my own uncertainty; his words give me the much-needed boost of confidence I need right now.

We hang up as the cab pulls up outside a small, hole-in-the-wall bar that looks like it’s seen better days. Handing the driver a wad of bills, I reinsert the Bluetooth earpiece before getting out, my heart hammering against my chest and my palms slick with sweat.

You can do this, I chant to myself, holding tight to Kai’s faith in me.

“Can you hear me?” I ask quietly, attempting to move my lips as little as possible in case Mel is watching.

“We’re here,” Kai reassures. “We’ll be at the bar in eight minutes.”

Feeling a little better at knowing I’m not technically alone, I push open the door and step into the bar.

I’m greeted by the strong smell of spilled beer, hard liquor, and manly sweat. Glancing around the poorly lit interior, I’m undeniably in some sort of dive bar that looks like it relies on its regular patrons to keep the doors open.

Being early in the evening, the bar is relatively empty. A couple of older men with their heads hanging in their drinks, uncaring of who might have just walked in, are sitting on stools spaced out along the high counter.

Even the bartender barely spares me a passing glance before dismissing me, returning to wiping down a counter that looks like all the elbow grease in the world won’t remove the filth and stains stuck to it.

Before I can take in any more, familiar tawny hair obscures my vision as Mel pounces on me. “You came!” she squeals. “I wasn’t sure if you’d get my message.”

All I can do is blink, forcing my arms into motion to return her embrace while I try to correlate this Mel with the one I met in the bunker that day. She’s acting like the best friend I’ve known for the last four years and not the creepy-ass bitch who’s been stalking my ass.

I’m getting whiplash from all the back and forth. Seriously, pick a personality and stick with it. Never knowing if I will be confronted with best-friend-Mel or crazy-stalker-Mel is going to drive *me* crazy.

Of the two, I actually think I prefer crazy-stalker-Mel. This best friend version brings up all sorts of nostalgia and makes me realize I’ve *missed* her. How fucked up is that? To miss my stalker? I’m seriously going to need therapy after all of this is over.

The problem is that Mel isn’t just my stalker. She was my confidant and my friend, so when she decided to kill Richard

and pursue me, I didn't just lose my boyfriend; I lost my best friend too.

Tears swim in my eyes, threatening to overflow. I ignore the fact that the woman in front of me murdered Richard, has been threatening the guys, and could easily turn on me, and allow myself to hug Mel—my roommate and best friend. My arms tighten around her in a fierce hug that I pour all my grief and heartache into.

When she pulls back, I can see that it's still Mel in front of me. Not the stalker I met in that bunker. At least until she plants her lips on mine. That's *definitely* not something best-friend-Mel would have done. Her tongue probes at my lips until I reluctantly part them, trying to block out the reality of what's happening as I return her kiss.

Every sweep of her tongue along mine feels like an invasion by an alien body—intrusive and unwanted. Her kiss is a claim, a test, a declaration. Although it's impossible because they're so embedded in my skin, it feels as though she's trying to remove every trace of Hawk, Wilder, and Kai and replace their marks with hers.

I never knew kissing someone could feel so wrong. I've had kisses where I felt nothing, ones purely driven by carnal desire, and then there are the rare, life-changing ones that bury so deep inside you they leave a permanent mark. The type that you can never wash off. The kind of kiss that forever changes you.

Not Mel's kiss. Hers feels like oil slipping over my skin, needles stabbing at my eyes, cement filling my veins. Where Wilder's touch feels deliciously wrong, Mel's is rotten. A foul stench that clings to your clothes no matter how many times you wash them.

Her hands begin to roam, first down my spine, then along the curve of my ass. My whole body stiffens when her fingers linger, before her palms slide around to my front, moving over my ribs. Her hands brush the sides of my breasts, and it's only then that I realize what she's doing—searching me.

I make a mental note to thank Wilder for his clever thinking—even if I still believe he went about it the wrong way.

When Mel finally pulls away, she beams at me—a wide, easy smile that is so at odds with the chaos swirling within me. Her eyes drop as she entangles her hand around mine, and the creepy-ass smile drops from her face, something far scarier replacing it. “What’s this?” she barks. “That’s new.” She lifts my arm, her spare hand fingering Kai’s bracelet.

Her eyes flash to mine. “Who bought you this?”

“Tell her it was Hadley,” Kai urgently barks in my ear.

Gaping at her with concern, I stutter, “H-Hadley.”

Before I can protest, she rips it from my wrist with a sharp sting and a furious snarl. “I’m the only one allowed to give you presents.”

Pain slices across my chest at the loss. Not because of the tracker in it but because Kai put time and effort into finding one that he knew I would love when he could have given me any old bracelet. It was just one of many ways in which he showed he cared, even while trying to put distance between us and questioning his self-worth.

Clasping it in her hand, she closely inspects the thin metal chain and each of the charms. When her eyes shadow over, I know she’s spotted the tracker.

“I-Is everything alright?” I ask after a tense moment of silence.

Her hand shakes with fury as she tightens it around the bracelet, before stuffing it into her pocket and pasting on a too-wide grin. “Everything’s fine. Come, sit.” Grabbing my hand again, she leads me over to a booth at the side of the room, only letting go so I can slide in opposite her.

I’m lost for words, sick to my stomach and unable to speak, but thankfully she seems content to simply gaze at me. Her eyes roam over my face, and for a moment I worry that she’ll be able to read the truth written there.

“You look good,” she says instead, with that smile that once seemed friendly but now just gives me the creeps. It would appear that her anger from a moment ago has been forgotten as another bout of whiplash has my head reeling. “I was worried that they’d hurt you when you stopped letting them touch you.” It comes and goes in a split second, but I catch it—the Mel from the bunker. Her eyes harden, and her expression turns menacing before she wipes the slate clean. “Especially that psychotic one.”

“Pot calling the kettle black,” Wilder grumbles in my ear.

If it wasn’t all so terrifying, I’d laugh at the irony. I guess it takes one to know one.

I search her face, trying to work out how to play this before deciding just to be myself—to forget about everything that has happened between us these last few months and behave the way I always have around Mel.

“I don’t know what’s going on anymore, Mel,” I say, not lying. “What’s the plan here?”

She reaches across the table and clasps my hand in hers. “Don’t worry, baby. I have it all worked out. I’m sorry it all unfolded like this. It wasn’t what I wanted.” Her hand tightens to the point of pain, and her expression again darkens. “If *he* hadn’t interfered, then none of this would have happened.”

It takes effort to suppress my shiver, and I deliberately don’t let my thoughts drift to what might have happened if Kai hadn’t barged into my apartment that day. Instead, I attempt a placating smile. “It hardly matters. We found our way back to each other in the end.”

She likes that response, a feral gleam lighting the dark blue depths of her eyes. “I knew once I explained everything to you, you’d understand. You see now, that you were never supposed to be with any of them?”

“I do,” I state emphatically, nodding my head and ignoring the taste of ash on my tongue. “I’m so sorry. I should have realized sooner. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before.”

Her thumb brushes back and forth across my cheek while she holds my gaze before her eyes fall to take in my outfit. “You looked so tempting today, baby.” She bites her lower lip seductively, and it takes everything in me to bat my lashes and keep up the facade. “Like a present all wrapped up for me to enjoy. It was so difficult to stay away from you.”

Once more, her demeanor changes faster than the snap of fingers, and I’m once again confronted by the Mel from the bunker. “He hasn’t heeded my warnings,” she says darkly. “Mr. Savior Complex thinks you’re a damsel in distress who needs saving.” She laughs at her own joke—one I don’t find remotely funny.

I don’t even know how to react to that. Thankfully, the mention of Kai has her glancing at her watch. She frowns. “He’ll know you aren’t at the house by now.”

“So what do we do?” I ask, my voice squeaking with anxiety. “Run?”

Even though I know the guys won’t let that happen, and even if I did have to play along with her and escape right now, they’d track us down in no time. Still, the thought is terrifying. Fleeing with Mel is the absolute last thing I want to do.

“Two minutes away,” Kai whispers urgently in my ear. “Try and stall her.”

I have to swallow back my sigh of relief when she shakes her head. “No. He won’t simply let you run away. If we run, he’ll chase. The only way to offload someone like that is to take them out at the knees.”

A dizziness sweeps through me as terror digs its cold claws into my skin. It doesn’t take a genius to know that when someone unhinged says something like that, they most likely mean murder. Mel’s already proven herself to be ruthless. She pretended to be *friends* with Richard and had no issues murdering him, so zero remorse will be offered to Kai.

Images of Kai in Richard’s place on the photos Mel sent, his name on the police report, and his death certificate flash

through my mind, causing my lips to tremble. I have to suck them between my teeth to stop them from giving me away.

The room around me is a distant blur as I try to figure out a way out of this that doesn't have me confronting Kai's dead body. Richard's death hurt my heart, but Kai's would devastate me.

I only come to at the feel of a warm hand against my cheek, and blinking back into the room, I notice Mel crouched in front of me. She's staring up at me with concern—fake or genuine, I have no idea—but I instantly fear that I've given away my true feelings for Kai.

“Shhh.” She strokes my cheek while she attempts to soothe me. “Everything will be okay. I plan to eliminate all three of them, and once I've seen it through, I'll come and get you. You only have to be around them for a few more days. Can you do that for me?”

Numbly, I nod my head, earning a proud smile from her.

Getting to her feet, she places one last kiss against my lips. “I promise I'll come for you soon, baby. Then it will just be the two of us. We'll find a remote cabin somewhere where no one will bother us, and we'll spend the rest of our days there—happy and in love.”

Oh, yay. Just what I've always wanted—to live in the middle of nowhere with a crazy person.

Before I can make my mouth move to form words, she's slipping down a back hallway and disappearing from view. The second I'm alone, I stop fighting my body's natural reaction and allow the fear to course through me. My hands tremble as I shake uncontrollably, and I stare unseeingly at the grimy floor of the bar as I go back over the last half hour.

“We're here.” Kai's voice makes me jump. I'd forgotten entirely about the earpiece.

“She's gone,” I say in an unsteady voice.

“Dumped the tracker, too,” Kai informs me—having presumably quickly checked.

Sighing heavily, I tell them, “I’m coming out now.” However, I don’t make any effort to move. I allow myself a minute to fall apart. As if sensing I need the time to gather myself, the guys remain quiet on the other end of the earpiece; none of them kicking in the door of the bar. One minute turns into five, which turns into ten.

When I’m ready, I slot all the broken pieces back into place and pick myself back up.

“That’s our girl,” Hawk soothes in my ear. “Come back to us. We’ll take care of you.” His comforting words are the glue I needed to heal myself again. As I slide out of the booth, I set my jaw and lift my head before striding out to the awaiting car.

I refuse to let Mel hurt Kai. Or Hawk. Or Wilder. I won’t let her tear me down mentally and drive doubts into my mind. And I sure as hell am *not* letting her take me to live in the freaking wilderness alone with her!

CHAPTER 18

HAWK

I groan as the blaring of my alarm starts up a pounding headache behind my eyes. *What an excellent start to the day.* The four of us sat up way too late last night while Em recounted her meeting with Mel and we all brainstormed ideas.

This shit is getting so far out of hand. When Em first showed up in my kitchen, I thought for sure her stalker was just some college creep, and Kai would have sniffed him out in a week and gotten rid of him, and Emilia would disappear back to her life as though her presence had been nothing but a weird dream.

I could never have guessed the psycho stalking her was a virtual ghost—one who is easily evading our team of trained professionals tasked with the job of finding her. How is that even possible? I know it's not because of a flaw in our system. I even had West update our software and search through it for blind spots, but he found nothing significant.

West is the most intelligent person I know regarding computers and technology. He's upgraded all of our systems, installing programs he created that give us the edge against rival security companies.

I remember when he set it up; he boasted that the computer program could find anyone literally.

Well, apparently, it can find anyone *except* Mel. Her skill set has outsmarted even him. I've tried to keep Hadley out of most of this, even asked West to see if he could do something to help us catch her. I'm at a loss as to what to do next, which pisses me off. This entire company that's built on protecting people, yet there's not a single damn thing I can do to protect the woman I'm falling in love with.

The incessant tinkling of my alarm stops, the quiet of the room rushing back in as I relax back against the mattress and pull a still-sleeping Emilia tighter against me.

When the noise immediately starts back up again, I realize it's not my alarm but an incoming call. Cursing out whatever asshole is calling me before the sun has even risen, I grab my phone from the bedside table and bring it to my ear.

"What?" I hiss out angrily, careful to keep my voice low so as not to wake Emilia.

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but there has been an, uh, incident."

"What incident?"

"Well, umm, we have just received notification from the authorities that Compton was found murdered in his home early this morning."

Fuck. He's a top-priority client, and his death will undoubtedly make front-page news. News that won't reflect well on Nocturnal Enterprises. Still, there's no reason to disturb me at such an ungodly hour.

"I don't see why this couldn't have waited until I'm in the office."

"Ah, well, you see, the authorities suspect someone from our offices was involved."

Eh, what now?

My brows furrow in confusion as I wrack my brain, trying to wrap my head around what he's saying. A leak? The police think someone in my company leaked personal, private information that resulted in Compton's death?

Nothing like this has ever happened before, and the timing is oddly suspicious.

"Has my father been notified?"

"Yes, sir. He's ordering everyone to come in right away for a briefing."

"Okay." I sigh, already hating this day. "I'm on my way."

Hanging up, I rest my head against the headboard, my eyes drifting shut.

“Is everything okay?” Emilia asks in a sleepy voice.

“One of our high-profile clients was murdered last night.”

“Oh my goodness,” she gasps.

Cracking an eye open, I gaze down at her. Her black hair is fanned out on the pillow, and her eyes are still heavy with sleep. She looks absolutely breathtaking. Waking up to her in my bed is still a novelty, and the best part of my day. I’ve gained a newfound appreciation for the simple stuff—the everyday things like having our morning coffee together, lying in on the weekends with her, and watching the news while she reads a book or grades papers beside me. Until her, those things have just been mechanical. Ways to fill the time in between going to work or class. I never slowed down long enough to actually enjoy any of it—or rather, I didn’t have anyone I wanted to cherish them with. Now, those tiny, insignificant moments make my entire day. They’re the moments I can’t wait to experience for the rest of my life—because I’ll be doing all of them with my Little Sparrow.

STARING down at her wondrous beauty, I’d love nothing more than to roll her onto her back and wake her up the right way—with my cock driving into her pussy and my name on her lips as she falls apart beneath me.

Instead, I palm my raging hard-on and try not to think about how good she looks when she’s coming all over my dick. “Cops think it was an inside job.”

“What? How?”

I shake my head. “No idea. Dad’s called a meeting, so I guess I’ll find out when I get in.”

Reluctantly, I throw back the covers, but before I can get up, Emilia tugs me back down.

“Sparrow, I need to get up,” I groan as she moves to straddle me. In contrast to my words, my hands gravitate to her silky smooth thighs, gliding over her soft skin. Her hot

core presses against my shaft, which twitches with need as I feel her center so close yet so far away.

“Two minutes,” she pleads. “I promise it’ll be a much better start to your day than that phone call.”

Her hands push against my shoulders until I fall back into the bed, and she climbs down my body with a smug smile, knowing just how much control she has over me.

Her fingers slide beneath the waistband of my boxers, and she pulls them over my throbbing cock, pushing them down my thighs until they twist around my ankles. Leaking precum, my erection bobs in front of her face, desperate to feel her perfect lips slide along his length.

Instead, she teases me by pressing a kiss to the tip before slowly licking around the head and down the shaft, driving me insane as I buck my hips and groan in both pleasure and pain.

“Stop fucking teasing me, Little Sparrow.”

She smirks, and I glower at her, promising vengeance if she doesn’t behave.

Unfazed, she challenges me. “Now, now, Hawk. Be a good boy, and maybe I’ll let you come down my throat.”

Fucking hell, this woman!

“Or maybe I’ll flip us over and shove my cock in that smart mouth of yours until you choke, and while you’re struggling to breathe, I’ll come down your throat. String after string until your stomach is so full of my seed you won’t be hungry until dinner.”

Her cheeks turn beet red at my dirty talk, her lips parting as she stares at me with lust-filled eyes.

“You’re drooling, baby,” I mock, earning a dirty look.

“Shut up, or I’ll let you go to work with a hard-on.”

I smirk, loving her fire. “No, you wouldn’t.” Leaning forward, I smack her ass, causing her to yelp. “Now, get back to work before I decide to do it my way.”

Still spitting fire at me, she lowers her delicious mouth over my tip, swallowing me inch by glorious inch. I look into her eyes, transfixed, as her lips stretch to accommodate me. It's a magnificent sight, heightened by the slick heat of her mouth as it wraps around me.

"Oh, baby," I groan, my eyes rolling to the back of my head as I bottom out at the back of her throat. I grit my teeth, struggling to stop my hips from driving forward and cutting off her air supply.

Breathing through my nose, I cling to the control slipping through my fingers like water. With every sweep of her tongue, every bob of her head, every slide of her lips along my skin, I lose ground, unraveling. My layers of humanity are stripped away until nothing exists except my inner beast, driven by primal need. The carnal desire to claim my Sparrow with every fiber of my being. To mark her so thoroughly that the stain will never wash away. To have my scent embedded in her skin—a warning to every other male that she's mine.

My control snaps, and I drag her off me, flipping us over and straddling her chest. My hand pulls on her hair, tilting her chin up and forcing her back to arch. Not giving her a second to suck in a breath, I shove my dick back down her throat and fuck her face.

"See what you do to me?" I growl. "You drive me fucking wild. I'll never have enough. No matter how many different ways I take you, I always want more." I stare frenzied into her wide eyes, pillaging her mouth until tingles race along my spine and my balls draw up.

Reaching down, I yank up her pajama top. Exposing her breasts, and pulling out, I fist myself as I come over her chest and tits and roar my release like a wild beast.

By the time I'm done, sweat lines my skin, and I'm breathing heavily as I stare at her heaving chest.

"I love seeing you covered in my seed," I tell her, running my finger through my mess. "Knowing that I've marked you." Using my fingers, I massage my seed into her skin before

flicking my gaze up to her eyes. “You’re not to shower this off. I want to smell myself on you when I get home tonight.”

When she just continues to gape at me, I pinch her chin between my fingers. “Do you hear me, Little Sparrow? That’s an order.”

“Yes,” she agrees huskily, desire burning in her green depths.

“No touching yourself, either.”

Her eyes flare with anger. Nonetheless, before she can put it into words, I lean down and plant my lips on hers in a quick kiss. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

Her eyes are blazing jade flames, voice coming out raw when she finally finds it. “You damn well better, Hawk Davenport.”

Pressing another kiss to her lips, I run my hand over her hair, unable to believe this incredible woman is all mine. Although I tried not to see it, she was a shell of herself when she showed up here. Now, despite the threat of Mel, she’s finding the missing pieces of herself, and every day I have the privilege of watching her come back to life.

She’s not the only one who feels like they’ve risen from the dead. With each passing day, the chips of ice are melting from my heart. A newfound adrenaline is flooding my system and reviving me.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

She stares into my eyes. “What for?”

“For coming back. For staying. For letting me in, even though I don’t deserve it.” Hesitating, I tack on, “For reminding me what it’s like to feel.”

Her eyes search mine before she surges forward, eliminating the space between us and kissing me fervently. Devouring me in such a way that makes me believe she needs me as much as I need her. Not physically, but in an all-consuming *I can’t live without you* kind of way.

We're like two opposing magnets drawn to each other and only complete when we're together.

"If anything, I should be the one thanking you," she murmurs against my lips.

"I guess we could just call it even?" I say with a teasing smile.

"Mmm." She pretends to think it over. "Maybe after I've seen if you can live up to your promise tonight."

I can't help but laugh. "Is that so?"

"It is. So you better come prepared, Hawk Davenport. There's a lot on the line." We're both laughing as she shoves at my shoulders. "That was way longer than two minutes. Go take a shower and let me go back to sleep."

With one more lingering kiss, I climb off her and head for the door. I pull it open and look over my shoulder to see her curled up on my side of the bed as if she needed the reminder that I was here and would be back.

I smile, wishing I didn't have to leave, and already excited to get back home to her. Something I can imagine still feeling twenty years from now because Emilia is my center. My guiding light. The north on my compass. Wherever she is, is home, and no matter the distance, I'll always follow her beacon back to her.

"So LET me get this straight. Someone managed to sneak past our security detail, used *our* code to enter the house, and evaded all of our security cameras."

"Yes, that's right," Jasper states with a furrowed brow and thin lips.

My eyes narrow on him. "Do you think it was an inside job?"

"Not a chance. There's no way one of my men would betray us."

I search his face for any sign of doubt, except Jasper is one of my best operatives. His team has the highest success rate—100% until today—which is why I entrusted him with Randall Compton.

Tapping my finger against the desk, I scan the array of photos sitting in front of me. A single gunshot to the head. Clean. Professional.

“Is it possible a professional could have seen one of the men enter the security code and made it past your defenses?”

“Not without some sort of inside knowledge. But if he did, it didn’t come from my team,” Jasper responds confidently. “The code was changed every day, and not only did he make it past the guards and evade the security cameras, but he also managed to slip past the hidden cameras. Only Ethan and I knew they existed.”

He seems to mull over something before deciding to spit it out anyway. “I don’t know if Randall was paranoid or what, however, he approached me the other day about beefing up security. He seemed nervous, twitchy, and was adamant I get more feet on the ground ASAP.”

“You think someone might have been after him?”

Jasper just shrugs. “He didn’t say it in so many words, although he already had a comprehensive team around him. Why would he suddenly want more?”

“Okay, Jasper. Thank you for coming in.”

With a curt nod, he exits the office, leaving me to stew over everything.

I’m still sitting there when my father walks in, looking as haggard as I feel.

“What’s the consensus?”

Wiping my palm down my face, I look up at him. “We have a leak.”

He nods, already having drawn the same conclusion.

“Any leads?”

I shake my head. “It’s not Jasper’s team. Other than that, no. I’ll get West to find out who has accessed Randall’s file in the last couple of weeks. That should give us a solid starting point.”

My father nods. “I’m sure I don’t need to tell you, son, that this reflects poorly on us. The press are already dragging us through the mud.”

“I know.”

“The sooner we can find the source, the better.”

I nod, and he sighs wearily. “I trust you to handle this.” Standing up, he gives me a tight smile. “Keep me informed.”

I’m once again left alone, and after gathering the slim file containing information regarding Compton’s death, I head to Kai’s office.

“Hey,” he greets with a head tilt. “How are you holding up?”

“Please tell me you keep whiskey in here. I’m having the day from hell.”

Huffing out a laugh, he pulls open his bottom drawer and lifts out a whole bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. Pouring a hefty measure into both, he pushes one toward me.

“So, it looks like we have a leak,” I tell him. He—along with the rest of the world—already knows about Compton’s murder and our supposed involvement. He already offered to help me, but I want all of his efforts on Mel.

His lips pinch. “You’ll find out who it is.”

I stare into my drink for a long moment before lifting my head to meet his gaze. “What if it’s Mel?”

His eyebrows lift in surprise, and he tilts his head slightly, considering. “It wouldn’t be her usual MO,” he says. Only I can hear the *but* coming. “*But* it’s not beyond the realm of possibility. She’s not able to get to us the way she usually would, so she could be choosing to target us this way instead.”

“She told Em that she had a plan,” I say aloud, remembering what Emilia told us from their meeting.

“She could be attempting to distract us so she can get to Emilia,” he surmises aloud. “Keep you—and possibly me—at work and away from the house.”

“Yeah, but Wilder would still be around,” I counter. “He might not have the training we have, but he’s no less deadly, especially concerning Emilia’s safety.”

Kai cocks a brow, clearly not as confident in Wilder’s ability. “I don’t doubt he’s capable, but would he genuinely put himself in the line of fire for her?”

“Yes,” I state resolutely. No hesitation, no second guessing. He’s an absolute dickhead, and he might deny it till his dying breath. Nevertheless, when it comes to protecting her, he’d do it just as fiercely as we would.

Besides, I’ve seen how he looks at her since the kidnapping. The hatred isn’t as pronounced, and that familiar softness he would always get in his eyes when he was around her is back. Plus, based on what I saw when I walked in the other day, I’m guessing he’s gotten over his shit and finally opened his eyes to realize she’d wormed her way back into his heart—whether he accepted it or not.

Kai studies me for a long moment before conceding. He appreciates that I know Wilder better, and while he might be a bit of a loose cannon, if I trust him with Em, then Kai knows he can too.

“In any case, *if* this is Mel—and I wouldn’t automatically assume it is—she’ll have something planned to keep Wilder distracted too.” I nod in agreement. “We’ll tell Wilder to be on his guard, and in the meantime, you need to find out for sure if this is Mel or not, because if it isn’t, Nocturnal Enterprises has a serious problem on its hands.”

CHAPTER 19

EMILIA

Absently sipping on a glass of wine, my eyes are glued to the television as the entire story about Randall Compton's murder unfolds. With every vile word out of the reporter's mouth, I'm getting closer to tossing my drink at the screen—glass and all.

"That's hearsay!" I yell at the TV when she repeats—for what must be the fifth time—how Nocturnal Enterprises is the primary suspect in the investigation. "Where's your proof?"

"Talking to the TV now, are we?" Wilder chuckles, walking into the kitchen. "I hadn't realized you were so starved for company, Angel."

I shiver at the familiar nickname and the fact that it's not tinged with hatred for a change. "Of course, I'm starved for company," I snark. "Anyone who talks to me ends up dead, and *you* haven't exactly wanted to be around me. Now Kai's avoiding me, so I basically just have Hawk to talk to, and we both know he's not exactly the chatty type."

"Only the people that touch you end up dead," Wilder unhelpfully corrects, earning himself a deadly glower, which he deftly ignores. "What did the television do to earn your wrath, anyway?"

"They're spouting absolute bullshit about Nocturnal Enterprises."

Right on cue, the reporter speaks up. "For those of you just joining us, senatorial candidate Randall Compton has been found murdered in his home in the early hours of this morning. Police are questioning those in charge at Nocturnal Enterprises, a private security company that was tasked with Mr. Compton's safety. Nocturnal Enterprises has been making a name for itself in recent years, and it is believed that Mr. Compton himself hired the company. Their inability to protect the front-runner for senator has raised some disturbing

questions. As of yet, the police have not arrested anyone, but stay tuned as the story unfolds.”

“See!” I exclaim, waving at the television. “Absolute horseshit! And she calls herself a reporter,” I snarl, disgusted.

Taking an overly zealous gulp of wine, it goes down the wrong way, and I end up choking on it. Smacking myself on my chest, I cough and sputter until I manage to clear my airway.

Noticing that Wilder hasn’t commented on the baloney spewing out of the reporter’s mouth—nor did he jump to my rescue as I choked to death on wine—I turn to face him.

My lips part to demand he agrees with me, but the words falter as I catch sight of his pale complexion. He’s still staring at the television, where the words *Senatorial Candidate Randall Compton found dead*, play on repeat at the bottom of the screen.

“Wilder? Are you alright?”

He doesn’t seem to hear me, his attention transfixed on the screen for another long minute before spinning on his heels and running from the house. All I can do is stare after him as the front door slams shut in his wake.

What the hell was that all about?

Dwelling on Wilder’s more peculiar than normal behavior for another five minutes, I push it out of my mind as I notice the time. Sliding off the barstool, I rush upstairs to change. Hawk was working late, but he texted ten minutes ago to say he’d be home in half an hour, so I’ve got twenty minutes. I want to have everything ready for him.

From what I gathered from the occasional text I received from him, he’s been in and out of meetings all day, attempting damage control and trying to find the source of the leak. I’m hoping a nice, home-cooked meal will ease some of the tension from his stressful day.

And failing that, I got Hadley to buy me some sexy lingerie—I didn’t want to use my own cards or have Mel catch me in a lingerie shop. Despite her whole-body shudder and

fake gagging noises when I pleaded with her to buy me something that would ensure her brother is fucking me against the table before the end of dinner—although I deliberately didn't mention said underwear was specifically for Hawk—she went all out and bought me three outfits.

The symbolism is not missed—three outfits, three guys.

Laying all three of them on the bed, I tap my finger against my lip as I try to decide which one Hawk might like best. I run the tip of my finger over the dark red chemise before moving on to the pale pink corset with matching lace thong and stockings. Dismissing both, I turn my attention to the final outfit—a longline black leather bra with lace trim and golden zippers along the cups and running down the center, complete with leather panties and a zipper that turns them crotchless in an instant.

Bingo. That's the one.

Vibrating with nervous energy, I slip out of my clothes and into the leather set. Sliding my feet into the black heels I wore on my date with Kai, I turn to face my reflection in the mirror.

I gasp as I stare at the bold, confident woman staring back at me. Gone is the scared, anxious woman who showed up unwanted all those weeks ago, and in her place is someone who finally knows what she wants and is ready to seize it.

Vacant eyes no longer look back at me. Instead, the jade flecks shine with a vibrancy I hardly recognize. It's been a long time since I came face to face with this version of myself, and I can admit that I fucking missed her.

“Good to have you back,” I murmur to myself before trailing my eyes over my body. I look pretty damn hot, if I do say so myself. The bra fits me perfectly, pushing my tits together and making them look big and perky, and the thong sits high on my hips, elongating my legs.

Part of me wishes I could stride out of my room in just this and knock Hawk on his arrogant ass the second he walks through the door. I'm almost tempted to do just that, but we're

playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse with Mel, and I don't want to provoke the beast.

As a compromise, I slip my satin dressing gown on. It falls to mid-thigh, and I tie the belt securely around my waist. Hopefully, should Mel come a-stalking, it will look like I'm planning on taking a bath or turning in for an early night.

Making my way back downstairs, I pull out the lasagna I had cooking in the oven, leaving it to cool on the counter while I top up my wine glass. I've just put the bottle back in the fridge when I hear the jiggle of a key in the front door.

Excitement thrums through my veins, my heart picking up speed with every click of Hawk's shoes growing louder as he approaches.

Spotting me, he stops in the doorway, a weary smile lifting his lips. "Little Sparrow, you're a sight for sore eyes."

"Long day, baby?" I ask, stepping into his open arms and letting him wrap me up in a bone-crushing hug.

"Something like that," he murmurs, burying his head in my hair and breathing me in. He relaxes with every inhale, melting around me until I'm the only thing holding him upright.

"I made you dinner," I say softly, stroking a hand through his hair.

Pulling back so he can look me in the eye, he murmurs, "You did?"

I nod, taking a small step back as I bite my bottom lip. "And just in case you weren't hungry, I also did this..." Slowly, I trail my finger down the middle of my dressing gown, parting it just enough to offer Hawk a glimpse of what lies beneath.

A deep rumble reverberates through Hawk's chest as he stares, mesmerized, at the slither of skin exposed. "I'm fucking starving, baby," he rumbles in a deep voice, "just not for lasagna."

I smirk at him. With another step backward, his hands fall away, and I tease him with a quick flash of my outfit before securing the tie around my waist.

“Such a fucking tease,” he growls, his heated gaze devouring me. “I want to throw you down on that table and fuck your brains out, Little Sparrow.” A shiver rolls down my spine, and my breathing hitches. “Take you over and over, so damn hard that the table breaks beneath the pressure. Then fuck you on the broken pieces. The splintered fragments will dig into your skin, and you won’t even feel them because you’ll be so overwhelmed with pleasure.”

I hiss between my teeth, rubbing my thighs together to ease the ache. Hawk notices, his gaze dropping as he licks his lips. Indecision wars within him as he flicks his gaze to the window.

Some of the heat fizzles away as reality crashes back in. He might want to do those things, and I undeniably want him to do them, but we can’t. Not here and not now.

As I try to wrangle my hormones under control, Hawk snarls like a rabid dog. “Fuck this shit,” he bites out angrily, stomping over and smacking his hand against the light switch.

We’re plunged into darkness, and we both turn to look out the window, searching. Not catching sight of any movement, Hawk turns on the outside lights, effectively blinding a certain someone.

Some of the light filters in through the window, glancing off Hawk’s chiseled features and highlighting the wicked glint in his eye as he slowly turns to face me. Moving with all the swiftness of a predator, confident his prey is trapped, he steadily approaches.

“Better get that sweet ass of yours up on that table and spread your legs for me before I decide to spank it raw.”

His dirty promise elicits another shiver. Nonetheless, choosing to behave myself tonight, I do as he says. Shifting over to the table, I slide onto it with my eyes latched onto Hawk’s hungry stare as he draws near.

I spread my legs so he can step between them, towering over me as I'm forced to tilt my head back and look up at him. His dark gray eyes, swirling with desire, hunger, and something a hell of a lot more meaningful, roam over my face, falling down the column of my neck until he reaches the trim of my gown.

"This has to go," he says huskily, tugging on the tie until the light satin parts slip from my shoulders and pool on the table.

His gasp floods the silent room, and his rough swallow does crazy things to my libido. I felt sexy when I looked at myself in the mirror earlier, but nothing compares to how I feel beneath Hawk's covetous gaze. Despite being in a submissive position beneath him, I have never felt more empowered. More emboldened. More desirable.

I feel like a freaking goddess being looked upon by a loyal worshiper, ready to fall to his knees and pray at my feet, offering everything he has for one infinitesimal moment of my love.

The thing is, if I am Hawk's goddess, then he is my god, because as easily as he'd bow at my feet, I'd also bend to him. This omnipotent god who owns all of me, who challenges me on a daily basis and pushes me to my limits, yet never falters from standing at my side. He's grumpy and infuriating while also loyal and inspiring. The arrogant, bad-tempered boy I once knew has grown into a strong and domineering man to be both feared and awed.

A man who carefully conceals all of his broken pieces but deserves to have someone patch them up and promise to keep them safe. I want to be that person. I *am* that person, and I'll guard his heart with my life until my dying breath and beyond. For I know he'll do the same for me.

Trailing a finger from the dip at the base of my neck along my collarbone and shoulder, then between the valley of my breasts, Hawk murmurs, "Do you have any idea what you are doing to me?"

My chest is already heaving, and he's barely touched me. "Only the same thing you're doing to me," I reply breathlessly.

His eyes dart up to meet mine, his finger stalling along the lining of my bra. I hold his gaze as he searches deep into my eyes, confirming the truth of my words.

In a swift motion, his hand wraps around the front of my neck, pulling my face to his. His breath fans my lips. "I hope you mean that, Sparrow, because you've made me fall in love with you."

"I'm falling with you," I assure him in a breathless rasp. "We can hit the ground together."

His thumb strokes over my pulse point. "Or maybe we'll grow wings and fly."

His lips slam against mine. Bruising. Demanding. Desperate.

"You better not have washed my cum off this morning," he growls, our moment of sweetness replaced with pure carnal need.

"No," I pant. Hawk's hands roam my body, somehow managing to be everywhere at once, and yet it still isn't enough.

I arch into him, and he cups my breasts with his large hands, squeezing and kneading the skin. "This sexy little outfit is driving me mad," he rumbles, staring hungrily at my breasts as he rubs the soft leather fabric above my nipples.

"Wait till you get to the panties," I say seductively. I lie back on the table, resting on my elbows. I kick off my heels and bring my feet up, opening myself wholly to him.

Hawk's gaze burns a path down my torso, flaring with lust when he spots the zipper. Crouching between my spread thighs, he places his palms against them and pushes my legs further apart. His tongue flicks out to run along his lower lip while he reaches out and pulls down the zipper one achingly slow tooth at a time.

The clang of metal breaking mingles with the heavy rasp of my breaths. I can't look away from Hawk's enraptured expression as he slowly exposes me.

"I can feel your arousal through the zipper," he states smugly, smirking at me before returning his attention to the task at hand. "Mmm, do you smell that? Is all of that wetness for me, Sparrow?"

"Yes," I pant, biting back the demand for him to stop fucking watching and touch me. My skin is on fire, and if he doesn't do something about it really damn soon, I'm going to combust.

My hips rock, desperate for relief.

"Need something, baby?" he purrs cockily, *still* not giving me what I'm silently demanding.

"Please," I plead.

"Please, what? Gotta use your words, Little Sparrow."

I groan, my head falling back as my hips grind against thin air.

"Hawk," I whine.

"Not until I hear the words," he teases.

"Jesus Christ, just fucking touch me already, will ya?"

His grin belongs to the devil—filled with wicked promises and filthy intent.

"It would be my pleasure." Staring me straight in the eyes, he leans in and licks me from slit to clit. I instantly go boneless, a pleasurable sigh escaping my lips.

"Is that what you wanted?"

"Yes," I moan. "More. Please."

"Only because you asked so nicely."

Unable to hold back anymore, Hawk's hands wrap around my thighs as he buries his nose in my pussy and fucking devours me. His tongue circles my clit before sinking into my

tight channel, back and forth, until I'm coming apart at the seams.

My hands clamp over my mouth, my back arching as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, leaving nothing but a sweaty, spent, gratified body in its wake.

Getting to his feet, Hawk swiftly pulls me into his arms, cradling me close as he exits the kitchen. I'm glad, because there's no way my legs can hold me upright.

"Where are we going?"

"I need to get a good look at you in that outfit before I tear it off with my teeth."

Turning my head to hide my grin, I bury my face in the crook of his neck and lavish his skin with kisses. I can feel the satisfied rumble in his chest, and as need again takes root, my kisses become more demanding. Soft kisses are replaced with scraping teeth. Skin is sucked between lips, leaving nothing but bruised flesh behind.

"Fucking hell, Em, if you don't stop that, I'm going to throw you up against the wall and fuck you right here."

"You'll hear no complaints from me," I get out between kisses, smirking against his skin when he growls.

Reaching the cinema room, he tosses me on the huge L-shaped sofa, kicking the door shut with his foot and flicking on the light.

Hawk Davenport is a sight to behold as he shrugs out of his suit jacket. I unabashedly drool over how his shirt stretches around his obscene muscles, the buttons along his chest threatening to pop. I bet all it would take is one flex of his pectorals, and they'd rip right off.

His eyes eat me up as he stalks toward me. "Goddamn, Emilia. You sure know how to bring a man to his knees."

I smirk at him. "And there I was, just trying to help you forget about your day."

His grin is savage. "You always were an overachiever."

He leans in, hands on either side of me, still fully clothed. He casts a look over my face with such adoration that it stalls the air in my lungs.

“Coming home to you is the best part of my day,” he whispers against my lips, before sealing it with a kiss.

I drown in the waves of love and affection that pour off him and crash into me. Being utterly consumed by Hawk is the most incredible feeling there is. He’s not someone who does things half-assed. When he decides he wants something, he puts all of his efforts into it—and that’s precisely what he does to me.

It’s exactly what I know he will do for the rest of our lives. From here on out, Hawk will give everything he has to this, to us. Our love will be fierce, boundless, unwavering. No matter what, Hawk will always be by my side, and I’ll always be at his.

Lost in Hawk’s smoky scent, which always makes me feel like I’m camped out under the stars with a campfire going and true freedom at my fingertips, I give myself over to him as he coaxes my body into a frenzy.

My breathy pants and his pleasurable groans fill the room, a heated static charging the air as everything around us falls away until all that exists in the world are the two of us.

As his hands slide over my skin, his lips trailing hot kisses between my breasts, I’m so overcome with pleasure that it makes me oblivious to the opening of the door,

“Shit, sorry,” Kai murmurs, quickly backtracking.

At the sound of his voice, Hawk’s head whips up, and he turns to look at him over his shoulder. “Stop,” he orders.

Ever the obedient soldier, Kai stops, his eyes remaining laser-focused on the floor as if it’s suddenly the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen. I can’t take my eyes off him, even when Hawk turns to look at me. I’ve wanted Kai since our very first kiss—probably even longer.

Despite confessing his feelings, he’s been keeping me at arm’s length, refusing to act upon those feelings until Mel is

obliterated. But in this room, Mel doesn't exist. This room is a safe haven. One where the real world waiting beyond that door can't infiltrate. Here, we can be anyone we want to be; do anything we want to do.

Seeing the longing plainly written on my face, Hawk smirks before turning back to Kai. He gestures to the opposite end of the U-shaped sofa and says, "Sit."

Kai's eyes snap to Hawk's, widening in surprise. "What? No. I can't."

Hawk arches an eyebrow in challenge and, in a quick move, lifts off me and pulls me into his lap as he sits facing Kai on the couch.

I watch, mesmerized, as Kai's eyes fall on me to take in every exposed inch of skin as his Adam's apple bobs.

"Still want to walk away?" Hawk taunts. His hand moves to squeeze my breast, and I can't help but moan. My eyes fall to half-mast as I watch Kai closely, anxiously waiting to see what he'll do.

Kai doesn't answer. Except he doesn't walk away either, as Hawk's hand trails a scorching path along my taut abdomen, his fingers slipping between the open zippers until he slides them along my drenched folds.

He hums in appreciation before sinking three thick fingers inside me. Pulling them out, he ensures the wet suction sound of my arousal echoes around the room.

"Do you hear how wet our girl is? It doesn't sound like she wants you to leave." Turning to look at me, he plants a tender kiss along my hairline. "Do you, Little Sparrow?"

My eyes remain fixed on Kai, even as Hawk slowly thrusts into me with his fingers. "No."

A chink forms in Kai's armor, his resolve cracking as he gazes entranced at the spot where Hawk's hand disappears into my panties.

"Well, what's it going to be?" Hawk asks. "Are you finally going to grow a pair and give our girl what she's been craving,

or will you walk away and pretend this isn't everything you want?"

Kai's nostrils flare, and his teeth gnash in fury, clearly not happy with being put on the spot. However, he can't deny the lust burning in his eyes, drilling a hole into me and melting me from the inside out.

With what looks like a herculean effort, he steps to the side and pushes the door closed behind him, still appearing furious. It's a heady combination—lust and anger. I'm clearly a sick bitch because I love watching these men fight for control against their tempers. I enjoy it even more when they lose control and vent their frustration on me.

Smirking like the cat who got the cream, Hawk gestures with his chin toward the other end of the sofa, a silent demand for Kai to sit. As though being pulled by invisible strings, Kai stalks forward, lowering himself onto the seat. His eyes remain on me the entire time, never faltering.

I whimper as Hawk removes his fingers, but then he shushes me with another gentle kiss to my temple. With a firm tap on my outer thigh, he dictates, "Get on your knees in front of him."

Displaying none of the resistance Kai showed, I eagerly lower to my knees and crawl over to him. Hawk groans as he gets a perfect view of my ass swaying, but it's Kai who has my undivided attention.

I slip into the space between his legs, my ass resting on my heels as I place my hands on his thighs. I stare into his emerald depths the entire time. They're so similar to mine, yet so different. Sharper. Deadlier.

Hawk moves until I can see him out of the corner of my eye as he barks his next order. "Undo his pants, Little Sparrow." Based on the deep timbre of his voice, Hawk is as turned on by this as I am. Of course, the control freak gets off on bossing people around in the bedroom.

I half expect Kai to stop me as I reach out and brush my thumb along the painfully obvious bulge in his pants, slowly

bringing my hand closer to his belt. When he makes no effort to stop me, I take that as my cue to continue and deftly undo his belt buckle. Popping the button, I pull down his zipper and his pants fall open.

“Uh-uh,” Hawk chastises when I begin to tug on Kai’s pants. “Did I say you could take them off?”

Biting my tongue, I turn to face Hawk, my expression filled with attitude as I sass, “No, *sir*.”

He flashes his teeth in a feral grin. “Now, now, you little slut. You’ll earn yourself a spanking if you don’t behave.”

My panties are positively drenched by now, and I’m seriously regretting my choice of leather underwear as it chafes against my skin, offering me fuck all relief.

“Is Kai hard for you, baby?” Hawk asks instead.

I’m pretty sure Kai’s erection can be seen from space, so I know he’s not asking just for the sake of it.

I wrap my hand around Kai’s thick shaft the best that I can through his boxers, earning a strained grunt as I begin to rub. “Fucking hell,” Kai curses when my other hand cups his balls. The muscles in his neck strain as he stares down at me with barely restrained control.

“Don’t move,” Hawk barks, as though sensing he was on the verge of doing just that.

Unable to take his eyes off me, Kai snarls viciously as he fights to stop his hips from rolling.

When I give Hawk a pleading look, he nods his permission, and I waste no time stripping Kai of his pants and boxers. I sigh contentedly as I wrap my hand around his shaft’s silky smooth skin. Staring at the swollen, angry head, I slowly work my hand along his cock. After our date, when we both came pressed up against the side of his car, I wondered what he had looked like. With neatly trimmed pubic hair, Kai isn’t as girthy as Hawk, but he’s no less impressive. I shiver as a gush of wetness soaks my panties at the thought of him slamming all the way into me. It would undoubtedly hurt, though in the best way possible.

I'm dying to flick my tongue out and taste him, but like the good girl I am, I wait patiently for Hawk's directive.

"Go on, Little Sparrow. Give him a lick. Tell me what he tastes like."

Kai's thighs are already trembling as he groans at Hawk's dirty words and the thought of having my tongue on him. Glancing up at him through my lashes, I hold his blazing green eyes captive as I lean in and swirl my tongue around his tip, gathering the bead of precum.

"Mmm." Biting down on my bottom lip, I smile coyly. "Like waterfalls and sunshine." His eyes flare with recognition.

"You're so beautiful, Blackbird."

Hawk makes a noise of agreement. "She'll look even better with a mouthful of your dick."

Taking that as my permission, I lower my lips over Kai's pulsing cock, smiling around him as he lets out a stream of curses. My lips only make it halfway down his length before he's hitting the back of my throat, and I have to use my hand at his base.

Unable to move, he's forced to sit there and take it as I lick and suck him toward an orgasm. So attuned to Kai's movements, I don't realize Hawk has moved until I feel his presence at my back.

Crouching behind me, his hand grasps the back of my head as he tears my lips from Kai's cock.

"What the fuck?" he growls at Hawk, promising bloody murder with his eyes.

Completely unfazed, Hawk ignores him, directing his question to me. "Do you think he deserves to come yet, Little Sparrow, after all those nights of leaving you alone and aching in your bedroom?"

Kai snarls again, and I bite back a smile. "He has been a bad boy," I agree.

“A very bad boy, indeed. Maybe we should keep him teetering on the edge while I fuck you right in front of him. Show him what he’s been missing.”

“Fuck you, Hawk,” Kai seethes, unbothered by his still, very hard dick bobbing in the air between us. “You think I haven’t been tortured enough, listening to you and Wilder have your fun, knowing I couldn’t touch the one girl I’ve wanted to touch for the first time in fucking years?”

Raising a challenging eyebrow, Hawk goads. “What’s stopping you now?” He strokes the back of his finger along my cheek. “She’s right here, on her knees for you, begging for you to stop being a pussy and take what you want.”

My chest rises and falls with shallow breaths as I wait to see what Kai will do. I’m frozen in place, knowing he has to be the one to close the space between us. His eyes pierce into mine, seeing to the very bottom of my soul and stealing every last bit of it for himself before he darts his gaze toward Hawk.

His expression of awe hardens, and he bites out, “I’m going to fucking murder you, Hawk.” With one strong tug, my knees leave the ground as he drags me upward until my lips crash against his. “Tomorrow, because tonight you’re all mine.”

“If you think I’m going to just walk away and leave you two lovebirds to it, then you’ve got another thing coming,” Hawk scowls. Digging his fingers into my hair, he rips me away from Kai and pushing me back onto my knees between them.

Wrenching my head to the side, Hawk licks a possessive trail up the column of my throat. “My Little Sparrow likes being shared anyway, don’t you, baby?”

“Yes,” I whimper.

Pleased with my answer, he turns my head so he can plant a quick kiss on my lips, uncaring that moments ago they were wrapped around Kai’s cock.

“You want to choke on Kai’s cock while I slam into your pussy?”

“God, yes,” I groan, squeezing my thighs together.

Hawk smirks, and still using his firm grip on my head, he pushes me down on Kai’s bobbing dick. Parting my lips, I hollow out my cheeks as Hawk forces me to take him deeper, until Kai’s sliding down my throat and obliterating any chance I had of breathing.

Holding me in place, Hawk undoes the zipper on the front of my panties and sinks three fingers inside my sopping, wet channel. “Always so fucking wet, Little Sparrow. Our greedy little whore, aren’t you?”

He pulls me off Kai’s cock, forcing me to look him in the eyes when I answer him. “Yes,” I pant breathlessly.

“You belong to us—me, Kai, and Wilder.”

“Yes. Only you.”

There’s a softness in Hawk’s eyes, entirely at odds with his rough hands, though I feel it all the way to my toes when he murmurs, “And we’re all yours.”

Kai reaches out and tucks a gentle finger beneath my chin, and Hawk lets him turn my head to face him. “All yours,” he reiterates, an urgent need burning in his eyes.

I feel Hawk’s cock nudging my entrance a split second before he slides home. My eyes drift shut, a blissful sigh falling from my lips as I welcome him in, as though my body was made to be split apart by Hawk.

“Open your eyes, Little Sparrow,” Hawk murmurs in my ear when he’s fully seated inside me. Prying them apart, I find Kai’s gaze bouncing between my face and the place where Hawk and I are joined as one. “See how much he wants you, even while it’s my dick stretching your walls?”

“Yes.”

“Show him what he’s been missing out on.” With a nudge, he says, “Make him come so hard his head explodes.”

Always one to rise to a challenge, I devour Kai’s cock until he’s cursing up a storm and coming down my throat. Only when his still semi-hard dick slips past my lips do I

acknowledge the heat curling in my belly from Hawk's hard thrusts.

Yanking on my hair, Hawk pulls my back flush with his chest, his other arm banding around my waist. The new angle allows him to go deeper, and I moan as he rubs against the sensitive bundle of nerves.

"So fucking tight," he grunts as I arch into him, so close to coming apart.

A tug on the front of my bra has me glancing back at Kai as he lowers the zipper and relieves me of the constraints keeping my breasts at bay. Without it, they bounce with every deep thrust Hawk delivers, and Kai sits riveted, licking his lips as he watches.

Reaching out, he pulls one nipple into a sharp peak, then the other. Between their ministrations, I'm teetering on the edge, needing more but not knowing what I actually need. I just know it's something.

"Kai," I plead desperately.

Brushing his thumbs over my taut nipples, he asks, "Do you need something, Blackbird?"

"Yes," I moan.

He gives one nipple a harsh pinch that makes me gasp, and Hawk grunts as I clench around him.

"She's so damn close," he grunts.

One hand still playing with my tits, Kai's other one moves between my legs and starts rubbing my clit. It's exactly what I needed, and immediately, I can feel myself cresting that wave.

"Yes," I pant. "Yes, yes, yes."

Kai's lips surrounding my nipple is my undoing as he sucks it into his mouth, and with my hands in his hair, holding him to me, I scream my release as Hawk coats my inner walls with his cum.

Sated, I sag against Kai, with Hawk at my back, as the three of us catch our breaths and come down from our high.

Eventually, we get cleaned up before collapsing in a heap on the sofa. Snuggled into Kai's side with a blanket thrown over me and my feet across Hawk's lap, I finally ask Hawk, "How bad was today?"

He sighs, rubbing his hand over his face. "Bad. The press is slaughtering us."

"Do you have any idea who leaked the information?"

He shakes his head before glancing at Kai. "I wondered if it might be Mel."

I tense at the mention of her name, until Kai rubs soothing circles along my arm. Looking up at him, I ask, "What do you think?"

He shrugs. "Hard to know for sure, but definitely something we should be considering. She must be one of only a handful of people who could get past West's firewalls. If it wasn't someone inside the company, then she's the only other viable possibility."

"West is currently looking into every employee who accessed Compton's file," Hawk states, "so we will know for sure soon enough."

I glance up at Kai. "Will you stay and watch a movie with us?" I already know Hawk will be on board. It's become our standard routine to hide out down here every night and pretend the world outside this room doesn't exist, however Kai never takes any time off. When he's not at work, he's scouring over CCTV footage or trying to dig up information we may have missed on Mel. He never stops; he never gives himself a break, even though he needs the rest more than any of us.

His eyes fall to mine, searching them before he lifts his hand to brush my hair back from my face. His fingers linger, as though he can't physically bring himself to break the contact between us, and there's a softness in his eyes that I haven't seen in a while. "Yeah, Blackbird. I will."

CHAPTER 20

WILDER

The front door slams shut behind me, but it's drowned out by that damn reporter's voice in my ear.

Randall Compton... murdered.

Murdered.

Motherfucking *murdered!*

I pull my hair out as I storm down the street with no clue where the hell I'm going, just that I needed to get out of that goddamn house before Hawk got home. I can't stand there and look him in the eye after what I did.

Not until I have some answers.

I mean, it's possible that the dude's death had nothing to do with me. He was a politician, for crying out loud. I bet he had a list a mile long of people who wanted to kill him. Just because I stole his file and the police are pinning the blame on Nocturnal Enterprises doesn't mean that I stole what allowed the killer to one-up Hawk's men.

Yeah, you tell yourself that, buddy, my inner voice unhelpfully pipes up.

Shut the fuck up, I yell right back. *This can't be on me. Robbie said they wouldn't even use the information.*

No, he didn't. He said that about the pen. You applied the same logic to the Compton file.

I stutter to a stop, cursing out a "fuck" as I realize how royally I've fucked up. Cursing colorfully, uncaring of the passersby that eye me warily, leaving a wide berth between us as they walk past, I bring up Robbie's number on my phone and call him.

If it wasn't outside of office hours, I'd stomp over to his office right now and demand answers.

"Fuck you," I snarl into the phone when it rings out, before immediately dialing his number again. With a renewed

purpose, I amble toward campus, repeatedly calling him and yelling into the phone for him to pick up.

There's still no answer as I approach the campus gates and make a beeline for his department, no longer caring that it's outside office hours. If he's in there, he's going to damn well see me.

Reaching his door, I pound on it. "Robbie! Open the damn door, asshole!"

I bang and bang, but there's no response, and eventually, I have to admit to myself that he's not here. *God-fucking-dammit.*

Sinking to the floor, I anxiously pull up news articles on my phone. They're all pretty much saying the same. No one actually states why the cops are pointing the finger at Nocturnal Enterprises. Other than it was their responsibility to keep the politician alive.

"It's possible this isn't my fault," I mutter to myself.

Yeah, but we both know it is.

There's no arguing with myself. I can say I'm not to blame until I'm blue in the face, but the truth is, this is too fucking coincidental.

I should call Hawk. Get the facts from him and find out for sure what's truly going on. Yet, as my thumb hovers above his name, I can't bring myself to actually call him.

This is all her fault, that stupid fucking voice pipes up.

"Shut up," I bite out. "I read her letter. I forgave her. I'm not doing this shit anymore."

My inner voice scoffs. She wrote those pretty words, then went off and fucked those hip-hop douchebags. How much can she really love you? And look at the chaos she's brought with her now. Body parts at your doorstep, a target on your back, and now she's gone and ruined your relationship with Hawk. There's no way Hadley will forgive you after this.

My stomach churns, and my hand shakes as I squeeze the phone so tightly that it creaks under the strain.

Forcing myself to my feet, I blindly make my way to the frat house, ignoring the incessant voice in my head that wants to pin all the blame on Emilia. Finally reaching my room, I grab the first bottle of liquor I find and, ripping off the lid, I down it until I'm gasping for air. It's the only way to drown out the voice.

WAKEY, wakey.

“Fuck off,” I grumble, not bothering to open my eyes. The headache is bad enough without adding sunlight to the mix.

Emilia will be on campus by now.

“No,” I snap sleepily. “We’re trying to be better with her.”

A scoff ricochets through my sensitive skull. *Who are you kidding? You’re not a good person. You were only fooling yourself before. You were twisted before you ever met her, but now you’re just plain rotten at your core. In no small part because of her.*

“She didn’t do anything,” I argue weakly, even as I feel my body feeding off the simmering anger. “She was a crutch. She kept the demons at bay. However it’s hardly her fault they came back when she didn’t even know they existed in the first place.”

She still left you, though, the voice taunts. For those small-dicked musicians. What did they have that you didn’t? Do you think she still keeps in touch with them? Still fucks them when they’re in town?

My body is vibrating with anger as I drive my fist into my pillow, begging the voice to shut up. My resolve is weakening; that anger burning into an inferno—one aimed directly at Emilia, even though I know at my core that she doesn’t deserve it.

I’m falling into old habits because it’s easier to unleash all of *this* on someone else than to bear the brunt of it alone. And

there's only one set of captivating green eyes I want to stare into when I'm warring with myself.

Before I've given it conscious thought, I'm out of bed. Still dressed in last night's clothing, I'm sure I'm a sight as I storm my way through the frat house, drawing questioning looks from my brothers.

Outside, the fresh air does nothing to abate the flames ravishing my body, sliding through my veins, and propelling me onward. As though driven by a higher power, I head toward Burney Hall. My head is full of rage, preventing me from thinking clearly. Only one thought penetrates the fog—unleash this pain. I don't care how; I just need it to be gone.

Only those crazy enough to choose early morning classes are out and about at this hour, so I only pass a handful of people. All of whom scurry away when they see me, as I stomp down the corridor to Emilia's classroom.

Throwing open the door, I snarl when I find the room empty. I have no idea what time her first class of the day is, though she usually leaves the house around the same time as Hawk, so she should be here by now.

I catch sight of her bag tucked beneath the desk, confirming that she is *somewhere* on campus. It takes only a second for me to narrow down the possibilities. The library. Where all book nerds go in their free time.

Except, stupid Ridgeway has like five different libraries.

There's no way the English department doesn't have one hidden somewhere. Pulling out my phone, I open the app for her tracker.

Bingo.

Keeping my eye on the blue dot, I march down the hallway toward it.

I choose stealth this time, sneaking silently into the room and quietly closing the door behind me. I prowl through the empty aisles until I spot her standing halfway down one, a book in her hand, as she flicks through the pages. I pause to drink in the sight of her.

I want to reach out and pull her against me. Bury my nose in her hair and drink in her jasmine scent. Let it surround me and chase away everything that's wrong.

At the same time, I want to wrap my hand around her throat and scream at her for leaving me to fight them alone.

I know it's not her fault. I fucking *know* that, yet that knowledge doesn't ease the fact that I feel like a stranger in my own skin. It doesn't negate the claws I feel scratching at the edges of my mind, whispering at me to let them in. To submit. To stop fighting and just become who they want me to be. Who I'm supposed to be—the monster that crawled his way out of that burning house.

I'd been so close to surrendering until Sunshine walked her way into my life, dressed up like hooker Barbie, with those deadened eyes that spoke to me on a soul-deep level.

Then Emilia snuck up on me out of nowhere, and before I knew it, my days were no longer spent battling the ghosts that followed me out of that fire but basking in her ethereal glow.

In her absence, I was plunged back into darkness, the voices louder than before as they promised retribution for my sins. I should have known I could only hide for so long. I was never meant to escape them forever, and I was wrong to put that pressure, unknowingly, onto her shoulders.

What's odd, though, is that Emilia's return should have sent them scurrying back into the shadows, but instead, they've been louder than ever before. Taunting me. Fueling my rage and hatred until they left me with no other option than to act on it.

Don't get me wrong; I have very much enjoyed watching Emilia bow to me. Breaking her. Tormenting her. After all, I'm a sick bastard, and seeing her on her knees, powerless and at my mercy... It's been a goddamn challenge keeping my dick out of her.

But I also recognize that buried beneath that misplaced hatred is something more profound. Something stronger than

the voices. Something more powerful than the need to hate her. Something possessive and protective.

I want to hurt her, yet I don't want to see her hurt. Finding her in that bunker put a crack in the impenetrable shields around me. A softer feeling snuck through, mingling with the hatred and momentarily overpowering it. A version of the softer Wilder Emilia once knew.

Since then, he's been lingering on the periphery of my subconscious, his shouts clashing with the cacophony of whispers from the ghosts that haunt me. He screams at me to make it right with her. To open myself up to that kind of love again.

I want to. As I drink in her soft curves, the sweet smile on her lips, I fucking want to.

I just... can't.

I shift on my feet, the movement startling her as her head snaps up.

"Wilder," she exclaims, wide-eyed and taken by surprise. As the momentary fear bleeds away, worry takes its place. "Where have you been? You just walked out last night and no one has heard from you since."

"I was working through some shit."

Her eyes run over me, her brow furrowing. "It doesn't look like you've had much success."

I give a careless shrug. "Depends how you look at it, I guess."

I take a foreboding step toward her, and she steps back, shutting the book, until she hits the bookcase. "Wilder," she warns.

"I do love it when you say my name with that hint of fear in your voice."

"I thought we were past this."

"Me too, Angel, but as it turns out, it's not that easy to just let go of the past. Trust me, I should know. It clings to you like

smoke from a forest fire, the ash staining everything it touches.”

“No, Wilder,” she states defiantly, tipping up her chin. *God, if her defiance doesn't nearly undo me.* “You read my letter. You know the truth.”

When I'm close enough to touch her, I reach out a finger and tenderly brush a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “You mean the letter you wrote before you went off to gangbang three other men for the rest of the summer?” My laugh is cold, caustic, as it bounces off the books surrounding us and causes Emilia to shudder. “I thought it was, but it's just not enough.”

Her slap comes out of left field, taking me completely by surprise, as my dick throbs behind the confines of my jeans. My left cheek burns with the sting as my lip curls up in an angry snarl.

“No, Wilder.” Her words are a sharp order this time, but I ignore them, grabbing her by the throat and wrenching her toward me. Suffocating any further objections, I slam my lips on hers, stealing the very air from her lungs as she wriggles against me, banging her ineffectual fists against my chest.

I shove her backward until she smacks into the bookcase, my weight pinning her against it as I swallow her grunt of pain. I maul at her lips. Wrenching her arms above her head, I hold them in place with one hand while the other attacks her clothing, pulling and tugging until buttons spring free.

Once I'm done wrestling her shirt open, I move to her pants. As I shove them over her ass, Emilia bites down on my lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

Snarling, I pull back, the copper tang flooding my mouth.

“I said *no*, Wilder,” she snaps, livid. “I won't let you treat me like this anymore.”

I let loose a humorless laugh. “And who's going to stop me?”

She stares up at me as though she doesn't recognize the person in front of her. I'm sure she doesn't, but this is the real me—the Wilder that existed before her and the Wilder that

returned in her absence. The same Wilder who crawled his way out of that fire, skin scorched and bubbling, a twisted mass of burning flesh.

This is the *me* who was left to rot on this earth. I'm finally fucking welcoming him and the ghosts in and accepting that this is who I am. Who I was always destined to be.

And it would be best if Emilia ran far, far away from everything I am.

Blinding pain batters the front of my face as something warm and wet gushes from my nose. "What the fuck?" I sputter between mouthfuls of blood, raising my hand to touch the tender bridge of my nose. "Did you just headbutt me?"

In my distraction, Emilia wiggles free, delivering another slap to my face. "I don't know what the fuck is going on with you, but we are done with this bullshit," she bites out aggressively, jabbing me in the chest with a pointy finger. "I am not the cause of all your problems, and you need to grow the fuck up and accept that. Stop blaming me. Stop pushing me away. Stop doing whatever the fuck it is that you're doing. This self-sabotage bullshit is getting old."

When she pushes me in the shoulders, I stumble backward and can only watch as she walks away, taking the last bit of warmth and light with her.

"ROBBIE!" I bellow, banging on his office door. After my failed whatever the fuck I was doing with Emilia, I cleaned myself up and, instead of heading to class, came back here. Deciding I wasn't fucking leaving until I had some answers.

"Robbie!"

"Jesus Christ," he growls, yanking the door open. "What the fuck, Wilder? The entire floor can hear you!"

Like I give a shit. Shoving my shoulder into his, I barge past him into the office.

“Have you seen the news?”

He stares at me like I’ve lost my goddamn mind, and maybe I have. His eyes zero in on the split skin across the bridge of my nose. “What happened to you?”

I don’t answer. It’s none of his fucking business, and it’s not why I’m here. The silence ticks by until he eventually sighs and asks, “What is this about?” as he shuts the door and moves behind his desk.

“That politician guy is dead,” I exclaim, standing rooted in front of his desk. “The one you told me to get files on from Nocturnal Enterprises.”

“The King’s Elite wanted you to get those files. I was simply the messenger,” he clarifies, as if that’s the goddamn point. I don’t give a shit what his role was.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I deadpan. “You told me to get those files. Files that gave *you* all the information you needed to get past his security detail, and I’m supposed to believe the King’s Elite had nothing to do with it?”

Ironing out a non-existent wrinkle in his suit, Robbie lifts his steely eyes to mine. Everything about him is shut down, giving nothing away, including his carefully neutral tone. “I didn’t say the King’s Elite had nothing to do with it. I’m saying *I* had nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I wave off his excuses. “You’re just a grunt, a fucking *messenger*. A middleman sent to give me orders so *I* can do the dirty work for you.”

Robbie’s face darkens, his expression turning cold. “The King’s Elite are the reason you can live in fucking la la land, prancing about doing god knows what, rather than grinding yourself to dust just to rub two pennies together. They’re the ones responsible for the cushy existence you have; they’re the ones working tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure the economy as we know it ticks by seamlessly.”

His harsh tone is like a slap to the face, stopping the rest of my tirade. “That *politician* you’re all tied up in knots over, do

you even know what his agenda was? What he would have done if he'd been elected?"

"No," I hesitantly say, suddenly wishing I followed politics.

"Exactly," Robbie spits. "If he'd gotten into office, he would have pushed his socialist agenda, and all the privileges you've come to take for granted would have been snatched away."

"What about Hawk and Nocturnal Enterprises?" I argue. "They're getting slaughtered in the news."

Robbie waves his hand, uncaring. "A little bad publicity won't ruin them. It's all unsubstantiated accusations and hearsay. When the police do their due diligence, they'll discover that your friend's company had nothing to do with Compton's death, and their names will be cleared. A small price to pay to maintain the status quo."

I frown down at him, feeling like I'm really seeing him for the first time. What sort of person is he that he'll risk another's reputation, all for the sake of what? Ensuring the rich remain rich and the poor stay poor?

"Speaking of the King's Elite," he sighs. "I understand you'll be given your first job at tonight's meeting."

I didn't even know there was a fucking meeting.

"I don't care about them," I snarl. "Or their capitalist agenda."

See, I know politics.

Arching an uncanny eyebrow. "You took a vow, Wilder. You can't simply walk away from this. Not to mention, Grandfather won't stand for it."

"I'm beginning to think I shouldn't give a shit what he wants either," I state, sounding defeated as I drop into the chair opposite him. "I saw that ring on his finger. Was he in that chamber that night? Hell, perhaps he's the gold-cloaked asshole who made me swallow his blood." Yeah, I'm still

pissy about that. “And what about the rest of my so-called family?”

Robbie sighs in exasperation. “Don’t be ridiculous, Wilder. I already told you that being a member of the King’s Elite is part of our family’s legacy. We’re all members. Even your father. While Grandfather likes to be kept informed, he is no longer an active member of the organization. That ring you saw is a proud symbol of his many years of hard work and dedication to the society. As for the rest of the family, I understand Grandfather invited you to dinner on Sunday. Come, and you can find out for yourself.”

With more questions than answers, and my beginning to feel like I’m trapped in a corner when it comes to this stupid fucking society and this family of mine that I don’t know—honestly, I’m not entirely convinced I really want to know any longer—I leave Robbie to it.

Needing to clear my head and avoid the humdrum of campus now that it’s mid-afternoon and likely flooded with students, I take the long way back to the frat house.

It’s not a path I take often; I’m not usually a fan of the quiet and *being one with nature* crap, but with my head a fucking mess and my life falling apart, I need the time to think. Don’t know where the fuck I’m at. I’ve betrayed my best friend and the only fucking family who has ever accepted me—psychotic personality and all. Don’t know what the fuck I’ve gotten myself mixed up in with this society and my family, and I’m as confused as ever regarding Emilia.

I genuinely thought I’d turned a corner when it came to her until that stupid fucking news article. Now she’s furious with me. I should probably apologize, but really, I’m not sure that’s the best thing. She should hate me. She should stay as far away from me as fucking possible, because I’ll only destroy her in the end. It’s all I’m good at. I’ll suck out every good part of her until nothing exists but the dim light in her eye where happiness once shone.

Too busy muttering to myself as I stomp along the leaf-laden path, I don’t hear someone sneak up on me until I feel

the cool glide of a needle as it sinks beneath my skin, something cold flooding my system before everything spins.

A bird flies overhead, its black form standing out against the pale blue sky like a beacon, drawing my attention. It takes too long for me to associate the clear view I have of the sky with the sharp stones digging into my spine. Only when a face appears above me, sporting a victorious grin, do I realize I'm flat on my back.

“What the fuck did you do to me, you crazy psycho,” I yell, or at least, I try. The words come out as an unintelligible slur, thanks to whatever shit is pumping through my veins.

“Oh, how I have been waiting for this day,” a triumphant Mel taunts. “You should never have touched what's mine. Now you're about to suffer the consequences.”

My eyes close as I succumb to unconsciousness. With the last of my remaining strength, I push out, “Mine.”

CHAPTER 21

MEL

Sweat is dripping from my every pore by the time I reach the entrance to the bunker. For a lanky fucker he sure is heavy. Dropping him unceremoniously on the ground, I stretch out the kinks in my back, using my forearm to wipe the sweat from my forehead.

Shaking my arms out, I bend down and pull open the trap door that leads down to the bunker. It's not the best hiding spot, although I hadn't exactly planned for this, so it will have to do. After watching him fucking assault my girl in the library, I knew I couldn't let him get away with that. No one touches what's mine.

I was coming for him anyway; his actions today simply accelerated the timeline.

It was challenging enough not to kill him after watching him fuck my girl on the cameras. If it weren't for the fact that it would have freaked Emilia out and made it that much harder to get to her, then I'd have gutted him a long time ago.

But Emilia's in love with *me* now. She doesn't care about him, and she sure as fuck doesn't want him touching her. I didn't need to see the way she attacked him to know that. So now it's my turn to have some fun.

I'm jittery with excitement at the thought of his warm blood spilling over my hands as I rip out his intestines. Maybe I'll twist them into balloon animals before he passes out.

Faced with the steep stairs leading down into the bunker, I sigh. Yeah, there's no fucking way I'm carrying the sack of potatoes down there. I'm likely to twist an ankle and end up hurting myself.

Dragging him by the arm to the open door, I shove him down the steps, watching in glee as he bounces down each one. Once he is lying in a crumpled heap on the concrete floor, I close the trapdoor behind me and descend the stairs, stepping over his prone form.

I grab his arm again and heave him over to a steel support beam. Lifting the plastic zip ties out of my backpack, I wrench his arms behind his back, securing them so tightly that his fingers immediately begin to turn white.

I zip-tie his feet together before grabbing some rope from my bag to wrap around his knees and torso for good measure. Fucker isn't going anywhere. He'll bleed out and rot in this bunker. Become nothing but sustenance for the rats and creepy crawlies that stalk this place.

When I'm done, I stand over my handiwork, cataloging the scrapes and bruises. It's nothing compared to how he'll look when I'm done with him. He'll be unrecognizable.

Crouching in front of him, I slap him hard across the face. "Wake up, you asshole."

Nothing.

With a sigh, I smack his other cheek, leaving a matching red handprint. He groans but still doesn't open his eyes. I didn't want him to be out for long, so I gave him a low dose. He should be waking up by now, and if he's not, it's because he's a fucking pussy who doesn't want to confront the consequences of his repulsive actions.

Bored, I get to work, slicing my knife through his top. I want a nice big canvas for what I have to do, and nothing is better to paint on than a torso. I pause when I spot the roughened, twisted skin along his left side.

My nose wrinkles in disgust. It's hideous. A hideous scar for a hideous person—fitting. Trailing the tip of my blade over the uneven skin, I press hard enough to draw blood, slicing a shallow cut from his armpit to his hip.

The bite of pain elicits another grunt, and when I flick my gaze up to his eyes, I can see them moving beneath his closed eyelids. Watching his face closely, I put more weight behind the knife, pushing it deeper until a steady stream of blood oozes from the wound.

His face scrunches, his eyes fluttering before they finally open. "About fucking time. I was beginning to think I'd have

to remove a finger before you finally woke up.”

“I just preferred spending time with my Angel in my dreams to being with you.”

Baring my teeth, I slash across his abdomen, uncaring whether he bleeds out as blood gushes freely, turning his pasty skin red before soaking into his jeans.

He grits his teeth against the pain, his nostrils flaring as he glares daggers.

“She was never yours,” I snarl. “You fucking forced yourself on her, time and again.”

His bark of laughter is cold and unhinged, an unexpected response to being told you’re a rapist, though not exactly surprising, considering he has no conscience.

“Me?” he questions, still laughing his head off. “Emilia was mine long before you even knew she existed.” He leans forward as far as his restraints will allow. “She ate up every single one of my touches. You know the first thing she did when she got home after *your* kisses? She heaved her fucking guts up.” He smirks smugly. “If anyone forced themselves on her, it was you.”

“You’re lying,” I hiss, my hand around the knife vibrating with the need to plunge it deep into his chest. But that would be too easy. The last fucker screamed for hours before he finally went to the light, and all he did was hug her. For his crimes, this one needs to scream and cower and beg for days before I finally grant him the mercy of death.

He shrugs a shoulder, utterly unfazed by the fact that he’s trapped in a bunker with no one coming to his rescue and knowing he will die. “Believe what you want, but I know down to the very fabric of my soul that Emilia belongs to me.” His eyes flash to the knife in my hand, showing no hint of fear before he focuses back on me. “Kill me all you want. It still won’t make her yours. What we have supersedes anything you can fathom in this world. In this life or the next, dead or alive, I’ll always find her.”

Unable to listen to another untrue word from his foul mouth, I cut and slash my way across his chest and abdomen, attacking him furiously. Time passes, and when I return to my body, he's slumped beneath me, his face ashen and chest slick with blood.

Breathing heavily, I drop my arm to my side and stare at my handiwork. I get lost in the steadily pulsing blood dripping from some of the deeper cuts; the shallower patches are already congealing. Reaching out, I stab my finger into a particularly gnarly wound, ignoring his pathetic grunt as I bring my finger to his throat and drag it across the skin, forming a red horizontal line.

"That would be way too easy," I murmur. "Besides, you don't deserve an easy death."

"Neither do you," he says weakly.

Not listening to him, I place a hand against his chest, satisfied with the rapid thumping of his heart.

Flicking my gaze up to his face, I tilt my head, surprised to see that even in his weakened state, there's still no fear. If there's one thing I've learned, most humans are consumed by fear in their final moments. It dominates their every thought, drives their behavior, and causes them to plead and beg for mercy.

"Why are you not afraid?" I ask curiously.

He chuckles weakly. "What is there to fear? I'm about to be free from my ghosts, and even in the next life, I'll still be with Emilia. She's my guardian angel."

Sneering at him, I toss the knife aside and, reaching for my backpack, pull out a lighter. His eyes fall on it, and for the first time, fear flashes in his glassy mud-brown depths. It was there and gone in an instant, but I still get a sick satisfaction from finally accomplishing it.

I run my thumb over the spark wheel, a flame flickering to life, then I hold it between us. His eyes follow the movement, his face set in grim determination as I bring it to his skin.

His body tenses; his teeth gritted as heat licks over his left pec before I pull back. I repeat the action until he's panting heavily, his chest heaving and sweat blending with the blood.

"Maybe I'll torch your body when I'm done playing with it."

"Go for it," he grinds out. His strange calmness and inability to care that he's on the brink of death fascinate me. I knew he was unhinged, but this is... surprising. It makes me wish we had more time together. I'd have liked to drag this out, to see how far I could push him before he finally cracked. Even a sociopath like him must eventually break, right?

Curious, I bring the flame to his face, running the tip of it along the angle of his jaw. Sweat runs from his temple, his breaths coming in short, ragged pants, and he shakes with the effort it takes to hold himself still while the flame licks at his skin. And yet, he achieves it, taking every second of searing pain.

Before I can push him any farther, the creaking of hinges draws my attention a second before brightness floods the bunker. Dropping the lighter, I shove to my feet as a sweet, musical voice reaches my ears. "Wilder? Are you down here?"

"Run, Angel," he shouts in a weakened voice. "Run!"

On numb legs, I move to the bottom of the stairs and peer up. With the harsh glare of daylight casting her in shadow, I can understand why he thinks she's his guardian angel. She looks heavenly as she hovers at the threshold before descending into the bowels of hell.

Her lips part on a gasp when she sees me. "Mel?"

Cocking my head to the side, my brows furrow. "Why are you here?"

"Run!" he shouts from behind me.

At his voice, Emilia's gaze flicks in that direction, but she's still suspended at the top of the stairs and can't see him.

"I, uh..." She licks her lips nervously. "What are you doing here?"

My eyes narrow, and I don't answer her. I watch as she slowly descends the stairs toward me, our gazes locked on one another. When she's standing on the bottom step, she stops. Gone is the nervousness, making me wonder if I imagined it.

"I knew you'd have seen what happened in the library," she says before a soft smile pulls on her lips. "Knew you wouldn't let him go unpunished, and I was hoping I'd find you here."

"You came looking for me?"

She nods her head. "I needed to make sure you were okay."

I search her face, her story not quite adding up. "Then why did you call his name?"

There's a flash of something that I can't identify before it disappears. "I wasn't sure if you were here, and I didn't want to tip him off." She nods her head in his direction without actually seeing him.

"You shouldn't have come, Angel," he croaks.

Emilia stiffens before slowly turning to face him. I'm watching her closely, so I catch the widening of her eyes and the parting of her lips as she gapes at him. Scanning her face, I don't find any signs of pleasure or admiration at my handiwork, nor disgust or hatred at finding him still alive. However, I also know Emilia isn't like me. She's softer. It's part of what drew me to her—that innocence.

Her radiant smile and soft glow. I knew instantly when I looked at her she was everything I wasn't. Where my life has always been pain and blood and darkness, hers are kitty cat pajamas, rom-coms, and fictional books where the heroes get the girl.

We couldn't be more opposite.

Night and day.

Summer and winter.

Good and evil.

She's everything I always wished my life could be. With her, I can have everything I've missed out on. Once I get rid of these interlopers, it can just be the two of us for the rest of eternity.

Her eyes rake over him, swallowing roughly before focusing on his face. His pained, hazy gaze latches on to hers, rife with regret and adulation. "My card was up a long time ago. I've been living on borrowed time all these years. If it's my time to go, then that's okay. I'll die peacefully knowing that I had you for a brief time, and I was happy."

Emilia's lips pinch, her face hardening. She steps away before I can read her further, moving closer to him. With an unfocused gaze, he watches her approach.

"You stupid idiot," she bites out, sounding choked. "How can you say that now, after everything you've put me through?"

He gives her a weak smile. "I'm a fuck up. I was the one who ruined us, not you. I blamed you for stuff that wasn't even your fault. Their ghosts were never going to let me be happy, anyway. You're better off without me, but I'll always be yours, Angel."

Giving up the fight, his eyelids fall closed. Like witnessing a car crash, all I can do is stand and watch as everything I know splinters. Emilia falls to her knees, her shoulders shaking.

"Wilder," she sobs, crawling into his lap and, in the process, covering herself in his blood. "Don't you dare give up on me now. I will follow you into the pits of hell and make your afterlife a living nightmare."

My brows pull together as I frown, my head tilted as I watch the woman I love break into pieces for someone else. The world around me upends, facts I overlooked before blaring with alarm bells as I look at them in a new light.

She wasn't putting up with his assaults so she could live in his house.

She wasn't subjecting herself to the grumpy one's indifference so she'd have somewhere safe to stay.

She wasn't fake dating the wannabe hero so he'd protect her.

It was all a carefully constructed lie to deceive me, and I was too blinded by my love for her to see what was right in front of my face.

"You tricked me," I say numbly, staring at the woman in front of me—a virtual stranger drenched in another man's blood. She startles at the sound of my voice, as if she somehow forgot I was even here. How dare she.

How fucking dare she!

"It was all a lie!" I roar. She shifts in his lap to face me, her chin tilted up and a fierce glint in her eye as she uses her body to shield the miserable sack of skin and bones slowly dying behind her.

Betrayal coats my insides like slime, leaving a sticky residue behind. Everything in me wants to stab and slash and kill. Craving the taste of her blood on my tongue, I advance toward her.

Her eyes remain locked on me. Unlike him, there's a hefty dose of fear in her gaze, even as she resolutely stands her ground, willing to die protecting the pitiful man behind her.

Wilder's eyelids flicker before cracking open as he puts up a final fight. "Don't you fucking touch her," he growls, struggling against his restraints. He's far too weak to break free. The pair of them can die and rot down here alone together.

He can spout pretty words about how they'll find each other in the afterlife, but that's complete and utter bullshit. If I can't have Emilia, no one can. Not in this life or the next. They'll die, and that will be that. No happily ever after for them.

I've put years of hard work into cultivating this relationship. Into becoming the person she needed. Into planning our lives together. After years of pain, torture, not

fitting in, and being alone, I thought I'd finally found my diamond in the rough.

I can still remember the first time I laid eyes on her like it was yesterday. She was so beautifully broken. I'd been passing through Halston on my way to nowhere when I stopped for a coffee. And there she was, working behind the counter.

When she smiled at me, it reached all the way down to the bottomless pit of my soul. I could see the pain in her eyes. She was damaged, but her splintered edges enthralled me. People believe beauty lies in perfection, but they're wrong. Beauty is in the chips and cracks. It's in watching something hit the ground without shattering. Beauty occurs in that moment of collision, when your whole world shatters, and you somehow manage to keep all the broken pieces together.

She didn't recognize me when we met again, on our first day at Halston University. Of course, I'd dyed my hair and changed my name, and I'd been one of the dozens of customers in the cafe that day. One glimpse of her hadn't been enough. I'd hung around until her shift ended and followed her back to her dorm room. The new academic year hadn't even started yet, so I don't know why she was already there. Guess it was just my lucky day. It was Kismet. We were destined to meet.

Until that fucking brown-haired, green-eyed savior of hers stormed his way in and ruined it all.

Now, staring Emilia down as I close in on her, I can see the difference in her. A difference I hadn't even known to look for. That broken beauty that drew me in in the first place is no longer there. At some point over the last several months, she's managed to put herself back together. It doesn't take a genius to figure out who exactly helped her achieve that.

It makes my blood boil. She was *my* broken plaything. *My* damaged doll. *Mine. All fucking mine!*

She could have had everything with me. Instead, she's willing to die in the dark *with him*.

When I'm a few feet away from her, her gaze shifts to the staircase. Only then do I register the pounding of footsteps over the roaring in my ears. I dive for my backpack as two pairs of legs appear, Grumpy and the Savior Complex scouring the bunker for Emilia.

It's only more confirmation of how fucking blind I've been, and I grit my teeth as a fresh wave of anger crashes over me. My vision turns red as my hand wraps around the gun in my bag.

Grumpy doesn't even see me as he rushes to Emilia's side, pulling her up as his hands run over her, inspecting for injuries. Savior Complex immediately clocks me. He moves with precision, steadily sidestepping until he's standing between her and me, his gun pointed in my direction.

We remain in a silent standoff until Emilia's teary voice breaks through. "Kai." He doesn't turn to look at her, but his shoulders tense. "Wilder... we need to get him to a hospital."

Shuffling from behind him, as she and Grumpy undo the unconscious asshole's restraints distracts him. He glances away long enough for me to slip up the stairs. Not looking back, I race toward the daylight, his harsh curse chasing at my heels as I reach the ground and sprint into the trees.

I may be fleeing, but this is far from over.

Until now, I'd been protecting Emilia, showing her how much I care.

My love for her has been burned to ashes and left to blow away in the wind and in the scorched remains where love once grew, there's now only contempt. Cold, harsh bitterness coats my tongue—the taste of retribution.

CHAPTER 22

KAI

Turn around as Mel races up the stairs. Running forward, intent on chasing after her, I pause when Emilia calls my name, her voice watery with unshed tears. “Forget about her! We need to get Wilder out of here.”

Glancing back, she’s on her knees beside an unconscious Wilder, fear brimming in her glassy eyes as she pleads at me. I curse under my breath and reluctantly let Mel go as I stalk over to them.

“His pulse is faint, but there,” Hawk states, staring at his best friend with concern.

“It’s going to be okay, Wilder. Everything will be okay,” Emilia murmurs, running her fingers through his hair in a soothing gesture as she crouches beside him, curled over him in a protective stance.

I run my eyes assessingly over his blood-soaked form, wincing. “He’s lost too much blood. He needs a transfusion if he’s going to survive.” Spotting what appears to be the worst of his wounds, I gesture to Emilia. “Give me your scarf; we need to staunch this bleeding.”

With trembling hands, she hurriedly undoes the scarf wrapped around her neck and hands it over to me. Balling it up, I press it against the slash across his lower abdomen.

“Press this against the cut,” I tell her.

Nodding, she takes over, and after I push her hands more firmly against his lower abdomen, indicating that she needs to put more pressure on it, I move to help Hawk lift him up.

We manage to get him up on his feet, Emilia still holding the sodden scarf to his stomach. With mumbled curses and a few close calls where either Hawk or I nearly fall backward and snap our necks, we crest the top of the stairs and break out into the late afternoon sunlight.

“How are we going to get him to the parking lot across campus without other students seeing us?” Emilia asks.

“We aren’t, but there’s nothing we can do about that,” I answer. “Want to explain why you went in there alone when I specifically told you to wait for us?”

“Is now really a good time to discuss that?” she argues, avoiding answering.

“Seems like as good a time as any,” I grunt, readjusting my hold on Wilder.

“It’s just as well I did,” she bites out angrily. “She was going to kill him!” I watch as she wrangles her emotions under control. “He was barely conscious when I arrived.”

“She was going to kill you!” I snap at her. “You were about to fucking sacrifice yourself for him.”

“Yeah, I was. And if it had been you in his place, I would have done the exact same thing.”

Hawk sighs, his voice coming out sharp when he says, “What’s done is done; arguing about it is pointless. Let’s just get Wilder to the car.”

We make the rest of the challenging journey in silence. When we reach the parking lot, Hawk digs his keys out of his pocket, the xenon lights of his Aston Martin directing us to the right car.

With some careful maneuvering, we get Wilder into the backseat. Hawk winces, looking physically pained as he stares down at him sprawled out on his white leather seats.

“What’s wrong?” Emilia asks him.

“My seats. I’m never going to get the blood out of them.”

Emilia just rolls her eyes while I snort. “Seriously? God, Hawk, sometimes I forget what an entitled prick you can be.”

He simply shrugs, wrenching his gaze away from the white leather already smeared with red stains. “I only just got the car a few months ago. Sorry if I thought I’d get a little longer out of her before she was irreparably ruined.”

“Well, that’ll teach you to get white seats,” I tease, earning myself a furious glare from Hawk.

“Yeah, next time, I’ll go with red leather and cross my fingers that it’s your blood on them instead.”

Giving him the middle finger, I climb into the front passenger seat as Emilia gets in beside Wilder, carefully placing his head on her lap while pressing the scarf to his abdomen.

Hawk drops into the seat beside me, and in the next second, we’re hightailing it out of the parking lot and toward the hospital.

As the city flies by in a sickening blur, with Hawk driving at what must be three times the speed limit, my thoughts tick back to Mel.

“Em’s cover is blown,” Hawk says, clearly on the same train of thought as me. “Did you see the look in her eye when we arrived? She would have killed Em without a second thought.”

“Yeah,” I sigh wearily, lifting my hand to run it through my hair before noticing the crust of dried blood on my skin. With another sigh, I drop it back on my lap. Glancing over my shoulder to the backseat, I find Em sitting with her head bowed over Wilder’s as she murmurs to him, her hand back in his hair as she strokes it.

Looking at Hawk, I say in a low voice, “She’s no longer safe.”

Taking his eyes off the road, he meets my worried gaze with a matching one of his own. “None of us are.”

We get Wilder to the hospital, and the doctors and nurses rush him into a room while we are shown to the waiting room. The three of us collapse into the plastic chairs. Thankfully, we’re the only ones here. Covered in blood, all of us look like we committed a horrific crime.

Hawk’s ass remains in the chair for all of three seconds before pushing to his feet and pacing the room. Under the stark hospital illuminations, his humor from earlier has

disintegrated, and in its place is a guy who is worried about his best friend.

“He’ll be okay,” I say aloud, attempting to reassure both him and Emilia. I received rudimentary first-aid training in the Marines. Enough to know that while Wilder’s wounds are serious, we got him to a hospital in time. He’ll need a blood transfusion, stitches, and pain meds, but he should be back to his usual weird self in a few days, if not a little stiff and sore.

Emilia stares at the floor, not appearing to hear me, her leg bouncing.

“I’m going to get us coffee,” Hawk says, probably feeling as though he needs to do something other than just wait here. Not waiting for a response, he pushes open the door. Silence fills the room in his wake, and I soon find myself fidgeting.

I hate sitting and waiting. It’s so unproductive. I’d much rather be doing something, assisting in some way, but there’s nothing I can do right now. Wilder doesn’t need my help. Hawk doesn’t want it. The situation with Mel is a fucking mess that I don’t have the headspace to tackle and Emilia...

My gaze falls on her, noting the slight tremor in her hands, her pale face and sunken eyes, and the blood that’s saturated her clothes. Spotting a bathroom at the back of the room, I push out of my chair and hold out my hand for her.

Her focus shifts from the floor to my outstretched hand. “Let’s get you cleaned up, so you don’t look like death warmed up when they let us in to see Wilder,” I explain when she doesn’t take my hand.

After a moment, her hand slides into mine, feeling all sorts of wrong as dried blood flecks off and sticks to my skin. Tugging her to her feet, I lead her to the bathroom.

Flicking the lock behind us, I hoist her onto the counter beside the sink. She looks so tiny, with her head ducked and her gaze unfocused. Tucking my finger under her chin, I lift her head until she meets my eyes.

“Talk to me, Blackbird.”

She swallows, tears welling up in her eyes. “What if he’s not okay? He... we had an argument before.” Her brow furrows. “I don’t understand. He tracked me down at the library. He was livid, acting like his old asshole self, except I don’t know why. I slapped him”—she winces—“and headbutted him.” I chortle, wishing I could have seen that. “But then in that bunker, he was saying all this stuff about how he was the one that ruined us and that his ghosts wouldn’t let him be happy.” She frowns in confusion, her brows knitting together.

I run my hands up and down her arms in a soothing gesture. “Wilder has some dark demons he struggles with. I think he’s afraid to let himself be happy, and every time he reaches that happiness, he finds a way to sabotage it.”

Her frown only deepens. “But he was happy once. Why can’t he allow himself to feel that again?”

Brushing my fingers through her blood-tangled hair, I meet her questioning gaze. “I can’t say I know Wilder particularly well. He’s a closed book most of the time, but I get the impression that those few months with you at Pac were the only time he’s been at peace. He knows what that kind of bliss feels like, and he also knows how soul-destroying it is to lose that.”

Emilia huffs in frustration, and despite our dire situation, it’s cute as hell. “Except I’m not going anywhere this time. I’ve told him that. I don’t know how I can be any more clear.”

I give her a sympathetic smile. “Only time will confirm that belief for him, but, sweetheart, Wilder’s issues have more to do with him than with you. He has to find his own inner peace, his own way of living with whatever haunts him. It’s a harrowing journey, but it’s one only he can choose to make.”

Her eyes bounce between mine, softened with understanding. “Thank you for always being there for me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Giving her an easy smile, I promise, “Always.”

Returning it with a small one of her own, she leans forward and presses her lips to mine. The second our lips touch, the tension I've been carrying around since her phone call earlier loosens. Every ounce of fear I felt at seeing her in that basement bleeds into our kiss. Relief at feeling her in my arms crashes through me, and suddenly, I can't get enough. Of her. Of the way she makes everything feel right in my world. Of the lightness in my chest when she's around.

Before I know it, my body is pressed flush against hers, my hands in her hair, our tongues entwined. Our kiss is demanding, replenishing, restorative. All the dark, empty areas inside me are filled with Emilia's light. In return, I push every ounce of comfort, reassurance, and promise of safety onto her.

We both breathe heavily when we break apart, her lips swollen and her eyes dazed. "I know everything is royally screwed up at the minute, but I'm glad that this means we no longer need to hide this."

She looks up at me, uncertainty deepening the green hue of her eyes. That raw vulnerability hits me like a punch to the gut.

"Right?" Her eyes dart between mine, searching. "We're done pretending there's nothing between us?"

In awe of this amazing woman in front of me, covered in blood yet remaining strong and unafraid to open herself up to love, I brush my thumb reverently over her cheek. "Yeah, baby girl. I'm done. I've wanted to call you mine for too long now. I was struggling with my past, and I just wanted to protect you, but I can't hold back any longer." A teasing smile plays on my lips. "I should have known after convincing myself that your horrific singing was sweet,"—she fake gasps—"and thinking you were cute with peanut butter smeared all over your face —"

"One time," she interrupts with a smile. "I had peanut butter on my face *one time*."

I chuckle. "That you were going to be a wrecking ball that would obliterate my world. You shook it up in the best way possible." My hands slide around the sides of her throat, my

thumbs brushing the angle of her jaw. “You reminded me how full of joy life can be if you just open yourself up to it.”

My eyes bore into hers. “Even back then, when your smiles were muted, and there was a dullness in your eyes, you still had moments of pure joy. Watching you open up and come alive has been a privilege I’m honored to have been a part of.”

“I could only find my way back to myself because of you.”

With a peck on her lips, I run the tap and grab some paper towels, washing the blood from her.

“Let me see if I can find you something to change into that’s less... bloody.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs gratefully as I duck out of the bathroom and find a nurse. I’m given a pair of hunter-green scrubs, which Emilia swaps her ruined clothes for, and we head back out to the waiting room and a stressed Hawk.

“Any update?” Emilia asks as soon as she sees him.

He shakes his head, handing each of us a cup of crappy but strong coffee. “Nothing yet.”

Snapping his gaze to Emilia, he reaches out and interlocks their fingers, tugging her onto the chair beside him. Draping his arm over her shoulder, his eyes run over her. “How are you? Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head. “I’m fine. Just concerned about Wilder.”

He gives her a tight smile. “It will take a lot more than a few stab wounds to take him out for good.”

Eventually, a nurse arrives with an update, and we can see him. “He’s just waking up, so he’s still a little groggy,” she warns as we step into his room.

“But he’ll be okay?” Emilia asks, unable to look away from Wilder.

He’s got a bag of fluids attached to a needle in his arm, and another machine hooked up to his chest. In a washed-out

hospital gown and still looking half-dead, he appears more vulnerable than I've ever seen him. I find myself hoping he'll open his eyes and pierce me with his sharp, umber stare.

“We gave him a blood transfusion. He may need another one, but we won't know for sure for a few more hours. Overall? Yeah, he'll be fine.”

I think we all breathe a sigh of relief at that reassurance, and as though pulled by an invisible string, Emilia moves to the side of his bed. Her hands hover, unsure where to settle, before landing on his arm and squeezing it to let him know she was there.

The nurse quietly exits, leaving us alone. Pulling a chair over to Emilia, I nudge her into it before leaning against the wall behind her while Hawk claims the one on Wilder's other side.

“I'm glad you're okay,” Emilia says softly to him. “But I am so furious with you, Wilder. I'm done taking any more of your shit. I'm here. I'm right fucking here, and I'm not going anywhere. You're just going to have to start believing that, or I'm going to go all Hadley on your ass.”

“Angel,” groans Wilder, his voice barely audible, his eyes still closed. Emilia immediately sits straighter in her chair. “You're going to give me a boner, and this crappy hospital gown will do nothing to hide it. You'll make the other two jealous.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole,” Hawk snaps, but there's no heat behind it, and a smile plays on his lips.

Wrenching his eyes open, Wilder scowls against the bright lights. Emilia fusses over him, pouring him water from a jug on his bedside table and helping him to sit up.

“What happened?” Wilder asks when he's settled again. His nose scrunched, he says, “Last thing I remember, I was pouring my guts out to you.”

He stares at Emilia with a rawness in his eyes that I've never seen before.

“Yeah,” Emilia grumbles. “You and I are going to have words about that later.” Despite the edge in her voice, her hand holds Wilder’s hostage in a death grip.

“Well, when we showed up, Emilia was acting like a human shield between you and Mel,” Hawk deadpans, eyes intent on Wilder. “Seemingly intent on dying alongside you.”

He shifts his ire to Emilia, a reminder that she’s not off the hook for that stunt she pulled.

She had called Hawk at work, concerned after her altercation with Wilder in the library. Always a bit of a loose cannon, Hawk had told her not to worry, then had called Wilder himself, ready to ream him out for being a dick.

When he couldn’t get in touch with him, he tracked the GPS on his phone, which showed he was somewhere on the edge of campus. Hawk thought it was strange, and when his location didn’t change, he became worried and called Emilia while coming to get me.

I don’t know if it’s because Mel is systematically targeting us or because Wilder apparently tried to fuck Emilia in the library—fucking idiot—and Mel caught him. Still, either way, we were worried she’d gone after him and specifically told Emilia to wait until we got there before going to find him.

“I didn’t know she was going to be there,” she argues. “It was the obvious first place to look, and I couldn’t just stand there and do nothing while I waited for you.”

“That’s exactly what you were supposed to do,” Hawk grinds.

“You put yourself between her and me?” Wilder asks, interrupting their argument as he stares at Emilia like he’s never seen her before. Confusion and awe mar his features.

“Of course I did, you buffoon.”

Unable to respond, he’s still staring at her, slack-jawed, when another nurse—an older, matronly lady this time—comes in. “Oh, you’re looking better already,” she says kindly, smiling at Wilder. “I just need to get a blood sample so we can

see if you need another transfusion,” she explains, fussing about as she gathers her equipment.

“And if I don’t?” Wilder asks.

“Then we’ll keep you overnight for observation, and the doctor will see you in the morning, but assuming you have no adverse reactions, you should be free to go home. But,” she says sternly, her eyes firmly on Wilder. “You’re to rest and take it easy for the next few days.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Wilder agrees, a playful smirk on his lips that confirms he has no intention of doing as directed.

Either ignoring him or not noticing, the nurse nods, seeming satisfied, before her eyes scour over the three of us crowded around Wilder’s bed. “Your friends will have to leave when visiting hours are over.”

Hawk acknowledges her words, and she gets to work, drawing Wilder’s blood before sticking a cotton pad to the needle site and exiting the room.

“What happened to Mel?” Wilder enquires when we’re alone.

“She got away,” I tell him, drawing his gaze my way.

“What are we going to do now?” Emilia asks, wringing her hands nervously. “All of us are in danger.”

“I think we should go to a safe house for a few days. Lie low and let Wilder recover while we regroup,” I ponder aloud.

“You mean run?” Emilia asks, worrying her bottom lip.

“No, not run, but we need a plan. It’s no longer safe for you to be out alone.” I shift my attention to Wilder and Hawk. “For any of us to be out alone. The only reason she hasn’t targeted me, Hawk, or Wilder is because she knew we would be difficult to lure in. We knew what she looked like and what she was capable of. She couldn’t manipulate or fool her way beneath our defenses.”

“Plus, it would have interfered with her plan to get to Emilia,” Hawk tacks on.

“Agreed, but now she’s got nothing to lose. She knows Emilia doesn’t reciprocate her feelings, and she’s fucking pissed. All bets are off. Nothing is stopping her from coming after any one of us, and we know how violent this woman can be.”

“Okay, so we lay low at one of the safe houses for a few days,” Emilia says on board.

Hawk nods his agreement, and the three of us look at Wilder. “Fine,” he sighs, “but I better get to introduce her to Marie before this is all over.”

Hawk frowns at Wilder in confusion for a second before he bursts out laughing, while Emilia and I just continue to look at him, bewildered.

“Ehh, who is Marie?” Emilia asks him.

Wilder grins this wide, broad, completely unhinged smile.

“Only the most beautiful, most deadly weapon there is,” Wilder says with a sigh, looking completely besotted.

“She’s the most ridiculous knife one can purchase over the internet,” Hawk explains when it becomes clear Wilder isn’t going to. “It’s only a matter of time until Wilder kills himself, or one of us, with it.”

Rolling my eyes, I snark, “Oh great, now we have two crazies we need to watch our backs for.”

ONCE THE NURSE informs us that Wilder doesn’t need another transfusion and will be discharged first thing in the morning, Emilia and Hawk leave to head back to the brownstone. We decided that none of us should be alone, so they will grab supplies for all of us while I babysit Wilder, and the four of us will meet at Nocturnal Enterprises as soon as Wilder is discharged.

If it weren’t for the fact that Wilder was half asleep by the time the nurse kicked the three of us out of his room, he would

have insisted on leaving against medical advice tonight, but he needs to rest and recuperate. He's only a liability in his current state.

I'm sure as soon as he wakes up in the morning, he'll be blowing up a storm until they let him out of here. The three of us are hedging bets on what time we'll be at Nocturnal Enterprises. I think six a.m. No way Wilder will be content to sit around here on his ass for much longer.

Hawk thinks he'll be demanding release before the night is over and has put his money on three a.m. Emilia went the other way and fully believes Wilder will conk out and sleep through until the doctor arrives in the morning, so she's going with nine a.m.

She's going to lose.

There's no way Wilder will content himself for that long. He's sleeping now, sure, but only because his body demanded the rest. As soon as he wakes, his priority is going to be her. Just like it's mine. And Hawk's. None of us will rest easy until we're at the safe house, and even then, it will only be a temporary respite. True peace of mind will only be achieved when Mel can no longer stalk our every move. When we aren't constantly looking over our shoulders, staring out of windows, wondering if she's lurking nearby. Only when this is nothing but a distant memory will I be happy.

Grabbing some snacks from the vending machine and a cup of crappy coffee to swallow them down with, I get myself settled in one of the plastic chairs in the waiting room—my bed for the night. Not as comfy as Wilder's, but I've slept in worse, and it's not like I'm going to get a good night's sleep anyway, knowing Mel is out there and not being able to see Emilia with my own eyes.

Hawk is under strict orders to send regular updates, and I'm halfway through an episode of some comedic cop show on my phone when his name pops up in a notification.

HAWK: At the house. Grabbing stuff now then we'll head to NE.

I RESPOND with a thumbs-up emoji and a photo of my substantial dinner before going back to my show. Time goes by in twenty-minute blocks, and by the time I've watched four more episodes and not heard anything further from Hawk, I'm beginning to worry.

I try to tell myself it's nothing, that he's just busy with Emilia. I know as well as anyone how the rest of the world can fall away when you're around that woman. It can be difficult to remember even the most basic tasks, such as sending a text message.

By the time the next episode ends, I can't sit still any longer, and I close out of the app to call him. "Answer the damn phone," I growl under my breath when it continues to ring. *I swear if he's too busy getting his dick wet, I'm going to give him a black eye as a reminder not to be an ass.*

Cursing him out when the call goes to voicemail, I don't bother trying again and instead pull up the app that enables me to track his phone's location. When a pin drops on top of the brownstone, I frown. *It's been hours; he shouldn't still be there.*

Emilia's tracker pings with the exact location.

The worry that's been niggling in my gut escalates to full-blown panic as I stuff the empty bag of crisps in the trash and rush from the room. Passing Wilder's closed door, I briefly consider waking him, but he'll only insist on coming, and I don't have time for that now.

If nothing is wrong and Hawk really is just being a dick-thinking idiot, then I'll be there and back before he wakes. And if something more sinister has happened... well, then I guess he'll find out about it when he wakes up. His fault for trying to fuck Emilia in broad daylight where anyone could see and getting himself stabbed for it.

Striding from the hospital, I climb into Hawk's car. He and Emilia took a taxi earlier, so we'd have the car instead of waiting for a taxi, especially if Wilder threw a fit and demanded to leave in the middle of the night. Now, I'm fucking grateful I don't have to hail down a cab and make small talk while my insides rage.

The car peels out of the parking lot with a squeal of tires, and thankful for the late hour, I race through the streets toward the brownstone. My head is a chaotic blur of possibilities, and as the miles tick by, I work to empty my mind of all thoughts. I need to go in there level-headed. I refuse to let my fears get the better of me as they did that day on campus. Hawk is with her this time, and I know that no matter what, he'll do whatever he has to do to keep her safe.

Of course, all of this assumes that there's something actually wrong, and the two of them aren't just going at it like rabbits in the cinema room. Yet, that sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me that's only hopeful thinking, and I should prepare myself.

When you're used to walking into unknown situations and having to assess in a split second with limited information if you and your men are in danger, you develop a sixth sense for these things. I swear I can practically taste a threat on the horizon before it ever encroaches. That gut feeling has gotten me and my men out of many perilous circumstances. I'm not about to ignore it now.

Pulling up in front of the brownstone, I reach over and open the glove compartment, lifting out the handgun I shoved in there after we dragged Wilder's unconscious ass to the car. I didn't want to leave it just sitting in the backseat for anyone to see and call the cops, especially given the very obvious blood stains on Hawk's white leather. That's just asking for unwanted questions and your hands in cuffs.

Grabbing Hawk's for good measure, I tuck it into the back of my jeans and double-check that the knife is still strapped to my ankle before slipping out of the car.

I quietly close the door behind me and look up at the brownstone. It's cast in shadow, no signs of a single light on inside. Scanning the deserted street, I stealthily climb the stairs and insert my key into the lock. Carefully easing the door open, I pause on the threshold to listen for any noises from within.

The hall is cloaked in darkness, and I have to turn on my phone's flashlight, waving it around the space as I deftly step inside. Two steps in, I freeze, nausea crashing over me as a discarded shoe catches the beam of my flashlight.

Flashbacks slam into me, causing me to double over, my eyes shutting against the onslaught.

Attempting to wrangle my emotions under control, I struggle to breathe through the pain. It's not the shoe that triggered me, but the trail of blood smeared across it. The reminder of that night is too much. Some sick reenactment that has me nearly crashing to my knees.

Sucking in a lungful of air, I force it out in a slow, steady stream. Keeping my eyes tightly closed, I repeat the action twice more, gathering my strength before prying them open. Swallowing around the lump in my throat, I force my eyes to remain focused on the shoe. I recognize it as one of the ballet flats Emilia was wearing earlier, a fact that has fear threatening to pull me under once more.

I will myself to remain strong, for her. Now more than ever, she needs me. I won't let her down. She may have been right when she told me I couldn't have done anything to help Laura that night, but I'm not eighteen anymore, and more importantly, I'm not too late. I refuse to believe otherwise.

Pushing myself upright, I tear my gaze away from the shoe, scanning the remainder of the hall with keen eyes. A shiver wracks my body when I find a bloody handprint on the wall. It's all too coincidental, too reminiscent of that night.

Only someone who was there or who has seen the crime scene photos could know how triggering this would be for me. At that thought, anger drowns out any other emotion, chasing my fear and PTSD into the shadows as it rears its furious head.

Mel knew I would come. She set this twisted little scene up specifically for me.

As I take a step forward, intent on stopping these sick games, a terrified scream pierces through the silence, stabbing me straight in the heart. *Emilia*. Any concern for my own safety and memories of my traumatic past are obliterated as I rush forward, only one thought on my mind—I have to save her.

CHAPTER 23

HAWK

“Quick in and out,” I tell Em as we pull up outside the brownstone. “There’s a couch in my office we can crash on tonight.”

Emilia bites down on her bottom lip, and despite how inappropriate it is, my dick twitches in my pants. Ignoring him, I reach over and squeeze her hand. “Everything is going to be okay. Wilder’s fine, and Kai will keep him safe until tomorrow.”

“And what then?” she asks, worried. “How does this all end?”

I cock a brow and deadpan, “With Mel dead and buried, ideally at the bottom of a very deep well.”

She shows no reaction to my blood-thirsty response, continuing to stare at me with those worried eyes. “It’s all of us against her. She’s not getting out of this alive. I promise you that. The three of us can look after ourselves, and we’ll all protect you.”

Her gaze lowers, and just as I’m about to demand that she look at me, she raises her eyes and asks, “Does it make me a bad person that I don’t feel anything at the thought of her dying?”

Taken by surprise, all I can do is gape at her. “Fuck, no,” I bite out. “After everything she’s done to you, you should hate her guts.”

Her lips thin. “But she used to be one of my best friends.”

Understanding, my expression softens as I stroke my thumb over her cheek. “The Mel, who was your friend, isn’t the Mel that you know now. She never really existed, but it’s okay for you to miss that girl you knew. You can grieve for that version of her while also hating the real her.” Pinching her chin between my thumb and forefinger, I make sure she’s paying attention to my next words before I say, “None of us

will judge you for whatever you feel. Whether you'll miss her, grieve her, be happy she's dead, feel nothing at all, or all of the above. Whatever you're feeling is okay."

She rewards me with a small, thankful smile, and not wanting to hang around, we exit the car, and I let us into the house.

"Go grab some of your things," I tell her, firing off a quick text to Kai, keeping him in the loop as I promised.

She moves toward the stairs, turning to look over her shoulder when I don't follow her. Pointing my thumb toward the kitchen, I explain, "Kai wanted me to grab his laptop."

Nodding, she scurries up the stairs, and I wander into the kitchen, flicking on the lights as I pass. Searching the room for Kai's laptop, I spot it on the kitchen table and walk over to grab it.

As I do, a flash of movement from the pantry catches my eye right before something cold stabs into my shoulder. I grunt in pain as the object is yanked out, giving way to a numbness creeping across my skin, along with a sticky warmth that trails its way down my back.

Bringing the bloody tip of a knife to my throat, Mel hisses, "Scream, and I'll happily slit open your jugular."

I snarl at her but keep my lips sealed. "Atta boy," she taunts, smirking at me cockily.

With the knife still pressed against my throat, I can feel the blade scratching my skin as I swallow. Digging it in deeper, she forces my ass into the kitchen chair. Pulling out several zip ties from her back pocket, she tosses them to me before exchanging the knife for a gun.

Oh great, that's much better.

"Tie yourself to the chair."

I promise her a painful death with my glare, moving to do as she orders. "You're a dead girl walking," I hiss.

Her laugh is caustic enough to crack glass as she tosses her head back, genuinely amused by my death threat—an odd

sense of humor, but whatever. Mirth gleaming in the black depths of her eyes, she tilts her head. “You still have no idea who I am.”

It’s not a question, and her self-assurance has me genuinely curious. “Why don’t you tell me.” I just assumed she was some run-of-the-mill wackadoodle with a talent for hacking, although now her certainty has me second-guessing.

She arches an elegant brow. “And fall for that whole cliché of the villain-spills-all spiel? Yeah, I’m not stupid.”

Acting as if I don’t care, I shrug my shoulder. “Fine. Doesn’t matter how good your computer skills are; we’ll eventually figure it out. Nevertheless, you’ll be dead by then, and Emilia will have forgotten all about you, so whoever you are won’t matter.”

Her venomous glare is totally worth it. However, the digging of her fingers into the wound in my shoulder has me biting back any more sarcastic comments.

“Big words for a man strapped to a chair,” she snarks. Moving back toward the pantry, she ducks out of sight for a second before returning with a knapsack. Grabbing several lengths of rope, she tosses them to me. “Thighs and torso too.”

I do as she commands, her gun remaining trained on my face. When I’m done, she moves closer to tug at the restraints. Moving out of sight as she steps behind me, I feel the press of a muzzle against the back of my head as she loops another zip tie around each of my wrists, restraining them to the chair as she pulls tight enough to constrict my blood flow. I swallow down the pinch of pain, praying that Emilia stays upstairs and hoping Kai gets pissy at my radio silence sooner rather than later.

“Even if you did manage to kill me”—she chuckles, like the idea alone is preposterous—“you’d have to answer for your crimes.”

My brows scrunch together in confusion. *Bitch is crazy*, is about the only logical conclusion I can come to. I don’t know if she’s talking about her ghost haunting my ass, my day of

reckoning when I come face-to-face with God, or what, but I'll deal with whatever consequences there are if it means Emilia is safe and stalker-free.

“Oh, well, now you have me reconsidering,” I drawl sarcastically. Snatching the knife with her free hand, she slices it across the front of my chest, cutting open my top and leaving a sharp, red line along my skin..

My lip curls as I glare at her. “You're a charming little Stabby Sally, aren't you?”

Her returning smile is all teeth and utterly insane as she hops onto the kitchen table, legs swinging. “I like watching people bleed.” She looks down at her outstretched hand, wiggling her fingers coated in my blood. “It's so shiny.” Snapping her gaze to mine, her head tilts in that creepy-as-fuck way that reminds me I'm dealing with a mentally unstable person. “But I have other instruments if you'd prefer I use something else.” She begins ticking off a never-ending list of torture devices with her fingers, and my confidence grows weaker with each one she mentions.

Perhaps I did underestimate her. I was under the impression that we would come out victorious because there were more of us. However, this woman isn't just nuts. She's batshit crazy. Downright insane. Belongs in the fucking loony bin.

When she's finished listing her extensive choice of torture options, she looks at me expectantly. “Let's stick with the knife,” I choke out, struggling to keep up my relaxed charade.

Swallowing around the ball in my throat, I open my mouth, intent on keeping her distracted with questions. Except the squeaking of a stair reaches my ears a split second before Emilia's sweet voice calls out, “Hawk?”

Mel's entire face lights up with a sick gleam, and she slides off the kitchen table, brandishing both weapons. “Oh, goodie!” she whispers excitedly, like we're best friends. She moves to stand beside me, the knife back at my throat and the gun pointed at the doorway. “Now the games can begin.”

What fucking games?

My heart pounds in time with the tap of Emilia's shoes as she descends the stairs, calling out my name again when I don't answer. When I hear her reach the bottom of the stairs, I scream, "Run, Emilia. Mel is here!" uncaring of my well-being as the tip of the blade embeds under my skin.

"You fucking asshole!" Mel spins on me with a furious glare, the blade vibrating in her hand and sending more blood coursing down my neck. Even though this might be the moment my life ends, I tilt my chin and meet Mel's eyes, showing her just how much of an asshole I truly am.

Only when a shadow fills the doorway, do I rip my gaze away, my face crumpling when I spot Emilia standing there.

"Why didn't you fucking listen to me?!" I yell at her. *Jesus Christ, if we somehow make it out of this alive, I'm going to murder her myself.*

Ignoring me, she stands straight, showing no fear as she faces Mel. Returning to my side, Mel's knife returns to my throat. "Come join us, Emilia," she says in a sickly sweet voice, waiting as Emilia cautiously moves further into the room.

"Take off your shoe." Emilia hesitates for only a second, her gaze bouncing to mine before returning to Mel, doing as instructed.

"Good, now bring it here. Be a good girl, or your little boy toy here will get a pretty little bullet in his skull."

With wide, nervous eyes, Emilia slowly approaches with her shoe—a baby pink ballet—in hand. When she's close enough, Mel gestures for her to hold out her arm, and stabbing one of her fingers into the stab wound on my shoulder, she smears blood across it.

Emilia and I watch on, confused but not daring to speak or ask questions. Still pointing the gun at Emilia, she uses her other hand to drag her knife across the front of my chest, deepening the wound she already inflicted.

I grunt against the pain, Emilia gasping as blood puddles along the surface before spilling over.

“Come closer,” Mel barks, setting the knife aside. Grasping Emilia’s free hand, she tugs her forward until she can press Emilia’s palm flat over the cut, coating it in blood. “Now, go leave your shoe in the hall and your handprint on the wall. Mr. Savior Complex will have a field day when he walks in and finds them.” She’s grinning so brightly. *I guess these are the games she mentioned.*

“W-what?” Emilia stutters, staring at Mel in shock. “N-no. No way. It’ll traumatize him.”

Mel just stares at Emilia like she’s being stupid. “Duh. That’s the whole point. Get him all worked up, but don’t worry, it won’t be as traumatic as finding your dead body will be.” She tilts her head thoughtfully. “The only thing I can’t decide is whether to hang around and watch, then put him out of his misery, or tail him from the shadows until he finds the courage to do the job for me.”

Emilia can only gape at her former best friend turned nightmare of insane proportion.

Mel snaps out of her reverie and fixes her gaze on Emilia. “Well? What are you waiting for? Go!”

Emilia’s wide eyes flick to mine before she reluctantly obeys, woodenly heading toward the door. I silently scream at her to fucking run this time, realizing already she won’t. Despite the fact that staying means we’ll probably both die tonight, I know she won’t abandon me. Just like I wouldn’t abandon her. Our love might get us both killed, but at least we’ll die together.

“Take a seat, Emilia,” Mel tells her when she re-enters the kitchen. “We’re going to play a game.”

“What game?” Emilia asks, lowering herself into a kitchen chair Mel has strategically set opposite mine.

“The Newlywed Game,” Mel answers, like it should be obvious.

What the fuck is the Newlywed Game?

Emilia looks equally baffled.

“I’m going to prove that you made the wrong choice. I know you better than they ever will. He,”—she pokes me with the pointy end of her blade for emphasis—“only wants to control you. He’ll never love you the way I do.”

Clapping her hands together, she steps between us. “Okay, rules of the game. I will ask a question, and you both have to answer for the other person. If your answers are correct, we move on to the next one, and if they’re wrong...” She pauses for dramatic effect. “Then I get to play with one of my toys.”

Emilia looks confused, even as nausea churns in my stomach at that notion.

“Let’s start with a simple question,” she continues, oblivious to my discomfort as she taps thoughtfully on her lip. “Favorite genre of movie.”

Spinning on her heel, she turns to face me, cocking a brow in expectation. “Uhh.” I take a second to get my brain into gear. “Romantic comedies,” I tell her, not having to think about the answer. Hadley used to complain non-stop when it was Emilia’s turn to pick a movie on their weekly movie nights at Pac.

She gives a curt nod, clearly agreeing with me.

“Emilia,” she barks, demanding her answer while keeping her eyes trained on me. “Action movies,” she responds instantly.

I nod in agreement, but I get the impression I don’t need to. Whether it’s her stalking skills coming into play or her uncanny ability to read people, Mel somehow seems to know it’s the truth.

With a pout, she moves on to round two of this twisted game. “Celebrity crush.”

“Ryan Reynolds.” I’ve watched more Ryan Reynolds movies in the last couple of weeks than I have in my entire life. Even if she hadn’t verbally confessed her crush to me, it would be impossible not to have figured it out.

Emilia has to think about the answer, chewing on her bottom lip. Her eyes are creased with concern until they suddenly widen, a lightbulb flashing. “Kate Beckinsale.”

Mel’s face scrunches. “Really? Isn’t she like fifty?”

“Didn’t you watch the *Underworld* movies? All that leather. What’s not to like?”

Despite our situation, my retort brings a small smile to Emilia’s lips as she smothers a laugh. In that second, my entire being focuses in on her. I latch onto that twitch of her lips, promising myself it won’t be the last time I see it. I want to spend the rest of my days teasing smiles from her, earning her laughter, and basking in her affection.

When her eyes latch onto mine, I attempt to convey everything I’m feeling in that single look. Her smile falls away, sorrow and desperation clinging to her features.

“I love you,” she mouths behind Mel’s back, and it kills me not to be able to say it back. Mel’s eyes are shrewdly on me, so we don’t need to piss her off any more than she already is.

Wishing I’d told her sooner and said it more often, all I can do is hope that she knows how irrefutably in love with her I am as I wrench my gaze away from hers.

“Okay, clearly I need to be asking harder questions,” Mel sneers, scowling at me. I’m starting to get the impression that this test is more about me and how well I know Emilia vs. her. I might not have shared a dorm room with her for the last four years, but everything about her was ingrained into me in the short time that Emilia consumed my life. Not to mention, my sister is Emilia’s best friend, and despite trying not to bring her up in conversation since our days at Pac, she has inevitably come up—probably more than Hadley even realizes.

Subconsciously, I ate up every nugget of information I received—what she was doing at college, how she was spending her summers, her plans after graduation.

“Favorite junk food,” Mel grinds out.

“She loves anything sugary, but popcorn is her go-to.” Despite Mel glaring daggers into my head, I smirk at Emilia, the inside joke passing unnoticed by Mel.

Mel’s nostrils flare at my correct answer, and she doesn’t give Emilia a chance to answer before firing her next question.

“Star sign.”

It takes me a second to connect her date of birth with the correct star sign, and I’m really hoping I’ve got the right one, because star signs are really not my thing. “Gemini.”

At my correct answer, Mel takes a threatening step toward me. “What’s her favorite thing to do on the weekends?”

“Read, probably in some overstuffed chair in a musty library.”

Another step forward, closing the distance between us as she fists the blade dangling at her side. “Dream job.”

“She always wanted to be an editor, ideally in fiction since that’s what she enjoys, reading. However, she loves her job teaching at Ridgeway, so I can see her doing that in the future,”—dismissing Mel, I fix my gaze on Emilia—“and I think she would be amazing at it.”

Her next step has her towering over me. “Where has she worked every summer since graduating from high school?”

“In her final year at Halston, she worked for a publishing house as an intern. The other three summers, she worked in a coffeehouse near campus. And the summer before she started college, she spent it on tour with Death on a Matchstick.”

Mel’s grin is downright malicious. A vile, contemptuous thing that has me wanting to shrink back in my chair.

“Wrong. She spent most of her summer before Halston working at the cafe.”

Brows lowered in confusion, I flick my gaze to Emilia for confirmation. There’s a blush on her cheeks, an apology in her eyes. “She’s right,” she says in a small voice, only confusing me further.

“I don’t—what happened with the band? I thought you left to spend the summer with them?”

“I’m the one asking the questions here, pretty boy,” Mel sneers before Emilia can reply. “And you got yours wrong.” Beaming like a deranged psycho, she says, “So now I get to punish you.”

She waves the knife in front of me, her eyes perusing my body as she tries to decide what she wants to do with me. Gritting my teeth, I stare her down, refusing to cower beneath her craziness.

Reaching my legs, her eyes slowly lift back up, lingering on my face. That’s when I begin to sweat.

“You probably won’t look so pretty with a nice big scar on your face, will you?”

“No,” Emilia pleads, leaning forward in her chair as though she’s about to get up.

With her ass hovering just above the seat, Mel rounds on her, knife outstretched. “Don’t even fucking think about it,” she snarls viciously. “Unless you want a matching scar on your face. Bet none of them will want you then when you’re all scarred up and broken. But *I* wanted your broken pieces.” She smacks her palm against her chest. “*I* wouldn’t have cared if you were scarred.”

Unblinking eyes stuck on the blade, Emilia slowly lowers herself back into her chair. However, Mel continues to stand over her. Fear that she will follow through with her threat spurs me on. “Are you doing this or what?” I spit at her.

It has the desired effect, and she dismisses Emilia, striding toward me with intent. “If I’d known you were so eager to get all cut up, I’d have stabbed you some more.”

“Do your worst,” I taunt, absolutely sick of listening to this bitch talk. I’m done with this fucking game. Done with her crazy rules. She can do whatever the hell she wants with me, so long as she doesn’t touch a single hair on Emilia’s head.

Her hand fists the hair on the top of my head, pulling until I’m forced to tilt my head back, brandishing my face for her to

disfigure.

At the very corner of my eyes, I can see Emilia, tears streaking her face as she bites the inside of her cheek to hold back her pleas. I focus on her as the glint of steel flashes off to my left, a split second before searing pain drills into my skull.

Gritting my teeth, there's nothing I can do but breathe through the pain as warm blood gushes down the side of my face. That stabbing pain moving as the blade slices through the skin all the way from my temple to my ear.

Even after she's finished, the pain doesn't subside. It just changes from sharp and deep to a burning sensation as though half of my face is on fire. My teeth hurt, my eyes sting, and I still keep my mouth shut, refusing to give her any satisfaction.

She admires her handiwork before letting go of my hair and stepping back. Falling forward, my head hangs there while I attempt to ground myself.

"Hawk," Emilia cries, desperation bleeding into her tone. "Look at me."

Closing my eyes, I can still hear her pleas as I gather my energy and lift my head, ensuring that when my eyes meet hers, there's nothing but determination and strength shining in them.

The relief is immediate to see in her posture, even though her face is still pinched with concern.

"Okay, next question," Mel says gleefully.

"No," Emilia croaks. "No more. Is this why you're here? To play games with us?" Her voice rises alongside her temper, fury burning in the fiery green depths of her eyes.

Eerily slowly, Mel turns to face her. "So anxious to die, Emilia?"

Swallowing roughly, it's evident that Emilia is afraid, but she battles through her fear, lifting her chin and staring Mel down. It makes me so fucking proud to watch her. "I'd rather be dead than forced to be with you. I'd rather have spent my life married to Richard, or with any of the guys that came

before him, than spend it with you.” She spits the words out with so much venom you can taste it in the air.

Mel freezes, her whole body locking up before she lunges forward. “It’s your lucky day, then.” She jumps on Emilia, sending them both careening backward as the chair topples. Emilia lets out an ear-piercing scream, my own joining the mix as Mel straddles her. Pinning her to the ground, Mel raises the knife above her head, readying to bring it down and end the life of the only woman I will ever love.

CHAPTER 24

EMILIA

My eyes are rooted to the sharp blade looming above me. They say that your life flashes before you in your final moments, but it's not my past that I see. It's my future. Moments with Hawk, Kai, and Wilder. Dinners together. Holidays. Hadley's wedding. *Our* wedding. Kids.

Smiling faces.

Laughter.

Love.

So. Much. Love.

That future I always wished for but felt so elusive is finally right at my fingertips. Yet, still out of reach. I may never get to live it, but to know it was finally achievable; an eventuality, it eases the sting.

Blocking out the reality of Mel extended above me as she slices the blade downward in a deadly arc, I picture Wilder, Kai, and Hawk's faces. I wish I could see them in these final moments, but my imagination will have to suffice as I whisper my last goodbyes.

The glint of steel catches in the light, and I suck in a breath—my final one.

Closing my eyes, I prepare myself for the pain, the cold, the numbness.

I feel as though I've plunged beneath the water as I collapse into my own world. Nothing exists except the rapid *thud, thud, thud* of my pulse, the rushing of blood in my ears as I cling to the last vestiges of my memories with each of my guys.

Good. Bad. Painful. Happy. I want to remember them all.

My lungs cry out, convulsing. I fight it for as long as I can, until my body's need for air overpowers my mental fortitude.

Then in an involuntary reflex, my lips part, and I gulp down as much oxygen as possible.

My eyes snap open, blinking as I stare at the empty space above me.

There's no Mel. No knife. No grim reaper coming to collect.

Only the white kitchen ceiling.

I stare up at it until a figure blocks my view, a face looming above me, very different from the one I faced before.

It's enough to burst the bubble, and all at once, everything comes rushing in. "Emilia? Emilia!" Kai's worried voice penetrates the cocoon I am wrapped in as he shakes my shoulder. "Come on, Blackbird. I know you hear me."

Blinking, I look into his gleaming green eyes, which sparkle with so much life that he can't be anything but real. With another blink, I focus on the warmth seeping from his palms. Heat radiates from where he's grasping my shoulders, coaxing my body back to life.

Alive.

I'm alive.

But how?

I look to my left, where Mel lies on her side. Blood pools beneath her, spreading outward.

I swallow roughly as Kai's hands on my face direct my attention back to him. "Don't look at her. Look at me." He pins me with his intense stare until he seems satisfied, giving me a sharp jerk of his head before his gaze lowers, searching my body for any injuries. "Are you hurt?"

"No," I croak, licking my lips and swallowing again. "Hawk."

"I'm here, Sparrow," he calls, and the relief that crashes through me threatens to drown me. Needing to see him, I push myself upright, forcing Kai to move aside before our foreheads collide.

Grumbling, he helps me up. With my gaze locked on Hawk's, tears well in my eyes. "Your face," I sniffle, moving forward until I'm wrapped around him, my fingers brushing along the side of his blood-soaked face. "I'm so sorry."

He rests his forehead against mine, breathing me in. "I don't give a shit about my face," he grinds. "Jesus, fuck, Em. I thought I was about to lose you."

With our foreheads pressed together and our noses butting, it would be impossible to miss the sheen of tears in his eyes.

"Kiss me, you foolish woman, before Kai unties my hands and I strangle you for not running when you had the chance."

With a half-laugh, half-sob, I press my lips to his. Kai must undo the restraints around his wrists as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me closer and nearly crushing me to death.

When I finally pull back, Hawk glances up at Kai. "Impeccable fucking timing," he tells him, his attempt at humor falling flat when his voice cracks in relief.

"I wanted to make a dramatic entrance," Kai retorts, his smile strained.

The fact that they can even pretend to joke is astounding. I'm trembling like a leaf, still not convinced that this isn't all in my head, a desperate cling to consciousness as I bleed out on the kitchen floor.

Tuning them out, I inspect the long gash running from Hawk's hairline to the top of his ear. "Hawk." My voice cracks over his name.

"That bad, huh?" he asks, trying to make light of it.

My throat closes over, making it difficult to speak as I try to force a reassuring smile to my lips. Sharing a look with Kai, he nods before going in search of a first aid kit. "I'm sure it'll look better once I've got it all cleaned up," I say, not sure if I'm trying to convince Hawk or myself.

Tilting his head to the side to get a better look, I tell him, "You're going to need stitches."

Putting his hand on my cheek to get my attention, Hawk doesn't look nearly as bothered as he should as he says, "It'll be okay, Em. Scars are all the rage nowadays. It'll give me a sexy, rugged appearance." His soft smile melts my heart.

"You'll have to beat the ladies away with a shovel."

"So long as one woman still wants me, I don't care about any others."

Planting my hands on his cheeks, my gaze bores into him. "I will never not want you, scars and all."

"I love you." Sincerity bleeds into his voice, matched only by the intensity of his gaze.

Tears sting my eyes as I choke out, "I love you, too."

We share another, sweeter kiss, only pulling apart when Kai reappears with the first aid kit. He helps me clean Hawk up and applies butterfly stitches to close the wound while I give him some pain meds to swallow down. It's a temporary solution but will suffice for now.

When we're done, I untangle myself from Hawk and climb off his lap, allowing Kai to cut the rope around his thighs.

Needing the confirmation of feeling Kai's warm skin beneath mine, I reach out and squeeze his bicep. Heat scorches my palm. Real. He's real. He stares down at the point where my skin touches his, as though he, too, needs the reassurance.

He turns so he can wrap his arm around my shoulders, pulling me against him until my nose is buried in his top, his sage scent working its magic as it cloaks me in its comfort.

I don't care that I probably look like I've lost my mind as I inhale him, my face pressed against his chest as I cling to him like a child. When I finally pull back enough to look up into his face, I notice the pain etched into his features, and I'm reminded of the horror scene he faced when entering the house. "I'm sorry you had to go through that again," I say softly.

"I'd relive that whole night over and over if it meant keeping you safe."

He plants a chaste kiss on my lips before the three of us turn to face Mel. Kai keeps his arm protectively around my shoulder, and Hawk stands a little in front of me as though they think Mel might jackknife off the floor and rush at me. I shiver just at the notion.

“I-is she dead?” I ask, looking between the two of them. She hasn’t moved, from what I can tell, and I don’t think she’s breathing, but someone should probably make sure.

Hawk and Kai share a look—a conversation without words. “Flip a coin?” Hawk suggests.

Kai rolls his eyes. “I’ll do it.” He sighs, removing the comforting weight from my shoulder as he steps forward. My eyes drop, spotting the gun gripped tightly in his hands. I hadn’t even noticed he was carrying.

With cautious steps, he approaches Mel’s prone form and rolls her onto her back. I gasp as she flops over, her sightless eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Crouching down beside her, Kai feels for a pulse. Turning to face us, he shakes his head, and I step out from behind Hawk, observing my dead best friend as I approach.

Standing over her, I’m both relieved and surprised to feel absolutely nothing. It’s like looking into the face of a complete stranger. The woman in front of me isn’t my friend, my roommate. She’s terrorized me for years, murdered my boyfriend, murdered Louis, who was nothing but nice to me. She tormented Kai, butchered Wilder, and sliced up Hawk. Her actions are unforgivable.

Hawk steps up beside me, his fingers threaded through mine, as Kai joins my other side, our shoulders brushing. Still, I can’t take my eyes off Mel. “I should probably hate you,” I say to her. Perhaps I’m simply too numb, and the torrent of hatred will come later, but at this moment, I can’t bring myself to hate her.

Lifting my gaze from her, I glance at Hawk, who gives me a reassuring nod, reminding me of what he said in the car. Flicking my gaze to Kai next, I find nothing but love and admiration staring back at me.

“But I owe you a thank you,” I say, looking back at Mel. I squeeze Hawk’s hand. “If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t have found my way back here.” My attention turns to Hawk. And despite the blood on his face, the dead girl at our feet, and the harrowing day we’ve had, I can’t help but smile at him. “I wouldn’t have realized what I was missing out on all these years.”

I hold his gaze for a heart-thumping moment before giving Kai the same smile. “Or found my missing pillar of strength.”

With one last look at Mel, I state, “I wouldn’t have found true happiness. So for that, thank you. But for everything else, I hope you rot in hell.”

A moment of silence follows my speech before Hawk bursts out laughing. The sound breaks the ice and sharing a look, Kai and I start laughing as well, until the three of us are bent over like lunatics, tears in our eyes.

“Best eulogy ever,” Hawk gets out between fits of laughter.

When our hysterics pass, we all focus back on Mel at once. “What do we do with her now?” I ask.

Kai glances out the window before consulting his watch. “It won’t be long until dawn.”

The two of them share a look before Hawk suggests, “There’s a storage room downstairs. Would suffice for now.”

I wrinkle my nose as Kai nods. “Why don’t you go take a shower and let us take care of this?” he suggests.

My brows tug down in a frown. “That doesn’t seem fair.”

He gives an easy shrug. “Sparrow, we’ve been waiting for this day. We knew we’d have to get our hands dirty. We know what needs to be done, and we’re more than happy to do it.” He waits until he can see the acceptance in my eyes before giving me a nudge toward the door. “Go shower.”

I’m halfway across the room when a sound out in the hall has all of us freezing in place. In the time it takes to blink, Kai

is standing in front of me, the gun back in his hand, as Hawk pulls me backward.

Footsteps thunder toward us, and I have to lean to the side to see around Kai as a shadow fills the doorway.

“Fucking hell, Wilder,” Kai berates. “You nearly got yourself shot.”

Wilder shuffles further into the room, dressed in nothing but a white hospital gown and the lime green sneakers he was wearing earlier, a murderous expression directed at Kai. There’s a white bandage across one side of his jaw and bruising along his nose from our earlier altercation. The rest of his injuries are hidden, but his pinched expression and hunched form give away the pain he’s experiencing.

“Well, maybe if you hadn’t abandoned me at the hospital... Do you have any idea how fucking cold it is out there? My balls are never going to climb down from inside of me, and it’s all *your* fault!”

Kai rolls his eyes.

“I had to get in a fucking taxi with my ass hanging out.”

He turns around so we can see the flaps of his hospital gown hanging open, his white ass on display for the world to see. Immediately, all three of us break down in another fit of laughter, Kai wolf whistling while Hawk hoots.

Wilder practically vibrates with rage as he turns back around, glaring at each of us.

“You were passed out,” Kai says when he’s stopped chuckling.

“How did you even pay for the taxi?” Hawk questions.

“The nice nurse had a bag with my belongings in it.” He scowls. “Although they apparently tossed all my clothes.”

“Well, they weren’t exactly wearable,” Hawk drawls. “What with your tee being half shredded and your jeans stained with enough blood to make you look like a serial killer.”

“I’d take that over *this* any day.” Eyes still hissing fire, Wilder’s gaze drifts to Mel, his mouth dropping open. “Did you kill her without me?!”

His accusing stare meets each of us. “You were in the *hospital*,” Kai attempts to reason. “Where you should still be, by the way.”

Ignoring Kai while he stares longingly at Mel’s dead body, Wilder huffs out a breath.

“It’s not like we planned on killing her,” Hawk reasons, waving at his face. “We were sorta ambushed. We were lucky Kai got here in time.”

I’m not sure if it’s his words or the tendril of fear in his voice, but Wilder’s gaze shoots to me, penetrating so deeply that I swear he can see all the way to my soul.

“I’m fine,” I reassure him. Still, he doesn’t stop his perusal until he’s satisfied I’m telling the truth.

“Since you’re well enough to discharge yourself from the hospital, you can help us cart her downstairs,” Kai tells him, jerking his thumb over his shoulder toward Mel.

They all surround Mel, with Hawk hooking his arms under hers while Kai takes her feet, hauling her off the floor. Wilder and I lead the way toward the stairs. However, when I start climbing them, intent on heading for that shower, Wilder speaks up. “Where are you going?”

“To shower.”

He immediately follows me up the stairs, abandoning any thought of assisting Hawk and Kai.

“Where the hell are you going?” Hawk growls at him, shifting Mel’s dead weight in his arms.

“One of us should stay with her.”

It’s the first time Wilder has sounded genuinely concerned about me, and despite the complicated existence of our relationship, hope blooms in my chest. Before an argument can commence, I reach out to touch Wilder’s arm. “I’ll be fine.”

“No—”

“You heard the woman. She’ll be fine,” Hawk snaps, his tone non-negotiable.

Scowling, Wilder continues to stare at me, likely considering disregarding all of us. After a tense moment, he stomps back down the couple of steps he’d taken. “Fine,” he hisses.

I toss Hawk a grateful look before hurrying up the stairs, leaving the three of them to navigate through the aftermath.

Reaching the bathroom I share with Kai, I shut the door behind me and lean against it. My jumbled thoughts jump all over the place, from Wilder storming out of the house yesterday to my altercation with him this morning to finding him and Mel in that bunker to walking in on her standing over Hawk.

Each scene flashes anew before my eyes, tormenting me. Taunting. Until it’s all I can see. I came so close to losing not one but two of the most important people in my life today. That knowledge settles into my bones like a lead weight, causing my hands to tremble.

Tears well in my eyes, and I bring my hands up to my face. Only, I grind to a halt when I notice the red stains—Hawk’s blood.

A fiery itch starts up under my skin, a sudden desperation to scrub myself raw driving me forward as I turn on the shower and strip out of the hospital scrubs in record time. Without testing the water, I step under the scalding spray.

Standing there, I let the ardent pelts turn my skin red, water mixed with blood pooling at my feet before swirling around the drain and disappearing. Closing my eyes, I let myself feel every panic-ridden, terror-soaked moment of the last twenty-four hours before finally directing my thoughts toward Mel.

A smile comes unbidden to my lips. I’m free. I’m finally free. A hysterical laugh bubbles out of me, this surreal feeling causing reality and fantasy to clash. Recalling the feeling of

Hawk's lips against mine, Kai's arms wrapped around me, and Wilder's skin beneath mine, I know there's no way this can be a dream.

She truly is dead.

And I'm free to have the relationship I want with each of the three men downstairs.

Although Wilder and I need to have a serious conversation before anything else happens. That stunt he pulled today is not okay; it just proves that he still hasn't let go of the past. I don't understand what that was all about or how it was my fault. Or maybe it wasn't my fault, and it was more habit that had him seeking me out to unleash his anger on. Either way, I refuse to tolerate it any longer.

I know the Wilder I fell in love with at Pac is buried somewhere inside him, hiding behind a hostile shell, and I am determined to yank him out again. I'm done letting him hide behind his anger. It's time Wilder faced me head-on and dealt with his shit. It's the only way we can move forward. The only hope there is of us ever being an eventuality.

With renewed purpose, I lower the temperature of the water and mechanically wash the dirt and grime from my skin. Once I've scrubbed the top three layers of skin from my body, I step out of the shower and wrap myself up in a fluffy towel before grabbing fresh clothes from my bedroom.

Towel-drying my hair before tying it up in a messy bun, I saunter downstairs in sweatpants and a hoodie I stole from Hawk. I heard the water running in both bathrooms when I passed, so I'm guessing the guys have successfully stored Mel's body for now and are cleaning themselves up.

While I wait, I put on a pot of coffee, and I've just gotten comfy in the living room with my piping hot, life-sustaining drink when the pounding of footsteps announces the arrival of more than one of my men.

All three stride into the room, freshly showered but with bags under their eyes. None of us have slept in over twenty-four hours, and even Wilder's nap at the hospital probably

wasn't all that rejuvenating. It won't be long until we all crash, but first, we need to discuss the problem hidden downstairs.

"There's coffee in the kitchen," I tell them, and Hawk and Wilder immediately backtrack out of the room. Evidently I'm not the only one in need of caffeine to sustain themselves today.

Kai's eyes fall to mine, his warm smile heating me from the inside out. Instead of following the others, he closes the distance between us, claiming the spot on the sofa next to me before taking the coffee cup from my hand and setting it on the table. Then he pulls me into his lap, bundling me against him like I'm a precious object to be protected and adored. Grinning like a schoolgirl with a crush, I bury my face in his neck and drink him in.

I've wanted this casualness with him for so long that I can't believe it's real. He's been opening up more since that kiss, especially after Hawk pushed him to confront his feelings. Nevertheless, something loosens in my soul at seeing him so at ease around me now that Mel is out of the picture. It makes me realize that, despite his assurances, he was holding back because of her. I had been worried it was a lie and more excuses would pour out even after he'd taken care of her.

His sigh of contentment nearly undoes me, and I cling tighter to him.

"God, I've wanted to do this for so long," he says against my ear. Outside of the cinema room, with the early morning light visible through the window, this feels more real than our private moments together downstairs.

"Me too."

Only when I hear the others coming back into the room, do I shift in Kai's lap, watching as Hawk settles in beside us on the sofa, handing Kai his mug, and Wilder claims one of the armchairs.

Noticing the butterfly stitches on Hawk's face have been replaced with actual stitches, I give him a questioning look, and he explains, "I got Kai to stitch it up."

“Still think he should go to the hospital,” Kai grunts. “I was only ever taught how to do a rough job to keep men alive in the field.”

“It’ll be fine,” Hawk says, waving him off.

“It’s your face,” Kai argues. “Don’t think I’m going to listen to your shit when you’re left with an ugly ass scar.”

Unperturbed, Hawk winks at me, and although I agree with Kai, I can’t help but grin at him.

“We were thinking of ordering breakfast,” Hawk informs us, effectively changing the subject.

“I would *kill* for some waffles right now,” Wilder groans. I am rolling my eyes at his dramatics and subtle word choice. I guess someone is still sour about missing out on all the Mel drama.

“Food sounds good,” Kai agrees.

My stomach rumbles as I lean forward to retrieve my coffee cup from the table, announcing its agreement with the plan, and Hawk lifts out his phone, taking our food orders.

“It’ll be here in thirty minutes,” he informs us when he’s done.

“Guess that gives us time to search this,” Wilder states, holding up a backpack.

“Is that Mel’s?” I ask as Kai tenses behind me.

“Yup.” Pulling it open, he pulls out another cord of rope and some zip ties. Even the sight of them makes me shiver. Flashes of Wilder tied up in that bunker and Hawk in the kitchen. Images I never want to see again, ones that will haunt my nightmares for years to come.

Seemingly having emptied the main compartment, Wilder begins pulling open zips to some smaller ones. “Oooh,” he says with an edge of excitement, grinning at us before revealing his find.

“Her phone?” Kai gapes, interest piqued as he involuntarily leans forward.

“And a key.” Wilder holds out a finger, a silver key dangling from it. “What do you think it opens?”

I glance at Hawk and Kai, both of whom shrug. “She had to be living somewhere, right?” Hawk supplies.

“Ugh,” Wilder groans after tapping on the phone for a few seconds. “It’s locked.”

“Here, toss it over,” Kai says, holding out his hand. Wilder throws him the phone, and I watch as Kai stares at the screen before frowning. “We should get West to look at it.”

Hawk expresses his agreement, and we set it and the key aside to look into later.

“So...” I begin after an awkward silence. “The problem of Mel...”

“We can’t do anything until tonight,” Kai speaks up. “After we’ve eaten, we should all grab some sleep.”

“And tonight?” I enquire.

He mulls it over for a moment before saying, “We could take her out to Hollow’s Park.”

I wrinkle my nose, not wanting to contaminate that place with the stench of Mel. Despite how it ended, my hike there with Kai is still one of my favorite memories.

“Not the trail we were on,” he explains, catching my expression. “There’s another one, further out. It’s off the beaten track, and there would be no one around this time of year.”

“And then what?” I ask. “Bury her?”

“No,” Wilder quickly chimes in. His eyes drill into me as he says, “We burn her.”

His declaration is met with silence, Hawk and Kai sharing a look before Kai shrugs his shoulders. “More immediate than burying. It would take too long for a body to decompose, and the last thing we need is someone finding her remains in the spring and starting up a whole investigation.”

“Oh, me, me, me!” Wilder jumps up and down in his chair, his hand raised in the air like a child who knows the answer to the teacher’s question. “I wanna do it.”

“You want to burn her body?” I ask incredulously, barely able to stomach this conversation, never mind being involved in the actual process.

“Ehh, yeah,” he states in a *duh* tone. “I missed out on all the fun earlier, the least I deserve is to chop her up and toss her in the flames.”

And there goes my gag reflex.

“Yeah, sure,” Kai says, sounding equally grossed out. “Have at it.”

Wilder grins like the fucking lunatic he is.

When the food arrives, I go with Hawk to the door, helping him carry it into the kitchen. Setting it down on the island, I let Hawk sort out plates and cutlery while I rummage through one of the kitchen cabinets until I find what I’m after.

“What are you doing?” he questions, watching with piqued interest while I grind up several tablets.

“Wilder and I need to have a little conversation before we can do anything else.”

“And that involves drugging him?”

I shrug a shoulder, remaining focused on my task. “Payback is a bitch.” He stands and watches as I grind the antihistamines into a fine powder before sprinkling them into Wilder’s milkshake. “I’m going to need your help, though.”

Snorting, he shakes his head, even as a grin stretches his lips. “Anything you want, Little Sparrow.”

CHAPTER 25

WILDER

Groggily, I peel my eyes open. The dark ceiling of my bedroom looms above me, and I stare up at it in confusion, trying to figure out how I got here. The last thing I remember, we were eating breakfast...

My brows lower as I wrack my brain to remember. A wave of exhaustion hit me. I put it down to the pain meds, lack of sleep, and the day's events. Except...

"Wakey wakey," a sugary sweet voice sing-songs.

I snap my gaze to where Emilia is straddling me. Well, that explains the pressure I could feel on my torso. Reaching for her on instinct, I come up short when something cold bites into my skin. Frowning, I tilt my head back so I can see my hands.

"You handcuffed me to the bed?" I question, jiggling the cuffs. She doesn't answer, giving me time to take stock of my situation. Now that I am aware of it, I can feel the same cool steel touching my ankles, and a twitch of my legs confirms they are also restrained, although hidden beneath a thin bedsheet.

My eyes slowly skim over my body. "Am I naked?"

"Yup." She pops the p, grabbing my attention as I stare at her shit-eating grin. I immediately harden at the promise of retribution in her eyes, which has turned her usually jade irises a hunter green. God, why is knowing that she wants to hurt me such a fucking turn-on?

The reasoning probably requires a therapist to pick at and psychoanalyze, but I don't give a fuck why. All I can think about is every moment she was the one at *my* mercy. I wonder what she will do now that the roles are reversed? The prospect only sends more blood south of the border, making Emilia aware of precisely where my head is at.

"Seriously, Wilder?" she chastises.

“Can you blame me, Angel? You look so fucking gorgeous straddling me, ready to rain down hellfire.”

What can she expect, dressed like Lilith herself in sexy fire-engine red lingerie? All she’s missing are cute little horns on her head, and I’d believe I truly did die in that bunker and woke up in hell.

Unaffected by my attempt to soften her, she waves a piece of paper in front of me. It takes only a second for me to recognize it as the letter she had written me four years ago. Ever since I finally opened it, it’s been in the top drawer of my bedside table, so it wouldn’t have been difficult for her to find.

“Remember this?” she snarks, and for the first time, I see just how furious she is. It’s hot, but I do my best to quell my baser urges, knowing damn well I deserve the verbal assault coming my way. “You asked me if I was done finding myself, and I gave you an honest answer. But *I* never asked if you were done hating me for what happened.”

Not giving me a second to answer her, she trudges on. “Don’t worry, in any case. Your answer was loud and clear in the library when you threw this letter in my face.”

Anger tightens her expression as her hand grasping the letter shakes with her fury. “The thing is, Wilder, if we are ever going to have a chance, we both need to come clean—to each other, to ourselves. I need you to actually fucking listen to me for once and take a good hard look at yourself.”

I gulp audibly. For the first time since I woke up, nerves batter at my carefully constructed armor. Like a fishing rod latched onto its catch, her gaze draws me in, holding me prisoner until I finally nod, accepting her agreement.

I thought I was going to die yesterday, and all I could think about was her. No longer able to feel her warm glow surrounding me. For the first time in years, I allowed myself to remember how it felt when she looked at me with affection and wonderment in her eyes. It made me feel like I was complete, like I had a purpose in this world—to love and care for her. After years of wandering the earth like a phantom—empty and aimless—I’d finally found a reason for my

existence. A reason why I had survived, and none of my friends had. For the first time in a long time, my world made sense.

Without her, my existence was nothing but a bleak wasteland. Desolate and unforgiving. I accepted my cold, harsh reality and learned to survive in its unrelenting conditions.

When I read her letter, I thought I could simply pack up all those unresolved emotions. Put in earplugs and drown out the voices, as I had before. Only now do I realize that that's not a long-term solution. If I locked everything up and went back to the way things were at Pac, everything would eventually have blown up in our faces in spectacular fashion. Which is exactly what happened in the library.

When we were at Pac, I wasn't ready to face everything I'd been keeping so carefully buried all these years. Emilia gave me a temporary reprieve, and I latched onto it, but the couple we were back then was never going to make it the long haul. Not when I couldn't be honest with myself.

Now, though. I'm ready—or as ready as I'll ever be—to confront my past. For Emilia, I'll face those demons, tackle the voices, and wade into battle with the ghosts of my past.

I just hope I come out victorious.

As my lips part, ready to spill every last piece of my blood-stained, corroded soul, Emilia beats me to it.

“I didn't spend the summer with the band,” she blurts out.

I'm so taken aback that I can only stare up at her while I wait for her to explain.

She worries her bottom lip, unable to meet my intent gaze. “Not even Hadley knows this,” she says in a small voice. “I couldn't bring myself to tell her. Couldn't admit to myself exactly what it meant.” Gathering her courage, she forces her eyes to mine. I latch onto them like the shining beacon of a lighthouse, safely navigating me through treacherous waters.

“I was only with them for a month before I left. As soon as I arrived, I knew it wasn't where I was supposed to be. It felt

all wrong. I forced myself to stay, but each passing day just got worse and worse. Until eventually, I made the decision to leave. I was able to move into my dorm room early at Halston, so that's what I did. I went to Halston two months ahead of schedule, got a job in a cafe, and every moment I wasn't working, I was holed up in my room, crying over rom-coms and screaming at every *happily ever after* I read in books."

Her face is set in tight lines as she searches my face for a reaction. I continue to gape speechlessly at her until I finally get my dry mouth to spit out words. "You didn't sleep with any of them?"

She shakes her head.

"And they were okay with that?"

"Yeah, I think so." Her cheeks turn rosy, her eyes dropping from mine to stare resolutely at a point on my chest. "When I first arrived, they talked about a relationship where they all shared me."

On instinct, my body tenses. The thought of anyone else sharing her has a red mist descending over me. *Hurt. Stab. Kill.* The only thing that pulls me back from the edge is the soft press of her fingertips against my skin. I'm not even sure if she knows she's touching me as she strokes soothing circles along my side.

"That was the final straw. I broke down and told them everything that happened with Hawk and with us. They understood and said I could still stay, but it no longer held the appeal it once did."

"You didn't sleep with them," I murmur. The dawning of realization is like being dunked in ice-cold water—a shock to the system that sends previously dormant neurons firing in all directions.

A heavy silence falls over us, as though blanketing us from the outside world while we sort out our shit. She's still stroking absently along my side—ironically, the side that was burned.

Gathering myself, I find my voice. “When I was fifteen, I was in a house fire.” The room, the bed beneath me, Emilia, all of it crumbles as I’m ripped from the present and dumped in the past. Before me, I can see the large house, flames erupting from the windows, the heat sending glass exploding outward.

It’s physically painful to get the following words out. “It claimed the lives of my three closest friends.”

I hear Emilia’s audible intake of breath, but it reaches me as though through water, barely penetrating the past that has erected itself around me.

As if the scene before me is playing out on a screen, it rewinds to earlier that night. The four of us are spread out across the sofas, some sport playing on the widescreen TV in the background. Cans of beer and bottles of liquor litter the coffee table and are toppled over on the floor, smoke hanging thick in the air with the telltale stench of weed so pungent that I swear I can taste it on my tongue even all these years later.

We’ve been at it for a while, the four of us descending into a drunken, drug-fueled haze for no reason other than a Thursday night. We’re rich, so why the fuck not.

“We were partying hard,” I say aloud in a voice that sounds nothing like mine. “Which wasn’t anything new for us. We were all rich, bored, arrogant teenage boys with nothing better to do and no parents around to police us.”

My mouth dries up as the scene in front of me becomes hazy, the drug-alcohol combination working its magic until the scene fades away into darkness. “I blacked out at some point, and when I came to, the room was on fire. It was so thick that I could barely breathe. My skin felt like it was literally melting from my bones. I remember searching for the others, but I couldn’t see a thing through all the smoke. I guess I must have managed to crawl my way out of the house, because the next thing I knew, I was in the back of an ambulance.”

Blinking, I slowly come back into the room. Emilia’s green hues ground me in the present. “One of the nurses later told me that I was the only one pulled out of the fire.” Swallowing

around the lump in my throat, I choke out, “The rest of them perished in the flames.”

“Wilder.” Emilia’s voice is coated in anguish, but I turn my head away from her sympathetic gaze, not wanting to see it. I don’t deserve her sympathy.

Feeling as though my insides are being ripped to shreds, I keep my eyes firmly on the wall as I say, “The firefighters were able to pinpoint the origin to right beside the chair I was sitting in. It’s a miracle I made it out alive, or so they kept telling me.” Gritting my teeth, I spit out, “But I can see it for what it really is—a curse. It was me that started that fire. I killed my friends, all because I had too much to drink and smoke.”

“Wilder,” Emilia repeats in a broken voice. “You don’t know that.”

Incensed, I snap my head around to face her. “I was smoking weed that night. I was high as a fucking kite, drunker than a skunk. It doesn’t take a genius to put it together. I must have been smoking a joint when I passed out. It fell from my fingers and hit the carpet, spreading outward until it consumed my three best friends.” Gesturing with my chin toward the twisted skin covering the left side of my body, I snarl, “And all I was left with were these reminders of my stupidity. My recklessness.”

Emilia looks physically pained as she watches me splinter.

Heaving out a long breath, I force myself to relax. “Although that’s not entirely true. I died in that fire. The Wilder that was before, went up in flames alongside his friends.” Wrenching my gaze away from the wall and back to hers, I confess, “The figment that was born from the torched remains of that house was soulless, incapable of normal human emotion. My insides had been scooped out, leaving nothing but a hollow shell behind.

“I was dead, or as dead as one can be, while still carrying around a beating heart. Hadley plucked the remnants of my blackened soul from the ashes, but it was you who breathed life back into my empty carcass.”

Searching her eyes for that constant anchor that steadies me, I tell her, “All those months spent around you, you coaxed me back to life. I was damaged and tormented, but I was no longer a dead thing aimlessly roaming.”

Seeing the tragic ending coming, Emilia murmurs, “And then I left.”

Defeated, I sag against the mattress. “Then you left, and the relative peace I found shattered.”

Tears gleam in her eyes, but they don’t fall.

“I don’t hate you, Emilia. Far from it, in fact. You’re too good, too pure. You shouldn’t be here, wasting your time on me. I am irredeemably damaged.”

“I happen to like all of your damaged pieces, Wilder.” At the soft cadence of her voice, I can’t help but stare hopefully up at her. I will never understand how I can want this woman to run as far away from me as possible while simultaneously hoping she will never leave.

She runs her palms over the ridges of my abdomen and along the hard planes of my chest before lifting herself up just enough to slide her hot core along my length, coaxing him back to life.

I groan despite myself. “You know what I think?” she murmurs seductively. “I think we had to get lost in the dark in order to find our way home to one another. I could never be your everything, and you could never be mine.”

She’s right. Of course, she is. The relative peace she offered me was a temporary reprieve. It wouldn’t have gone on indefinitely. It couldn’t. Eventually, the past I refused to deal with would have come knocking, and I’m not sure we would have survived the fallout.

But now? Now there’s hope. If we start this thing on a clean slate, with her knowing every dark secret of mine, we have a chance.

“I want to be the one to help you wrangle your demons, Wilder,” she whispers, her voice low and heady as she continues to rub against me. “I like that I can offer you an

escape, but I refuse to be your crutch. *You* have to be the one to confront your past and cast out the ghosts. I can't banish them for you, but I *can* stand by your side while you face them." Vulnerability flashes across her face. "If you'll have me."

I move my arms, needing to fucking touch her, forgetting that I'm shackled to the bed. Even though my gaze remains securely moored to hers, I snarl at the restraints.

"I wouldn't want anyone else by my side, Angel. You've been it for me since that night I slept in your room, and you thought a pillow wall would stop me from touching you. Even when I hated you, I still needed you. Not to keep the voices at bay, but just because I don't fucking function without you. You're so deeply embedded under my skin that I'm not complete unless I'm looking into your eyes or I can feel the heat of your skin against mine. I don't care if you're sitting in a chair on the other side of the room or asleep in my arms; whether you're pissed at me or want to cut my dick off, I just want to be fucking *around* you."

I eat up every bit of the devilish grin slowly spreading along Emilia's lips. "I can't promise to always do the right thing, and I'm definitely going to fuck up, but I can promise that I'll love you with every broken shard of my wretched heart. I'll put you first, above all else, protect you no matter what, and be the man you deserve."

"So long as you start communicating with your words instead of your cock, then I don't have any concerns about the rest of it," Emilia says, emphasizing her statement with another glide of her tantalizing pussy along my engorged flesh.

Lifting herself up, she pushes away the bedsheet, showcasing my erection in all of its painfully hard glory. Standing upright, like a soldier ready to march into battle. Emilia bites her lip as she tightly wraps her hand around my straining shaft.

Her other hand swiftly pushes the fabric of her red thong to the side, and she lines herself up. Precum leaks from my slit as

she presses the head against the wet warmth of her cunt.

I strain against the cuffs as she taunts me, barely letting me breach the threshold before lifting off. Her hand tugs on my length, driving me wild as she holds me back from embedding myself in the only place my dick has wanted to be in months.

“No more teasing. No more torture sessions. No more driving me to the edge and leaving me hanging.” The promise of retribution in her tone has my hips punching upward; the need to be buried inside her impossible to deny.

“I promise,” I grind out between gritted teeth, the words barely more than a guttural rasp.

Continuing to tease us both, Emilia doesn't move an inch. Her eyes are latched on mine, blazing with desire; inch by inch, she eases herself down on me. Throwing my head back, a low groan passes my lips as she slowly impales herself on my throbbing erection.

Her hands skate over the ridges of my abs, sending pleasure jolting through me that's only heightened when she fully seats herself. I can hardly breathe through the intense, agonizing need to move. To take over. To flip her onto her back and fuck her so far into the mattress that it'll forever be indented with the outline of our bodies.

“Angel.” My apt nickname for her is barely more than a hiss. “Move.”

Smiling coyly, she lifts herself up before slamming down. My eyes roll to the back of my head, an inhumane growl erupting from my lips.

The cuffs jangle against the headboard with my need to feel her skin beneath mine, lick a wet trail up her neck and suck her nipple into my mouth. Rattling the bars of my cage, I growl, “Unlock these damn cuffs.”

Emilia's only response is a cunning smirk as she continues to milk me with that tight little cunt of hers. So slick. So wet. Sweet fucking perfection. I don't give a shit what people might say; I want to fucking die with my cock buried inside her.

Her soft moans fill the room, echoing in my head and drowning out everything else. I can't tear my eyes away as I watch her bounce on my dick.

"Top off," I grunt, needing to see her tits bouncing as she takes every ounce of pleasure from me and keeps it for herself.

She obliges after sparing me a withering glare, which is completely ruined by the lust burning in her eyes.

"Fucking beautiful," I murmur, unable to look away as her breasts sway in front of me, her pert nipples aching to be touched. My hips buck when she reaches out and fondles one, moaning deeply as her pussy spasms around me.

"Oh, fuck, Angel."

She strokes me at a rapid tempo that binds our bodies together, until I feel her pulsating with impending pleasure.

"Come for me, Angel. I've waited so fucking long to feel you lock around me, creaming my dick."

"Shit, shit, shit." Emilia quivers, shattering into a million pieces before my eyes. Watching her claim her release is my undoing, and I follow her into oblivion in a downpour of fiery sensations.

I'm still panting as I snarl, "Get me the fuck out of these handcuffs. Now, Emilia."

Whether the orgasm has scrambled her brain or she's finally done teasing me, she reaches over to the bedside table and grabs a key. She first undoes the cuffs at my feet, before doing the ones around my wrists.

The second the last one falls away, I leap forward, wrapping my arms around her as I flip her onto her back, with my softened cock still seated inside her. Eliminating every ounce of space between us, I crush my lips to hers, needing to kiss her more than I need air in my lungs or blood in my veins

I devour her softness, ravishing her lips as I ardently reacquaint myself with her mouth.

Breathless, I pull back just enough to stare into her eyes, pupils blown with desire. “If this is a dream, I never want to wake up.”

“Not a dream,” she assures, trailing her fingers through my messy mop of hair. “You’re stuck with me for life, and if you ever pull shit like what you did yesterday again, I will actually cut your dick off.”

Unaffected by her threat, I smirk down at her, gyrating my hips against hers. “You mean this dick?”

Before she can argue, I recapture her lips with mine. Our kiss is slow and thoughtful, savoring and languid. Shivers of desire race through me, blood filling my cock as I grind against her.

Soft, sweet moans escape her lips, and I swallow each one until she’s convulsing around me. Involuntary tremors wrack her body, and I bury my face in the juncture of her neck as I grunt out my release.

We lie like that for who knows how long, wrapped up in one another, while a deep feeling of peace like nothing I’ve felt before displaces those feelings of hatred I’ve been clinging to so desperately.

“I love you,” I murmur against her skin. “Have for four years now. Just thought you should know.”

Threading her fingers through my hair, she tugs gently until I lift my head. I can tell from the shimmer in her eyes what she’s going to say before she even opens her mouth, and before she can return the sentiment, I say, “Don’t say it.”

Her brows crease in confusion, and I explain, “I want to earn those three words from you.” Stroking my hand over her hair, I plead, “Give me a chance to work for them first.”

She swallows audibly, nodding. “Okay.”

Shifting to the side, so my weight isn’t on top of her, I pull her in against me. “We should probably get some sleep,” she says, snuggling into my side.

I snort. “If you think you’re getting any sleep today, you’re sorely mistaken.”

We lapse into a comfortable silence, but one final secret niggles at me.

Coughing to clear my throat, I confess, “There’s one more thing you should know.”

Her body tenses against mine, and I attempt to soothe her by running my hand along her arm. “I’m the one responsible for that senator’s death.”

“What?” Pushing up onto her elbow, Emilia frowns down at me, her eyes narrowed as she tries to puzzle out what I’m implying. “How? Why?”

I shake my head. “It’s a complicated story. I have no good reason, but it’s probably easier to explain it to everyone at once.”

She stares at me for a moment longer before conceding. “Is that why you stormed out of here the other morning?”

“Yeah.”

“And why you came at me at the library?”

I give her a contrite nod.

Sighing, she shakes her head before cuddling back into me. “You realize Kai and Hawk think it was Mel.”

I did not know that, but I guess it makes sense. “Let’s just get tonight over with, and then I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

We spend the rest of the day in bed, catching up on sleep in between satisfying our need for one another. As the sun sets, I place a final kiss on Emilia’s shoulder before sliding out of bed.

Padding over to my dresser, I pull open the top drawer and retrieve the hidden sheath. Gripping it firmly in my hand, I take one last look at the sleeping beauty in my bed before heading out the door.

I may have missed out on killing Mel, but I sure as fuck want to be the one to make sure she can never rise from the dead. I'm going to enjoy chopping her into bite-sized pieces and barbecuing her ass. It feels like karmic justice after everything she's done to Em, not to mention the stunt she pulled earlier.

My hands shake with rage as I tramp down the stairs, knowing my girl could have died *twice* tonight. If Hawk and Kai hadn't arrived at the bunker in time, or if Kai had been even a second later getting to the house.

I might have been pissed at him for abandoning me at the hospital, but he could leave me ball gagged and stripped naked in the middle of the desert if it meant he saved Em in time.

When I'm standing over my Angel's ex-stalker, I take my time casting my eyes over her still form before crouching down beside her. "There's no *maybe* about it. I *will* torch your body when I'm done playing with it."

CHAPTER 26

KAI

“Is that it?” I ask as Wilder slams the trunk shut. He’s been hard at work all evening, chopping Mel’s body into burnable pieces. The creepiest part is that he’s been sporting a crazy grin ever since. Now, it may have something to do with the fact that he and Emilia have finally resolved their issues, but I’m pretty certain a large part of it has to do with the pleasure he gained from dismembering Mel.

“Yup, that’s all of her.”

“It’s disturbing seeing you this happy.”

The lunatic just grins at me. “What’s not to be happy about? It’s a great day.”

I wouldn’t say I’m all that close with Wilder. He was part of Hawk and Hadley’s group when they invited me in, so he was around, but until Emilia, I never spent much time with him.

After the hell he’s put Emilia through and seeing the pleasure he has derived from today, I can now officially say that I think the guy is certifiable. Probably more similar to Mel than to me.

“So you’re done with all your crap?” I ask. “With Em.”

My question seems to catch him off guard, his smile wavering slightly. He doesn’t immediately answer, and instead of allowing myself to be intimidated by his piercing stare, I meet him head-on.

I don’t care if Mel is out of the picture; if he’s going to be a part of this, then I need to know that I can trust him. Trust him to put Emilia’s well-being first. Trust him to protect her. To inform me if something happens.

He must see that in my gaze as he eventually caves. “Yeah, I’m done. We talked. Well, she talked, and I finally listened.”

I roll my eyes. “If only you’d done that in the first place and saved us all months of listening to you torture her.”

He smirks. “Don’t lie, you got off on that shit.”

Matching his expression, I retort, “I got off on getting her off after you left her hanging.”

Eyes narrowing to slits, he scowls at me. “Did both of you just help yourselves to my leftovers?”

“Maybe that will teach you not to leave a girl high and dry.” As I step past him, I reach out and smack him across the back of the head. “And don’t talk about her like that. Emilia isn’t discarded food you didn’t want to eat.”

“I know that,” he snaps. “That’s not what I was saying.” Spinning, he closes the distance between us until he can jam his finger in my chest. “Emilia is a five-course meal filled with delicacies you’d sell your left nut to taste again.”

I take a step away from him and give a nod of acquiescence. “Glad we’re finally on the same page.”

“Everyone ready to go?” Hawk asks, appearing at the front door with Emilia behind him.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

He locks up the house, and the four of us pile into the car. It’s pitch black out, seeing as it’s the middle of the night, and we feel strangely cocooned in the safety of the car, despite the purpose of our drive.

I navigate us through the city and toward Hollow’s Park. None of us need to fill the silence as the miles tick by. When I pass the turnoff for the trail Emilia and I took that day, I reach across the center console and grasp her hand.

She turns to look at me, and I whisper for only her to hear, “Soon.”

She smiles, and even though we’re driving a dismembered body across the city and we’d all end up in a jail cell for the rest of our days if the cops decided to pull us over, it lights up her whole face.

It fills me with hope. Hope that I’ll witness more of those smiles. Hope that we will be free to pursue this chemistry

between us. Hope that the four of us can carve out a happy existence for ourselves that will survive the long haul.

Driving further down the road, I turn off down a narrow dirt track. If you didn't know to look for it, then you'd just drive on past without ever seeing it. I only know of its existence because I've spent many of my days off hiking in this terrain and know the area like the back of my hand. This part of the mountains is away from the popular tourist trails and is most likely only visited by locals, many of whom probably don't make a habit of coming out here now that the seasons have changed—or so I'm hoping.

Civilization is left far behind as we bump down the beaten path, with nothing but my headlights and the stars above to guide us. When we're far enough out, I pull the car to a stop, and everyone peers out the windows.

“Looks like as good a spot as any,” Hawk states before throwing open his door.

The rest of us follow him out. Hawk and Wilder move to the trunk, gathering supplies to get a fire started, while I check what direction the wind is blowing before leading Emilia away from the car in search of a suitable spot.

We walk about a quarter of a mile before I'm happy that we're far enough away from the car that unless the wind changes direction, no ash should cover it. We're all wrapped up in winter coats, but I still put my arms around her from behind while we wait for Hawk and Wilder to catch up.

She tilts her head back, looking up at the stars, and prompts me to do the same. Out here, away from the light pollution, hundreds of thousands of stars twinkle high above us.

“It's beautiful,” Emilia says, captivated by the universe's beauty. “It reminds me that there's a whole universe out there, and we're nothing more than a speck of dust. Here for a blink of time, and then gone.”

“It's one of the reasons I love coming out here so much. It helps give me some perspective. When I'm feeling lost or

bogged down, I just come out here and take in the scenery, look at the stars, and it helps me realize how inconsequential my worries are.”

Her gaze shifts to mine as she smiles. “I like that. I could do with that perspective sometimes too.”

Leaning down, I press a brief kiss to her forehead. “We can start coming out here together.”

“What are we whispering about?” Wilder says, interrupting us in too loud a voice for the moment.

Sighing, I tear my eyes away from Emilia’s, glaring at him before shifting my attention to Hawk as he gets the fire lit. Still gathered in my arms, Emilia reaches out to hold Wilder’s as the fire grows.

When the flames grow tall enough, I notice Wilder’s paler-than-usual complexion and rare nervousness as he stares at the fire. Guess that explains why he’s standing back here with us.

Hawk steps back to join us as the fire gathers energy, and the four of us watch the intensity rise. Occasionally Hawk or I add more wood, stoking it hotter until the flames reach up into the night sky, like fingers trying to touch the stars.

“That’s probably hot enough now?” Hawk asks when we’ve been standing out here, freezing our asses off for half an hour. He looks at Wilder and me for confirmation.

“Yeah?” I respond, unsure.

It’s not like any of us have any experience burning body parts.

“I’ll go grab some... parts,” Wilder says before taking off to the car.

“You’re still okay with doing this?” Hawk asks, scrutinizing Emilia closely.

“It’s not like we have any other choice, but to answer your question, yes, I’m surprisingly okay with this. I’m actually having fun.” She laughs, as though she just heard herself and realized how fucked up that probably sounded, but I get it. Sure, we’re out here to commit a heinous crime, but it’s not

like the bitch doesn't deserve it, and other than the fact that my nose has started to freeze, I could happily sit out here all night under the stars with the fire going.

"I'm having fun, too," I assure her, squeezing her tighter.

"It's the first time all four of us have done something together," Hawk says as we watch Wilder approach, his arms loaded.

"Is it weird that *this* is our first group activity?" Emilia asks.

"Nah, I don't think so. It feels almost fitting. A new beginning for all of us—together." Emilia grins at Hawk, linking her hand with his.

"Agreed," I chime in.

The three of us fall silent as Wilder reaches the fire, dropping his stack of *parts* on the ground before tossing the first one into the fire.

"Is he okay being that close?" Emilia asks, worried.

"He'll be fine. He wants to do this," Hawk assures.

Wilder throws another couple of pieces on before moving to join us, and even though we're a fair distance away from the fire, it's not long until the smell of burning flesh reaches us.

"Ugh, that's not pleasant," Emilia gripes, her hand coming up to cover her mouth and nose. Agreeing, I zip my coat up enough to cover the bottom half of my face.

Wilder throws the last remaining pieces into the flames, and we all agree to wait for the fire to do its job from inside the warmth of the car. Emilia climbs into the backseat with Hawk and Wilder wedged in between them while I slide into the driver's seat. Turning the engine on, I blast the heat, and it's not long until it's warm and cozy.

"So, do we just wait for the fire to burn out?" Emilia asks, glancing at each of us.

"Yeah. Once the fire's extinguished, we need to gather up the bones. They won't burn," Wilder explains.

That's news to me. "What do we do with them then?"

"I brought a sledgehammer. I'll crush them up, and then we can bury them."

Well, I'm rather impressed at his level of research and ability to complete a job thoroughly. I'd always written Wilder off as one of those guys who wanted to go through life having fun but never really getting his act together. It still baffles me why he's even enrolled at Ridgeway. He's repeatedly made it clear that he doesn't care about his grades or graduating. So to hear that he didn't just go all stabby and get carried away with getting his revenge on Mel but actually put some thought and groundwork into it all is impressive.

"We still don't know who she really is," Emilia says with a frown.

"Does it matter?" Wilder asks.

"Why weren't you on tour with Death on a Matchstick?" Hawk asks. Emilia and Wilder share a quick glance before Emilia sighs and fills us all in on what happened that summer.

Wilder must have heard this story already, because he doesn't seem surprised at all, but Hawk is shocked. "Did my sister know?"

Emilia shakes her head. "No one knew. I basically pretended the summer didn't happen."

Something about what she said makes Hawk frown. "Not even Mel?"

Emilia's eyes widen. "I'd forgotten about that." Lips pulled down, she bites on her bottom lip as she tries to think. "No. I never mentioned that summer to her. Even with Mel, I barely talked about anything before Halston. I didn't want to have to explain anything about either of you, so it was easier to just not talk about it."

"So, how did she know you worked in the cafe?" Wilder asks.

Emilia's wide eyes flash to mine.

"That's possibly when she first saw you."

“So, not the first day on campus?” Emilia asks me.

I shrug a shoulder. “It’s impossible to know. I’ll continue trying to find out who she is, but you might just have to accept that we’ll never have all the answers.”

“She said something about me not knowing who she was,” Hawk pipes up. “As if she were someone I should know, or maybe I should know who her family is.” He shrugs, unsure. “She made it seem like we’d be in deep shit if we messed with her.”

Wilder scoffs. “Yeah, well, we sure showed her.”

“She could have been lying,” I surmise. “We know she’s adept at it, or she might have been taunting you with the fact that we don’t know anything about her.”

“Maybe,” Hawk says with a sigh. “Who the fuck knows.”

“And who the fuck cares,” Wilder tacks on before turning to stare out the window. “She’s gone now. She’s not worth another moment’s thought.”

“Agreed,” Emilia chimes in.

“Agreed,” Hawk and I both say at the same time, before the four of us burst out laughing.

“I guess since we’re all here,” Wilder begins, trailing off as his gaze latches on Emilia’s. She reaches out to take his hand while angling the upper half of her body toward Hawk. Her tense posture puts me on edge, and I have a distinct feeling whatever Wilder’s about to confess isn’t good.

His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows, and he shifts his focus to Hawk. “It was me who stole Compton’s file from your computer. I’m the one responsible for his death.”

The silence that fills the car is so thick that it sticks in my throat, threatening to suffocate me. How? Why? For what purpose? I’m completely taken aback by Wilder’s admission. I would never have thought he would betray Hawk like that.

Peering at Emilia, I can tell that she already knew this tidbit of information. A niggling voice at the back of my head wonders how long she’s known for, but I quickly snuff it out.

Emilia's got integrity. If she knew, she would have told us. He must have only confessed to her today—probably when they finally made up—and that's why he's telling Hawk and me now.

Shifting my attention back to Hawk, his face is unreadable, although the tense set of his jaw and the narrowing of his eyes give away his anger. "Why?" he hisses out. I notice Emilia's hand on his thigh, giving it a squeeze in a silent gesture to keep his head. Yeah, I'm not sure how long that's going to last. Perhaps spilling his secrets in the small confines of a car wasn't the best place to do it. Wilder may find his body burning right alongside Mel's before the night is over.

If it's possible, Wilder manages to shock me even further as he confesses everything he's been up to this year—the fucked up secret society he joined so that he could get into his family's good graces and meet them, the shit they asked him to do for the trials, the creepy as fuck vow they made him recite, and the meeting with his grandfather last week.

By the time he's finished, all three of us are staring at him, slack-jawed. Even Emilia, so I'm guessing she didn't know about any of that.

"That's... a lot." Emilia finally says after the car had descended into another round of tense silence.

Hawk looks like he's about to explode. His face is thunderous, his hands clenched in tight fists, and if I had to guess, I'd say he's about 0.5 seconds away from launching himself at Wilder and choking him out. The only reason he hasn't is that he appreciates how important family is and can understand why Wilder would want to get to know his—even if they do sound like deranged lunatics with their heads lodged up their own asses.

"I don't even know what to say to you right now," Hawk grinds out.

Wilder nods, but the devastation is plain to read on his face. I know how much Hawk, Hadley, and the others mean to him. *They* are his family, which is why it surprises me that he would betray Hawk for people he doesn't even know.

When my eyes drift to Emilia, and I see guilt shining in her eyes, it clicks. He only did it because she showed up, and Wilder probably felt like he was losing his family when she and Hawk got together.

Fuck. This is one chaotic mess.

“Let’s put a pin in this for now,” I suggest. “We can talk it all out tomorrow, and maybe look into who these King’s Elite are.”

Emilia nods, latching onto that escape for right now. “That sounds like an excellent idea.” Holding both Hawk and Wilder’s hands in each of her own, she gives them both a squeeze. “We’ll figure it all out. Besides, there are only a few months left of college, and then you’ll be done with it all.”

Wilder doesn’t look as though he believes that to be true, but when she looks up at him, he smiles at her, hiding his doubts. It’s odd to see him looking at her with anything other than hatred, but the way Emilia’s smile broadens beneath his soft gaze, I can tell she’s happy with this new arrangement. She truly seems to believe he’s turned over a new leaf. I, however, will be keeping a close eye on him for the foreseeable future, just to be sure.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Emilia says again, meeting each of our gazes. Her eyes land on Hawk last. “We have each other, and nothing can come between us. If we can defeat Mel, then we can overcome anything else that comes our way.”

Forcing a smile, Hawk leans in to press his lips to hers.

“You’re right, Little Sparrow. Nothing will stand in our way.”

EPILOGUE

THE KING

Slamming my hand down on the desk, I bellow, “Where the hell was he?”

“I-I don’t know, Sir. He hasn’t been seen since yesterday afternoon, and his phone has been switched off.”

“This is unacceptable. You assured me you had him in line.”

“I do. I did.” He grimaces. “T-there’s this girl.”

I snarl. *Of course, there’s a fucking girl.*

“Who is she? What do you know about her?”

“Not much. She’s a substitute teacher. Just started this year.”

“Well, get rid of her. This has been years in the making, and I won’t let some slut of a teacher ruin it for me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The pathetic weasel scurries from the room, leaving me alone to stew in my anger. I pour myself a measure of twenty-five-year-old whiskey and drop in two ice cubes before taking a seat by the fire. I lose myself in my thoughts as I stare into the dancing flames. I was convinced I had him reeled in. He was right on the cusp, ready to give himself over to me. Years of manipulation, moving pieces around the chess board, cashing in favors, all so I could mold him into what I needed him to be and then place him within reach.

When he took his vows, it should have guaranteed his commitment to us—to me—but apparently, I was wrong.

The cubes of ice clink together as my hand clenches around the tumbler. I should have known he’d be a wild card. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, after all. However, I don’t tolerate disloyalty, and if this cunt is blinding him to his true purpose, then I’ll simply remove the distraction.

A slow grin crawls across my face, my anger finally subsiding as a thought dawns. Perhaps she is the final twig that needs to be snapped. The last thread to Wilder's humanity. Cut that, and he will give himself over to the darkness. He'll become everything I've been shaping him to be. He'll finally be mine—to manipulate, to use, to exploit.

With him at my disposal, I'll bring in a new era. No more pulling strings behind the scenes. I'll stand front and center, and just like the King's Elite, this country will bow before me.

Novus ordo seclorum

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And I can't forget my husband for always being a solid source of support and for putting up with me all these years.

And finally, to all of you who have picked up this book and made it this far. My readers are so important to me, and I hope you are enjoying reading about Emilia's journey as much as I'm enjoying writing it.

Love, Rachel xXx

ALSO BY R.A. SMYTH

Crescentwood Series

A dark, high school bully reverse harem with a stalker and gang element.

Pacific Prep Series

A dark, academy bully reverse harem with a taboo relationship.

Black Creek Series

A rival gang-mafia reverse harem with a vigilante FMC. Contains MM.

The Ruthless Boys of Ridgeway.

A college, friends-enemies-lovers, second chance reverse harem with a stalker and secret society elements.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

R.A. Smyth is best known for writing contemporary dark romance filled with unexpected twists, mystery, and plenty of steam. Rachel lives in the UK with her husband and two golden retrievers, and when she's not busy thinking up crazy cliffhangers to drive her readers insane, she enjoys inflicting the same torture on herself by reading incomplete series.

She has always been an avid reader, starting from the Harry Potter books as a kid. It's an interest that has grown into an obsession over the years and becoming an author has been a secret lifelong dream of hers.



BROKEN TRUST (PACIFIC
PREP #1)

CHAPTER 1

Hadley

I readjust my duffel bag on my shoulder while I take in the towering wrought iron gates in front of me. Who knew a set of gates could hold such significance? Most of the students here probably don't bat an eye as they pass through them, the cold iron representing nothing more than the start of a new school year. To someone like me, it symbolizes so much more. The opportunity for a private education. The chance at a new life, a future. Freedom.

Taking in the school crest branded on the gates, my eyes hover over the three words the school has chosen to embody everything they stand for.

Felicitatem. Patientiam Operatur. Dignitate.

Prosperity. Perseverance. Prestige.

No, I sure as hell do not speak Latin, but I do know how to do a google search. Only one of those words resonates with me. Perseverance. I've endured my fair share of shit so far in this reasonably short life. As for prosperity and prestige? Well, only the wealthy can afford that shit, and I'm sure as fuck not that.

Ignoring the judgmental eyes from the passing chauffeur-driven cars as they make their way through the gates and up the tree-lined drive, I trail after them, taking in the campus as I walk.

The campus is vast and fancy as hell, with its grandeur buildings, perfectly manicured lawns and trimmed hedges. I

can just about make out a football field and tennis courts, as well as some sort of sports center in the distance.

I walk past a large building that is somehow even more prestigious looking than the others. It's got more steps leading up to it than any normal building needs, meaning it towers above me, with its large glass windows and dramatic floor-to-ceiling columns.

Above the large wooden doors, a plaque reads 'Davenport Hall'. Well, whoever the Davenports are, they have more money than they clearly know what to do with. What school needs a hall like that? I bet it's only used a few times a year. *What a waste!*

Strolling on, I watch as cars stop in front of another building up ahead of me. Students climb out, most of them with their parents, looking around warily before following their parents up the steps—freshmen kids, I bet. As they disappear through the front entrance, uniformed men rush over to the cars and start lifting luggage out of their trunk, placing them on carts and, I'm assuming, taking them off to the students' accommodations.

Older students who have their own car—which appears to be everyone over the age of sixteen—climb out of their vehicles in the parking lot opposite the main building, greeting their friends, laughing and joking with one another as they slowly make their way toward the school. They all look perfectly presented in their school uniforms, not a crease to be seen or a hair out of place. With their white teeth, flawless makeup, and expensive haircuts, they look like models or celebrities, all of them oozing the sort of confidence that only comes with having money.

I cast a quick glance down the front of my white shirt. The school had it delivered to me for today, but, despite it being exactly the same as everyone else's, it doesn't hug my slim frame or accentuate my boobs like it does on other girls.

I run my hand over the shirt, smoothing it out, pulling on the ends of my green, gray, and black tartan mini-skirt so it sits a little lower. I'm not used to wearing short skirts and it feels

like a light breeze would give everyone a firsthand view of my basic white underwear.

Approaching the main school building, I follow behind a group of girls, only half listening to them as they catch up, ranting and raving about their summer vacations spent in far off exotic countries, while my eyes roam over the building.

It goes without saying that this is yet another fancy as fuck, ostentatious structure that resembles what I imagine a 17th century manor house would look like. I have to crane my neck back to see all the way up to the roof, the three stories looming over me. It's built in the same fashion as the hall I just walked past, composed of dark stone and large windows.

Walking between two large columns, I ascend the stairs, making my way through the large entryway into the open foyer beyond. The atrium is the depth of the building, with large glass doors, providing an unobstructed view of an enormous courtyard beyond, lined with shrubs. There's a massive marble fountain in the center, with picnic tables and benches placed around the open space.

Glancing around, I notice there are corridors branching to the left and right, and a staircase leading up to the second floor, with a balcony overlooking the atrium. Students and their parents are dispersed around the room, saying their final goodbyes, while others move out to the courtyard where I can see others milling around.

"Finally," a tall girl with perfectly curled white-blonde hair, way too much makeup, and sky high heels snaps, striding toward me, her hips swaying seductively, her tartan skirt swishing against her thighs with every step she takes. "It's about time you showed up."

"Me?" I ask, looking behind me in case she's talking to someone else.

"Yes. You. Who else would I be talking to?"

She casts her eyes over my appearance, her lips pursing in disapproval as she takes in my curly blonde hair that's impossible to tame and face clear of makeup. Self-consciously,

I run my hand through the mass of curls in a vain attempt to flatten them a bit. I don't get a chance to say anything, not that I have any idea what to say to this weirdo who's snapping at me, when her eyes fall on my worn duffel bag.

"What is that?" Her nose scrunches up in disgust as she waves her hand toward my bag, her dislike of my non-designer, tattered duffel written all over her face.

"Uh, my bag?"

"Why do you have it here? You're supposed to leave all of your belongings with your driver for the bellboys to collect."

Drivers? Bellboys? What fresh hell have I subjected myself to?!

Seeing my look of utter confusion, she rolls her eyes, sighing in exasperation before glancing around the hall.

"You," she calls out, waving over some guy in a uniform as he passes by us, heading out toward the parked cars. He looks like he should be working in a high-end hotel, not a high school.

Barely sparing him a glance, she gestures toward my duffel bag, "Take this...thing," she sneers, "to, uh"—she glances down at a page in her hand—"Hadley's room."

The guy goes to grab my bag and my hand instinctively tightens around the strap, preventing him from taking it from me. We remain in a standoff for a few seconds, him giving me a weird-ass look before I relax enough to let go, letting him walk away with every single thing I own in this world.

Turning back to the annoying girl in front of me, eyeing her up with a critical gaze, I ask, "Eh, who are you? How do you know my name?"

Her lips pinch together in disapproval as she looks down at me. At five-foot-six, I wouldn't call myself short, but between her height and the six inches her heels give her, she's a good head taller than me.

"I'm Bianca," she responds snootily, with all the arrogance of a rich brat as she tosses her hair over her shoulder. She acts

like I should already know who she is. Placing her hands on her hips, she sighs. “I’m supposed to show you around today.”

Well, that statement was overflowing with enthusiasm. I’m guessing she wasn’t given much of a choice in the matter, and I can’t help wondering how she ended up stuck with the job. I have to bite my tongue to stop myself from letting her know I’m just as thrilled to have her as a guide as she is. “I take it you got a welcome pack? With a map?” she snarks, not really sounding like she cares one way or the other.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Good, then I’m sure you can work it out for yourself.” She raises an eyebrow at me. “You are here on an academic scholarship after all.”

Barely holding back my retort, I roll my eyes at her as soon as she turns her back to me, taking off across the foyer, not bothering to check if I’m following her. I am, of course—I don’t see I have a choice. She forced me to hand over my bag, with my map and everything in it, to that guy. And I have no clue where the accommodation building is, or what I’m even supposed to be doing this morning.

“This is the main building, where most of your classes will be. There’s an east and a west wing,” Bianca explains, pointing to her right to indicate the East wing before pointing out the West wing on our left. I’m honestly surprised she’s bothering to tell me anything, but I guess she feels like she needs to at least explain the basics. “The east wing is where all the science, math, and computer classes take place; while the art classes, English, history, languages, all that sort of stuff, is in the west wing. The music department has its own building, and anything drama related is held in the auditorium.”

She pulls open the door into the courtyard, the buzz of other students chatting and calling out to one another reverberating around us, drowning out the noise of water trickling from the fountain. By now, the quad is filled with students from all years. A few of them hang back, lazing on picnic tables and laughing with friends, but most of them have joined the throng of students slowly making their way into

what I'm guessing is the auditorium—a large stone building on the far side of the quad.

Bianca and I join the back of the crowd, slowly inching our way onward. I can feel the press of bodies around me, people jostling me as they join the crowd behind us. The more they push and shove, my heart rate starts to spike and my chest feels tight. *Why the fuck can people not respect personal boundaries. The quad is fucking huge, you don't need to be shoving against me.* I scowl at the girl behind me as her shoulder knocks into me for the third time, my dark glare succeeding in getting her to back up a step as Bianca scans the crowd, oblivious to the students around us as she looks for someone in particular, most likely her friends. She doesn't spare me a glance when she says, "Stay in your lane, and you'll get through the year without any problems."

"My lane?" I question, confused about what she means.

She sighs, and I don't miss the snooty bitch rolling her eyes at me before penetrating me with a deadpan stare. "There's a you, an us, and a them," she explains, as though it's obvious and she shouldn't have to clarify any of this for me.

"A what?" I shake my head slightly, not understanding her at all.

"You," she sneers derisively, her voice making it clear she thinks she's so much fucking better than I am. She roams her eyes over my less-than-perfect uniform, scowling, before dropping her gaze to my combat boots, her nose wrinkling in disgust. *Yeah, okay, the boots aren't exactly school attire, but they're sturdy, and I could do some damage to her with them if she doesn't stop looking at me like I'm shit on the bottom of her designer pumps.* "The scholarship students."

Ah, yes. Us common muck scholarship students that are unfortunate enough not to be born into a life of luxury, and have to actually work for everything in life.

"Us refers to every other student. The ones that actually pay to attend this school," she says pointedly, once again emphasizing—in case it wasn't already obvious—that we're lesser because we don't have buckets of cash to spend on an

education. I doubt she would be open to seeing my point of view if I tried to explain that hard work and dedication make me just as entitled to be here as her precious money does.

“And them?” I ask curiously, wondering who she could possibly be referring to. She’s just lumped the entire school into the ‘you’ and ‘us’ categories...so who is left?

Her eyes flash up to something behind me. “Them,” she repeats absently, her tone breathy, her eyes glazing over at whatever has caught her attention.

Spinning around, I see exactly what has her so distracted. Or more specifically, *who*. Striding through the crowd, who part for them like they are gods, are four of the most striking guys I’ve ever seen. I’m not sure if the whole courtyard hushes, or if I just become so focused on them that everything around me fades into the background, but all I can hear is the blood pounding in my ears as I soak up the mouthwatering sight in front of me.

All four of them confidently strut through the crowd, looking like one of those sexy-as-hell TikTok videos. All they need to do is remove their tops and flex their muscles, except I’m pretty sure more than a few girls around me will faint. I can’t even be sure I wouldn’t be one of them.

I focus on the guy to the far left, who’s tall and lean, perfectly put together in his gray slacks, white shirt, and forest green blazer as he strides across the courtyard. Every step is filled with arrogant confidence. My eyes roam over his face, noting his short, blond haircut, narrowed eyes, and pinched lips. Everything about him screams ‘stay the fuck out of my way’.

My gaze sweeps to the guy beside him. He’s built like a fucking tank. At over six and a half feet tall and built like an MMA fighter, he’s easily double the size of every other student around us. Similarly to the first guy, everything about him screams unapproachable. His features look like stone, with his sharp, angular jaw, high cheekbones, and icy glare. A few loose strands of his dark brown hair fall forward into his eye, somehow only adding to the fierce image he’s working. I

can feel my mouth going dry as I drink him in, before I quickly glance away.

The third guy is the complete opposite of the first two. His black tie hangs loosely around his neck, the top button of his shirt undone. His blazer is nowhere to be seen, and where the first two guys don't bother to pay attention to anyone around them, he constantly nods his head at guys as they call out 'hellos', sending flirty looks to the girls. He's got a tall, lean, swimmer's body, built for speed and agility, and short yet stylish blond hair.

He catches me staring at him as he lifts his hand, running his fingers through his short strands. His eyes drop down my body, a salacious grin spreading across his face as he lifts his eyes back up to my face, giving me a dirty wink that I'd love to say doesn't affect me, but damn, I'm as much of a sucker for that wink as every other girl around here seems to be.

Embarrassed by the sudden racing of my heart and the heat in my cheeks, I quickly move on to the final guy in the group. Again, he's completely different from the first three. I can immediately tell he's the shy, quiet, studious one. He's got dark floppy hair that's hiding his face from my view, but as he flicks it out of the way, I can see that he's got a broad jaw and sharp features. He's wearing thick black-rimmed glasses, giving him, combined with his meticulous uniform, the overall appearance of a nerd. But on his lean, slightly muscular frame, it looks super hot, like Superman before he puts on his cape.

His hand flattens over his shirt, ironing out invisible creases before his head snaps up, his intense gaze meeting mine, having apparently sensed me watching him. Unlike the flirty look the last guy gave me, his is filled with uninterest, his lips pinching together in what looks like disapproval. *What an ass. We can't all have perfectly ironed uniforms and look like gods.*

The noise filters back in around me as the four of them disappear into the auditorium. With them no longer occupying my every thought, I realize I've been standing in the middle of the courtyard gaping at them. *Talk about embarrassing.*

Glancing out of the corner of my eye to see if Bianca, or anyone else, noticed my moment of distraction, I find her still drooling after the guys. At least I wasn't the only one who lost some common sense in their presence.

“Who are they?”

Damn girl, get your inner slut under control, I mentally berate myself when my voice comes out all husky.

Bianca must pick up on it too as she spins toward me, her eyes narrowing. “Out of your league,” she snaps before storming off, following them into the auditorium.

I cast a quick glance around me and see that most of the students have also disappeared. Not knowing what else to do, I quickly scramble after Bianca, trying not to lose her in the sea of students.

Passing through the large double doors into the hall, it takes a second for my eyes to adjust after the brightness of the California sun outside, but after a few quick blinks, the room comes into focus. There's a large, empty stage at the front of the room, with a podium off to one side. The rest of the space is taken up with wooden pews that are slowly filling with students. *You'd think such a fancy school could afford something comfier than wooden seats.*

Spotting Bianca making her way toward a crowd of rich girls, I follow her. I don't particularly want to sit with her and her friends, but it's not like I know anyone else. I'm just about to slide inconspicuously into the last seat in the pew when Bianca glances up, noticing me.

“No. You don't sit with us,” she snarks, her outburst garnering the attention of her friends, who all sneer at me. *They don't even fucking know me.* “Scholarship students sit at the front,” she snootily states, pointing to the front of the hall.

Whatever. Like I said, I didn't want to sit with them anyway. I guess our ‘tour’ is officially over.

“Oh, and Henry,” she calls after me, deliberately butchering my name. I turn around to glare at her, my teeth gritted. She's wearing a sickly sweet smile, which morphs into

a superior smirk when she sees she has my attention. “Welcome to Pac Prep.”

Rolling my eyes at her cattiness, I ignore the other students whispering around me as I storm down the aisle, slipping into an empty seat in the first pew as the headmaster steps up to the podium.

He casts his eyes over the room, taking his time to survey us, before leaning into the microphone. “Quiet down, students.” His booming voice echoes out across the large space, everyone quickly settling into a hush, focused on the front of the room. “For all of our new students, I am Mr. Phister, your headmaster.”

Mr. Phister? For real? Glancing around me, I notice a few other students holding back a laugh.

“Welcome to the start of a new school year! I’m sure all of our returning students will make our new pupils feel welcome and help them adjust to life here at Pacific Preparatory.”

Hmm, I somehow doubt that based on the less than stellar welcome I got this morning.

“You must be a new scholarship student,” the girl beside me leans over and whispers, pulling my attention from the drivel coming out of the headmaster’s mouth.

“That obvious?” I ask rhetorically, taking in the girl beside me. She’s got short, black hair pulled back in a functional ponytail, and an innocent-looking face—or maybe it just looks that way because she doesn’t have layer upon layer of makeup caking her face, like every other teenage girl around here.

It suddenly makes sense how Bianca knew I was a scholarship student. We just don’t look like the other kids at Pacific Prep. Our hair doesn’t have that same glow, and our skin doesn’t look like it’s been moisturized to within an inch of its life.

I guess that’s what happens when you don’t have unlimited money to spend on haircare and beauty products.

The girl smiles back at me, showing me her slightly crooked teeth. It’s a real, genuine smile, nothing like the fake,

cosmetically enhanced ones Bianca's friends wore.

"Are you a senior?" she whispers.

"Yeah."

"I'm Emilia. Stick with me, girl. I'll show you the ropes."

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