



ROYAL

BRUTAL BOYS OF SIN BOOK ONE

LEILA JAMES

ROYAL

BRUTAL BOYS OF SIN

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PLAYLIST

- “Easy to Love” Bryce Savage**
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- “Adrenaline” Zero 9:36**
- “Demons” Jacob Lee**
- “No More Hurt’ Longlost**
- “King” Niykee Heaton**
- “Run” Nicole Scherzinger**
- “La Di Da” Vukovi**
- “Ride for Me” Daniel Di Angelo**
- “Like That” Bea Miller**
- “Bad Intentions” Niykee Heaton, Migos, OG Parker**

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

ROYAL IS THE FIRST BOOK IN THE BRUTAL BOYS OF SIN trilogy, centering around three men and one woman. MMFM

WARNING: This trilogy contains dark elements, graphic content, and situations that some readers may be particularly sensitive to. If you have triggers or are remotely unsure, please check out the Content Warnings on my website, available through the link below.

[CONTENT WARNINGS](#)

WELCOME TO SIN

SECOND CHANCES COME AND GO;
THIS ONE'S YOURS TO KEEP OR THROW.
ACCEPT THE TERMS BUT DON'T FORGET,
THE PRICE FOR FREEDOM
IS NOW YOUR DEBT.

Σ IN
KEEPER

ONE

ECHO

THE TAU ZETA ETA HOUSE IS ALIVE WITH SORORITY GIRLS getting ready for the annual welcome bonfire. My stomach gurgles uncomfortably as I lie on my bed, alternately reading and watching the action passing by my doorway.

Drawing in an unsteady breath, I worry the skin at the corner of my lip. It's not that it doesn't sound like fun—and I'm definitely not going to be the obnoxious girl who refuses to participate—it's simply that the last bonfire I attended ended in the complete and total destruction of my life as I knew it. The girl who loved parties and dancing and hanging out with friends disappeared that night and never came back.

I promised myself this year would be different—I'd come to Kingston University, accept the legacy bid to my mother's sorority, like my older sister, Kara, had encouraged me to do, and at least try to find the fun-loving girl I'd left behind. It's hard, though, especially when all I want to do is vomit at the prospect of hanging around a manufactured blaze, picking at a wound I swore I'd never open again.

For all intents and purposes, I'm ready. Shorts. Cute black babydoll tank top with spaghetti straps and lace accents. I glance down at myself, inspecting my outfit thoroughly. The sheer material floats around my midriff in a way that might allow for some air flow so I don't overheat while outside. Ever since I arrived, it's been so hot and sticky. Then again, it *is* Georgia. Definitely not in Connecticut anymore. With a sigh, I continue ticking through my pre-bonfire prep in my head. Makeup done—smoky eye shadow, mascara, and a little lip

gloss. I kick my feet. Strappy sandals. Check. I'm ready for whatever the night brings. Physically, anyway.

Looking up from my book when the noise of pounding feet distracts me, I shake my head with an amused smile. A half-dressed girl in a fuchsia bra with panties to match races down the hall, tits bouncing, as she shouts to anyone who will listen that she is in dire need of a white tank top. Her shrill voice cuts through the music playing in my earbuds. I still don't know who half these girls are. There are like twenty of us living here this year.

I'm unsure if sorority life is going to be the right choice for me, but it's far too early to pick up and move out. And I *do* want to be here. I think this would have made my mother happy ... and not much I've done in the last few years has succeeded in doing that.

“Echo! What are you doing? Are you ready?”

My eyes flick up to find Freya, my appointed big sister, staring at me in bewilderment. “Oh. Um.” Feeling like a huge loser, I let out a ragged exhale, suddenly unsure if I can do this after all. “I'm actually not feeling so well.” It's not entirely a lie. No matter how hard I try to convince myself that I'm fine, my stomach continues to flip and twist at the thought of going out tonight.

“Girl, it's a rite of passage to attend. It's a big deal! *Everyone* will be there. Every single frat up and down Greek Row will be represented.”

I clench my teeth together. “How long has this tradition been going on?”

“Only since KU opened. Yes, your mother would have participated.” Freya's well aware of my legacy status. It's why I was offered the last room in the house even though I'm a freshman and have only just accepted the offer they'd extended me to join. I didn't even have to wait to do the whole rush week thing, simply because of who my mother is. *Was*.

Shit. Guilt seeps into my chest, and my heart squeezes. “Yeah, okay. I'll go.”



WITHIN THIRTY MINUTES of arriving at the bonfire, I've lost Freya in the crowd. It sucks because I'm stuck listening to inane conversations swirling around me, and I can't help but feel like I stick out like a sore thumb—the girl who is two seconds away from hitting the panic button and having a breakdown of epic proportions.

Unease continues to flow through me, an indescribable sense of foreboding that's been with me ever since we got here. I'd thought it was my past experience with bonfires that's making me feel on edge, but ...

Staring past the flames, my body jerks, and before it mentally clicks in my head why, every cell in my body screams at me to run. I'm not one to argue with gut instinct, so I take off like a shot from the flickering glow and head for the protection of the trees, my heart frantically slamming inside my chest.

That can't have been who I thought it was.

But the fury on his face has fear gripping me in its sharp claws as I cut through the dark foliage. With every stride, the leaves and twigs beneath my feet crackle and snap, but the noise I'm making as I crash through the undergrowth has nothing on the rhythmic pounding through my eardrums. My breath quickens, labored and ragged, as I search for a place to hide from the heavy footfalls sounding steady and sure behind me. I'm so overwhelmed that a sob scrapes up from my throat, trying to escape.

I've heard it's impossible to outrun the past, but I'm sure as fuck gonna try.

There's no rhyme or reason to the path I'm taking, all I'm capable of is fleeing as fast as my sandaled feet will carry me. No matter that tree branches poke and slap at my face and

arms. No matter that my shoes aren't made for running. No matter that I'm getting more and more lost with every second that passes.

I clutch at my chest and blink into the dark, coming to a complete standstill. Tears streak down my cheeks, and nervous sweat trickles uncomfortably down my back. Turning one way, then the other, I listen hard but can't hear anything over the frantic beating of my heart. This can't be happening. I tuck my hair behind my ears as I chew on my lip and wait.

Twigs snap. Something rustles off to my left. In response, a violent tremor rushes through me from head to toe. *No, no, no.* I haven't seen him in several years, but I've never forgotten him. Too much transpired between us for that.

But I thought I saw him. Whoever it was had been wearing jeans with holes ripped at the thighs and a lightweight dark-colored hoodie, which hid half his face. Six two. Athletic build. Quite a bit more muscular than I remember. *Shit.* What the hell am I doing? That description fits any number of the other freaking frat boys in attendance at the welcome bonfire.

He's in *prison*. There's no fucking way *he's* at Kingston University. Panic claws its way up my throat. *You're letting your imagination run away with you again. There's no one in the woods with you, just like there hasn't been someone watching you sleep in your new fucking room at the sorority house.*

I jerk myself from those thoughts, choosing instead to listen for anything—anyone—that shouldn't be out here with me. Wetting my dry, trembling lips with a tentative swipe of my tongue, I hold very still. For several long seconds, leaves rustle in the slight breeze and crickets chirp. Standard night sounds. Nothing weird. Had I mistaken the thrumming of my own heart for the pounding footsteps of someone chasing me? I lift both hands to my head, pressing the heels to either side and rubbing in circles.

Just when I think all is well and I'm chiding myself for being overdramatic, there's a distinct crunch of dry leaves on my left. Ice-cold fear snakes down my spine. A few moments

later, from my right, there's a whisper. My head snaps from one side to other, my eyes widening in the dark as my breath comes faster and faster. I knew I wasn't crazy. *Please, no.*

Without wasting another second, I push myself into motion again, hoping to escape whatever is in these woods with me. I'm so wiggled out I tear through the dark at a perfectly ridiculous speed. I don't even put up my hands to shield my face from the branches in my way. The pain they cause only serves to heighten my awareness, because this time, I'm certain. Someone is chasing me.

I dart behind a particularly large tree and back myself up to it. My fingers dig into the bark on either side of my thighs, like somehow holding on tight is going to stop what's happening. The hammering sensation in my chest is unbearable as I scan the deep darkness of the forest. My mind spirals, tormented by a familiar feeling in my gut.

A silhouette appears about twenty feet from me, and my eyes lock on whoever it is. *Please, no.* Panic races through me even though the figure hasn't moved since they made their presence known. And that's when I spot another person watching me on my left. This one's about the same distance away, and, like the first, doesn't make any move toward me, simply stands there. Ominous. Dangerous. Fucking terrifying.

A sudden rush of anger fills me. "Are you trying to scare me? Is that the point of this?" I let out a shuddered breath that I hope they can't hear. The pounding of my heart intensifies, but I'm not going to let these two assholes get the upper hand here. They don't get to mess with me like this. I raise my voice, infusing it with all the strength I can muster. "I don't care if this is some sick fucking frat thing you're required to do. I don't want any part of it."

And with that, I push away from the tree and begin to run back in the direction I came from. My breath tears painfully from my lungs, and my leg muscles burn as I push myself to move faster. I can't hear the crackle of the bonfire or the whoops of drunken laughter anymore. *Shit.* My eyes rapidly track through the dark void of trees surrounding me. I'm lost.

A moment later, out of nowhere, muscular arms band around my midsection, tight like a vice, lifting me straight off my feet. *What the fuck?* “Get your hands off me!” I frantically shriek and twist in his arms, digging at his skin through his hoodie as I struggle to free myself.

“Is that any way to greet the person you gifted your virgin pussy to, princess?”

TWO

ECHO

THE DEEP TONE OF VOICE MAKES ME JERK TO A STOP, THE words deadly soft as they drift into the humid night air. Hot breath caresses my ear, sending tingles through my body from head to toe. *No*. I jerk in his arms, thrashing. Because now I know I was right to be unnerved earlier. *He's been watching me all evening*. "Let me go, Royal."

"So, you do remember me." His voice is huskier than it was when I knew him. Deeper. Different. This is not the boy I had once lost myself in so completely. This is a man, a criminal—and a prison-hardened one at that.

My throat feels thick as I try to think of what to say, but I come up with nothing, my mind reeling as memories of the night that changed everything crash through my head.

"Don't worry. We'll have plenty of time to talk, princess, you and me." He easily handles my flailing body, like I'm no more than a tantruming toddler. "You should be terrified of the things I'm capable of. You *never* should have fucking come here. And you won't tell a goddamn soul about this little encounter. Understood?"

Before I can take in everything he's said, footsteps sound near us, followed by the distinct sound of people deep in conversation. Royal's lips brush my cheek. "Go. Maybe they'll save you." He chuckles darkly. "But I suggest you fucking *run*."

Then all at once, his arms are no longer around me, and I stumble, falling to my knees on the hard forest floor amid the

leaves and debris. It's so jarring, I'm dumbstruck for several seconds before I realize I'm free. With my heart hammering in my throat, I scramble to my feet and hurry blindly toward the voices.

As I move, I realize I must have sent myself in circles earlier. *Fuck*. So stupid. Swiping my fingers under my eyes, I give a furtive glance over my shoulder, but don't see Royal behind me. He hasn't followed. Thank fuck.

Where are the people we heard a minute ago? My head swings back around, and my ears are met with a whole different array of sounds. A soft moan. A grunt. The rustle of clothing. And a moment later, I stumble upon a couple making out against a tree. My eyes practically bug out of my head, as it's two guys. Both muscular as hell, one is dark and tattooed, while the other has wavy blond hair. They're mauling each other with lips and teeth and tongues. And hands. Fuck, their hands are everywhere. I swallow hard, momentarily stunned by my discovery.

The make-out session is scorching hot, and I feel badly for interrupting them because they're obviously out here in the woods to get some privacy. As is my luck, a twig chooses that moment to snap beneath my foot, and the breath whooshes from my lungs. Embarrassed to think they'll assume I was peeping on them, I freeze in place, my eyes going even wider than before. This was not on my agenda for the evening, no more than running into—and away from—a nightmare from my past.

My heart thumps hard behind my rib cage as the dark-haired dude releases the front of the other guy's shirt and turns toward the noise I've made. As my eyes land on the second of the two men—the one who'd been pinned against the tree—my mouth drops open. He's almost too pretty. Just a really fucking attractive man.

The first guy's hands go to his hips as he assesses me, and the blond steps up beside him, cocking his head to the side. Even in the dark, I can tell they're breathing heavily, and their lips are swollen from the kisses I'd interrupted. I hold my

hands up in front of me, palms out as I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I was trying to find my way—”

I begin to sidestep, ready to edge around them and flee, when the good-looking blond smiles, his brow furrowing a bit. He raises a hand to stop me. “Wait. Are you okay?” His eyes travel my body from head to toe, and I can only imagine what he’s seeing. I’m disheveled at best. Sweaty. Bits of dirt and leaves in my hair. Mud on my knees and covered in scratches. Red-faced. Hands shaking. And one hundred percent freaked out by my encounter with Royal.

I glance hesitantly over my shoulder. “Um”—my head swivels back to find two pairs of eyes watching me, one a sinful brown, the other a brilliant blue—“I’m fine.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” He couldn’t be closer to the truth if he tried. The chiseled cut of the dark-haired guy’s jaw catches my attention as the muscle twitches and jumps. He studies me curiously, almost as if he doesn’t believe a fucking word I’m saying.

I grimace, rubbing my hands over my face. “I really need to get back to my sorority house.” But I’ve lost track of Freya. I peek past the guys, beyond the trees, realizing after all my running, I’d come very close to escaping the woods.

Chaos ensues around the bonfire, the night’s festivities still in full swing. *Shit*. I sigh deeply, shaking my head.

The blond nudges his friend. “You good to drive?” The blue-eyed god pauses to turn toward me with a raised brow. “Sorry, I’m Benneti, and this is Emory. You’re ...?” They’re both looking at me in a kind way that makes me feel mostly safe in their presence. Even so, I don’t trust easily anymore, especially now that it’s just me and my siblings. This is not the time to dwell on that, though.

Trying not to bring attention to the tracks of tears drying on my face, I swipe my fingers over my cheeks, making it look like I’m brushing my hair out of my eyes. “Echo. My name is Echo. I should find my big sister. She brought me.” *Ugh*. My hands begin to shake. I’m never going to fucking find her in this mayhem. And what if Royal comes after me

again? My knees quake at the thought, and I press my lips together, eyeing the two of them. I suck in a breath, then words rush out of my mouth before I have a chance to consider what I'm saying. "You know what? I actually would appreciate a ride. It's been a weird night. I-I just want to get home."

Emory narrows his eyes, but nods, then jerks his head toward a grass field where a bunch of vehicles are parked. "My truck is that way."

Benneti gestures that I should follow as they both turn to exit the woods. He waits for me, and once I catch up, he casually slings an arm around my shoulders. I hope he didn't notice the way I flinched at his touch. He clears his throat, gazing down at me. "It'll be far easier to grab a ride with us than to find your friend in the pandemonium over there. Where do you live?"

"TZE."

"Oh." His brows draw together ever so slightly. "Cool. I was guessing you were on campus. You're a freshman, right?"

"Yeah." I give them both a tentative smile, then tuck my shaking hands behind my back. "But my mom was a TZE sister here at KU. I guess the whole legacy thing means I have some advantages. I'm, um, not super clear how it all works."

"Legacy. Interesting." I have no idea why my sorority status is intriguing to Emory, but after a brief few seconds, he nods and gestures in the direction of the makeshift lot. "TZE it is. We'll have you home in two minutes."

I chew my lip as we get to his truck, hoping this isn't the dumbest thing I've ever done. If it goes to shit, I'll blame Royal. He's been the source of my heartache and turmoil for years. This is simply one more thing to add to his mountain of misdeeds.

The short journey back to TZE is filled with awkward silence, and I'm thankful when Emory stops his truck outside my sorority house. I throw the heavy door open, then scurry out of the back seat. "Thank you," I say with a small smile.

Benneti waves from the passenger side with a quick wink. “Anytime, Calamity Jane.”

My brow furrows at the awkward nickname as I back up onto the curb. The rumble of Emory’s badass truck pulling away practically shakes the ground. Casting one last furtive glance over my shoulder at the two guys who brought me home, I will them away, my body vibrating with the need to be alone. As soon as they take off down the road, I bolt inside TZE and slam the door shut behind me. Leaning against it, I work hard to calm my breathing while my heart jumps around inside my chest.

What would I have done if they hadn’t brought me back to the sorority house? Scream?

But they *did* deliver me directly home. I’m fine. No cause for alarm. *You’re letting Royal’s threatening, devious behavior infect your thoughts about everything else, including the actions of those two perfectly helpful frat boys.*

Royal. One singular thought of him, and I fall deep inside the memory of racing through the dark woods—only this time I know who is chasing me. I blink hard to bring myself out of it, but I can’t force my limbs to move from where the door is holding me up.

I hadn’t even gotten to look him in the face, but in my head, his pale-green eyes had been cold and harsh. Hateful. Still so unbelievably angry with me, even though we both know the events that took place on the night in question are all on him. He made a choice, and I did what I had to do to survive the aftermath while my life turned to shit around me.

My stomach lurches violently, giving me incentive to push away from the door and run toward the hallway on the left. My bedroom is the second to last one, and the dirt-covered sandals on my feet slap against the hardwood floor with every step. I come to a skidding halt in front of the door, fumbling for the key in my pocket. The reality of everything that’s transpired tonight slams into me like a ton of bricks, making it harder and harder to breathe.

Finally, my shaking hand fits the key into the lock, and I'm able to gain entry. Gasping for breath, I secure the door behind me, then rush into the bathroom and lock that door, too. My hands are shaking so badly, I clasp them together as I cross to the sink. Standing in front of the mirror, my eyes widen. My face is pale as fuck, with the exception of two distinct marks—one scratch on the side of my forehead near my hairline and another on my cheek. Both slashes of red are very obvious, a result of the tree branches that'd slapped me in the face during my mad scramble through the woods.

Once upon a time, I thought if I ever saw Royal again maybe we'd be able to speak to each other. Or that we could at least be civil. Tonight's catastrophic reunion showed me just how wrong I'd been. Why is he even here? Had he been released from prison only to fucking follow me straight here to mess with me?

His words come rushing back. *You never should have fucking come here.* I swallow hard as my hands grip the counter tightly. *You should be terrified of the things I'm capable of.* A tremor runs through me, and my throat goes dry at the reminder of the threats. He'd told me to *run*.

In the mirror's reflection, there's movement ... that isn't me. I go perfectly still, eyes trained on the window over my shoulder. The bushes outside rustle. The wind maybe? But it hadn't been windy earlier this evening ... in fact, it's hot and muggy, making my clothes stick to me. There hasn't been a breeze of any kind at all tonight.

My attention darts down to the bottom right, where eyes pinned on me blink. Pure terror pumps undiluted through my veins. I spin to face the window, my heart rate ramping up again. Shaking, I stare through the glass panes, hoping my mind isn't playing tricks on me. *What the actual fuck.* I left Connecticut for a lot of reasons, but the big one had been that I no longer felt safe in my own home.

But there's nothing outside except the black, black night and what I think is a hydrangea bush. Drawing in a breath, I remain still. I haven't gone completely crazy. I didn't conjure eyes watching me out of fucking nowhere. Rubbing my hands

over my face, I whisper, “No.” The word comes out pathetic and unsure, and, hearing that vulnerability in my voice, frustration, anger, and panic flash through me. It all collides, sending my head into utter chaos.

With a soul-ripping sob, I lash out, knocking makeup and other assorted products from where they’d been carefully laid out on the counter. My hands find my head like I’m physically attempting to keep myself from shattering, and unbidden tears splash down my cheeks as I lose that fight. Shaking violently, I drop to the ground and curl into a ball of despair. *Why is this happening to me? Was that him out there? Had he somehow followed me after I’d stumbled onto Benneti and Emory?*

I have no idea how long I allow myself the meltdown that ensues, but my heart tightens in my chest as I relive over and over the unsettled feeling that sent me dashing into the woods in the first place. A scene from the past tumbles disjointedly through my head, making me sick and dizzy. He’s here somewhere. I know it. But it feels different than the first time. This isn’t some high school game. The hunter is hungry, and I’m the prey.

THREE

ROYAL

WHAT THE FUCK IS THE HOLDUP? EXASPERATED, I GLANCE AT my phone again, wondering for the tenth time how it's taking this long for Beckham and Wilder to return from their mission.

At the bonfire earlier, it'd taken me a hot fucking minute after I'd spotted Echo to throw together a rudimentary plan, something meant to scare her. Make her go the fuck away ... yet also draw her in and confuse the shit out of her. I've had a long time for all my anger to seep into the marrow of my bones and turn my feelings toward her into twisted knots of hate.

I tuck the phone in my pocket before lacing my hands over my head. *Fuckin' breathe.* Back and forth, I stride across the spacious kitchen. I make a ridiculous attempt at distracting myself by studying the current state of the most-used room in the house. Its dark granite counters are immaculate at the moment, but they won't be for long. Soon, this entire place will be a fucking mess, littered with beer bottles, cans, and red Solo cups until the housekeeping staff that comes in once a week gets a chance to clean it up again.

A low rumble creeps up from inside my chest as my mind curls in on itself and points me right back in the direction of everything Echo. I thought she was in goddamn Connecticut. How the hell did she end up at Kingston University? Blowing out a hard breath, I shake my head, aware that I probably look like I'm having some sort of mental crisis with the way I'm pacing the floor. And maybe I fucking am. Wouldn't be the first time I flipped out and went completely off the deep end. It

just takes the wrong person saying the right thing and it's all over. In prison, crazed behavior like that results in a one-way ticket to solitary.

The kitchen I'm pacing is situated at the very back of our house, and I find my eyes traveling out the floor-to-ceiling windows, across the grassy back lawn, and to the trees beyond. That's where I had her in my clutches. That's where I spoke directly to her for the first time since the night everything went to shit. I sigh. *Don't torture yourself like this.* She's not even out there anymore. At least, I assume Wilder and Beckham took care of that detail for me. Took her back to the bonfire or something.

Thank fuck most of the other SIN brothers are still out of the house and will be for a good long while. It's one of those nights when it's expected that we party until dawn, but my night of fun had blown up in my fucking face the second she showed herself at the joint fraternity and sorority event.

My boys *get* my aggravation and upset, though. Enough of it, anyway. I've shared limited information about why I was in prison. They know *she's* responsible for putting me there. Honestly, that's more than they fuckin' need to know.

I never figured I'd be part of a fraternity, but SIN is a good fit for me. I met Wilder and Beckham when I first arrived, and we just ... clicked. Against all odds, I've found myself capable of trusting them—as much as I trust anyone these days, that is. I hope Echo's appearance doesn't fuck all that up.

With an irritated growl born of *years* of waiting for this chance at her, I reach back and grab the collar of my T-shirt with one hand and pull it over my head. Like a sledgehammer, the scent of whatever fragrance she was wearing this evening slams into me. It's sweet and practically edible, and nearly knocks me for a goddamn loop as it reminds me of the chase—every time she let me catch her and *especially* the times she put up a fight. I clutch the garment in my hands and exhale harshly, expelling her from my system before swiping it over my sweat-coated chest. I stuff a handful of it into my back pocket, leaving the rest to dangle. I'll deal with it later. Might have to burn it now that it smells like her.

Talk about a shock, seeing Echo at the bonfire like that. It'd been like a lightning strike, a bolt of electricity slamming violently through my system. My lungs had seized up, or maybe I'd been holding my goddamn breath, I don't know. I'd fuckin' blinked a ton, because I thought the smoke was messing with my eyes, but soon it became apparent they weren't playing tricks on me. It was definitely *her* standing on the other side of the fucking flames.

The hateful girl who'd ruined my life with only a few words.

I roughly rub my hand over the stubble coming in on my jaw, thinking about how she'd remained in front of the wicked lick of the fire, completely still, while pretending she wasn't quietly observing everything happening around her. She hadn't had a fuckin' clue I was studying her from head to toe. Every inch of creamy skin exposed, every lush curve, every breath she took. The fullness of her cheeks isn't prominent anymore, but those petal-soft lips are still one of her best features. She's petite, but that body ... Jesus. *Fuck*. She's filled out since the last time I had my hands on her.

There'd been no mistaking her for anyone else, even with the dyed-red hair. Hidden behind the raging inferno, I fought with my desire to lash out right there in front of everyone. But no. That'd be too easy. When our eyes locked, an uncontrollable fury had whipped through my body. It'd forced me out of the fuckin' stupor I'd been in and pushed me into action.

The muscle in my jaw twitches angrily. I'm gonna make her pay for everything. Every goddamn ounce of pain and anguish I've endured and every indignity I suffered. My list of grievances is long. I want vengeance for every stab she made to my heart as she carved it, still beating, from my chest. I was ready to turn my world upside down for her, but that bitch decided I wasn't worthy. She lit the fuse, then walked away when my life imploded.

The breath I draw in is ragged. Disgruntled. And the plan—for now—is to make Echo sorry she ever showed her face here.

Wilder walks in, nose buried in his phone, his brow furrowing hard as he stares at whatever is on the screen. I can tell from the stony expression on his face that it's not good. He's off in his own angry world. Sometimes he gets like this. I highly doubt it has anything to do with Echo. His hair-trigger temper is legendary, though, so who knows what has set him off this time.

I glance past him, looking for Beckham, but there's no one there. Frustrated—and not scared of his fury at all—I growl, “Where the fuck is Beck?”

Blowing out a sharp breath, Wilder stops mid stride, his dark gaze darting to mine as he wets his lips. “What?” And then without waiting for me to repeat myself, he looks back down at his phone to hammer his thumbs on the screen. Once done, he shuts off the phone and tosses it onto the counter next to me before shooting me a perturbed grimace like I just pissed in his Cheerios for target practice.

I raise a brow and let my eye slide from him to the phone.

“It's nothing.” He shrugs with a sigh, narrowing his eyes as he finally takes a good look at me. “Why do you look like you ate a box of nails and are ready to fuckin' spit 'em at me?”

Exasperated, I shake my head and press my palms to the countertop, leaning forward. I wait a beat. When he stares at me as if I've gone insane, I can't control my outburst. “What the fuck? Beckham. I asked where he is. And what happened with Echo? Was she freaking the fuck out? Did she say anything? Why are you acting like I didn't just have a fucked-up encounter with the girl who cost me the last several years of my life?”

He gives me a flinty-eyed stare. “Slow the fuck down. First, I'm not Beckham's fucking keeper. He said he needed a second. He's out on the porch, I think.” His jaw works to the side as he peers at me from under hooded eyes. “And second, what went on in the woods?”

“I hope I scared the fuck out of her,” I growl.

At my hard words, Wilder's brows shoot up and he throws back his head, silent maniacal laughter bouncing his shoulders. When he finally gains control of himself, I could swear he's about to jump out of his own skin with how curious he is to know what went down out there tonight between me and Echo. But still, he waits, because he knows better than to act like it's his business. Thank fuck he's still willing to go along with whatever I need. It's that brotherhood bond working in my favor. This oddly twisted bunch of brothers had tortured the fuck out of me when I pledged this frat last year. And now, despite my late start, I'm one of them. Wilder smirks before he asks, "Well, did you at least let her know it was you?"

I give a slow nod. "Oh, I did for sure. Reminded her who she turned her back on. Who she screwed over and let rot in a cell, as if—" My eyes slam shut and my jaw tenses. *As if she had no feelings involved.* People are always harping on about women and their consent; well, no one gave a shit about mine. I'm sick of her playing the victim.

When I open my eyes again, his arms are crossed over his broad chest. "I get it. She did you wrong. We fuckin' heard you loud and clear at the bonfire." He shakes his head, gripping the back of his neck with both hands while he assesses me. "Well, if it helps, she seemed pretty messed up. Physically and mentally. I don't think seeing you again will be on her highlight reel from the first week of life here at Kingston U."

"I should fucking hope not." I throw my arms out from the sides, adrenaline rushing through me again. Every time I think for even a second about how she handled things, it makes my blood boil.

Wilder's head bobs slowly, as if he's considering my reaction, trying to figure me the fuck out, but yeah. I keep my shit pretty close to the vest. He gets a funny smirk on his face. "Um. Did you know—"

He doesn't get to finish his question because a second later, the sound of the front door opening and closing reaches us, then the sure stride of footsteps approach. Beckham comes

to an abrupt halt when he sees the two of us with our eyes pinned on him.

He looks from me to Wilder and back, then runs a hand through his tousled hair. Jerking a thumb over his shoulder in the direction he came from, he offers, “Should I leave? It feels ... way too intense in here.”

My body vibrates with irritation, and I huff out a breath. Wilder fucking snorts like he thinks this is funny, which, in turn, has me practically growling. “I’d like to know what you made of what happened in the woods.”

Beckham’s gaze darts to Wilder’s. In response, Wilder gives him the slowest of blinks and a slight shake of his head. There’s a devious crinkle at the corners of Beckham’s eyes that makes me think he’s messing with Wilder somehow, but I have no clue what the fuck that’s about.

“I know what you two need,” Beckham mutters before he proceeds to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of vodka from the freezer. He also snatches up three shot glasses we’ve taken to leaving in there so they’re always chilled. He comes back to the counter, lines up the tiny glasses, and pours the shots. Pushing one across the granite to each of us, he picks up the third. I work my jaw to the side. I shouldn’t. But *fuck it*. Eyeing each other, we down them together. He pours again. We drink again. This goes on for three rounds before he looks shrewdly at us. “Everyone chilled the fuck out now?”

I nod. “I told you all to help me corral her, which you did, so thanks for that. But did you get her to trust you?” I kinda thought that might help somehow. To have her fucking trust at least one of us to see how we could use that to my advantage. To ultimately make her know the hurt and betrayal I have.

Beckham’s tongue slowly swipes over his lower lip. “I think you could say we accomplished that. Wouldn’t you, Wilder? She trusts the two of us. Had no problem getting into his truck with us.”

“Seriously?” My interest is piqued.

Rolling his eyes at Beckham, Wilder affirms with clear annoyance, “Yeah. We fucking asked her if she was okay and offered her a ride home.”

“Which she wasn’t going to take at first. But I made it happen.” Beckham winks. “I have some pretty slick moves when I feel like busting them out.”

I huff out a laugh. “Yep. You’re a regular Casanova, Beck.” I pour myself one last shot, then let my eyes flick up to meet theirs, questioning whether anyone else is in for another while I ponder what my next steps are.

Beckham gestures that I should fill his, then Wilder flicks his glass with his finger, sending it careening across the granite until it collides with mine. That must have fucking hurt his finger, but he doesn’t seem to give two shits. I throw the liquor back, my brain moving a mile a minute.

“I get heated thinking about the fact that she’s here. Could you both kinda ... watch her?”

“Tail her as if we’re your own personal private investigators?” Wilder’s chest bounces with silent laughter again.

“I want to know what she’s up to, and I can’t fucking stand to look at her, so you two jokers are my best bet.” I lean forward, resting my forearms on the counter. “Just watch her until I can figure out how I want to play this.”

Beckham rubs a hand over his face, but slowly nods. “Yeah.” He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans and shrugs. “Okay.”

“Do you want us to mess with her a bit?” Wilder’s dark brow goes up into a high arch as he skims his thumb over his lower lip. He’s got a look in his eye that makes me both curious and terrified about what he has in mind.

“Mess with her, scare her, follow her. But whatever you do, don’t let her know it’s you. Know what I mean? We’ve got her trusting you. Don’t wanna fuck that up. Yet. Don’t let her catch you breaking into her dorm room or anything.”

They pause, glancing at each other before Beckham raises a finger. “That can’t possibly happen.”

“I’m just saying don’t get caught.” I narrow my eyes when he begins to shake his head.

“No, I mean we won’t get caught breaking into her dorm because she doesn’t live in one of the dorms.” From the tone of his voice, I get the distinct feeling he doesn’t want to explicitly tell me what the hell he’s referring to.

Goose bumps rise on my skin, and I stare into his light-colored eyes. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

When Beckham doesn’t answer right away, I shift to Wilder, who catches his lip between his teeth and slowly lets them scrape over the tender skin. “She’s a freshman, so we were surprised to discover Echo wasn’t at that bonfire as anyone’s guest tonight.” He shrugs. “I dropped her off at TZE, man. Her mother was a sorority sister. She’s right fucking next door.” He points firmly in the direction of the sorority house in question.

Three thunderous beats of my heart go by before I fully comprehend what Wilder said. Furious heat lances through me, and I blink at them, wondering if it’s possible that I fell in the woods earlier, hit my head, and have been dreaming everything that came after. I’ll probably wake up in a hospital bed with a nasty concussion to find these two fuckers hovering over me.

This turn of events sends anger ripping through me like a blast from a cannon. Without any foresight as to what I’m about to do, I lift my hand and knock my shot glass clear off the island countertop as a wretched sound tears from my throat. The glass hits the floor and smashes into a million shards. My eyes crash shut, and embarrassment floods through me. One aggravated breath after another makes my chest jerk hard as I struggle to draw in air.

In my peripheral vision, Wilder and Beckham watch me cautiously. I fuckin’ hate losing it in front of them. Feeling irrational at best, I whirl around and punch the door to the pantry so hard, I swear I hear a crack and a splintering of

wood. It feels good. The splitting of skin. The swift burst of pain. The sticky warm blood. The injury to my knuckles gives me something else to focus on, but before I can go again, rough hands pull at my biceps and the hollow sound of voices, seemingly somewhere off in the distance, ring in my ears. I thrash in their viselike hold, a fuming frenzy blooming in my chest that won't dissipate, no matter what they do. It hurts.

“Save it for the ring, Royal.” Wilder's harsh words grate past my ear. “Or better yet”—he shoves me away from him and slaps his own cheek, taunting me—“fuckin' bring it. You know I'm always game.”

Crazy fucker. As I swing at Wilder, all I can think is that Echo Madden deserves this. She got to live her life while mine was on hold. Lives were lost. Now I'm going to take away any sense of safety, security, and fucking peace she has and set fire to her life like she torched mine.

FOUR

ECHO

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I'VE BEEN LYING ON THE COLD TILES of the bathroom floor, letting fear win, but I have to snap out of it. It should come as no surprise to me that life would reach out and slap me around a little more, because that's all it's done since I was about fifteen.

Picking myself up, I draw in a breath and walk over to make sure no one is outside before I undress. *Why the hell are there no blinds on any of the windows in this house?* This was actually one of the first questions I'd asked when I moved in, especially since my room is on the first floor. The answer from the sorority president, Cassie, had been something about old architecture and how they weren't allowed to drill holes into the window encasements. I'd set aside my concerns at the time, but now, it makes me really fucking nervous.

Cautiously, I blink into the dark, as if it will help me see better, but there's nothing and no one out there. That should ease my fears, but all it does is make me question my sanity. My eyes flick to the shower. What I really need right now is to let the water beat down on me and wash away the sweat clinging to my skin.

Once I'm in the stall, I'm no longer visible from the window, which is the only thing keeping me from totally wiggling out as I close my eyes to get my hair wet.

Washing myself from head to toe of the dirty grime and sweat coating my skin, I use the utmost care on my scuffed-up knees and the palms of my hands.

I can't believe Royal's actually here. For way too many minutes after I'm done cleaning up, I stand with my hands over my face, full-on shaking. What the hell am I going to do?

When I finally feel like I can face the world again, I grab a towel from the rack and dry off, picking up speed as I begin to hear the sounds of my new sorority sisters returning to the house. I cover my mouth. Freya. *Shit*. I should have sent her a text.

It's not twenty seconds later that there's a swift knock on my door. Cringing, I hurry through my bedroom to answer it. No sooner have I twisted the knob than the door springs open, and Freya barrels in like a fast-moving thunderstorm. Good thing I'm wrapped securely in a towel, I guess, because Freya grasps me by the upper arms and tugs me into a fierce hug.

"There you are!" Freya clicks her teeth against her tongue as she pulls back to stare into my eyes with her dark ones. "I was looking for you all over. I turned around at one point, and you weren't with me. I'm so sorry." To her credit, she looks stricken, like she failed me.

I give her a little shrug, holding up my hands palms out. "It's okay. I just kinda hung out right at the bonfire, people watched, met a few people, and then grabbed a ride home. I'm sorry, I meant to text you, but the shower was calling my name."

Just then, Freya's gaze locks on my scraped-up hands before it travels over the rest of me, noting my reddened knees. As her eyes dart to my face, her lips part. "Are you okay? You're all banged up."

I glance down, sticking one leg out to see how bad it looks. *Pretty bad*. I guess I was too worked up in the shower to notice. I can't believe I didn't feel the sting. My teeth clench. "Yeah, um. I needed a breather from all the fun and went for a walk in the woods. I tripped over a root or something. Landed right on my hands and knees." Freya's got this look on her face like she's going to ask more questions, so I jokingly say, "It's going to be a cute look, for sure, right?"

“I have a dress that might hit below the knee if you want to borrow it for tomorrow.” One brow quirks up as she waits for me to accept the offer.

“Oh, no. Really. I—” I grit my teeth. The more I protest, the worse it’ll be. “Okay. I appreciate it.”

“Great, I’ll make sure you have it before the meeting tomorrow.”

“Meeting?” I give her a quizzical stare.

Freya covers her mouth with her hands. “Oops. Yes! Oh my gosh, I keep forgetting that you don’t know everything. You’re a unique case, Echo. Usually, freshmen aren’t involved in any of this. Anyway.” She gives me a cute little grin and flips her long, dark hair over her shoulder. “House meeting. The rush events start tomorrow, and we have other things on the agenda, too. I’m excited. You’re going to love it here. Promise.”



TO MY SURPRISE, when I come downstairs the next morning, Cassie is standing at the glossy gray kitchen island but no one else is in sight. She pops a few pills in her mouth and follows them up with a swallow from her pink water bottle.

When she catches sight of me, she sets it down with a clunk and cocks her head at me. “You okay?” She frowns, her eyes scanning my face. The makeup I’d applied in an attempt to hide the redness hadn’t given me nearly enough coverage. Thank goodness for the sundress Freya loaned me. As promised, I’d found it hanging outside my door first thing this morning. She’s a bit taller than I am, so it hides the scrapes on my knees perfectly.

“Oh, uh.” I wince. “Last night during the bonfire, I went for a walk in the woods to get away from all the smoke and

got myself a little lost. I might've panicked a bit before I found my way back to all the fun. Walked right into a few branches." I shoot her what I hope is a playful look with a shrug as I touch a few fingers to the scratch on my cheek. "Oops."

Her mouth forms an O, eyes roaming over my face again. "I'm so sorry you got lost out there. I get it, though—about the smoke, I mean. I actually came back early. It gives me a headache. And the music. And the shouting." She laughs. "I think I heard you come in. Did you enjoy the event otherwise?"

"Oh. Yeah. It was great, thanks." Great until the one person I've feared ever seeing again showed up. Pushing that aside, I busy myself getting a mug down out of the cabinet and pouring myself a cup of coffee. As I'm doctoring it with cream and sugar, the house slowly comes to life. I settle at the island on a stool with my drink and one by one, or in pairs, the other girls leisurely make their way into the kitchen. I recognize most of them on sight now, but I'm still foggy on names.

As I take a sip of coffee, a curly red-haired girl that I'd met when I first arrived, Christine, blows through the kitchen. "Who has painkillers? I'm dying." She stops across the island from me, groaning as she leans against the counter, and holds her head up with her hands as if it might roll off if she were to let go.

Following right behind her is the girl who'd been running around in the fuchsia undergarments last night. She sidles up beside Christine and shakes a bottle of what appears to be ibuprofen in front of her nose. With a mischievous glare Christine huffs out a laugh. "Samantha, you're a lifesaver. But if you keep shaking those pills like that, I'm gonna strangle you."

Setting the bottle down and shooting a wink over her shoulder, Samantha turns to pull a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator, along with a bottle of water for her grumpy friend. Judging by their interaction, I think they must be reasonably close. Sisterlike, even. Which I suppose makes sense since they belong to a sisterhood. Too fucking weird. I keep having to remind myself that I'm now part of it, too.

There's a flurry of chatter and activity as more people enter the kitchen, then a few moments later, Cassie claps her hands to get our attention. "Okay, ladies. If you want to grab drinks and breakfast, we'll make our way to the back patio. I think we could all use some fresh air after last night's misadventures. I'm sure half of you would like to crawl back into bed as quickly as possible, so let's get moving. We've got a full agenda this morning." She chuckles at the round of cheerful groans that tumble from the entire sisterhood as they gather their things and shuffle out the wide, glass-paned patio doors.

Without a clue about what happens at the meetings or what I'm supposed to be doing, I give a nervous look around for Freya, hoping she can clue me in. My eyes wander over one sister after another, but her blue-black hair and dark, penetrating eyes aren't anywhere to be found, so I slip off the stool and follow the crowd of sleepy, dehydrated women out to the meeting on my own.

Feeling awkward, I stand off to the side for a few minutes, waiting while everyone gets settled. I end up taking a seat on an ottoman, making sure Freya's borrowed dress covers my knees, and wait for the meeting to begin.

A blue-eyed blonde hurries over to where Cassie is standing and anxiously whispers loud enough for anyone to hear, "The drawing for Sunday's cage girl is on the agenda, right?"

"It is, actually. Whoever is chosen will probably have to miss the event at Lambda Mu that night. You know Mr. Pierce likes our girl to be there plenty early."

My brow furrows. Cage girl? Sounds ... interesting. So far, this house has proven to supply endless entertainment for me—especially when I consider the fact that my own mother must have participated in activities like the bonfire, these meetings, rush, and whatever else is still to come. Crossing my legs at the ankles, I draw in a deep breath, noting that Freya has yet to appear. It's all good. I don't need anyone, per se. In fact, some of the shit that life has thrown my way has made me very independent. For now, I'll drink in as much

information as I can about the other sisters and learn how to survive at TZE.

As if wondering about Freya has conjured her, she takes a place near Cassie, then scans the group until she finds me, giving me a quick wave. I smile back, patting the skirt of her dress and mouth, “Thank you.” Before Freya can respond with more than a slight nod, the meeting is called to order.

“Okay, first”—Cassie stretches her arm in my direction, and I feel a rush of embarrassment at being the center of attention—“everyone give a warm welcome to Echo Madden.” I can tell color is flooding my cheeks because they’ve become very warm. “Some of you may have seen Freya’s new little sister move in earlier this week. Her mother was a TZE sister back in the day, so of course, we’re extending her a legacy bid and the use of our spare room. So, play nice, and let’s help her get acclimated.”

I may be mistaken, but Cassie’s gaze lands on a couple girls in particular. If I’m remembering correctly, their names are Ireland and Savannah. I haven’t had any interaction with them at all thus far, so I don’t know what their deal is. Maybe they both just have resting-bitch faces.

Freya looks around the room. “Of course, everyone is going to treat my little sister with kindness and respect, the way we do all our sisters. She’s one of us now. She’ll officially have her pledge pin next week after rush, but she’s legacy. And there’s no arguing with that. Welcome, Echo. Did you have anything you’d like to say, or is there anything we should know about you?”

Any number of things rush through my mind, but I have no desire to share any of that with a roomful of people I don’t yet know, so I nod, ducking my head as I find all eyes on me. “Thanks. I’m, uh, happy to be here.” Wiping my hands on my sundress-covered thighs, I give them a sheepish grin. “My mom loved it here, so when I was contacted over the summer, I figured why not?” My stomach rolls uncomfortably in my abdomen as I notice some strained looks passing among the girls. Is there something going on that I don’t know about? *Is*

the legacy thing actually an issue? Inwardly cringing, I decide I'll ask Freya to explain later if I've missed something.

There's some shifting around from the sisterhood, nods of agreement, and a whole lot of whispering behind hands. It leaves me feeling decidedly nervous.

Fuck. I don't need something else to worry about on top of everything that happened last night.

I must have tuned out for a few moments because when I finally focus, Cassie has moved on with her agenda. There's discussion about a fundraiser that we'll be involved in with our brother frat. I'll have to ask her about that term because it seems redundant to me. A brother brotherhood. My forehead pinches.

Freya's eyes flash to mine, and seeing my confusion, she bobs her head reassuringly. I read the look on her face as *Don't worry, I've got you, boo.* Encouragement practically oozes from her before giving me a thumbs-up and turning back to Cassie. She appears to be excited to share with me how everything works. Having a brother frat is probably their way of getting the guys and girls to mingle, but I've been wrong before. I barely choke down the internal laughter at my own thoughts. *Mingle.* I sincerely doubt we're talking about cute mixers and whatnot like might have existed in the days my mother was here. More like ragers and hazing and who the hell knows what else. With alcohol consumption high and inhibitions low, there's probably not much going on that's brotherly or sisterly.

“Okay, one final thing on the agenda.” Cassie's eyes have a certain excited gleam to them as she begins speaking again. “And I know so many of you are waiting with bated breath for this ... It's time to select our cage girl for the first fight night of the year.”

That announcement has every single one of the girls in the house sitting up and paying way more attention than they have to any other topic. My eyes widen as I glance around the room at the excitement growing exponentially, threatening to overshadow everything else discussed earlier. Seems like

whatever this fight night thing is must be a pretty big fucking deal.

“Freya, want to give me a hand?”

Obviously understanding what Cassie needs from her, my big sister crosses over to where an ornate box sits on a glass-top table in front of one of the many couches the sisters of TZE are perched upon. She scoops it up, then returns to Cassie’s side with an eager grin, holding it before her. With an overdone flourish, which I’m beginning to recognize as typical of Freya, she lifts the hinged lid.

Squeals break out from all around me, there’s a smattering of enthusiastic clapping, then girls who are sitting close enough, grab each other’s hands for support. Some girl behind me—Jennifer, maybe? I think I recognize her voice—starts chanting under her breath, “Oh my god, oh please, oh god, please let it be me.”

I look around in wide-eyed amazement, taking in the fact that these girls are going completely apeshit over the chance for this opportunity—and I don’t even know what the hell it entails. Cage girl. The term is beginning to sound a bit freaky to me. Blowing out a careful breath, I bring my gaze back to Cassie and Freya who are drawing out the moment to near-excruciating levels. Finally, our president pulls a solitary slip of folded pink paper from the box.

“Drumroll, please!” She unfolds the paper and looks down at the name. One second goes by, then another. Blinking rapidly as her forehead pinches, she glances up, then scratches the side of her head with her free hand. “Um.”

It’s obvious from the way she’s working her jaw to the side that she’s struggling with how to go about revealing the name of the winner to the sisterhood. She chuckles a bit before letting us in on the joke. “Our lucky cage girl for this first fight is Echo.” Her eyes lock with mine as her words fall flat on the floor in front of her.

The room goes dead silent for a count of five frantic, stomach-churning beats of my heart.

Oh, shit. It's me. *I'm* the joke.

Frozen in place, all the voices seem like they're reflected sound waves, as if they're talking into a tunnel, so I'm literally hearing an echo—the same things over and over again. *What? Why her? How?* I blink hard as their upset washes over me.

“Um, that's weird.” I swallow as my eyes find the speaker's. I think her name is Allie. That's followed quickly by a whispered, “What the hell?” from an unknown source.

Another girl snorts with laughter. “I didn't see that coming, but this is a surefire way to liven up the house meeting.”

From the other side of the patio, Christine lets out a belly laugh. “If you mean spark some controversy and add a dash of good old-fashioned jealousy, then yeah. Totally.”

My heart is beating so loudly that it's drowning out half of what's being said, but from the expressions on these girls' faces, I'm unsure what's going to happen next. A couple of them, like Samantha and a sweet girl with glasses—Shani, I think her name is—seem genuinely happy for me. But the rest? I've made my way onto their shit list through no real fault or doing of my own.

Confusion flows through me, sticky and uncomfortable like the midmorning air, and my hand raises from my side of its own volition.

Cassie meets my shell-shocked gaze and gestures to me, though it's clear it pains her to drag this out. “Did you have a question, Echo?”

Before I can say a word, there's a snort from my right. “If she doesn't, I sure do. How is her name even in the box?” I turn my head to see a dark-haired girl with beautiful dark eyes glittering angrily at me.

Freya crosses her arms over her chest and gives a quick shake of her head. “Ireland, you heard me earlier, I know you did. I said she's one of us now.” Her gaze flicks to mine, and she gives me a half smile. If I had to guess, she's not terribly happy about the entire situation that's been dropped into her lap, seeing as how she's responsible for me. And she may even

be the slightest bit jealous herself but is still unwilling to allow these other chicks to interfere with what's already been decided.

“Some of us have been here for multiple years and have never had our names drawn.” Ireland rises to her feet and flings her arm in my general direction, as if she doesn't even care to look at me. “She walks in and hasn't even technically pledged yet”—her brows draw sharply together—“and she gets to attend one of the most coveted events of the year? Hang out with some of the SIN boys? It's bullshit.”

“They're so fucking hot,” Jennifer groans out under her breath before slapping a hand over her mouth.

“Ireland's right.” The blonde next to her with the super-long hair twists her lips, staring at me blankly. “Sorry, girl. We know you're new and all, but this is *so* not fair.”

“Her name was in the box. It was drawn. Those are the rules.” Cassie's eyes flash. “That's the end of it. It's not up for discussion.”

Ireland rolls her eyes and takes her seat again, but as she does, she nods toward me, a ruthless glint in her eyes. “What's up with your banged-up knees?”

Shit. I suck in a breath, and my eyes fix on hers. Freya's dress must have inched up over my knees, putting my scraped-up knees on display. Shocked giggles fill the air. “Whoa. Somebody did their dirty work last night.” That statement sets off another round of laughter as my face burns with embarrassment. That's not what fucking happened but telling them that the boy I once knew scared the shit out of me at the bonfire isn't an option at the moment. They don't get to know my business. I don't know them, and they sure as hell don't know me.

Savannah removes her hand from her mouth long enough to ask, “You just got to KU. Who are you already getting on your knees for, girlfriend?”

A voice with a heavy Southern drawl spills out, “Savannah! Oh my god, you didn't just ask her that.”

I'm too mortified to meet the eyes of whoever is actually supporting me. Just ... wow. These bitches have no idea who they are dealing with, but I'm positive this isn't the time to let my inner warrior out. Even so, my lips part, indignation swarming through me like a cloud of angry bees, and my jaw clenches hard in an effort to contain all the venom I'd like to spit right about now.

I'm on the verge of unleashing when Cassie slices her hand through the air. "We're done here. There's a Zeta Gamma party tonight, which is a rush event. Your attendance isn't mandatory, but I'd appreciate it if you made TZE look good by stopping by. Now, everyone except Freya and Echo, back inside please. A few of you should do some thinking about what it means to be part of the TZE sisterhood because this sort of catty behavior isn't going to fly with me in charge. I will kick your asses out so fast your sweet cheeks will skid across the pavement." From the steam that practically pours from her ears, I have to wonder which cheeks she's referring to, because *damn*. She's *pissed*.

We wait while the disgruntled sisterhood files into the house. Savannah shoots me one last dirty look over her shoulder as she and Ireland walk side by side. Rolling her eyes, she leans close to Ireland's ear and with a hiss that I can hear plainly, she says, "Should've been you or me. We've been waiting for-fucking-ever."

Ireland doesn't even bother to hide that they're talking about me. In fact, she all-out glares in my direction as she speaks in a clipped tone to her friend. "I know. Just once, I wanna show my tits off to those guys. See what happens afterward."

What. The. Hell. I glance down at my chest. My stomach flips over, wondering what is going to be expected of me. Have I been thrown to the lions?

Once the door clicks shut, I stand up, putting my hands on my hips. "When you say 'fight night'—what is that, exactly?" I exhale hard, waiting for an answer, and when it's not immediate, I continue. "I don't think I fully understand what's

happened. How much trouble is drawing my name for this going to cause?"

Freya moves to stand beside me, throwing an arm around my back and giving me a side hug. "It's going to cost us a metric fuck ton of bitchiness around here."

Cassie sucks in some air through her teeth. "But don't worry about that right now. Better to tell you what to expect so you can mentally prepare yourself."

I scrape my teeth over my bottom lip as Freya gives me a reassuring pat on the shoulder as she releases me to perch on the edge of the coffee table.

"So, technically"—Cassie's eyes travel to Freya, and the two of them exchange an odd look—"no one is supposed to know about the cage fights that happen on Sundays. Or, at least we aren't supposed to talk about them. But a lot of guys from the fraternities like to fight at these events. There are winnings for the victors—and we even get a cut, too—but for most of these guys, it's more about the status it gives them."

"So, this is about the honor and notoriety of being chosen for this particular duty." I nod, beginning to truly understand why the new girl getting to do this is a problem.

Cassie grins through clenched teeth at me. "And our brother frat—the SIN brothers?—they are something else. Different. The bad boys of campus. But totally ..."

"Hot. The word she's looking for is hot." Freya gives a dainty shrug. "I said what I said."

I exhale slowly. "So, it's not only about being seen, but being seen by these guys in particular."

"Yep," Cassie confirms. "You've got it. There are only so many fight nights per semester ... and we're limited to sending one girl to perform cage girl duties for each SIN fight."

Freya gives me a wickedly excited smile as she wriggles her brows. "And honey, this first coveted spot—it's all you."

FIVE

WILDER

THE BRUISE INFLICTED BY ROYAL LAST NIGHT IS NOW featured prominently on my smoothly shaven jaw. It fuckin' hurts like a bitch. I like it. I'm sick like that, though. Turning my head to inspect the damage, I rub an open palm over the purple-hued skin. That *fucker*.

I shake my head, laughing to myself. It's all good, though, anytime he wants to go a round or three, I'm down. Working my jaw to the side, I push away from where I'd been leaning forward against the sink and ease back to splash my face with water. A gasp of air erupts from my lungs as the biting cold of it snaps me out of my mind's wanderings. Time to go inspect the rest of the injuries that were inflicted. It's always something around here—it'd been a typical night for SIN. Maybe even a mild one, compared to some nights.

On the way to the staircase, I rap a few roughed-up knuckles on Beckham's door—relishing the pain—but there's no response, so the asshole is either still sleeping like a log or is downstairs scarfing down something for lunch, I guess, since it's nearing noon. But the man is like a human garbage can. It's completely normal to find him eating a huge bowl of pasta before leaving for class first thing in the morning or a bowl of ice cream at 2 a.m. Fucking weirdo. Anyway, my bet is on him being in bed still since we had a late night, but I'm not going into his room to find out.

Flashing back to last night, my mind fills with the heady sensation of his firm lips on my mouth, his slick tongue seeking. It'd all been part of the plan, Beckham's grand

fucking idea—of *course* it had been—to pretend to be a gay couple. We'd been tasked with distracting Echo from what'd just happened to her at Royal's hands, and I think we did a bang-up job. Pun intended.

I'd told him, the only way I'd go along with it is if I got to play the part of the aggressor, pushing him up against a tree. And yeah, I'd rubbed up on him, in control one minute and out of control the next. The friction between us had been lethal, and the hotter things got, the more prominent Beck's erection became between us, the bastard. Lust shot through my veins as my dick responded in kind. Right there, for anyone to see if they chose to come looking for us.

This thing between Beckham and me—I'm not ready for other people to know about it yet. My jaw tightens and twitches as I consider how I almost hadn't heard Echo's approach because I was so fucking into it. Beckham does something to me that I haven't quite come to terms with, especially now that we've veered into new territory.

Shaking myself free of my lingering confusion, I steer my thoughts back to Echo.

Last night, she'd been frightened. Chased. Captured. And oddly enough, released. I hadn't taken Royal for one to delay the inevitable, but perhaps he has a reason for drawing out her punishment. Because punishing her is, indeed, what he intends to do.

I blow out a harsh breath. If I were him, I'd probably have fucked her right there on the forest floor. Hot and dirty and rough. It does things to me, simply thinking about it. He hasn't told us the specifics of what led to this. And he doesn't have to, but he wants our help with it. I'll offer mine freely, especially if it means getting to play with Echo and make her scream. I'd like the chance to swat her fine ass. Feel it warm with each delicious strike of my hand. Chuckling internally, I shake my head. I'm getting ahead of myself.

We all have pasts here at SIN. Plenty of us don't want to breathe a word about what brought us here, and I'd wager every one of us has at least one secret we're hiding.

In any case, Royal's given us free rein to do what we want to Echo to help him get her the fuck out of here, and I intend to take him up on that offer. Just have to play my cards right and I'll have her eating out of "Emory's" hand in no time flat. Beckham might be the ladies' man, but I have charm oozing from my pores when I need it to. Women are attracted to a bad boy, and that's me to the fuckin' core. With all manner of unholy thoughts swirling through my head, I drop a hand to my dick, giving myself a slight readjustment.

Downstairs, I come to the conclusion that Beckham is still asleep, as he's nowhere to be found in the kitchen or dining room. I head for the den and discover Royal sprawled across one of the plush leather chairs in the corner. A coffee cup rests on his chest, held steady with one hand, as his gaze remains trained on his phone.

I dart forward, and as I swipe his phone from his hold, he grunts, his brow furrowing at my audacity. I laugh at the rage immediately bubbling from him as he shoots from his seat. "Calm the fuck down. I just wanted your attention." I chuck the phone back at him, and he catches it in midair right before it plows into his chin. The look he shoots at me is disgruntled at best. Too bad I didn't nail him. That would have been quite the entertaining start to our morning. Besides, splitting his chin wouldn't be so bad. He could use a scar on that pretty face of his.

I sit on the arm of the couch to his left and from under hooded eyes I study him. My lips twitch, but I can't hold my comment in. "I banged up your cheek pretty good, huh?"

He flips me the bird, rolling his green eyes to the ceiling.

At that moment, the front door opens and closes with a slam. I frown. Making that kind of noise before noon on a Saturday is really fuckin' annoying. And the only one of us who is ever out and about this early is Royal because he likes a midmorning run, even when hungover. So I have no clue who the fuck just walked into our house. Frowning, I wait a beat as there's some shuffling, then what sounds like luggage rolling on wheels down the hallway.

Who the fuck? Oh, wait. We were told there was some new guy—a transfer—who'd be showing up. I bet that's him. *Great.* Another damaged asshole to contend with. As if we don't already have our fair share here. With a sigh, I stand and turn around as our new frat brother approaches.

Royal moves so quickly I don't know what to make of it, but he blasts past me, a strangled roar ripping from his throat. In no time, he's tackled the dark-haired guy, sending the luggage toppling. It crashes into the back of a chair as the two of them grapple on the ground.

My mind clamors to understand what the fuck is happening. Fists are flying furiously, some punches landing, others missing. Both of them gasp and groan with the effort of it. Spit and blood fly everywhere, splattering furniture and the floor.

Way too fucking early in the morning for this bullshit.

Beckham, as well as Dan and Wyatt, approach, staring at the pair as they roll across the floor, muscles straining, both seeking dominance.

“Who the *fuck* let you out of your cage, Royal?” the guy grunts out.

“Shut the fuck up, you douche.” Royal rears back and slugs whoever the fuck this idiot is square in the jaw.

No one brings up his time in prison if they want to keep their head attached to their neck. When Royal first showed up on our doorstep last year, that idiot Jenkins had the nerve to say something. After the three nights he spent in the hospital, I'd say for certain he regretted going there with Royal. No one has been brave—or stupid—enough to say a word to him about it since.

Until now.

The moron growls in pain, breath heaving. “Gonna wreck another of my cars? Fucking asshole!” From his back, he takes a swing at Royal, but it's blocked.

Royal stares at him, the fury in his eyes not ebbing even a little. *Fucking hell.*

My eyes flick up to meet Beckham's. His blue gaze shifts from me, down to Royal, and back. He shrugs as if to say, *Who the hell is this, and do we let them keep at it?* Good fucking questions, both of them. If I knew the identity of this unfortunate soul, perhaps I'd have a better answer.

While we've been busy pondering the identity of the new guy, Royal has swiveled his position to the guy's side and has him pinned to the floor. I can tell by the crazed look in his eye that he means to inflict as much damage as he can, and he doesn't particularly care that he's taking some hits in the process. He might regret that later, but it's not my place to point that out. Besides, I'm rather enthralled by his tenacity at the moment.

Ramming his knee into the dude's rib cage, Royal makes his mystery opponent gasp for breath, and he grunts in pain with each vicious strike. There's a flurry of movement a moment later, and somehow Royal takes an elbow to the side of his head and a punch to his gut.

It amuses me to watch how riled up it makes Royal every time the guy actually lands a hit. With a deep sigh, I gesture to Beckham that he should help me pull Royal off before there is more blood spilled on the ceramic tile floor than we care to clean up.

Beckham purses his lips as he skirts around the flailing limbs of the fighters. I get on the other side, mouthing, "One, two, three" before we lunge in. We each grab Royal by an armpit and the waistband of his pants and haul him upward and back until he's on his knees between us, a good three feet from where the other jackass is scrambling away, blood streaming from his nose and a cut just under his right eyebrow.

"Let me go." Royal wrestles himself free of our grasp, resting his palms on his jean-covered thighs as his chest rises and falls rapidly. His jaw is locked up tight as he glares.

Enough is enough. I don't care to be in the dark another damn minute. "Who the fuck are you?" I bark, my eyes narrowing. *And how the hell does Royal know you?* That's

what I really want to ask, but I hold back, instead choosing to cock my head to the side and intensifying my glare.

I guess my expression must be pretty fucking intimidating because he doesn't respond. That, and he's too busy trying to stem the flow of blood from his nose. His eyes dart around as the brothers of SIN slowly fill the room. They remain silent, as if sensing the gravity of the situation.

"This is Davis, everyone." A rough chuckle tears from Royal's chest as his eyes shoot daggers. "We have ... *history*." He gives a shake of his head and staggers to his feet, firmly planting his hands on his hips and looking down at Davis. "Keep your cunt of a sister away from me. And you can do the fucking same."

My eyes go wide as my brain scrambles. With sudden, blinding clarity, I know exactly who this prick is, but I don't have a chance to confirm my suspicions, as the TV on the far wall flips on to a static-filled screen before it blinks black. My chest squeezes my lungs so tightly it restricts my airflow.

The Sin Keeper.

Shit. There's an odd flicker, then a dark, hooded figure appears, backlit by the light so we can't make out any distinguishing features, just like every other time we've gotten a surprise "visit" from the person who brought all of us together at Sigma Iota Nu. We can see the occasional glint of an eye, but that's it. And as is always the case, the Sin Keeper speaks through some sort of speech-changing device so that his voice comes out chilling and robotic. "Attention, please, brothers of SIN."

I finally take a breath, sucking in oxygen like a fiend. Crossing my arms over my chest, I peer at the screen. I don't know what to make of our ... benefactor? I'm not fucking scared of him, rather I have a high degree of respect. But he's mysterious as hell, having offered each of us a chance at a life we wouldn't have on our own. He's helped us all in one way or another, I'm sure of it. But the Sin Keeper doesn't seem to be offended by our wrongdoings or our mental state or any number of other things.

Not so long as we're willing to comply. *And obey.*

SIX

BECKHAM

APPREHENSION CLOAKS THE ROOM IN SILENCE. WE NEVER know what to expect when the Sin Keeper appears. He does generally show up at the beginning of each year with a message for us, so this is likely that now that the final member of our brotherhood has arrived. Though, the way he's paused and seems to be staring right through us is fucking creeping me out.

The reality is our cloaked savior—whoever the fuck he is—is a tiny bit twisted at times. I haven't received one of his fancy black cards of doom in a long time, though, so I know I'm probably due. I'll be on edge until I get the next one. And the hell of it is, it's not likely that I'll feel any relief until I've completed the task doled out.

We're not allowed to discuss the tasks with other brothers, so there's no way of knowing if we're doing the same sort of stuff or not. Talking about our personalized instructions is forbidden. No matter, I haven't ever wanted to tell anyone the perverse, deranged things he assigns me to do ... or how much I enjoy doing them.

The logic behind what's asked of us isn't always straightforward, so it can be daunting. It's usually warranted, though. If nothing else, the Sin Keeper's requests are well thought out, even if we don't comprehend why he's made certain demands until well after the fact. And looking back, I've never had trouble sleeping over what I've been made to do.

I focus on the screen again, waiting with bated breath. The tension in the room is stifling, the air thick with nervous energy.

“Welcome to a new year at SIN. I hope you’ll find your accommodations comfortable. There will be no new pledges this year, as we’ve had a transfer, filling our final available room—Davis Madden.” The shadow near where his lips must be moves, revealing the way they twitch in amusement. Or maybe disappointment? Nevertheless, he nods and continues, “I hope you’ll do well here, brother.”

Royal has visibly stiffened as each word had fallen from the Sin Keeper’s lips. His gaze cuts to Davis, who’s dripping blood onto our floor. I can’t quite tell whether he’s nervous about what our infamous leader thinks of what happened between them or if it’s simply hitting him that he’s fucking stuck with Davis for the entire year—that they’ll have to somehow get along. Otherwise, this place is going to be a bloodbath of epic proportions.

There’s a maniacal, deadly chuckle that comes through the television’s speaker before the Sin Keeper continues. “It would seem like you’re off to a ... rough start. Please do your best to fit in with our other souls in need.”

I grimace. I fucking hate being referred to like that. But after everything—and knowing what little I do of some of the brotherhood—maybe it’s fitting.

Davis clears his throat, looking furtively around the room as the Sin Keeper speaks again. “The rest of you, I look forward to having you serve again this year. Together, we can change what should never have been. Remember, I’m always watching. Listening. Strategizing.”

Why do I feel like he’s looking right inside my head, those dark, obsidian eyes scanning through everything I’m thinking and feeling. I shudder, despite trying to make it seem like I’m taking what he’s saying in stride.

And speaking of listening, we’re so focused on what he’s saying that when there’s a zapping sound and the screen goes blank, it makes half of us startle. Fucking jerk. I give myself a

full-body shake as if it will rid me of the sensation of my skin crawling. My nerves are fucking shot.

Wilder glances around, then claps. “All right. Fuck off, everyone. You heard the scary hooded man.” Usually, it would be Royal to make a statement like that, but fortunately, Wilder has the balls enough to step in when needed. He focuses on Royal, as do I, because he gives every appearance of wanting to fly across the room like some sort of winged demon and remove Davis’s appendages from his body limb by limb.

As everyone else disperses, Wilder slings an arm around Royal’s shoulders. “Come on. Let’s go.” He nods to me, and I already know what he’s thinking.

“Darts?”

“Yeah. Let’s go to the game room. Can you grab that little medical kit from under the sink?” Wilder grasps one of Royal’s hands, inspecting his busted knuckles. “Dammit. You’ve gotta fight tomorrow.”

Fuck. I wince internally. That’s right. Royal finally gets a chance at Bear Pierce during the first fight night of the semester. Fuckin’ Daddy Pierce made Royal fight all sorts of people last year, but he’d never let him have a shot at the main event since he was technically a freshman. But now, all bets are off. Royal’s got the first of the big fights this year. Not good timing at fucking all. “On it.”

Before I move, my gaze lands on Davis. He’s still breathing rather heavily, his jaw clenched. Dude looks lost. Like he’s wondering what he’s gotten himself into. Why the fuck did he transfer here? Did he know Royal was here? “What do you need?”

“Could someone at least fucking tell me where my room is?” Davis glances at the floor, swiping the back of his hand across his face. He only succeeds in smearing blood everywhere. “Fuck.”

My brain clicks back to the verbal volley between him and Royal. It’d seemed like Davis was as surprised as Royal had been. And there was mention of a sister. I pause, thinking. *No.*

Seriously? It can't be. Studying our new brother, I grimace as it hits me this isn't just one and done. Far from it. There's no way around this. We're going to have to deal with this guy who Royal has history with living in our space. I grit my teeth, tucking my assumptions about Davis away so I can focus on him. The other stuff can wait. I gesture to the bloody mess that he should follow me.

In the kitchen, I whip the paper towels off the dispenser, and pluck both the disinfectant spray and the medical supplies I need from under the sink. I shove the bottle and towels into his hands. He glances at the first aid box. I stifle a laugh, then deadpan, "Clean up the floor first. I hope you brought some Band-Aids or something, man. Your room is upstairs, second on the right." With that, I take off for the game room.

When I get down there, Wilder is staring at Royal, his arms crossed over his chest. Clearly frustrated, he throws an arm in Royal's direction. "He won't talk."

My eyes ping between the two of them. Royal's jaw grinds hard enough that he may pulverize his teeth, and Wilder's hair-trigger temper is about to snap. "That's okay. Let him shoot some darts first." I set the medical supplies down on a nearby chair. Wilder can deal with the mess Royal made of his hands later. When neither of them budes an inch, I stride forward, pulling the darts from where they're embedded in the board on the wall. Stopping in front of Royal, my brows quirk up as I hold out a trio for him. "Let's go. You and me."

Royal huffs out a breath through his nose. He's still pissed off. I don't blame him. I don't know exactly what the deal is with him and Davis, but it's gotta suck to realize he'll be in our faces this year.

Speaking of faces, fortunately, Davis hadn't landed a punch directly to Royal's face, but he did get him with the elbow to the side of the head. I roll my shoulders back, loosening up, as I stare at him and wonder what's going on in that brain of his and whether that asshole has jolted a screw loose inside it.

Apparently, Wilder is having the same thoughts. “Come here a sec before you start.”

Royal turns with an agitated frown. “What?”

“Just humor me, okay?” Wilder’s lips press together, and he takes a few deep breaths, crooking his finger.

With a grunt and a stony glare, Royal ventures closer to Wilder, who takes his head between his hands, carefully studying his eyes. “I just want to make sure that hit to the side of your head didn’t jar something loose.” After peering carefully for a few seconds, he holds up a finger and asks Royal to follow it with his eyes. A moment later, he gives a satisfied grunt. “I think you’re good.”

Physically good? Maybe. But Royal is already on the edge half the time. Between Echo and Davis, I think we’re screwed.

Royal shoves out of Wilder’s hold and turns around without a word and begins our game. Taking turns throwing our darts at the board and subtracting our points as we go, I silently observe Royal. I’ve gotta admit, coming downstairs to find him whaling on a random stranger had been bizarre. Fascinating, really. I’ve thought often of what his time in prison must have been like, seeing as how I’m a criminology major, but I’ve veered away from asking about it. I doubt I’d want to know the full story of every brother who lives here. We’re all a fucked-up mess. And let’s face it, my studies have nothing to do with him, and everything to do with me.

When I’m not far off from winning, Royal throws his darts harder than he normally would and with zero finesse, then turns to us as he scrubs his hands through his hair. Anger burns hotly in his eyes, and he shakes his head, as if he can’t believe the events that led us here tonight. “Davis is Echo’s brother. In case it wasn’t obvious.”

Wilder raises a hand to his jaw, gently probing the bruised skin. Royal’s handiwork. When Royal doesn’t expand further, Wilder wanders to the first aid box.

“No, man. I’m fine.” Royal extends his fingers, then curls his hands into fists. “See?”

“Yeah, whatever. Let me at least clean your knuckles.” Wilder’s dark eyes bore into Royal’s. “Don’t make me ask again, you stubborn fuck.”

With a hard exhale, Royal walks over and reluctantly holds his hands out. Wilder doesn’t hesitate to carefully dab them with some antiseptic because if I’m being real, who knows how long Royal is going to allow this.

Scanning his features, no one would know the pain he’s in from his expression, but the air being sucked in through his teeth is audible. I wince on his behalf.

I must have a death wish because the next moment, I sputter, “So— You realize this Davis guy’s room is next to yours ...”

An immediate growl sounds from deep within his chest. His green eyes flick toward mine. “Yes,” he bites out.

“And we don’t like this Davis guy.” I slick my tongue over my lower lip, attempting to gather more information. Any little piece might be helpful, yet I don’t want to pry. It’s one of the things we are made to agree to when we arrive at SIN. Keep your fucking nose out of everyone’s business unless they offer up information. As it is, it’s a fine line I’m dangerously close to crossing ... yet I can’t seem to stop myself. “Just want to make sure I know—we know—what we’re dealing with.” My eyes travel to Wilder who confirms he’s on the same page with a bob of his head. *Thank fuck.*

“Davis doesn’t like me either. It’s complicated.” A shutter falls behind Royal’s eyes, effectively ending the conversation.

Might be complicated, and he may not want to dwell on it, but there’s no way in fuck this is the last issue we’ll have with Davis. Or Echo. My chest clenches violently at the thought of her. Of being near her. Of wanting to get as close as I can.



SUNDAY EVENING, I creep along outside Echo's bathroom window, a black ski mask pulled down over my face. My dick is steadily hardening, and a wild feeling shoots through me, slicking its way into the blood pumping through my veins and worming into the depths of my bones. This time, the Sin Keeper has done me a solid. There'd been a black envelope on my pillow when I went back to my room after the Davis and Royal uproar.



That's all the card said. I assume the Sin Keeper is referring to Echo because I can't think of any other "her" that he could possibly mean. I rarely question him because from the beginning, he's known me better than I know myself. He seems aware that she's the sole female of importance in my life at this point in time and has conveniently given me instructions that line up with my own agenda. *Watch her like you did the rest.* In my gut, I know what he's referring to, so for now, I'll do what he's asking and what Royal has requested—I'll watch her.

Echo has had my attention from the start with her glorious crown of dyed-red hair and those sparkling green eyes. The moment she showed up next door, I'd felt something, felt her in a way I don't with most—just with the special ones. She's not the first. But maybe she'll be the last.

I've been anxious for another reason to get closer. Now, with the Sin Keeper's permission, I have proof that she's mine for the taking.

Standing in front of a full-length mirror, she holds up a sparkly black skirt and a teeny, tiny teal-hued bra top covered in sequins. My brow pinches together. Now, this is interesting. The outfit she's holding to her slim body is not Echo's style at all. After meeting her at the bonfire and watching her last night, I know her well enough to understand she's more of a shorts-and-tank-top girl. Or maybe a dress? Sweet, but with a little bit of edge thrown in. The flashy hair and black—or maybe it's a deep blue—nail polish speaks to a darker side. In any case, the glittery shit is totally not her. And from the look on her face, she's not exactly happy about it.

Echo glances to the side, as if someone else is in the room with her. Whoever it is isn't visible from where I'm spying. I can't quite make out much of the conversation, but I think I heard the word "cheeks." And from the looks of that skirt, I could easily surmise that she's worried about her ass hanging out. My eyes travel the length of her body. *Fucking perfect.* Doesn't matter what she wears. But why the outrageous outfit? Seems like someone's helping her dress.

She shakes her head at whatever's being said, and with her position, I can make out the anxious expression sliding over her features. Listening to whomever is just out of my line of sight, she finally nods in reluctant agreement.

I think they must be gone now, as she sets the outfit on the counter before covering her face for a few seconds. My heart tugs, twisting as if it's a creature ready to find a way to escape from behind the prison of my rib cage.

As I watch, she peels off her Florence and the Machine T-shirt, then shimmies out of her shorts. My head lolls back, and my eyes shut ever so briefly before I can't stand not watching. That ass, oh my god. Her back is to me, but honestly, I have the perfect view, especially when she flicks open the clasp on her bra. It slides down her arms, and I allow my thirsty eyes to wander to the mirror where I can see the beautiful handfuls of flesh adorning her chest.

I endure strike after strike of lust zapping down my spine and stiffening my cock. Just here to watch. Taking one slow breath after another, I seek to calm myself. But ... I can't. My hand skims down the front of my shirt, meeting the desperate outline of my erection. A breath gusts from me as I watch in rapt fascination as Echo ties the strings of the skimpy bra top at her neck and back, then steps into the tiny skirt. Bending at the waist and giving me a fucking tantalizing glimpse of her upper thighs, she slips on a pair of strappy heeled sandals. I lift a clenched fist to my mouth and bite on my knuckle. Fuck me. So goddamn perfect. She's the one.

From the front of the house, there's a commotion that grabs both my attention and Echo's as well. As she begins to move toward her bedroom, presumably to check out what's happening, I give her one last longing look before I slip to the side of the house to peer around the corner toward the white covered porch with fancy pillars.

A brunette of about average size stands at the door, practically coming out of her skin while she waits for someone to answer. My honest assessment is that she's a sweaty mess with her long hair piled on top of her head in a haphazard bun but still pretty cute. Definitely not a TZE sister, though. I know all of them. Who the hell is this?

My brows furrow, but I decide this odd behavior is worth paying attention to. I edge closer. When the door opens, I'm immediately confused. I swear to fuck she just asked all these girls to hand over their panties. I almost laugh aloud at the request.

Whoever answers the door laughs, and I hear her usher more TZE sisters closer. "I think you're going to have to at least explain your request. Is this some sort of rush thing?"

A second girl mutters, "I haven't heard of any sororities doing that."

The panty pilferer bites her lip. "Uh. You're right." And then there's a shout as another sister pushes herself into the doorway. She lunges toward this girl, wide-eyed. "Holy. Shit.

Wait. You're the girl who showed up to the Zeta Gamma party with Kingston Hawthorne."

"That was me, yes."

I can hear the hope in the girl's voice. And she was with Kingston? Shew. That guy is arrogance personified ... but also hotter than hell. Obviously, from the look on the few faces I can see from here, these ladies agree.

Another voice chimes in, "Oh my god. I think I remember this from last year. There were like three guys going around asking girls for their underwear. Is it that?"

"I don't get it. Hawthorne Hall is a brotherhood. How would she be involved? It makes no sense."

I roll my eyes at this last girl's tone, then as they invite Kingston's girl in, I climb onto the porch, crouch down, and move to kneel under one of the windows that gives me a good view of the foyer. *Oh. Oh my god.* There's discussion, but half of these chicks are already wiggling out of their skimpy little panties, pulling them out from under skirts and dresses. As I catch sight of Echo coming from the hallway on the left, my heart gives an erratic jolt, and my dick springs to full attention.

Before I can give any thought to what I'm doing, my hand shoots down my joggers, and I whip my dick out, jerking myself fast and furious. I know what I like and, despite the fact that there is one pair of satiny panties after another being placed into this girl's backpack, my eyes find Echo and lock on her with intensity. She's the stuff dreams are made of. And while I know that fucking outfit doesn't truly suit her, my god, she's like sex on a stick. My eyes rove over her from those strappy black heels to the tiny skirt and bra top. There's no stopping me now, my hand shuttles faster and faster. I'm dying inside because I want to be near her. She's *mine*.

Whoever let the panty raider in hadn't quite closed the door, because I can hear a couple of the girls tell Echo that she needs to join in. Her lips part into a surprised O, but she hurriedly slips a hand under her skirt and pulls the scrap of fabric I'd seen her wearing earlier down her legs.

My brain short-circuits at the thought of her bare pussy, and my hips jerk forward, cum spurting from me, violently splashing against the side of the house. Holy. Fuck. My chest heaves as I blink, trying to get my bearings.

A moment later, the door flies open, and I turn away, hoping to hell I blend in enough in the dark to not be noticed. Quick footsteps descend the stairs, then they pick up speed. I hazard a glance over my shoulder in time to see the panty princess running as fast as she can in the direction of Hawthorne Hall with the backpack full of women's fucking dainties bouncing on her butt the entire way.

I turn back toward the window in time to see Freya gesturing to Echo. She tells her they need to leave or they'll be late. But none of the other girls seem anywhere near ready. They're still primping with their lipsticks and mascaras.

With a bit of a fake smile on her face, Echo nods at Freya, then they're hauling ass across the foyer and—

The gravity of my situation slams me upside the head. If I don't move, they're sure to spot me. Quickly and quietly, I flee the way I came, then while at the side of the house, I yank my mask and black hoodie off and leave them hidden behind the bushes under Echo's window. I make a pit stop at the vehicle I know to be Freya's, pull out a pocketknife, and jam it into her front drivers' side tire. With a grunt, I yank it out and plunge it in two more times before racing across the lawn to the sidewalk. From there, I slip the knife into my pocket and try like fuck to regulate my breathing as I walk slowly past the sorority house. My vehicle is parked down the road a bit, in the opposite direction from SIN. I hadn't realized there would be such a good reason for me to do so until now. Maybe in the back of my head I foresaw something like this. A plan begins to form.

The door opens. "Have fun tonight, Echo!"

I let my gaze casually drift to their porch as I watch a bunch of them step out to see the two girls off. Another girl shimmies her upper body, shaking her enormous tits. "Show those SIN boys what you've got, honey!"

I pause, blinking. Oh. Fucking. Hell. Why did it not occur to me that she must be our goddamn cage girl tonight?

SEVEN

ECHO

“SO, WHAT HAPPENS IF WE’RE LATE?” I WONDER ALOUD AS WE hurry toward Freya’s car. She seems adamant about the fact that we need to hustle, but I have no idea why. My body is racked with a sudden shiver from head to toe. It’s far from cold tonight—more like hot and sticky—so my response can’t have much to do with the temperature. Who am I kidding? It has everything to do with the fact that I’m scantily clad and without my freaking underwear. *Who was that girl, anyway?* I’d tried to go back to my room to grab something to cover myself with, not to mention another pair of panties, but it’s clear from the urgent expression on Freya’s face that we have no time. Fuck me. Nothing like going to an event where I’ll be on display and being able to feel the air on my lady parts.

Freya shakes her head. “Well, I sure as hell wouldn’t want to find out, but the men who coordinate the event, they’re a little ... scary.” She grits her teeth. “Like not scary in a monster way, but more like they’re really important around this town. People know better than to cross them. So, we definitely don’t want to upset them, especially since for every one of the SIN boys that we support at a fight, we get a cut if they win.”

“Yeah. I remember Cassie said something about that.” I’ve been somewhat stewing over the fact that my biological brother is a brother in the SIN fraternity that TZE interacts with. Part of the reason why Davis followed me here was to make sure I was okay, that I’d have some measure of protection, but ... I tug at my short skirt. At the moment, I

sincerely hope he's too busy getting situated to come out and see me in this role tonight.

Freya clicks the button to unlock her car. "Oh, shit. Shit!" Sucking air in through her teeth, she bends down and stares at something I can't see. "My fucking tire is flat."

The what-the-fuck look on her face is priceless. I clench my teeth, raising my brows at her. "I could, um, help you change it?" My dad showed me how one time, so maybe?

"We have no time for that." She pulls out her phone and has it glued to her ear in no time flat. On a huffed exhale and without introduction, she blurts out, "Can you pick us up? My tire is flat, and Echo needs to be at the fight night warehouse in ten minutes." Her eyes slam shut, and her fingers dart up to her temple, pressing like she's trying to stop her brain from leaking out.

How do I get myself into situations like this? The honest truth is if I'm going somewhere new, I don't want to be walking in late either. I have no idea what I'm doing.

"Hey! CJ!" My head whips toward a deep male voice. My brow furrows, scanning the area for whomever he's calling out to. But the guy on the sidewalk is staring right at me. He nods. "Yeah you, Calamity Jane! What's going on?"

Benneti. The way-too-pretty guy from the bonfire. "Oh." The air gusts from my lungs at the confident way he ambles across the lawn toward me.

"Oh?" His lips twitch in what I believe to be amusement as his eyes take me in. "What's going on? Can I help?" He shoves his hands in the pockets of his black jeans. My eyes ping from there to the broad chest in a plain white T-shirt and finally back up to his charming face, jawline coated in stubble, and blue eyes twinkling. He stops before me, eyeing the frantic way Freya is gesturing to her tire and talking into the phone. "Ah. Car trouble, huh?"

"Yeah." I wince, glancing down at my attire. "I'm supposed to be at some"—I stop and lean closer—"fight?" I

give him a tight-lipped grin, not having any clue if he knows what I'm referring to.

"Ah. Fight night." He grips the back of his neck with a strong hand, glancing up the street along Greek Row. "Freya was taking you?"

I inhale through my nose, closing my eyes for a moment before I open and let out an unsteady breath. "Somehow I got the dubious honor of being the cage girl tonight."

He looks like he's about to laugh, but to his credit, he doesn't, even though he has to chew on his lip to stop himself. He puts a hand out as he offers, "I could give you a lift, if you want."

And now it's my turn to smile. "I'm beginning to think you and Emory are going to be my permanent Uber drivers."

Shrugging, he gestures to a car a little way up the street. "It's only a two-seater, though. The Honda up there."

My eyes flick to the silver convertible, then over to Freya. "Hang on."

I blow out a breath and rush over to my big sister. Words spill rapid fire from my mouth. "Benneti says he can give me a ride. Does that help?"

She turns, eyeing him with interest. "Are you going now? Because she's our cage girl, and she's gotta be there soon."

"So, I heard, and, yeah, I'm leaving right away." He runs a hand over his jaw, then back down, gripping his chin. "But I don't have room for more than one in my car."

Glancing back down at her phone, Freya's eyes widen as she does another time check. "Okay, yes. Please take her with you. And can you show her where to check in at the cage girl dressing room?"

He gives a calm nod. "I can do that."

Freya shoos us away from her. "Go. I'll follow as quickly as I can. I was waiting for Zane, but maybe I'll grab one of the girls. But everyone is supposed to be headed to the party." She

shakes her head. “Crap. Shit. Fuck, I don’t know. I’ll be there. Don’t worry, Echo. I’ll be there. I promise.”

“I-I’ll be fine.” Damn. She’s not making me feel great about this. I draw in a breath, looking up at Benneti. “You know where I need to be?”

“Yes. And you’re going to be more than fine. I’ve got you.” He gives Freya a wave, then tips his head to the side in the direction of his car before throwing an arm around my shoulders, just like he had the other night. “Come on, CJ, let’s go.”

“Her name is Echo,” Freya shouts from behind us.

He chuckles into the balmy night air. “Not to me, she’s not.” His head dips down next to mine as we cross the distance to his waiting vehicle. “This is going to be fun. You’ll love fight night. Guaranteed.”

Inside Benneti’s car, I have to admit, even though it’s probably close to fifteen years old, it’s well cared for. He folds himself into the driver’s seat, quickly shooting off a text before he fires up the engine. “Emory. Just wanted to give him a heads-up I’m on my way. I’m supposed to meet him there. There’s nothing like a good fight on a Sunday night.” He tears his gaze from the road for a moment to shoot me a wink. “He’ll be happy to see you again.”

The crazy thing is, whether or not I see another hot gay man tonight is the least of my worries. I can’t believe I’m going to be at this place without Freya and need to figure out how to strut my stuff in front of this crowd. I groan deep in my chest, then rest an elbow on the side of the door as we zip down roads I’ve never seen before.

“Almost there.”

A few moments later, we pull into a parking deck in a decidedly dark, seemingly uninhabited part of town. All the buildings near the parking area looked to be closed as we’d driven past. Yet, Benneti lets himself out and circles the front of the car before opening my door for me.

“Where are we?” I murmur, confusion infusing my words as I step out of the car. “Let me guess, you brought me here to kill me or something?” I’m joking. Sort of.

He chuckles. “Sorry, I’d have dropped you off right at the door, but since you have no idea where you’re going”—he pauses as another laugh bursts from his lips—“I figured we’d find a space, then I’d escort you to the dressing room.” He points at a creepy old warehouse dotted by windows that appear to be boarded up. “We’re headed over there.”

I frown. I still feel like I might die tonight. But whether it’s because this place looks as if it might fall down around our ears or from the sheer embarrassment of what I’m attempting to pull off, I don’t have a fucking clue. My throat goes dry as he takes my hand in his and leads me across the street.

At the large, rickety door, I’m suddenly glad for the way Benneti’s fingers have remained threaded with mine. Holding his hand makes me feel secure. Grounded. And that proves to be a good thing because as I look around, this is definitely not the kind of place I’m used to frequenting. The hallway is dark, except for a bulb above and smells ... well, like a gym, which I suppose makes sense. I wrinkle my nose.

“What’s the matter?”

I’m no stranger to sweat, having run cross-country since I was about fourteen, but it’s not simply sweat I’m smelling. It’s also booze and smoke and I could be wrong, but ... blood? There’s a metallic tang to the air that’s making my nose twitch.

We stop at a door with a trio of sparkly star cutouts on it—kinda like you’d see in a classroom on a bulletin board or something—and Benneti gives the wood a sharp rap with his knuckles. He’s ready to knock again when the door pops open. There’s a natural redhead standing there. Long hair, lots of makeup, and an outfit very similar to mine. I suck in a breath, ready to say hello, but find my brows raising instead as she slides her hand up the door, leaning her entire body into it as if it’s a ... shit, like a stripper pole or something.

Well, all right then. I press my lips together while Benneti clears his throat behind me. “Hey, Morgan. Echo is here for

SIN tonight, but Freya got held up. Can you give her the rundown on what she'll have to do out there and when?"

I glance up at him over my shoulder and he's definitely turned on the charm, and from the looks of it, his smile at this Morgan girl is practically enough to bring her to orgasm. Her cheeks have become distinctly pink under the blush that was already there.

She doesn't even take an eye off him before nodding enthusiastically. "Of course I will. Anything for you, Be—"

He cuts her off, reaching out to pick up a long tendril of hair that'd been lying just to the side of her boob. She gives him a giddy smile, but he drops the lock a moment later before resting his hands on my shoulders. His lips brush my ear as he leans in to whisper, "Catch your act out there, Calamity Jane. Can't wait to see what trouble you get into next." He gives me a gentle nudge into the room, then, much to Morgan's dismay, pulls the door shut, leaving me with her.

My throat is thick as I take inventory of the room. There are four small vanities set up, which I guess makes sense if there are two fights and four fighters. A couple girls seem to have just finished up. One's in the process of removing makeup from her eyes with a wipe. She glances at us in the reflection of her mirror, but never turns around. The other girl hikes up a pair of joggers and bends to tie her athletic shoes. She's friendlier than the first girl and, as she rights herself, she gives me a quick wave. "Have fun tonight, you lucky girl."

Lucky girl. Interesting. Am I? I watch her go, then turn back to Morgan, but she's wandered over to one of the other vanities and is sitting in front of a mirror, primping. I walk over to join her. "Um. So, what do I do?"

She smirks, her red lips twisting as she gives me a once-over. "It's a little late for a boob job, so you're going to have to make do with what you've got." Her eyes wander down my body and then back up. "Nice legs, though. Pretty hair."

I blink at her, wondering if she's for real or if she's just messing with me. Boob job? Frowning, I cross my arms over my average-size chest and decide for the moment to ignore her

comment. “So, out there, I assume the fight is where all the noise was coming from at the end of the hall. And I ... do what?”

Rolling her eyes, she flicks a hand in that general direction. “Yeah. You’ll want to greet your fighter. They like a little attention before they get into the ring, usually. Let him do what he wants. There’s a crowd of people, so I doubt it’ll be anything crazy, anyway.” She turns back to the mirror, running a finger lightly under the red lipstick, then picks up a bottle of some sort of fragrance. Sniffing gently at it, she nods her head. “Here, try some of this. They like it when you smell good.”

Hesitantly, I take it and spritz a tiny bit on my wrists.

“Neck. Elbows. Backs of your knees.”

“Uh, yeah. Okay. Got it.” While I’m doing that, I can’t help but think there is more to it than just showing up and letting some guy scratch and sniff me. “What else do I need to know?”

“The rest is easy. There are round cards on either side of the ring where the guys have a bench. Right after they announce the fighters, you pick up your card and make your way around the ring. Slow walk, swing your hips, push your boobs out.”

“And what do I do between rounds?”

“If you want, you can sit on the bench, waiting, or if you have friends here, you can hang with them in the regular seating.”

Freya should be here any time now, thank fuck. My brows draw together. In fact, I’m surprised she hasn’t burst in here to collect me yet. “Okay. Yeah. I can handle all that, I think.”

Morgan shrugs. “Give them as good a show as you possibly can.”

I blow out a breath, wiping my sweaty hands across my stomach. “How long does this last?”

“Three rounds, five minutes each. Sometimes it takes the full fifteen minutes, other times, it’s over in five seconds.”

My eyes bug out. “Five seconds?”

She stands up and throws a fake punch toward my nose—one that comes a little too close for my liking—and I rear back. In response, she gets this odd Cheshire Cat-like grin on her face. “Knock out. Wouldn’t surprise me if it happens tonight. With Bear fighting? *Your* guy doesn’t stand a chance in hell. He’ll probably wet himself the second he steps foot in the ring.”

I don’t know *my* guy, so I make no comment about her bold assumption. “What do I do when the fight is over?”

“That’s up to you, baby.” Her brows wriggle suggestively. “This is your night. Your five minutes of fame. Make the most of it. He wins? Definitely make sure he’s taken care of—if you know what I mean. And hell, same if he loses.”

EIGHT

ECHO

I'M TRYING SO HARD TO KEEP MY COOL, BUT I KNOW MY FACE is probably turning a tomato red at Morgan's insinuation of what I'm supposed to do tonight. I think she's for real—I detect no lies. Why hadn't Cassie or Freya made this clearer?

While I've been studying Morgan, she's been giving me a once-over, letting her eyes travel up and down my body. She purses her lips, searching my face and hesitating only a second before she blurts out, "Are you a freshman? I'm not trying to be mean, but you seem so damn innocent. Do you maybe need some tips or tricks on how to give a decent blow job?"

Wow. I don't know what I thought she would say, but she's caught me off guard, causing my mouth to drop open in unadulterated shock. Behind me, the other girl—who's obviously been listening in on our conversation—doesn't disguise her snort of laughter. And Morgan, this judgmental bitch, waits with an expectant expression on her face, like it's an actual question she wants answered. She doesn't know a damn thing about me. I'm anything but innocent. Not anymore. Weighing my options carefully, I make a show of settling my hands confidently on my hips. I could lay into her, but I'd prefer not to make an enemy out of this girl, so instead, I shrug. "I'm always being underestimated." Drawing in a breath, I give her a doe-eyed blink, subtly clapping back with my next words. "I bet no one makes that mistake with you."

Morgan's brows draw together for a fraction of a second before her face breaks into a smile. "No, ma'am. They don't. They know I know what the fuck I'm doing. I'm itching to get

at Bear tonight. His gargantuan cock has been calling my name all day.”

I’m in the process of trying not to laugh at the fact that she all but missed my dig at her, but also how absurd she sounds talking about some guy’s mammoth trouser snake, when there’s a loud knock on the door.

“Ladies, it’s time,” barks out a rough, gritty voice.

Quickly glancing in the mirror’s reflection, I take a deep breath. I look good. I know I do. My eyes shift to Morgan. I just don’t look like *that*. But there’s no way a transformation of that magnitude could happen in the ten minutes I’ve been here, so “my guy”—whoever he is—will have to be satisfied with what I have to offer.

Like a whirlwind, Morgan leaps into motion, beckoning with her hand that I should follow her. When we exit, I’m beyond relieved to find Freya hurrying down the hall toward me. Morgan winks, a sassy grin on her lips. “Looks like your mama is finally here. See ya around the ring, girlfriend.” She strides down the hall, immediately working the crowd as she approaches, like she was made to do this. Meanwhile, I swallow back the enormous lump in my throat, because I most definitely was not.

But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to try. I can do this. Mentally psyching myself up, I exhale in a slow, steady stream. As long as it’s not my brother in the ring, which would be both unfortunate and absolutely gross, this is no problem. I can be convincing. I can be the cage girl for SIN. Davis is just going to have to look the other way if he’s here. Oh god, I really hope he’s not here. I know he moved in yesterday, but as per my request, he hasn’t reached out otherwise.

My mind wanders while I wait for Freya, who’s gotten waylaid. It still feels really strange that my family is back in Georgia again. When Freya contacted me about the whole legacy bid thing at TZE this year, my sister said we should move back home. Connecticut hadn’t been kind to our family, and this way, both Davis and I could attend KU. She thought it would be okay after all this time. That we’d figure things out.

And maybe, just maybe, it'd help us feel close to the parents we lost if we came back, especially with the Madden Family Trust still owning our childhood home.

Davis and Kara are the only ones left to look out for me. My eyes crash shut and my chest jerks with unfathomable pain. *Our parents are dead.*

“Echo, you ready?” Freya’s voice draws me out of my head. She sounds calm, but her eyes don’t disguise how fucking nervous she is that I can’t handle this.

A gust of air blows between my painted lips. “Yeah. I think so. Tell me your version of what I should be doing out there. I want to make sure I’m meeting expectations.”

Freya’s teeth clench, and she shoots me an anxious smile. “You’re going to show our fighter a good time. They like their egos stroked. Fawn all over him, stick your boobs in his face, tell him he’s a big bad fighter. Sit on his lap and let him get a little handsy with you. Make him feel good. It’s all part of the job.” She nods, strangely like she’s affirming with herself that this is how it’s done. “Then, once he’s in the ring, you get up and make your way around, holding the round card high over your head, all sexy like. I’m sure you’ve seen something like that on TV before.”

I nod, readjusting my bra top as we get closer to the crowd. I have seen women perform this duty for various MMA or boxing matches, I just never imagined it’d be me up there with my ass half hanging out.

“Make way. Cage girl coming through!” Freya shouts. We stop to allow them time to move, and she has to nudge a big guy blocking our way to the side.

My stomach gives a flip, diving into my throat, then flopping back into place somewhere in my abdomen. This is it.

“There.” Freya points with a manicured finger. “There’s your guy. Royal Kaplan.”

Fuck me sideways.

I blink twice and try to pick up my jaw from where it fell onto the floor.

Royal. He's one of the Sigma Iota Nu boys. One of their fighters. *My* fighter.

Freya hisses in my ear, her hand on my upper back. "What the hell are you waiting for? Everyone is watching. Go!"

How had I not fucking known Royal is a brother at SIN? Why hadn't Davis warned me? Panic races through my veins, and my eyes widen as I take in the crowd. The ring. And a pair of lethal green eyes that pierce holes into my heart.

Shoving all my apprehension down deep, I choose to ignore him for the moment and focus on the crowd. The people move as one, a rabid monster snarling and drooling as I lift my arms into the air and try to placate it by waving with both hands. I swing my hips and propel myself forward, each step bringing me closer and closer to certain annihilation. I could turn and run, tail between my legs, but as awkward as I find this, a tiny thrill does zip through me. I make the final call, affirming it in my brain: I fucking have to do this, put on the best motherfucking show I can. Flicking my eyes over to Morgan, I decide I'm going to embody every bit of that bitch's sex-kitten persona I can. Really play the part. I won't let Royal scare me. We're in public. He can't fucking hurt me here.

If I recall, Cassie said this was the first fight of the semester, and from the electric atmosphere filling the warehouse from floor to rafters, I believe this crowd is primed and ready to watch this matchup between Royal and Morgan's guy. My eyes drift to the bench across the cage from where Royal is sitting, looking for Bear.

Oof. That's gotta be him. He's ... something, all right. First of all, he's enormous. I can tell he's super tall, even while seated. Morgan hovers beside him, toying with the hair at his nape, and I can only imagine the coy, sultry things she's whispering in his ear. Interestingly enough, this Bear guy doesn't seem like he's into it. In fact, she says something, and he suddenly stands, almost as if annoyed. My lips twitch, wondering if Morgan has actual carnal knowledge of him, or if she was simply trying to impress me. Or make me jealous? Scare the fuck out of me? I have no idea.

My breath stutters when I realize while I've been pondering what the deal is with Bear and Morgan that my feet have carried me all the way to Royal. I jerk to a stop, taking in the arch of his brow and the cool gaze he's aiming at me. Groaning internally, I surrender to the feel of his eyes roaming over my body, touching me in all the places he used to. I swallow hard as he holds out a gloved hand and, with a beckoning of his fingers, he roughly demands, "Come here."

A swarm of chaotic bees buzz in my lower abdomen. There's an awareness that has always spiked inside me whenever I'm near him. He'll use it against me. I know it. He's not the same person he was. He's changed, and I can't say it's for the better.

I let a steady exhale leave my lips as we face off. A stubborn streak a mile wide resides inside me that makes me not want to bow to his command, but I know I'm expected to put on a show for the audience. I'm supposed to gush over him and all his fighting prowess. Fuck it. I'll do it. *Show no fear. Make sure he understands he can't fuck with you.*

I've learned to be strong because life has handed me so much bullshit. If I hadn't sucked it up and carried on, I'd have surely broken under the weight of everything that's been dumped onto my shoulders.

Slowly, I close the distance between us until I'm right in front of him. Propping my hands on my hips, I bend at the waist, leaning close. I know better than to poke an angry beast, but I nail him with all the sass I can conjure up. "Hey, baby. What a nice surprise."

There's a flicker of annoyance in his eyes before he narrows them on me. His jaw works to the side. "In-fucking-deed. I could say the same."

I blink and out of nowhere, his fingers have snaked around the back of my neck and tugged me within an inch of his face. My hands shoot out to brace me from falling. They make contact with the warm skin of his pecs, and the muscles immediately react, bunching under my fingertips. We're so close our noses brush, and the corner of his mouth quirks up.

He exhales, his minty breath cascading over my lips, and my heart hammers so hard I'm terrified he can see it because let's face it, this stupid bikini top isn't hiding much of anything.

Shifting, he whispers in my ear, "Princess, I don't know why the fuck you're here, but you'd better make this look good. There are plenty of girls watching tonight who would fucking *love* to be in your shoes right now."

Fuming, I take in one breath. Then another. "Maybe you should do something to prove you're worthy of the show I'm about to put on, then." Fuck it and fuck *him*. I turn my back on him, pop my hip to the side and give the crowd a wave and a big smile that makes a good percentage of them sit up and pay attention. The volume in the arena increases exponentially as they scramble to figure out what's going on over here.

In the next instant, Royal grabs my elbow and spins me around. Air leaves my lungs in a violent rush, and I barely have time to process what's happening. I stumble in my sky-high heels, and he has my back against the cage in no time flat. He's caught both of my wrists with his free hand and holds them over my head.

It's awkward, but the rowdy crowd goes wild as they watch our struggle. It's entirely possible they think we're putting on an act for them. My breasts brush Royal's chest. All that's separating our flesh is my skimpy bikini top. His hips have mine pinned, and with one of his thighs wedged between mine, I'm very cognizant of the fact that I'm bare under my skirt.

"If you're not careful, I'm going to make you put that sassy mouth to work in front of this entire crowd." His eyes glitter with malicious intent. He means it.

My breath catches in my throat, and I strain against his hold on me, bucking my body against his. We have these deranged jackasses surrounding us in the warehouse absolutely roaring. Sounds of encouragement fill the room, and the comments from faceless men come rapid-fire, one after another.

"Hey, Royal, who's the little hottie?"

“So fucking hot.”

“I wonder if it’d be better for him to fuck her and get it out of his system or use all that pent-up frustration in the ring.”

I suck in a breath as Royal’s free hand grasps my ass and tugs me closer. The cup he’s wearing prevents me from feeling an erection if he has one, but his implication is clear as he rubs it against me. There’s a part of me that remembers his touch. My eyes flutter shut. Things worsen for me when he skims his lips along my jaw, then all the way up to my ear. Memories cascade over me with startling clarity.

Blood pumping through my body as sweat slicked my skin.

My lungs on fire as the fragrant breeze blew through my hair.

And Royal’s laugh bouncing off the trees of the forest surrounding us.

He was the one I wanted. And I had him ... until our lives spun out of control.

His breath is warm as he rasps, “You’re going to show all of them that you belong to me. My dirty little slut.”

Feeling my cheeks scorch with heat, I push back so I can stare into his eyes. It’s startling to be this close to him after all this time, but I aim a sultry look at him, sliding my tongue along my lower lip for full effect. To anyone watching, they probably think we’re totally into each other. I taunt him with a saucy smile. And then I catch his lip between my teeth and bite down. *Hard.*

He blinks, and his quick intake of breath is followed by a deep growl. Hoping he sees the challenge in my eyes, I finally let up, sucking on his lip before I let it go with a pop. A metallic taste hits my tongue. Wicked pleasure rolls through me at the idea that I made him bleed. He deserved that.

But then, a rough, gritty chuckle escapes him. Against my lips, he whispers. “I love it when you fight back. Always have.”

NINE

ROYAL

ECHO THOUGHT SHE'D GAINED THE UPPER HAND WHEN SHE turned her back on me. Little did she know, she brought out the lion. Time to teach her why she should never antagonize a predator.

The fire in her eyes is impressive, and it makes my blood course thick and hot through my veins. *Oh, little lamb.* It's time to take you to the slaughter. I grimace and thrust against her, rattling the cage, much to the delight of all the horny fucking assholes in the crowd.

This motherfucking getup she has on is going to make my dick poke through the steel cup meant to protect it. Flames race down my spine as need rushes through me. I *will* make sure Echo understands that I'm not fucking around. My hand drifts down to find the bare skin on the back of her thigh. My touch is light, but entirely inappropriate in this public setting. Goose bumps erupt over her flesh when I trail my fingers lazily upward until they're under the fabric of her fuck-hot glittery skirt, mere inches from her ass. "You are not the one in control here, princess. You'd do well to remember who you're dealing with."

Whatever I do tonight, I can't let her presence distract me.

Movement inside the cage catches my attention, and I reluctantly glance up. The ref is staring at me, his brow arched high on his forehead. A semi-irritated *Okay, time's up, lover boy* is written all over his face.

“That’s my cue, princess.” I dip my head, my tongue darting out for a taste of her skin. I slide it from the base of her neck to the hinge of her jaw, all while she squirms against me. I inhale, taking in a potent hit of everything Echo. “Give the crowd a good show, sweetheart. We’ll settle up later.”

And with that, I release her, easing away. My concentration needs to be on this fight. I enter the ring and eye Bear on the far side where he’s moving around to keep his muscles warm. Oddly, he has no one with him tonight either, which is interesting because normally Duke and Mason are around to back him up.

My eyes subtly shift to Beckham and Wilder in seats they wouldn’t normally be in. I’m really fucking glad Beckham alerted me to the fact that he was on his way to the warehouse with Echo in tow. If he hadn’t, I’d have been caught off guard, and that would have pissed me off.

If we’re going to keep up the ruse that they aren’t my friends, they’ll have to support me from over there. It’s all good. It’ll be worth it when I bring Echo’s world crashing down on her head.

I jut my chin toward Bear while I swing my arms back and forth across my chest and jog a bit to stay warm. Keeping an eye on Echo, I don’t know what to think. She had to have fucking rigged this. How the fucking hell is she here otherwise? I don’t get it.

My teeth grind, and I shake my head, shoving my mouth guard in and attempting to focus. I glance up as the ref beckons us to the center of the ring.

“The challenger for our fight tonight is from Sigma Iota Nu. He’s a killer in the ring and fighting for the first time in our main event. Everyone give a round of applause for Rooyal Kaaaaplan!”

I huff out a hard exhale through my nose and raise my arms into the air, nodding my head as the crowd makes some noise. Out of the corner of my eye, I can tell Beckham and Wilder are on the edge of their seats, their focus pinging back and forth between me and Echo.

She's seated there, on my bench alone, gaze darting around the room. She spots "Benneti" and "Emory" and gives them a tiny wave. This is, possibly, an excellent opportunity to have them try to get closer to her, to make her feel like they are her friends.

Her attention returns to the ring as the announcer continues his spiel. "And the man of the hour, the one you've all been waiting for, from Bainbridge Hall, the one, the only Beear Piiiiierce!"

I give him a feral grin, shaking my head when he leers right back at me.

"Tonight's fight is scheduled for three rounds of five minutes each ..." And I tune him out because Echo has found her Round One card and hoists it over her head. Her perky breasts jut from her chest as she swings her hips, beginning her walk around the ring.

My lungs fill with fire. I glance back at Wilder and Beckham, seeking their understanding. With my eyes flicking from them to the now empty bench, I give the command. *Get your asses over here.*

They don't hesitate. While Echo's busy charming the audience, they take their places on the bench. I hope no one vocalizes any questions as to why they aren't assisting me as they usually do. The ref is getting ready to start the fight when Echo stops in front of the bench where my friends have settled in.

Faintly, I hear her whisper, "What are you doing?"

It doesn't matter what they're saying to her—I trust them—and I can't hear them over the crowd, anyway, as everyone begins to get loud in anticipation of the start of the fight. Turning one last time to put eyes on what's happening behind me, I grit my teeth. It's obvious she's attempting to decide whether to invite them to stay with her or not. Does she think I won't notice that her two *friends* have come to join her on my motherfucking bench? My eyes connect with hers, and I shoot her a death glare, telling her in no uncertain terms that she's about to cross a line.

The very definite *Fuck you, I'll do what I want* is written all over her pretty features. She rips herself from my steely gaze and sits her lush ass between them. Wilder gives me the smallest of nods. Good. They understand. This is going to work perfectly.

And as for Echo? *Game on, baby. Game on.*

I swing my head back to Bear, just in time for the ref to tell us to touch gloves, and then, it's fucking on.

Bear eyes me with deadly determination. The guy is intimidating as fuck. He's a beast in the ring, all six foot six of him, and because of this, his dad has him fighting in the main event almost every damn weekend. And the hell of it is that the guy doesn't lose. I guess I should have been honored when I received the call from Derek Pierce that it'd be me up against his son in the first match of the semester. I don't claim to know the guy's motives. But with a lot of money on the line at every fight, I do know that he simply wants it to be a good fight. Can't put little asswipes in here and let Bear pummel the shit out of them. That's no fun for anyone, except the real sickos who enjoy seeing a lesser fighter get beaten to a pulp.

I prefer a real motherfucking fight. An all-out battle of evenly matched opponents. And that's exactly what Bear's about to give me.

We circle, sizing each other up. The corner of his mouth twitches a bit, and like lightning, his fist shoots out. I dodge it just in time, then throw one of my own punches at his stomach. With these big guys, sometimes a bunch of hits to the body are the way to go. Tires them out. Or the legs. I fire off a kick to the side of his calf. He grunts. Smiles. And comes forward with a barrage of fists so fast, I realize if I'm not at the top of my game tonight, I'm going to get my ass completely handed to me.

Despite having that knowledge, my eyes slip to the bench, noting Wilder in conversation with Echo. A huff of air blows from my nostrils, and I clamp down hard on my mouth guard just as one of Bear's punches glances off my cheekbone. *Motherfucker.* I bounce a few paces back, reassessing.

It goes on like that until the ref calls time on round one. Breath heaving from me, I touch gloves with Bear before turning around to grab my water from just outside the cage. Without my friends right there, this all feels fucking weird, but whatever. I remove the mouthpiece and take a swig, then set it down and grab a towel to mop my face free of sweat. That done, I squat, opening a jar of Vaseline to swipe over my cheekbones and brows. I don't need one of his punches landing and splitting open my face.

Eyeing the trio on my bench, I shoot them a dirty look before wiping my fingers clean and chucking the Vaseline at Wilder. It almost hits him in the forehead, but he manages to catch it before it does. They might be doing what I asked, but tit for tat, buddy. I huff out a breath and return to the cage.

I'm mentally preparing to go another five minutes with Bear, which is a grueling prospect at best, when Echo hops up from the bench to grab the Round Two card. She lifts it over her head and parades her way around the ring, teasing the entire warehouse as she goes. Echo may not look like a fucking blow-up sex doll like Morgan does, but the focus across the board is pretty evenly split between the two cage girls. I want to rip all the eyeballs glued to her tits and ass right out of the sockets of their owners.

As she passes the bench on the way to set the card down, Beckham reaches out and playfully swats her ass. His palm. Her ass.

Fury blooms behind my eyes, lighting the fuse on a bomb that's about to go off in my head. *Fucker.*

She whirls around, and the cheeky devil shrugs, shooting her a beguiling grin. Shaking her head at his mischievous stunt, she returns to the bench and sits right down between them again.

I meet Beckham's smooth grin with an irritated glare. Some of it's fake. For show. Some of it's real. He's doing what I asked of him. Getting close to her. Even so, I feel my blood getting hotter and hotter the more I witness. I've gotta put it out of my head or channel it into the fight. The latter is

probably easier because there's simply no forgetting what is going on over at my bench.

The second and third rounds pass in a blur of fists and grappling and sweat as Bear and I go back and forth, both gunning for the win. Without Wilder coaching me through this, I'm finding it hard to know exactly what the judges are seeing and how they'd be scoring the match. Bear is a fierce competitor, though, and when it's all said and done, the announcer shouts that Bear has won by unanimous decision. It grates on my nerves, but I can't deny that he probably deserved the win. *Motherfucker*. At least he can't say he fucking knocked me out or won by submission.

Still, I'm pissed. Because I can't help but think that I'd have done better if I hadn't been worrying about what was going on with Echo right under my damn nose. My rage channels in the only direction I have left.

Livid, I come down the stairs from the cage, take one look at Wilder, and give his shoulder a rough shove that has him stumbling backward before I turn and plow my fist into Beckham's gut. I heave out, "That's for swatting my girl's ass."

Echo's face is pale. Stunned. And as the surprise at my actions and words continues to roll through her, I stoop, banding my arms around her waist to pick her up. My skin is sweat-slickened, and her body slides against mine, clawing a groan right out of my chest.

With the way I'm carrying her, she's forced to either wrap her legs around my hips or let them dangle. Doesn't matter to me what she chooses to do, all I know is I'm not putting her down until I have her to myself. She must understand her options—either she makes this look like I'm an asshole barbarian hauling her off or she goes for more of a can't-wait-to-take-care-of-my-fighter vibe. A moment later, her decision seems to have been made as her thighs squeeze me tightly and her hands scramble to get a grip on my shoulders. I barrel across the warehouse, through the gawking crowd, and she doesn't produce so much as a peep of dismay.

We reach the hallway leading to the dressing rooms, and she finally sputters, “Wait. What are you doing? I have to find Freya.” And then the struggle commences. “Let me down.” Smacking at me, her chest heaves. “I don’t have to go anywhere with you. Nobody warned me about what this cage girl gig entailed. If they had, or if they’d told me it was for *you*, I sure as shit wouldn’t have shown up in the first place.”

“What? And dishonor your mom by embarrassing her sorority?” I huff out a laugh when that shuts her up. “Your girl is busy with her man. And I’m afraid you’re wrong about that other bit. You do have to be here with me. You have your end of the deal to uphold, princess.”

I manage to let us into the dressing room assigned to me, all while she’s flailing and squirming, then slam the door behind us. Temper flaring, I drop her to her feet and turn, shoving her against the wall beside the door. The expression on her face when her hands end up above her head again is almost comical. She’s spitting mad, but not angrier than I am. I’ve built up a whole head of steam throughout the fight as I watched the tiny touches both Wilder and Beckham got away with. A squeeze of a shoulder here, a pat of the knee there. A fucking hand on her goddamn ass. A frenzy of savage, irrational thoughts slam through my head, and at the center of all of them is Echo.

“Who do you think you fuckin’ are?” I snarl and, as my venomous words tumble out, my hand snakes down her body. Touching her. Memorizing the new and different way she feels. “You’re *my* cage girl. You don’t invite other fucking dudes to my bench. Not acceptable.”

Anger of her own flashes in her green eyes. “They’re just friends, you belligerent asshole. And you’re out of your mind if you think anything you say to me matters, Royal. I’m not yours. I never will be again.” She twists in my grip, writhing against me and riling me up all at once. “Let me go.”

“What, do you need me to chase you to make this hot enough? You need to be panting and gasping for air when I catch you and make you come?”

“I never wanted any of it,” she grits out, bucking wildly, her words like stabs of a dull knife to my heart. “I don’t want you,” she raggedly breathes out.

But it’s there in her eyes, the lust we both know she felt the moment I reminded her of our past. The memories I have of her had gotten me through over a thousand lonely fucking nights, even if they also slashed my soul to pieces, knowing I wasn’t good enough for her.

I let out a guttural growl. “Little liar, I’ll make you fucking pay for the lies you tell.”

Her chest heaves and jerks against mine in her fury. “You don’t deserve my truth,” she seethes.

“Sweetheart, you wouldn’t know the truth if it hit you over the head with a flashing neon sign.” My fingertips slip under the small triangle of fabric covering her tit. “If you don’t want me, why is your needy little nipple begging for me?” Her breath stutters as I squeeze and play with it. “If I slip my hand under your skirt, what will I find? Have you drenched your panties for me? Or are you wearing any at all?”

One of the things that’s had my dick straining against this goddamn metal cup half the evening is the knowledge that underneath the skirt, she’s bare. Beckham had relayed that interesting bit of information via text, too—something about a girl coming to TZE and asking for panties. Beckham has all the luck. He watched the whole damn thing. And that means this princess, here, has pranced around the warehouse all evening with her cunt barely concealed by this tiny excuse for a skirt. And now, the thought of her arousal slicking her pussy and maybe even those soft upper thighs is almost too much to handle.

She blinks, her eyes meeting mine. “Did you— Have you been watching me? Is it you?”

“No,” I grit as I shake my head, flicking my thumb over her nipple. “If I were watching, it’d be from behind while chasing you.”

Her tongue slicks over her lower lip, and she shakes her head all while her back arches, pressing her breast to my fingers. She lets out a strangled moan. “Don’t touch me.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard that before, too. Right before you spread your legs wide for me. It’s all part of the game you like to play.” Her breath stutters out as my fingers lightly slip along the satiny flesh. Grunting in the back of my throat, I lift my hand again, bringing the evidence of her arousal between us for her to see, then place my fingers in my mouth. I fervently suck on them, the taste of her exploding on my tongue. “Even though you’re a bitter bitch, your cunt is still as sweet as ever.”

Somehow, maybe because I got a little lost in her stare, she wrestles a wrist free, and before I can secure it again, she shoves me hard in the shoulder, which gives her just enough room to swing her arm. Her loud huffed exhale is only trumped by the sharp crack of the slap she lands on my cheek. The sound of it ricochets off the walls of the room.

In my shock, I step back, and she wrenches herself from me, tugging the fabric of her bikini top back into place as she throws open the door. “Don’t you dare fucking follow me.”

TEN

WILDER

I'M SIPPING ON SOME BOURBON THAT I'D GRABBED AT THE warehouse bar before they'd closed shop when I sense a disturbance behind me. I suppose I'd call it a sixth sense, but no matter, I'm not wrong. I swivel around just in time to see Echo barge through the crowd. I nudge Beckham, and he glances over his shoulder, his eyes widening. There are still plenty of people here—mostly those who placed bets and won. Understandable that they'd want a few more minutes to celebrate and maybe another round of drinks with friends before they go.

“Oh, shit.” Beckham clears his throat as he watches Echo fly past us. Her gaze darts frantically around the huge space, and if there's a bet I'd be comfortable making tonight, it's that she's looking for Freya. I tried to keep an eye on Echo's big sister throughout most of the fight. Didn't need her venturing over and fucking things up for us by calling us Beckham and Wilder in front of Echo. Fortunately, Freya had been occupied sucking face with the same guy she's with now. In any case, it's clear Echo doesn't see her and also that she's very frustrated.

A moment later, she spots us watching her and shoots me a tight-lipped frown when I hold up my hand in greeting. *Oof*. Not a good sign. There's no connection that she knows of between me and Royal, so it's not that. She's clearly upset enough that she's not even willing to stop for a goodbye before she takes off. *Fuck*. She's a girl on a mission, heading for the exit, even though it's not the way she came in. Can't say I

blame her for not wanting to plow her way back through the crowd to get to the back exit.

Beckham brought her. Freya's with her man. And whatever happened back there with Royal has her messed up in the head. This one's up to me.

As she pushes the door open and heads out into the night, I turn back to Beckham. "Another opportunity. I'm on it."

With a shrug of his shoulders, Beckham jerks his thumb in the direction of the dressing rooms. "I didn't think that was going to go over well, the way he hauled her out of here. I'm gonna grab a bottle and hang out with him for a while. Get a little drunk. We'll take an Uber."

I nod, sliding the rest of my drink to him. "I should be good to drive. I barely had two fucking sips. I'll see you back home after I drop her off."

"Sounds like a plan." Beckham throws back my drink, then his, points to a bottle of Herradura Legend that is Royal's favorite tequila, and gets a nod from the familiar bartender, so he goes ahead and swipes it. He knows we're with Royal, even if Echo doesn't.

I move quickly toward the door, hoping I can figure out where she's taken off to. As I exit, the humid August air is like a wall of invisible wet heat, and I don't immediately see her, which is concerning. She may have circled to the back of the building to get her bearings since that's the way she came. I hurry in that direction, then once I'm in the back parking lot, I scan the area.

My eyes immediately land on her. The light from the sole lamp illuminating the darkness bounces off all the glitter and sparkly shit on her outfit. There are no cars out here because everyone is parked in the deck across the street, so that little ass of hers is pretty obvious as it speed walks across the empty lot. Her head is angled down, and I can only assume she's texting someone—probably Freya. If she's doing what I think she is, her thumbs are busy hammering down on the phone screen. She pays zero attention to her surroundings as she

continues to pick her way over the gravel, making it very easy to creep right up on her.

I get some strange looks from people heading for the parking deck, as it's obvious I'm following her. The closer I get, the more I can make out. It's odd. Her breath comes out in pants and strangled moans, but she's also very clearly muttering to herself. She's getting herself worked up like my sister does all the time. *Such a dick. No right to do that. None at all. What am I going to do? Come on, Freya. Where are you?* Then there's more stuttered breathing, like she's attempting to get herself under control as she picks her way toward the sidewalk.

When I place a hand on her shoulder she whirls around, mouth open, ready to scream. *Yep.* I was right, her phone is clutched in her hands at her chest. There's no denying the fleeting look of irritation on her face that she tries to hide when she sees it's me who has deigned to stop her. "What are you doing, Emory?"

"I saw you leave without Freya. And I know Benneti is inside. I thought I would offer you a ride."

She doesn't say anything at first, simply stares at me. Her face is a sort of mottled reddish pink, and she's tense, her body rigid as she frantically swipes a few fingers over her cheeks. She's not *crying* crying. She's so angry she can't stop the tears from sneaking out. And, oh boy, does her body language ever tell me that it's pissing her the hell off that I'm witnessing it.

"I don't need a ride. I'm fine. Really." She turns and almost stumbles in the ridiculously high heels she's wearing, but keeps right on going, her back ramrod straight.

"Are you sure? Because my truck is right there in the parking deck." She keeps moving, so I follow a few paces behind.

"I'm not your concern."

Technically not, no, but— I can't let her walk around in the middle of the fucking night all the way back to campus. "I'm concerned because you've already demonstrated that

you're so involved with your phone and so upset that I was able to put a hand on you before you knew I was there. That makes me fucking nervous."

"I'm *not* upset," she tosses over her shoulder as she stalks away from me. Her body disagrees. It gives an involuntary shuddering quake from head to toe.

Could've fooled me.

A slurred voice rumbles out from somewhere behind me. "Hey, baby, looking good tonight." He lets out a low whistle that has Echo picking up speed.

Jesus Christ. Case in point as to why she can't walk home dressed like this. I shoot the guy a dirty look, then make a split-second decision to jog quickly across the street to my truck in the parking deck. Rummaging around in a gym bag I keep back there, I yank out the first T-shirt I come across before slamming the door and taking off at a dead sprint. I pass the obviously intoxicated guy and scowl at him. His hands go up in surrender, and he begins to back away. He's not an idiot, just drunk off his ass. The guy's a regular at fight night and has seen me in action often enough to know I will ram my fist into his mouth and rip out his tonsils if he doesn't leave her alone.

I catch up to her, and quickly drape the shirt over her shoulder before backing off again. I grit out, "It's a terrible idea to walk around in a bra top and a bandage masquerading as a skirt, Legacy."

She stiffens at the nickname, then huffs, but yanks the shirt in front of her, looking at the Guns N' Roses logo for a quick second before she pulls it over her head. I wince when it falls past mid-thigh on her. Now, it looks like she has no pants on. Oh well. Better than before, I suppose.

A few minutes later, I'm still trailing her from six feet behind. I've just tapped out a message to Royal and Wilder.

I'm following her home on foot.

She refused a ride.

Beckham:

Sounds about right.

Royal:

She mad?

Don't ask dumb questions
if you don't want dumb answers.
She's doing that thing some girls do.
You know.
That I'm-so-angry-I'm-crying thing.

“Are you seriously going to follow me home?” she bites out.

I shove my phone back into my pocket. “Are you *seriously* asking me that question?” I study the way her shoulders have slumped and how her gait has slowed. I know a little bit about women, and I'd surmise that not only is she physically tired, but she's also exhausted by this entire situation she's found herself in.

She turns her head to look at me, and I lift my brows, my lips pinched shut in a grim smile. With a shake of her head, she stares up at the sky for a second before she relents. “Fine. If you're going to be a creeper, you might as well walk up here with me.” Air gusts from her. “This is a longer walk than I thought.”

All I have to do is play the part of her savior and I'm golden. Hurrying to catch up, I fall into step beside her. We're both quiet for almost a full minute before she speaks. “Thanks for the T-shirt.”

I bob my head, shoving my hands into my pockets. “No problem.”

“You like Guns N' Roses?”

“Yeah. I like most late eighties-early nineties metal bands.”

“Cool. Me too. I like most music, though. I kinda collect concert T-shirts.” She folds her arms over her chest as we stroll. “Don't be surprised if you don't get this one back.”

I huff out a laugh. “Noted.” From the corner of my eye, I watch each and every step she’s taking. Those fucking shoes are probably killing her feet. The speed walking is definitely over for the evening. Maybe I can get her mind off it. “So. You and that Royal guy. What the fuck was that?”

Her inhaled breath is audible, and she slowly turns her head to meet my gaze. “He used to be my brother’s best friend. There are a lot of old wounds there.”

Used to be. What the fuck happened? This is entirely new information to me, and it has my brain jumping to make all the connections. I already knew Echo and Davis were siblings. Hell, I knew from their fight that Royal must have done something to Davis’s car prior to his prison days. But Royal has never once said anything about a best friend from back home that he was estranged from. “He seemed pretty pissed to see you.” I snort, remembering the fucking Vaseline jar that’d come flying at my face. “Pretty pissed that we were sitting with you, too.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, sorry about that. It’s been ugly for years.”

“What happened between them?”

Wincing, she shakes her head. “That’s private. And you and I just met two nights ago.”

I clamp my teeth together and nod. “No problem. I hear you.” I shoot a smirk in her direction. “So, do you always get into cars with strangers?”

Her face whips around to mine, and she lightly shoves my bicep as we keep walking. “Well, you didn’t do anything awful to me that first night. And Benneti managed to get me here.” She pauses. “And, well ...”

““And, well’ what?” My brow raises, curious what she’s about to say.

A pretty pink stain covers her cheeks that I can just see by the light of the moon. I side-eye her because it comes to me quickly what she’s probably going to ask me about, and it might work perfectly into the plan.

“Um”—she turns her head, squinting at me a bit—“about you and Benneti ...” A tiny smile curves her lips.

Me and Beckham. My jaw works to the side for her benefit—as if I’m really having to consider whether to answer or not—but I’m secretly glad she’s going there, because I know if I do share something with her, especially after she clammed up when I asked her a personal question, that it could help us in the long run. Earning her trust might be easier than we thought. I turn, walking backward so I can observe her reaction to our conversation. “What about us?”

Her teeth scrape over her bottom lip and her nose crinkles. “Well, you know what I saw in the woods.”

I nod, rubbing my hands together as I consider how I want to play this. “Huh. Yeah. That was drunk Benneti. Besides, that’s private. And you and I just met two nights ago.” My lips twitch with amusement as it dawns on her that I’ve used her own words against her. Those luscious lips of hers part in surprise, and she stares at me for a good, long moment before I finally give in. “Just kidding. I’ll tell you.” I remove a tube of flavored lip balm from my pocket and use the time I’m applying it to think.

Her eyes follow my motions, then, when I’m done, she holds out her hand, palm up. “Me too.”

“Well, shit, if we’re going to be sharing lip care products, I guess I may as well tell you everything, huh?”

A beautiful laugh bubbles from her lips. “Yeah, maybe so.” She finishes smoothing it on, then slaps the tube back into my waiting hand.

I tuck it away before shrugging. “The honest truth is that Benneti is Benneti. You’ve already seen it. He’s playful. Flirty. Handsy. He takes *nothing* seriously. He’s the life of every party. And when I tell you he loves everyone, I mean it. We’ve known each other a long time now. I’m used to it. He’s a man who loves both hot dogs and tacos, if you get my drift.”

She slaps a hand over her mouth, and her sparkling eyes blink up at me. “That’s one way to put it.” A moment later,

though, her forehead creases right down the center. “But, in the woods ... The two of you—?”

“He was drunk.” I draw in a deep breath. “And I’m—” I pause as my chest constricts. I hadn’t planned to open up quite this much, but again, it’ll be the fastest route to gaining her trust. And while I know where my loyalty lies, I— Fuck, I don’t know why something is tugging at me, making me want to share this part of myself with her.

So, fucking here goes. “Look, we both love women. But Benneti’s a good-looking dude. Sometimes I just go with the flow and see where he takes me.” I press my lips together, trying not to cringe at the way-too-easy explanation of what has become a complicated part of our relationship. “It’s all kinda new, so I’m not ready to share what he and I have with the world, so I’d appreciate it if you kept it to yourself for now.”

“Oh. I’d never out anyone or share things that aren’t my own business.” She raises her hands. “Trust me. I have too much of my own shit to worry about to be talking about other people.”

“Good. Glad we understand each other, then. Greek Row is up ahead. I can’t believe you walked all this way in those fucking heels.”

She grimaces. “They aren’t too bad. But I’d much rather be in a pair of flip-flops, if I’m honest.”

I reach out and lightly tap her nose. “Despite why I was here, I had a good time talking to you.”

“Me too. Thanks for helping me get my mind off things.”

“Sure. Even though you somehow managed to get me to talk about some pretty personal shit. Maybe next time it’s your turn, Legacy.”

ELEVEN

BECKHAM

JESUS. WHY HAD I THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA TO DRINK that much? Or for that matter, why had I let Royal have two shots to every one of mine? That was fucking stupid ... but at the time, he'd needed it, and there'd been no convincing him otherwise. I swipe back the unruly hair that keeps falling in front of my eyes while babysitting my friend who's slumped in the back seat beside me.

Under my breath, I mutter, "Hope this helped, buddy, because I don't know how we're getting your muscly ass upstairs and into bed." I'm feeling good. Really fucking good, actually, but for Royal, drinking to excess tonight is a way to mask what he's truly feeling. A way to dull the pain.

One thing's for certain, it'd been easy to follow the Sin Keeper's instructions to watch Echo tonight. But while that entire show she'd put on during the fight had been interesting, I doubt it's what he was trying to make me see. So, I'll do my best to stay on her and try to solve the Sin Keeper's riddle. Who knows what his motives are, honestly. It's a little odd that Echo is a part of Royal's history, yet he's handed her to me on a silver platter. I let my head fall against the back of the seat, my lips twisting. It's too much to think about with my head swirling the way it is.

Royal groans and mumbles something like "Echo, why?" He's out of it, but I'm still paying attention. Drunk Royal might share more about both Echo and their past. I have no problem with the fact that he keeps his shit to himself. But, damn. Based on what we witnessed tonight, Echo's

reappearance in his life is going to fuck with him *bad*. Having her chosen for cage girl duties tonight of all nights while Royal is fighting? That's seriously some fucked-up shit. I'd love to know who was responsible for that.

Royal was lucky tonight, though, because I fully expected with him so caught up in watching what his princess was doing ringside that Bear's fists would find their mark and send him to oblivion. It so easily could have been a lights-out situation ... and all because he couldn't keep his eyes off her. His disturbed gaze came back to her over and over again, like magnets to steel.

Royal says nothing else of interest the rest of the way home. I let out a sigh, wondering if Wilder fared better with Echo. Assuming she agreed to let him give her a ride, that is. Whatever had happened between him and our red-headed spitfire, they'd been long gone by the time I'd convinced Royal we should get the fuck out of Dodge.

I draw in a breath as our Uber driver pulls up at the curb in front of SIN, and I'm unable to stop myself from glancing in the direction of the sorority next door. My brain hurtles back to earlier when all those chicks had peeled off their panties—all for an initiation ritual of some fraternity, I guess. But it'd been a girl asking for them. It'd made no sense, but the specifics don't matter. What does matter is knowing Echo's thong had ended up in that backpack had given me a semi for the remainder of the evening. As she'd flaunted and flirted her way around that ring for all those horny-as-fuck men, the fact that there hadn't been so much as a scrap of lace between her legs had been at the forefront of my mind.

And now I imagine Echo is in her room, maybe stripping out of that cage girl outfit. My head is so dizzy with all the details I took in tonight. Thoughts of CJ's beautiful, pale skin make my dick hard as stone. And those sweet, pink lips have my balls aching with need. The desire to creep over there and have a sneaky little peek burns inside me.

But that's not happening yet because I have Royal to contend with. His head lolls toward mine, and I suck in a breath. *Shit*. He seems more and more fucked up by the

minute. I guess that's how the good stuff works, though. It's so smooth and tasty that before there are any outward signs, boom. Drinkie Drunkerson. Or is it Drunkie Drinkerson? Shit, I think I'm drunker than I thought. Is *drunker* even a word? Fuck. I think I'm toast.

I thank the driver and get out, then circle around to help Royal's drunk ass. The driver gives me a look, and I can't tell what it means, but I'm always one to go for the shock with people who can't mind their own damn business. "My boyfriend, here, had a little too much to drink tonight. Sorry."

"You motherfucker. Shut up." Royal rolls out of the vehicle and stumbles to his feet, swinging half-heartedly at me. I dodge his ineffectual punch and shoot the driver a laughing wink before I slam the door on whatever he was about to say.

Oh, boy. Our drunk fighter is weaving where he stands. This is definitely not what Wilder is talking about every time he reminds Royal to bob and weave in the ring. Pale-green eyes drift shut. Time to stop fucking around. I throw an arm around his back before he falls and sling his arm over my shoulders. I'm not much shorter than Royal, but he's got a tiny bit more muscle than I do, just because he likes to spend time preparing to be in the ring, which means lots of time in the gym. The muscle also means he's heavier than he looks. "Let's get you inside, man." I urge him forward, and he must be at least half-conscious because he walks with me—or at least something that approximates walking. Still, it's like herding a baby giraffe, all gawky limbs and awkward steps. He's not completely picking his feet up, and I hope to fuck we both don't end up face-planting before I can get us into the house. We've gotta move quickly, too; I really don't need Echo looking out her window and seeing me helping Royal. It'll blow up his entire revenge plot. Not that I'm sure of everything he has planned where Echo is concerned, but he definitely doesn't want her to know that her helpful buddies are actually his *friends*.

It's quite the feat, but I'm finally able to get the door open so the two of us can stagger inside. Before we reach the

kitchen, Royal turns to me, halting our forward progress. He stares strangely and squints. He's so drunk he's probably seeing two of me. "You're a good friend." His words come out slurred. "Did I fight okay tonight?"

"You did. You landed a lot of good hits. I think Bear was surprised he had some decent competition, to be honest. He's not used to that from all accounts."

A loud exhale blows from between his lips. "I need water."

"Yeah, man. I know you do. So do I." We trudge into the kitchen as a drunken unit to find Wilder sitting at the island. It looks like he's sipping on some bourbon, which strikes me as funny—or maybe I'm just that drunk—because drinking bourbon is exactly what he'd been doing at the warehouse bar before we got interrupted by Hurricane Echo earlier. I snicker. "Hey. Finally getting your drink on, huh?"

He gives me the side-eye, dark eyes appraising us. Rubbing a palm over his jaw, he takes another swallow, then stands up, shaking his head. "The fuck happened here?"

I grimace as Royal slumps against me, and I take on even more of his weight. "Tequila plus a really bad fucking mood."

Wilder takes over, guiding Royal to a stool where he promptly leans forward and puts his bruised cheek on the granite. He groans in pleasure, closing his eyes. "That feels good." The stone must be cold.

I hold back a snicker, because let's face it, I'm not sober either and everything is funnier when I'm drunk.

Cocking an eye at me, Wilder grits out, "He needs damage control. Did you not take care of him after the fight?" Swiveling to the fridge behind him, he stoops and pulls open the freezer. Royal's eye pops open as several flexible ice packs hit the granite two inches from his nose. He picks one up and slips it under his cheek.

Perturbed by Wilder's tone, as well as the assumption that I wasn't taking care of our friend, I growl back, "He wouldn't fucking let me." But then my drunk ass starts laughing, and I can't help but blurt out, "Not from a post-fight injury

standpoint and most definitely not in the way Echo was supposed to have taken care of him.” When Wilder groans and Royal lifts his head to shoot me a dirty look, I hold my hands up. “Sorry. Look, he needs some water. And sleep. Those two more than anything else.”

In my alcohol-infused haze, I hadn’t noticed until now that Wilder already had two bottles in his hand. His brow arches, and he sets them down with a thump. “Drink those, both of you. Who can chug it faster? Go, go, go.” He claps his hands like he’s orchestrating some competition.

Royal perks up and snatches at one of them, twisting off the cap. He eyes my lack of movement. “Come on, pussy. Let’s go.”

I roll my eyes and grab the second bottle.

While we’re busy glugging down the water, Wilder pulls out the medical kit from under the sink, yet again—it’s getting a fuck ton of use lately—and sidles up to Royal, inspecting the damage. “The swelling is the worst of it.” He makes quick work of cleaning him up, hands him another bottle of water, along with some ibuprofen, and encourages him to drink.

The entire time, I’ve been watching him buzz around us like the freaking caretaker he is. “Nurse Wilder, you gonna help me get him upstairs?”

“You just worry about yourself. I’ll take his drunk ass up there.” Lips pressed together, he hands all the ice packs to me. “You’re responsible for those. See you upstairs.”

He turns to Royal, tugging him up from the stool. I have no idea how he’s going to get two hundred pounds of loose-limbed male up a flight of stairs on his own, but I can’t wait to watch the show. He slings one of Royal’s arms over his shoulder, then bends at the knees. He surprises the fuck out of me by scooping him right off the floor and into his arms. “Up you go, Charming.”

Royal gives an undignified grunt but doesn’t argue.

Wow. Impressive. My eyes roam over the bulging muscles on display, straining against the T-shirt he’s wearing. Biceps

and shoulders and back, oh *fuuuck*. Kinda makes me wish I were drunker than I currently am. I glance at the glass of bourbon Wilder abandoned—yet again—and throw back the amber liquid. Following them up the stairs, ice packs in hand, I can't keep my eyeballs off his ass. Fuck me. My teeth clench as my dick hardens, and it's no longer the booze making me warm, but rather, the thoughts of Wilder and how fucking perfect he is when he surrenders to me.

It's Sunday night, so we shouldn't have to worry about anyone roaming around the house because the brotherhood is generally asleep. Monday morning classes, and all. But when we reach the landing, Davis pokes his head out from his doorway. He takes one look at Royal and shakes his head.

“Got something to say, transfer?” Wilder's bark and his bite are equally mean, so I'm not surprised by Davis's quick step backward.

Eyeing the three of us, he works his jaw back and forth, before his judgmental gaze lands on Royal. I duck past them to open Royal's door because I'd rather not have an all-out brawl in the hallway at one in the morning. Finally, the douche huffs out a laugh. “Nothing. But this is classic Royal.”

Wilder hasn't moved an inch, and he's got that look on his face he gets when he's about to really pound on someone. His temper can flare rather quickly, especially in defense of someone he feels he has to protect. Usually Royal can fucking take care of himself. But right now? Not a chance in hell.

Case in point, Royal grits out, “What did he say? Put me down.” Wilder blows out a breath, glances at me, then dumps Royal from his hold like a load of bricks. Luckily, Royal lands on his unsteady feet, but whirls on Davis. “Fuck off.”

“Fight must have gone really well tonight.” Davis crosses his arms over his chest.

Who does this fucker think he is? Seriously. Who has the balls to taunt Royal like this? And what does he even know of the fights? He just fucking got here.

Royal snorts. “Yeah. I probably would have won if your whore of a sister hadn’t been shaking her ass around the ring half naked.”

Davis bristles, his face pulling into a nasty sneer. I shoot a look at Wilder that I hope he reads as *Nope, we gotta put a stop to this.*

Wilder skirts around me, and I take the opportunity to shuffle Royal backward into his room and shut the door.

“He—” His eyes crash shut. “This is so fucked.”

“Yeah. I know. I wish you didn’t have to deal with Echo’s brother being in your damn face. But you know what—?” I don’t get to finish my thought because there’s a loud thud from the hallway, which I assume is Davis’s body either hitting the floor or a wall. A moment later, I’m proved correct when Wilder joins us ... like nothing happened.

He points at the bed. “Time for you to sleep this off.”

Royal’s head is lolling a bit again, and his blinks have become long. “Yeah. Okay. But I really wanna put my fist in that asshole’s face.”

I laugh as the dude kicks out of his sliders, then clumsily strips out of his T-shirt, athletic shorts, and boxer briefs. Buck naked, he falls face-first onto the mattress. With his mouth half obscured by a pillow, he mumbles, “T-tell me I didn’t fuck it all up. I know you needed me to win tonight.”

I grit my teeth. *Shit.* That’s aimed at Wilder. Should have seen it coming.

Wilder shakes his head, squatting down next to Royal. He puts a firm hand on his back. “Not at all. You went all three rounds. You did better than most against Bear. Even got in some amazing hits. You did good.”

“We can’t help it that Mr. Pierce is now pitting you against difficult opponents. If you weren’t a couple of fucking badasses ...” I shake my head in dismay.

Wilder pats our friend on the back. “We’ll train harder. You’ll have to help me by making sure I’m ready to win the

next one.”

A soft snore blows from Royal. He’s out. Wilder rises from his crouched position, hands on his hips. I can tell his brain is racing when he looks toward the ceiling and exhales softly. I don’t know if he needs me to say anything else, so I keep quiet. He’ll figure things out. He always does. A moment later, he seems to gather himself, then, observing the way Royal is half off the bed, he grasps both ankles and drags him to a slightly more comfortable position.

Finally, he trains his dark gaze on me. “What a fucking night. Let’s get your drunk ass to bed.”

My lips twitch as I sway on my feet. “You can take my drunk ass to bed any night of the week and you know it.”

“Not what I meant, Benneti.” He gives me an eye roll, and we exit Royal’s room, and head for ours, which are directly across from each other, all the way at the end of the hall.

“That stupid fucknut must have picked himself up off the floor,” Wilder murmurs after we pass Davis’s room. He clears his throat, pausing between our rooms, then lets us into mine, gesturing that I should enter first. “After you, Captain Jack Sparrow. Did you save any of the rum at all for me?”

I laugh. “It was tequila. And no. Royal drank most of it.”

Inside the room, Wilder scrubs his fingers over his scalp. “We can discuss how all things Royal and Echo went later. But —” He stops, clearly in turmoil over something in particular. “I wanna know how the fuck that Davis guy was ever Royal’s best friend.”

I blink, certain the alcohol is playing tricks on me as I back up. My balance is shot, so maybe my hearing is, too. I stop to physically *and* mentally regain my bearings. Davis and Royal. Best friends? “What?” I reach out, grasping the front of his shirt to steady myself. “That makes no fucking sense at all.”

Except maybe it does. The way they’d gone after each other, it’d been more like brothers fighting than acquaintances.

Wilder glances down where I have a hold of his shirt. He sighs heavily. “They were friends. Close, according to Echo.

But you know what? Let's fucking drop it for now. We can talk about all of that later."

"Right," I grunt softly as I pull him closer. "There are other things we can be doing."

Wilder stares dangerously into my eyes, but the tone of his words doesn't carry quite the same ferocity. "Fuck off, Beck. Not tonight."

Catching my lower lip with my teeth, I tilt my head to the side. "You don't mean that." My fist unclenches, and I rest my hand flat on his chest. The warmth of his skin and the thudding, heavy beat of his heart can both be felt through the thin material. We stand there several moments with our gazes locked on each other, close enough that his breath teases my lips with every exhale. "Come on. Let's have a little cuddle." I know he hates it when I say shit like that, but whatever is happening in his head, it's way too serious for my liking.

His Adam's apple bobs hard as he swallows. "I do mean it." He looks away, his jaw twitching madly. His body has gone rigid.

My brows dart together, and I grasp his jaw and turn him to face me before taking his head between my palms and staring into his eyes. "The fuck is wrong with you? We're alone here. Just admit you like dick."

TWELVE

WILDER

“I DO NOT.” GRIPPING HIS WRISTS, I PULL HIS HANDS DOWN, freeing my head from his hold. I’m fully aware that I sound like a stubborn jerk, and, despite the fact that I’ve just said I don’t want his cock, I haven’t let go of him, won’t allow him to walk away. It’s quite the conundrum that’s filling my head. I want him. But—

A laugh trips out of Beckham’s mouth. He tips his head to the side, studying me. “You sure liked it last week.”

I blink rapidly as I take a few steadying breaths. My eyes narrow. I know exactly what he’s thinking: *He can’t fucking deny it. I had his dick in my ass.*

But it’s bothering me. I finally let him go so I can grip the back of my neck with both hands. It’d hit me while I was talking to Echo. I don’t *want* to *just* be his drunken hookup. I glance at him again, shaking my head.

Before I can formulate words to express what I’m feeling, he steps right into my space because he knows it irritates the fuck out of me when he forces me to acknowledge him. “What’s got you twisted up about it all of a sudden?”

I heave out one breath, then another, before jabbing a finger into his chest. Maybe I’m not fucking ready to discuss it, because I can’t help but lash out. “Don’t try to psychoanalyze me. I’m not your test subject. Lay the fuck off.” He drops his gaze to the finger I’ve still got jammed against him, then ever so slowly, he shifts so his eerily bright-blue eyes are probing mine. Never looking away, he covers my

hand, purposefully wrapping his fingers around my fist so the pointer finger I've been poking him with remains free. And then? He lifts it to his mouth and slides it deep into the warm wetness. His tongue swirls around, teasing me, and I can't help myself. My lips part as a lusty bolt of lightning strikes. He sucks and licks, treating my finger as if it were my cock. A reminder, maybe, of other misadventures. *Fuuuck.*

"You like it when I'm in your head. I know you," he rasps. "And I know what you want." Before I can guess what else he's planning, his free hand shoots downward to palm my growing erection.

My breath gusts out as he firmly strokes me through my jeans. This is the way it always is with him. He touches me, and I don't know where my fucking head goes. He makes me lose my goddamn mind.

He moans around my finger before letting it go with a sinful, wet pop. "What were you saying?" One brow arches, and his eyes blaze as he grips my dick, squeezing me lightly before going back to the languid, fucking sexy up-and-down movements of his hand.

My lips press together into a tight line. I want to stop him, stop the way this always comes about, but fuck. I also really don't want to because he makes me feel so fucking good. His lips curve into a smile, and he nips at my chin. Liquid heat shoots through my veins. I groan. Fuck. *Yes.* I blow out a hard breath as his hands go for the waistband of my jeans, and he makes quick work of the buckle.

I don't know if he sees the split-second shift in me before I grip him by the neck and my mouth crashes down on his. My tongue doesn't seek entrance. It demands it, delving inside, hot and devious, stroke after stroke after stroke. Wicked. Sensual. Fiery.

Because this is what he fucking does to me. He whips me up into an unthinking frenzy until I can't fucking stop myself. Not for any goddamn thing.

"That's it, Wild. Take everything out on me." He grasps my hips, rubbing his cock against mine. It sets me off and

makes me want to explore all kinds of dirty fucking things with him. It swirls and swirls around in my head until I feel like I'm going to detonate.

Yes. With my heart mercilessly pounding a crazy rhythm in my chest, I clutch him to me and run my hands up and down his broad back, then down to his ass. Holding him to me, I grind against the thick cock that's hiding behind his pants. The symphony of grunts and moans flying from our lips makes me so goddamn hard. Fuck, it's good. So. Fucking. Good.

Grasping the back of my neck with both hands, Beckham tips my head so he can get better access as our bodies bump together, every demanding movement eliciting a flow of uncontrolled heat through my body, the kind that could flashover into full-fledged angry flames at any second.

I pull back long enough to gasp out, "You finished my fucking bourbon, you dick."

"Then drink it from me," he groans. "Plunder my fucking mouth for it. Steal it back." Panting, he bites my lower lip, then sucks it into his mouth. That vicious pull, the suction, all of it has me growling in response, and my eyes flash open, finding his. Desire pours through me, and I grip his hips as we writhe together. And I do exactly what he told me to do—I plunder, wanting to taste every bit of him.

I yank him forcefully to me, and he sucks in air, his chest jerking. Staring at him for a second, a growl rips from my throat, and I connect our mouths again, punishing him for making me feel everything I do. My hands slide down his chest, gripping the material of the button-down he'd worn to the fight, and wrench the two halves apart, popping every fucking button in the process. They go flying, the noise of them hitting the hardwood floor like a pepper of gunshots going off.

I'm either all in or all the way out. He knows this. I groan, breathing hard. "Fuck, Beck." My hands go for my shirt, pull it free, and toss it from us. I'm fucking *in*. I want his hot skin on mine.

And Beckham, though definitely drunk, is desperate for more of me, too. He grasps the sides of my bare torso, kissing his way down my chest and tasting every dip and groove of my body. “Fuck. You are chiseled perfection. And these tattoos are such a fucking turn on.” His tongue snakes out to lick over some ink on my lower abdomen. Fuck, yes. One excited breath after another heaves from me as he unfastens the button on my jeans. He trails his tongue along the muscle of V that leads into my pants and rips the zipper down. Hooking my fingers in the waistband, I shove my jeans over my ass and let them drop.

Commando. I seldom wear underwear, and he seems to appreciate this. My erection springs free, and I groan as he grips it and gives me a slow stroke from the base to the head, where I have a frenum piercing. He looks up at me from under hooded eyes. “Your cock is perfect. I’ve been dying to slide my tongue all over it again.”

“Then lose the clothes, Beck, and get the fuck on the bed.” My voice is gruff, deep, and full of the command I know he gets off on.

He moves quickly, shrugging out of the shirt I destroyed and divesting himself of his pants in no time flat. There’s a lustful glint to his gaze as he backs up, crooking his finger at me. The smirk on his face has everything to do with the liquor he drank earlier. I want to think it has to do with wanting *me*, too, but that remains to be seen.

I stalk forward, and when my hands meet his shoulders, I shove him backward onto the bed. It doesn’t faze him. He beckons to me again. “Get over here, you sexy beast.”

There’s something about the way he talks to me that makes my cock jump every fucking time. But his request doesn’t make me hurry. Not one fucking bit. I take my time, knowing part of what he likes is the tease of this. The lead up. This intense foreplay seems to be our thing. If we have a thing, anyway.

I crawl over him, aligning our dicks as I straddle his hips, and rest my chest on his, bracing my arms on the bed just

under his shoulders so I can hold him where I want him. He immediately grasps my head and drags my mouth to his for a hot, wet kiss. I thrust against him, and the feel of his dick—the soft skin, not to mention the pure hardness—rubbing against mine is everything. It does crazy things to my head, the idea of it—Beckham’s most intimate parts touching mine.

I grind down on him as our lips collide over and over, and our tongues slide and explore, wanton and devilish. When we’re together, it feels so right. So fucking good. But I wish I knew—

I must have been distracted by my thoughts because I’m interrupted by Beckham flipping me over without any difficulty. Highly unusual. I’m almost always the aggressor once we get going. The one in control. And he agrees to it. But this time, I note his wicked, still-drunk smile, and it’d seem like he has different plans tonight. So, I’ll let him lead. For a while.

Beckham shifts to my side, scooting down until he’s face-to-dick with me, and he brings one hand up, letting his sinful fingers trail over my flesh, touching me everywhere—my balls, my shaft, and lightly around the other piercings that grace the head of my cock. A magic cross. He grips my balls in his hand, gently squeezing, then tugging. The idea of his hands on me elicits a carnal moan the likes of which I’m not sure I’ve ever heard come out of me. I throw my head back as he takes me in hand and strokes me so good my eyes roll back. I can’t help it, I let out a strangled grunt of pleasure. “Fuuuck.” Threading my fingers through the hair at the crown of his head, I roughly push him back where I want him. “Take my cock. Swallow it.”

The wet warmth of his mouth. The way he flicks his motherfucking tongue at the same time he takes me deep. The suction. Oh, fuck. I might die right here in his bed. His tongue makes a circuit of my piercings, licking around them, toying with them, and my eyes slam shut to the sudden white heat roaring through my body.

“Look at me when my mouth is on you, Wilder.” My eyes pop open at the demand in his tone, but he goes right back to

it, using both hand and mouth to drive me right out of my fucking mind. I can hardly control the way my hips buck, driving my cock into the depths, hitting the back of his throat. He doesn't even have a damn gag reflex. He just takes it.

I'm so engrossed with the way it feels, I don't realize he means to run his fingers through the sticky mess on my stomach that is our pre-cum until he's already done it. He holds them to my lips. "Fuck, so hot. Taste us."

With my mind a hazy place from everything we're doing, I don't even think, I just do, taking them into my mouth. It's an explosion of masculine energy on my tongue. It's so fucking heady and right that I groan. Loudly. Especially when he begins to work his fingers in and out of my mouth like he's fucking me with them.

And I'm so rocked by the taste of us in my mouth and the gleam in his eyes, that I know I'm going to be in real trouble if I don't take control right fucking now. I bite down on his fingers before I let them go with a smirk. "You're going to pay for that." I shift to my side and grasp one of his legs, pulling his body around until I'm face-to-dick with him. "Keep sucking me off," I grunt out, driving my hips toward his mouth as I take his dick in hand.

I jerk him, but that's not really what I'm after. My fingers drift between his legs to the stretch of skin behind his balls to massage him there, every once in a while letting my fingers stray to lightly brush over his puckered hole. I tease the fuck out of him, touching, then pulling back. Over and over again.

Before long, he's panting, and he looks at me with wild eyes. "You gonna fuck me or are we just dicking around here?"

My lip curls, and I can't resist baiting him. "I got the idea you were taking the lead tonight. Is that what you wanted?"

He blows out a breath, and gives me a smirking, "Yes." He gets up from his side and crawls to the head of the bed, grasping the headboard with both hands. Looking over his shoulder at me, his brilliant blues glowing, he grits out, "Fuck me like the animal you are."

That's more like it. "You know I will." I grab the lube that is almost always under his damn pillow, uncap it, and drizzle a good amount into my palm. I leisurely stroke myself, watching him as he waits for me, hands clutching the headboard so tightly I bet I'd be able to see how white his knuckles are if it weren't mostly dark in here. I squeeze the bottle, aiming for the crack of his ass, and watch him shudder as the slick lubricant slides between his cheeks. Eyes glued to his ass, I add still more to my fingers. I don't give him any warning. One second, he's waiting with bated breath, the next, I spread his ass cheeks. I stare at his hole. No different than ass-fucking a girl. Except his body is bigger. More muscular. Closer to my size. And I enjoy the struggle for dominance that we sometimes have. The way we wrestle our way into fucking sometimes. It's so fucking hot.

"Yo. Wilder. What the fuck, man?"

I look down to see the lube sliding from his ass down over his taint and to his balls. I huff out a laugh. "Beck, you know I like you a little messy." I drag some of it back up, rubbing my fingers over him as he twitches and jerks with anticipation. A moment later, I slip a finger into his ass.

His back bows, his hips canting back, giving me an even better view than before as I smoothly insert a second digit inside him. With his breath stuttering, I work him open, scissoring my fingers while cupping his balls with my other hand. He groans, deep and guttural. It does something to me to know that I can pull these noises from him. That I'm the one whose fingers and cock his ass chases. "That's it. Fuck yourself on my fingers."

"Give me another," he bites out as he continues to writhe in response to my ministrations. I fill him up with my fingers, and he grunts, sweat popping out on his lower back and between his shoulder blades.

I want to collect each drop of moisture on my tongue, lick every part of him I can get at ... and I will, as soon as I'm inside him. More pre-cum leaks from my tip, dripping onto the sheets. My dick throbs for him. It wants to be in his ass. I want to fuck him with frenzied, crazy abandon.

“Wild, would you get your bejeweled dick in my ass?” He snorts at his own words, but hisses as I remove my fingers.

Notching the head of my dick just inside him, I take one ragged breath after another. I grab hold of his hips with both hands and slam my cock home. With every maddening thrust, his ass eagerly swallows my dick. The shouts and growls and groans that tear from us are enough to bring down the roof. I don’t want to think about whether or not Wyatt, whose room is next door, can hear us—because I’m positive he can. We sound like a couple of rutting heathens.

My hips snap hard against Beckham’s ass, and fuck if I don’t get off on the sight of my thick cock disappearing into his body. The raw energy between us is a potent, intoxicating thing. He grips the headboard hard, the play of muscles in his back and shoulders a thing of beauty. I curl around him, grasping his hard length in my hand.

“Ah. Fuuuck. Fuck, Wilder. Fuck me.”

I sweep my lips up his back, tasting his salty skin, then sink my teeth into the space between his shoulder and neck. He lets out a startled yelp, followed by a satisfying whimper. I clutch him to me as we grunt and strain together, getting closer and closer to finding oblivion in each other.

“Your fucking piercings—”

“Good, right?”

“Oh, fuck yes,” he pants. “I’m gonna come.”

I groan as he begins to tremble against me. And then I’m shaking too, and it’s a race to see who will come first. Or who will last? I don’t think it matters because it’s so motherfucking good.

Beckham shouts, and I feel the pulsing of his cum shooting from him as I pump my hand up and down, stroking him through his release. His ass tightens rhythmically on my cock, making everything in my head go foggy. I know it’s happening, but it’s so good, it can’t be real. I slow my own movements as I feel the orgasm cresting inside me. I rock in

and out of his ass, flooding it with my cum. “Goddamn, Beck. Why does it feel like this when I’m with you?”

Maybe I can convince myself this feels so good with him because of the lack of protection we use—after all, he’s the only one I’ve ever been bare inside—but deep down, I know I’m fooling myself. Sex has never felt this good, and it all comes down to one thing. Beckham.

THIRTEEN

ECHO

LAST NIGHT WAS WAY MORE THAN I'D BARGAINED FOR. I'M SO freaking exhausted, I wish I could sleep another six hours or so, but I can't. Classes begin today, and that means I'm going to be walking all over campus on my poor, tired feet. I should have looked harder for Freya. Waited for her. But I don't have a clue where she disappeared to.

I fumble around for my phone, finally finding it under my pillow. Lifting it in front of my face, I squint at the screen, and when the face recognition doesn't work, I quickly jab in the passcode. With a huff, I open my text messages. There are several from Freya, as I sort of expected, one from my sister, and one from my brother. Jerk. I can't believe he didn't warn me about Royal.

Little liar. I hear him in my head. My eyes squeeze shut as I shudder involuntarily. Panic is setting in again. Because what the hell am I going to do?

But I can't think about him right now. I focus on my phone again, and knowing whatever Davis texted will probably piss me off, I ignore it, opting instead to open the thread with my sister.

I hope you're settling in.

Can you come by on Wednesday?

I have an appointment at 9.

Chewing on my lip as I consider whether I'll walk or try to get a ride to our house, I fire off a quick response.

Yep. See you then.

I click into the thread of texts I have going with Freya. The first thing that hits me right away is that her messages in response to mine had come in a full twenty minutes after I texted her. Where the hell had she been?

I can't find you.

Shit. Okay.

I'm heading back.

Echo! Did you really head back
without me?

Where are you?

You did so good.

And you have serious chemistry
with Royal.

That can't be faked.

He was totally into you.

I need the juicy details.

Shit. I think you really left.

Okay. I'll either see you at home
or catch up with you tomorrow.

Sorry, I may have gotten a little
caught up with my bf.

Text me when you get in so I
know you made it safely.

XOXO

Oh, shit. That's a lot of texts I missed. After the long walk home with Emory, I hadn't bothered checking for messages before I crashed. I'd been too overwhelmed by everything and needed the oblivion that sleep provides. I exhale steadily as I let my thumbs fly over the phone screen. Hopefully, she'll

accept my apology and not ask questions or make any more assumptions—because telling me how amazing the chemistry was between me and the guy who is hell-bent on ruining my life is too much for me to take. It makes me want to bury my head in the sand and never come up for air.

Hey, sorry.

I was so tired, I passed
out when I got in.

Didn't check my phone.

Morning, sunshine.

It's okay.

I poked my head into your room.

You were sound asleep.

See you downstairs in
thirty for coffee?

Yes!

My brow creases. How the hell did she get back to the house after me? She must be totally caught up in this boyfriend she's seeing. Zane, I think she said his name was? I'll have to ask her about him later.

I inhale deeply, getting a whiff of pure male. It surprises me at first until I remember I'd worn the shirt Emory had loaned me to bed. I grasp the collar and pull it up to my nose. It smells the way it does outside after a hard rain. Crisp. Fresh. Captivating. I think he must have worn this shirt, because I'd caught a hint of the same scent when I'd thrown my arms around him last night in thanks when we finally made it all the way here. I still can't believe he walked all that way with me. He could have ditched me in favor of driving home. But he hadn't. And despite the shoes from hell that Freya had given me to wear, I'd enjoyed my time with Emory. A lot.

I glance back at my phone, then grumble as I pull open the text Davis sent me. I know I told him to keep his distance, that I wanted to do this on my own, but I'm perturbed that he

didn't give me any warning about Royal. He had to have known this would be an issue for me because it's a real wrench in his plans for this year, too.

Reading the four short lines he sent, I only get more ticked off.

Did you know Royal is here?

Stay away from him.

He's going to cause trouble.

I mean it, Echo.

With my jaw locked tight, I angrily jab my thumbs at the phone screen.

No shit.

Thanks for the heads-up.

But you're a little late to the party.

My hands shake, and I drop the phone to the bed to cover my face. I'll let him figure out what the fuck I meant by that. Am I referring to the manic chase through the woods? The mind-boggling encounter at the fight? Honestly, both. I groan, irritated with myself and the entire situation. Davis couldn't have warned me in time. He wasn't even here for the first disastrous encounter. I'm just pissed that once he moved into that house—the SIN house where Royal resides—he'd waited so long to say something. Gritting my teeth, I exhale slowly. There are sure to be fireworks if Davis confronts Royal about anything at all. From the way Royal has come at me, I have no doubt it'll be ugly.

Everything that happened after the accident between the two of them is a fucking blur to me. The severing of their bond that fateful day had been instantaneous, and the odds of them repairing that friendship are slim to none. But right now, their problems are the least of *my* issues.

Reality crashes down as it hits me full force—I'm going to have to deal with Royal Kaplan at every fucking turn. Untangling our twisted history is nothing I want any part of. I can't. Not now. There's too much at stake.

Once I'm dressed, I hurry downstairs to find Freya already pouring coffee.

"When's your first class, little sis?" she asks as she lifts a steaming mug to her lips.

Oh, thank goodness. Maybe we aren't going to discuss the shit show after all. That'd be preferable, honestly. I exhale, clearing all thoughts of the entire debacle from my head. "Um, nine. I have three in a row on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, done around noon."

"Ah, shit. My first one isn't until eleven, or I'd go to campus with you."

"Oh." I hold up a hand with a shake of my head. "I'm a big girl. I'll figure it out. That's what online maps are for, right?"

"I had a feeling you'd be pretty independent." She turns and pours a second mug, holding it out to me. "Coffee?"

"Yes, thanks." I gladly accept it, then go about adding a bit of cream and sugar to it while more sisters amble into the kitchen, seeking sustenance and caffeine. A few minutes go by while a herd of bleary eyes and slow-moving bodies put cereal into bowls or throw bread in the toaster.

Not interested in food this morning, as I'm first-day-of-class nervous, I decide to take a seat at the far end of the kitchen island so I'm out of everyone's way. Samantha sits down beside me with a glass of juice while other girls take their breakfast to the dining room or elsewhere. I watch all the action, trying to steady myself. From across the counter, Freya gets my attention. "What do you have first?"

"Calculus. And I'm no math whiz, so that should be fun."

"That'll be in Harrington Hall. Did you get Clem or Graves?"

Grabbing my phone, I pull up my schedule for the tenth time today. "Clem."

"He's pretty good. You'll be okay. And hey, you have a whole sisterhood behind you, so if you need help, odds are good someone will be able to give you some pointers."

While she's talking, I've become distracted. From behind me, there's some giggling, whispers, and someone being shushed. Then more laughter.

Frowning, I sip at my coffee as calmly as I can while trying to discern what's being said. Freya clearly hasn't realized what's going on because she starts talking about the calc professor I have and something weird about his grading system.

Listening to both proves impossible as a sinking sensation blooms in my stomach. *Oh, boy.* I should have known I wouldn't get away without someone saying something to me about last night. I was honestly hoping that no one except Freya would have a clue what went down, but that's not the case. And if I expected the mean girls to keep quiet about it, I was sorely mistaken.

"Echo?" Freya pats the counter between us, grabbing my attention. "Are you okay?"

The group moves into the cozy den, out of sight. Anxiety prickles up my back because apparently, these girls assume if they can't be seen, they can't be heard either. How very toddler of them. My eyes shift to the side, following the sound of their laughter. Freya's brows pinch together, leaving a crease down the middle of her forehead. I can tell she's about to march in there to put a stop to it, but I really want to hear what they say. I shake my head, holding up a hand to make sure she stays put.

"I heard he practically fucked her up against the cage." An indelicate snort follows those words, and now I know exactly who it is. Savannah.

I roll my eyes at her comment. It's not true. Not really. My jaw sets. And it wasn't like I invited him to go beast mode on me.

"Stop. There's no way that's true." I think that might be Allie, but I could be wrong. The pretty brunette seems like she could be trouble if in the wrong company.

"No, it is. I heard about it, too."

My eyes slam shut. I have no idea who that was, but news travels fast, I guess.

Ireland's nasty voice hits next, barreling right into my chest. "Even better, he stormed off after he lost with her wrapped around him like a clinger monkey. I wonder if she made wild jungle noises while he fucked her or if he made her gag on his dick."

"You're just jealous," Savannah snorts out.

The response from Ireland is immediate and boisterous. "You bet your sweet ass I am!" Her words are met by gales of laughter.

I meet Freya's eyes, and she hesitantly asks, "You okay?"

"Yeah. It's whatever." I shrug.

She pouts a bit, like she's upset for me. "I'll tell them to shut it down right now."

"It's all good. I'm fine. They're just mad it wasn't them. It'll blow over when the next girl gets selected, right?"

Freya slowly nods. With her lip trapped between her teeth, she considers me for a moment, then as if she can't resist, she blurts out in a quiet voice, "But really. What's the deal with the two of you? I keep thinking about it because I'm the one who saw it with my own two eyes, and I couldn't believe the ... the ..." Her cheeks flush pink, and she whispers, "The raw animal energy. It was crazy. I think the entire room felt it. For it to be like that with someone you just met—wow."

I shrug again because I'm not so sure I need anyone to know yet that Royal and I have a past. "I guess I reacted to what he was putting out there."

"You can say that again. Did you ...?" Her brows wriggle.

I dampen my lips as our gazes connect again. If I deny it, she probably won't believe me, anyway. I take a few more seconds to think as I walk over to put my coffee mug in the sink. I end up pouring half of it down the drain. It's not settling in my stomach after all this. I draw in a breath and straighten

my back, then, with a glance back over my shoulder, I shoot my big sister a wink. “A lady never tells.”

She claps her hands. “I knew it! You know, we’ve got a big party coming up this weekend. The SIN guys will probably be there. Maybe you’ll get a chance to talk to him again.”

“Maybe. Though there wasn’t a lot of talking last night, if you know what I mean.” There wasn’t, that’s the truth, but it wasn’t because we were getting down and dirty. She can take my *if you know what I mean* however she wants. While we’re now called sisters, I don’t know if I can trust her yet. I hardly know her. Checking my phone for the time, I suck in a breath, realizing I need to get moving. “I’d better head out. See you later?”

“Absolutely. Have a great first day. Text me if you need anything.”

I nod and give her a wave as I hurry toward the door.

Outside, I hike my backpack onto my shoulders and hope like fuck I played it right by letting those bitches have their catty girl talk. I’m almost one hundred percent sure they knew I could hear them. They probably thought they were being fucking hilarious. But it’s fine. Now I know who to have my eyes on so I don’t get stabbed in the back. They think I’m weak, but I’ll get my chance to laugh when they realize I’m anything but.

I hit the sidewalk and make a right, heading toward the main part of campus. Greek Row isn’t far from where my first class is. Like I told Freya, I have a math class first thing, then a psychology class that I’m excited about, with an art class rounding out my day.

As I pass by, I glance at the building that houses the SIN brothers, and my heart thuds hard in my chest before picking up and racing around behind my rib cage. Because right there on the steps is Royal. He’s staring at me, looking for all the world like he’s pissed to see me. I calmly give him my middle finger. As if he didn’t know I was here. And I haven’t done anything wrong. I keep walking, hoping if I don’t engage further he’ll leave me alone.

I don't have a clue why I thought that would be the case. From the corner of my eye, I see him thunder down the steps and stride to the sidewalk. *Shit*. Is he going to follow me?

He remains about six paces behind me, saying nothing at first. But I feel him back there, along with every ounce of animosity that oozes from his pores. It makes me want to run from him, like I always have. It used to be a game to us. I had such a crush on him. Fuck. "Leave me alone, Royal."

"Hey, I'm not the one who showed up at *your* fight last night. I also wasn't the one prancing around with my *cunt* hanging out."

Whirling around, I stare into his pale-green eyes, the same ones I've gotten lost in so many times. It slices my heart to pieces to have him look at me with such distaste and utter hate. I know he was angry with me the night our world went to shit, but what he did was so much worse.

I wrench my mind from the past that can't be changed to focus on the present. "I didn't ask to be your cage girl, Royal. If they had told me, I'd have refused."

"I don't know why you're here, but know this—if you run, I will chase you. If you hide, I will find you. And if you insist on staying, I will make you regret it."

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Royal. I don't belong to you. I never did. I'm my own person and can make my own damn decisions. Just like I always have." At the way his head cocks to the side, that may have been one step too far.

"That's where you're wrong. I will bend you to my will before we're done here, princess." He narrows his eyes on me, then nods toward the academic buildings up ahead of us. "Better run along now. You're going to be late to class."

My heart clenches, squeezing tight in my chest, my mind hurtling into the past. *Wait*. Does he mean—

"Yes, little liar. You'd better fucking *run*."

And there, in broad daylight, my heart rams up into my throat as I spin away from him, taking off like a shot.

“You’re out of practice.” The pound of his footsteps sounds behind me, and I hear every last one of his breaths as he gets closer and closer to me.

I grip the straps of my backpack, looking frantically around, but it seems like everyone thinks we’re playing a game. I suck in a breath, getting ready to scream for help, but when I hazard a look over my shoulder, he’s gone.

FOURTEEN

ECHO

AFTER THE ENCOUNTER WITH ROYAL THIS MORNING, I HAD trouble concentrating on anything my professors were saying during my first two classes. Fortunately, it was mostly just going over what to expect, grading scales, credit for late work, and exam schedules. The calculus professor did a review of some key concepts. In psych, though, we'd had a great discussion about the importance of studying psychology. I spend a lot of time pondering why people think and act the way they do, so it sounds like it's going to be an interesting class.

Staying afterward to introduce myself to the professor had been a mistake, though. I bite my lip as I throw open the door to the university bookstore. I need a sketchbook and drawing pencils. The info on the syllabus for my art class had been very specific that we'd be using them during the first session. I totally should have picked everything up this weekend but getting situated at KU had thrown me big-time.

After finding what I need and completing my purchase, I hightail it back out the door, jogging across campus with my art supplies in my arms. I try to tell myself it's okay that I'm running a little late to my final class, after all, it's the first day. I can't imagine freshmen don't get lost all the time. But dammit, I hate not being on time, and this was poor planning on my part. All my fault.

Even worse, as I race along one footpath after another toward the art department building, I'm assaulted by memory after memory. It's overwhelming. The Kingston University

campus has always been one of my favorite places. When I was young, my mom and dad used to bring the three of us kids to this big grassy square in the middle of all the academic buildings for picnics. We'd run around playing hide-and-seek behind the hawthorn trees. It's sad to think those happy times are long gone ... and I'm unsure if the memories that this place invokes are going to help or hurt.

On my approach to Brandywine Hall, I find there are hawthorn trees here, too, along a pebbled path behind the building. There's even a bench situated under them. I wish I had time to stop and sit for a few minutes, calm the frantic beating of my heart, but I just don't.

Hurrying in the rear entrance, I quickly scan the room numbers listed beside each door as I stride down the hall. I'm looking for Studio A ... but how am I supposed to find a room that doesn't have an actual number?

I stop, hating that I'm turning in circles and becoming more agitated by the second that I'm in the right building, but somehow still lost as can be. A moment later, the same door I came in opens and clangs shut again. A guy with a nose ring and surprisingly good hair for a dude ambles slowly toward me, seemingly taking his time even though class started five minutes ago. He glances at me from under a full fringe of lashes, nodding just slightly before he continues on.

Shit. "Um. Hey, could you help me?" He turns back toward me, brows raised. *Oof.* He's intimidating as hell, his dark eyes pinning on me. But his grungy jeans and charcoal stained T-shirt scream art major, so, I put on a brave face. "Studio A? I'm late."

He jerks his head and gestures that I should follow him. We turn a corner and walk down a long hall, traversing the entire building. Of course, I'd come in on the exact opposite side from where I needed to be. "That's it right there. Good luck." He brushes his hair out of his eyes, a slight smirk teasing at his lips.

"Thanks?" I murmur, but he's already walking away, so I turn and let myself into the classroom. The professor, Dr.

Kinman, has already begun speaking, and with the setup of the room, all eyes are on me. I'm center stage, quite literally, where it's obvious either props or actual models stand for our observation. Shit, shit, shit.

I don't even know how it happens, but one minute, my sketchbook and box of drawing pencils is in my arms, and the next, they've clattered to the tile floor. I stare down, dumbfounded at the turn of events, and unable to understand how it happened.

Lifting my head, I meet Dr. Kinman's steely gray eyes. His jaw is twitching. *Oh, shit.* He's definitely not happy. "You're late. Your punctuality is important. Pick up your things and find a seat. Don't be late again."

"I'm so sorry," I murmur. "I misjudged how long it would take—"

In clear exasperation, he slashes a hand through the air, uncomfortably close to my nose. "Unnecessary explanations only waste more time."

My lips part in surprise at the aggressive stance he's taking with me, but I nod. He isn't at all the go-with-the-flow art teacher I imagined he'd be.

"Here." At my feet, a dark-haired guy has taken it upon himself to pick up my mess. He rises, handing me my things without looking at me because his eyes are narrowed on Dr. Kinman. Locked there, really.

I swallow hard. It's *Emory*. And he's staring our professor down like he might like to detach his head from his body. My eyes widen, and my heart rate increases as I watch the nonverbal face-off between the two of them. A shiver runs through me.

I don't know whether to be impressed or what, but Emory is *not* the first to look away. With a rough clearing of his throat, our professor refocuses his attention, addressing the rest of the class as he continues through the syllabus. Slowly, everyone's gaze shifts away from Emory and me. Old jerk. The crazy part is that he asked us to read the syllabus before

we got to class today, so missing five minutes of the recap shouldn't have been a huge deal. Still. I don't like being the center of the sort of shitstorm that mistake created, so I won't be late again.

I swallow, finding myself rooted to the floor. My eyes drift around the room, and I take a few deep breaths before hugging my things tightly to me. Is there even a seat available?

“Come on. This way,” Emory whispers, his voice all rough, like gravel. He puts a light hand on my shoulder, guiding me toward the back of the studio where there's an empty stool and easel. And that's when I realize, yep, it's right next to his, almost as if he were waiting for me. Or maybe it's that he seems a little scary at first glance, and no one else wanted to sit next to him.

As we reach our seats, he leans close. “I see now that the Calamity Jane nickname Benneti gave you is fitting. Funny that he should pick up on that so damn quickly, huh?”

I roll my eyes and shrug, setting my things down, then have a seat on the stool at my little station, my eyes furtively darting to the front of the room. Maybe I'm reading into what's not there, but it seems like the professor is purposely not looking in this direction.

From what he's saying, though, we'll be at our current stations for the entire semester. My eyes flick to Emory, my lips curving when I catch him watching me. I pick up one of my drawing pencils and poke him.

He waits until our grumpy asshole of a professor turns to point out something on the screen behind him before he meets my gaze. I carefully mouth, “Thank you.”

Waving away my show of gratitude like what he'd done was nothing, we both turn our attention to the front of the room. I'm surprised to find that this particular art class I'd picked out simply to fulfill an arts requirement involves pencil drawing, charcoals, watercolors, oil paints, and even pottery—a sampling of everything the art department has to offer.

My eyes wander to the pottery wheels on the far side of the room, remembering a movie my mom and I used to watch together. *Ghost*. Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore. I freaking loved the scenes with the two of them running their fingers through the clay together as the machine spun and spun. I really hope we get a shot at using those. I know this is only an intro to art class, though, so maybe we won't.

Dr. Kinman claps his hands, catching my attention again. "So, we're going to start off with simple drawings. You'll choose someone to work with and sketch their likeness."

A hand shoots up from a blonde on the other side of the room. "But you haven't taught us anything yet."

Dr. Kinman shoots her a condescending smirk. "There's a lot I can learn about you by seeing where you're starting from. Don't worry about what you draw or how. It's more what you *see* that I care about. You can't really make a mistake." He holds up a finger. "There's also a second part to the assignment that I'll let you in on with about five minutes remaining. Now, pair up and get started."

The entire class grumbles, but it seems kinda fun to me. I just need a partner. Sucking in a breath, I look around for a moment, watching the rest of the class pairing up before turning to the left. Emory's gaze is locked on me, and he huffs out a chuckle. "You never had a choice. It's you and me, Legacy."

It's not that I mind. I even had hoped he'd ask. But I can't help messing with him a bit. "What do you mean I didn't have a choice?"

"None of these people would argue with me."

"No?"

"Nope. Not when I'd tell them to fuck off." He works his jaw to the side, his brow arches again, and for a moment, I can't tell if he's teasing me or serious. I stare at him until he barks out a laugh. "Besides, you're going to love being my partner."

I bring my drawing pencil to the paper on my easel and squint at him, studying his facial features for a moment before I begin. He's ridiculously good looking. "Is that so?"

"Well, yeah. We already have the same taste in clothes." He nods toward the Metallica T-shirt I'm currently wearing. "I like that one, by the way."

I glance down at it, as if I didn't already know what I picked out to wear this morning. When I lift my gaze again, he's staring at me with a funny look on his face. He's also got his hand moving, supposedly drawing me, which is cracking me up because he's not concentrating for shit. He narrows his eyes on the shirt, then gestures with a jut of his chiseled chin. "I think if you want to keep the Guns N' Roses shirt, I'm going to need that one."

My head jerks, and so does my pencil. "Shit." I clench my teeth together. "You made me mess up."

"Did not. Didn't you hear him? Nothing you do in this exercise is a mistake."

"Yeah, I don't think that's what he meant by the there-are-no-mistakes comment. And this shirt won't even fit you," I huff out with a wink. I sit up straighter, demonstrating how it barely stretches enough to allow room for my breasts, much less his muscle-bound chest.

He'd been sketching very quickly until I did that, but his hand is now frozen over the paper. I keep working, not sure what to make of it, because he's not looking at me. His stare is off at the front of the room. It's locked on our professor. Who is, coincidentally, watching me with interest.

A moment later, Emory's drawing pencil snaps in his fingers. "He needs to keep his eyeballs to himself."

"I—" I stop, frowning. "Did I do something?"

"No. Don't worry about it." He shakes his head, mumbling, "He'll be lucky if he can see out of his two black eyes if he keeps looking at you like that."

Shit. Is my shirt indecent or something? I glance down at myself. No. It's not. All I did was sit up straight and

demonstrate that there was no way Emory's chest was fitting in my shirt. I hadn't meant to call attention to myself. I don't even have anything up top worth looking at. In fact, that's the last thing I *ever* want.

Emory's voice comes out gruff and gravelly, catching my chin with his fingers. "Look at me. I said not to worry about him. You didn't do anything wrong." He clears his throat. "And for the record, I didn't want to wear the shirt." He drops his hand from my face, resting it on his thigh instead.

My brow quirks up. "Is there some other reason you want it?"

"Last night?" He clears his throat. "When you hugged me before you went into your house?"

"Yeah. What about it?" I did hug him in a grateful, flustered sort of way. It'd been nice. A quick, friendly gesture. I frown.

"You just smelled really good. That's all."

For several seconds, neither of us move. Then my mouth forms an O before I bite down on my lip. Scraping my teeth over the delicate skin, I shake my head at him, slowly, a hint of a smile curving my lips as my cheeks flame with heat. A moment later, he cocks his head to the side and smoothly picks up another pencil to get back to work.

My exhale is shaky, but I try to refocus. I study the cut of his jaw and cheekbones with bold intensity, but it's difficult to settle back into drawing, knowing he's observing me to the same disturbing degree. Looking at every nuance of my face. My hands become sweatier the longer we do this until holding the pencil becomes difficult. *Shit*. We probably don't have much more time to work, and I only have half of his face sketched.

That's enough to push me into action. I move the pencil smoothly over the paper, hoping what I've drawn won't be too embarrassing to share. We've been working quietly for several minutes when I blurt, "You know, you look really ... familiar."

"I do?"

More heat hits my face, and I mumble with a shrug. “Um. I think it’s because you look a little like Superman.” *Oh, wow. And here you thought it was the drawing itself that might be embarrassing. Nope. Just your runaway mouth.*

He eyes me curiously while stroking his chin between fingers and thumb, as if he’s truly considering my revelation. “Well, which one? Because that’s kinda epically important.”

At his question, I can’t help but bring the pencil to my lips, tapping it there while I think. “Honestly? You look most like the animated version from *Superman: Man of Tomorrow*.” I huff out a laugh, ducking my head.

He’s silent, staring at me while I panic internally that I’ve let loose way too much of my inner nerd. “So ... like a cartoon.” His brow arches high on his forehead in a way I find amusing.

I look away, trying to hold in more laughter that wants to burst free. Tipping my head to the side, I offer, “But you’re like a *handsome* cartoon.”

He closes his eyes, his silent laughter making his shoulders and chest jerk. I cover my mouth as our eyes meet and hold, his dark ones to my green. I’m still lost in the connection when Dr. Kinman barks out, “Okay, now look at your drawing and write as many words as you can think of to describe your partner. The key here is that I don’t want to know what you *know* about this person. And I don’t want you to ask them questions. I only want you to write down what you see evidence of in your sketch. What did you manage to understand about your partner that ended up on the paper? Some of you might not have very much to go on.” The dick laughs. “Don’t cheat. And remember, this is a *college* art class. On Wednesday, I expect you to be willing to share the thought process for why you chose each word. You’ve got five minutes remaining.”

I shoot Emory a nervous look, then alternately stare at my sketch and steal peeks at him as he jots what I assume are words that somehow describe me—the likeness of me—on his paper. Clenching my teeth, I stare at my drawing so I can do

the same for him. I release a steady breath as I write the word *protective* on the paper, then *strong-willed*. The altercation with the prof earlier tells me a bit, too, and I can see in his eyes much of the time he lives right on the edge of anger. *Quick-tempered*. I stare at him for a moment, biting my lip as I hesitate, but then finally decide that *hero complex* also fits him to a T. I have, after all, drawn him with an open button-down shirt and an S on his chest. The bell for the end of our class session rings, and Emory immediately points at my sketchbook with his pencil. “Lemme see.”

“No way. Not until I see yours.”

He shrugs. “Have a look.”

At first, I don’t want to, but he sticks it right in front of my face.

Go figure, he can actually draw. Compared to his, mine looks like a little kid drew it. He’d written *bold*, *fierce*, *resilient*, and *determined*.

Ha. If only he knew it’s more like *overwhelmed*, *constantly worried*, *on edge*, and *traumatized*. I glance back at my own drawing with a sigh. “Fine, you can look. But don’t make fun of me. It’s the first day of class.”

“I’m sure it looks great.” He winks at me, pointing at his face. “Hard to mess this up, right?”

I laugh. “Oh, you’d be surprised.” I glance at my drawing one more time before turning my sketchbook to show him.

He studies it, gaze roaming over both the sketch of his likeness and the words I’d chosen, and his brows snap together. A storm brews in his dark eyes that has my throat going dry. A moment later, he gets up and walks out of the studio without a word.

Okay. I know I’m no Picasso, but I’m not *that* bad. It’s only a stupid assignment. What the fuck just happened?

FIFTEEN

ROYAL

RUNNING IS USUALLY THE ONE SUREFIRE WAY I KNOW OF TO clear my mind. I missed it like crazy when I was in prison. An hour a day outside with a bunch of other assholes didn't cut it. Since getting out, I've gone right back to my old habits, pounding the pavement whenever things are overwhelming or there's lots of shit on my mind.

Only now the shit on my mind is right in front of my face, and even a good run isn't enough for me to feel better about it. I ran myself hard, too, the evidence of it pouring down my chest and back. As I enter the house, I hear voices coming from the kitchen area. Don't particularly feel like talking to anyone, but I need water, so fuck it.

The moment I enter the room where a couple of the guys are gathered, my jaw locks and my eyes harden. Case in point. Fucking Davis is right here. In my kitchen. Talking to people I know and acting like everything is all good. Motherfucking ex-friends are the worst.

"What's up, Royal?" Dan, the big motherfucker who's a year ahead of me, grins. He's kinda happy-go-lucky most of the time until he's pissed off. At that point, he'd probably chop the offender's toes off and feed them to a dog. No one wants to be on his bad side. Makes me wonder what his life was like before SIN. Fucked if I'll ever ask, though.

I nod at him. "Nothing much. Need water and a shower." I turn to the fridge and open it, staring inside as if the appliance holds the answers to how to deal with the bastard that is my

ex-friend watching my every move. I can't even fucking concentrate with the douchebag in the room.

"You always did like to run." Davis's voice is low. And I fucking hate that he thinks he has a right to pretend like he knows me anymore.

We might live in the same house, but I don't owe him a damn thing. Paid my dues. Survived the system. All I want to do is put my troubling past behind me. His ugly mug in my face 24-7 isn't going to help, as it's a reminder of how angry he was with me at my drunken confession and how fucking stupid we were in the moments that followed. I deserve to feel whatever way I want about him. And right now, I'm pissed. He'd best stay out of my way. I grab a bottle of water and walk out without another word, heading upstairs to my room.

"Yo. Royal. Is that you?" Wilder pokes his head out of his doorway, toying with a necklace he often wears. "I wanted to talk to you for a sec."

"Yeah?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were aware of a couple things." He rubs his hand over a smooth-shaven cheek. "It's about Echo."

My brows immediately knit together. His tone is a bit off. It's setting off alarm bells in my head. I blow out a hard breath, swiping one hand through my sweaty hair. "Can it wait until after I shower?"

He shrugs. "I guess. I'll be studying. Already had a heap of work piled on me today."

"Well, that sucks. I thought you were taking it easy this semester."

Huffing out a laugh, he shakes his head. "Only in that I'm finally fulfilling that arts requirement, so I get to doodle or whatever a few hours a week in an art class. The rest of the courses I need before nursing school are all fucking tough."

"That sucks. Mine are fine so far. Probably for the best because I have enough shit to deal with at the moment. I'll be quick, then we can talk. You seen Beckham around?"

“Nah, not since this morning.” He inhales deeply, and he may think he hides it well, but I can see I’ve moved into territory he’d rather not be discussing. *Interesting*. His gaze skirts away from me.

“Cool. Give me ten, and I’ll join you,” I grit out, then duck into my room. Inside, I toe off my running shoes, then peel off my socks before making a beeline for the bathroom. I don’t have a fucking clue what makes me do it, but I glance out the sole window, only to stop dead in my tracks. Echo. I can see directly into her bedroom from here. The other day, I actually watched Beckham peeping on her, just like I’d asked him to. Sick fuck was under her window in a black hoodie and mask. I know he gets off on this shit. He’s a bit obsessive. Can’t help but wonder if it has something to do with why he’s at SIN in the first place. Could be fucking anything, though.

I bring my attention back to the girl across the way, sprawled across her mattress. It looks like she’s reading a textbook or something, and she’s got a notebook on the bed with her, too, pencil in hand. My eyes roam from what she’s working on to the dipped curve of her back, then up and over the rounded one of her ass, and down her shapely legs. If I’m not mistaken from the concert tour info on the back of her T-shirt, she’s wearing the same outfit she had on earlier. It’s a Metallica T-shirt. She used to wear it all the time in high school.

Shucking my athletic shorts from my hips, I stand there, buck naked, continuing to watch her alternately tap her pencil against her lips and jot things down in her notebook.

Fuck. My body stirs as I look at her, the way it always has—it’s undeniable the pull I have toward her. The need I have for her. Even when it was wrong. Even when I shouldn’t have been fucking looking at her at all.

It’s enough to make a man insane. She most definitely isn’t the kind of girl I want. She ripped my heart out. And now? She’s playing with my head by being here. And it’s so fucking tempting to retaliate.

With a disgruntled groan, I turn on the water and step into my walk-in shower. The water is cool, just how I like it post-run, but it does nothing to soothe the heat rolling through my veins. I squirt some soap into my hands and run them over my body, unable to think of anything else. I can't get the mental image of her out of my head, not even when I close my eyes. She's there, like a plague to my system, a sickness that I can't remove. It wouldn't matter if I tried to hack my need for her out of me with a knife. It'd just come back, and with a vengeance, like it has ever since she got to Kingston University.

I'm so fucking aware of her proximity, I can hardly catch my breath. My hands roam over my body. This is what she'd felt. It'd been fucking ecstasy to have my hands on her. Touching her. Slipping my fingers along her wet pussy. *Fuck*. She'd always been wet for me. That's how I knew no matter what she said or did, she wanted me. That her hate-filled words were all a motherfucking game.

I rest one hand on the tiles of the shower, reaching between my legs to grasp my aching cock. It wants her so badly it weeps for her. I run my thumb over the moisture beading at the tip, and smear it over me, knowing it's all for her. With a heavy groan, I begin to stroke myself. It feels so fucking good. It *always* does.

I swear when she decided I wasn't enough for her, she cursed me so that I'd want her until the day I fucking died. And now? She's here, within my grasp again, and I want more. It's a strange mixture of hatred and lust that's spinning around in my head, making me a feral beast. I want to chase her down and take a motherfucking bite.

I gasp as my dick twitches hard in my hand. It knows what it's been missing. I want to plunge deep into her tight little cunt. Feel the velvety soft walls clamp down hard, trying to hold me inside. Pull out. Ram back in. Listen to the snap of my hips hitting her ass cheeks. Watch the way her eyes become unfocused as I fuck her so good her legs quake as she screams my name. Remind her of everything she threw away.

Remind her how she treated me like trash. She never reached out. Not once.

My heart pumps the blood through me so hard, I wonder if I'm going to pass out, hard dick in hand, before I can finish. But I keep going, imagining her legs spread out before me, her pink pussy on display, glistening with arousal. Dripping with it. I want my face between her legs. I'd feast on her flesh, lap up every bit of her juices, make her lose all control. Make her beg for the orgasm.

And then, I'd leave. Like she left me.

I tighten my fist around my erection, until it's almost too much, then fuck my hand like a brute, hips pistoning fast. The wet squelching sounds created by what I'm doing, well I'll pretend that's the sound of her cunt taking my dick. And with my eyes clamped shut, I can imagine it's her. I've had so much practice going somewhere else in my head while I sought release. Because if I hadn't, I'd never have survived.

Such a good little princess. Such a good girl. Give me that tight, wet pussy. Squeeze me tighter, baby. You know you want me. You know you like this. Take it. Take every fucking inch. Milk me dry.

With a shout, I unload, hot jets of cum erupting from my dick like a volcano. I paint her little cunt with it, stroking myself all the while, until I'm spent.

I pry open my eyes to see the spray from the shower washing the evidence of my orgasm down the tiled wall and into the drain. My mind is tormented. Torn between the girl I thought she was and the one she's proved herself to be.

I finish washing up and, with a towel wrapped around my waist, go immediately back to the window. She's no longer in her room. My teeth grind down hard, making the muscles in my jaw pop and twitch. Anger at my inability to get her off my mind crashes through me, and I tear myself from the window and head for the bedroom to throw on some clothes before I go see Wilder.

Wilder ... who wants to talk about Echo.

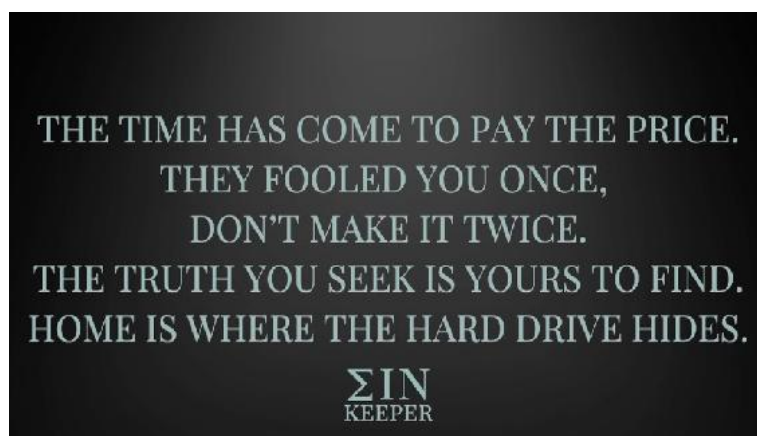
Fuck. Me.

Before I can get to my dresser, I stop, mouth going absolutely dry. My eyes land on a black envelope propped against my pillow.

Oh, what the fresh fucking hell is this? I take a few careful breaths. It can only really be one thing. I haven't gotten a Sin Keeper card since the very first one. Ever since I accepted his terms, I've been dangling in the balance, waiting for the other shoe to drop. My first one arrived while I was still in prison. If I accepted the scholarship to KU and the space that'd been reserved for me in SIN, I'd be released but should expect to pay down the road. The agreement came at a price, but I accepted, eager to fly free of the cage I'd been locked away in.

But I never dreamed it'd be more than a year before finding out exactly what the Sin Keeper had in store for me. I close my eyes, resting my hands on my hips. There's probably a good chance I don't want anything to do with whatever is in this envelope. And it shows up right when my life is set to detonate again.

There's no sense in putting it off. I pick it up, turning it over in my hands for a moment before I slide my finger under the flap. Inhaling deeply, I pull a black piece of card stock out and allow my eyes to skim over the silver writing, taking in what it says.



My brows draw sharply together. Well, what the fuck does that even mean? I chew on the inside of my cheek for several seconds while I contemplate each line and word. How they

connect. What they might be trying to tell me—or, rather, what the Sin Keeper is trying to tell me.

I might have to sit with this for a bit. I don't even want to hazard a guess as to who "they" are. Home. A hard drive. Seriously. I'm supposed to be able to figure this out? What is he trying to tell me?

I run a hand through my damp hair. The kicker is I can't talk to anyone about it because that's one of the rules we have to abide by. Everyone deals with their own shitty tasks. My teeth grind together as I ponder the card again. Not sharing information is what we all agreed to—but I don't have to fucking like it. With a sigh, I tuck the card into the drawer at my bedside before moving to the dresser to pull out a pair of athletic shorts.

A moment later, I stop, one leg in my shorts and one out as it hits me what the card could be telling me to do. It's the only thing that makes sense. My insides twist like a wicked beast is in there clutching at my organs. Fuck, I think I have to go back. And the very thought of it puts me on edge.

As I approach Wilder's room, Beckham's voice drifts out to me. *Good*. I want his take on last night, too. I've been messed up about it all day and haven't gotten a chance to talk to either of them. Not while sober, anyway. There'd been a lot of fucked-up, angry slamming around the dressing room back at the warehouse that Beckham had witnessed, but no real discussion of anything. I was too fucking mad to talk, even though he'd tried to calm me enough to have a rational discussion. That's all I remember before the tequila had taken hold of me and made me its bitch.

The door is open, and I could swear their words are a little heated, but when I walk in, the conversation stops. My brows go up.

Wilder sits on the edge of his bed and Beckham has sprawled himself across a leather chair with his leg thrown over the arm. A glass with a few fingers of an amber-colored liquid dangles from his hand. Wilder's gaze wrenches from Beckham at my appearance.

“Am I interrupting?” The air is thick with something I can’t quite put my finger on.

Wilder clears his throat, shaking his head. “Never, Kaplan. Come on in.”

The eye roll from Beckham as he takes a large swallow of his drink tells me I’ve absolutely interrupted something, but it’s none of my fucking business. They have a unique friendship. Or is it a relationship? I’ve wondered a time or two lately whether or not they’re fucking, but they haven’t said as much to me, so I’m not uttering a word.

I wander in, bracing my elbow on the dresser beside the door. “So ...”

Beckham’s brow quirks up. “I wondered how long it’d take you to talk to us about last night.” He chuckles. “Seems like the hangover is pretty nasty.”

My head still throbs, reminding me with each vicious beat of the sheer insanity the night had brought. “Yeah. It was all I could do to get my ass to class. Fuckin’ tequila almost did me in.” I smirk, my gaze first landing on Wilder before it shifts to Beckham. “Glad to see you shifted away from the evil tequila.”

“Wilder’s good bourbon has been my hair of the dog today.” Beckham shoots me a wink at the same time a disgruntled groan falls from Wilder’s lips. “Nurse Wilder believes alcohol will not cure a hangover.”

Wilder’s words come out on a growl. “It fucking doesn’t. It’s a myth.”

Ignoring the strain between them, I mutter, “How did I even get home? Or into my fucking bed?”

“I Ubered us home, then our resident nursing student hauled your ass upstairs—quite impressive, by the way.” Beckham’s eyes travel to Wilder for a moment, boldly roaming his body, before coming back to study me. “You weren’t on the bed hardly a minute before you were out for the count.”

Wilder huffs out a laugh from behind his hand as he eyes me. “Bear didn’t knock you out, but that tequila sure as fuck did.”

“Cute.” I exhale hard, running a hand over my jaw. “What did you want to talk about before I decide you need my fist in your face?”

He smirks for a second before his expression gets serious. “So, first ... I guess your lack of sharing about whatever happened with Echo in the dressing room means that’s off-limits.”

I huff out a breath. “She— I—” My jaw tightens. “Let’s just say I made sure she understood me.”

“Understood what, exactly?” Beckham squints as he observes me. It makes me twitchy.

“I reminded her of our past. Let her know I haven’t forgotten a fucking thing that transpired between us. I *know* her.”

“Fair enough, I guess.” Running a few fingers over his lips, Wilder’s expression is thoughtful.

“Got something else to say?” I prod, wanting to hear every bit of what he might have learned while he was alone with her.

He sighs. “Echo mentioned something last night that ... well, you hadn’t previously mentioned to us. I wasn’t sure if it was important, if it’s something you don’t want to talk about, or what.”

My gaze bounces between the two of them. Beckham’s slowly nodding, so whatever it is, he’s fully aware.

“Spit it out.” My voice is a bit clipped, but mostly because I’m irritated they have information I don’t. Which is downright fucking stupid, considering I asked them to watch her. I’ve gotta get my head right.

Wilder gives a half-hearted wince. “So, while we were walking home, Echo mentioned that you and Davis— That he used to be your best friend.” He pauses, looking for all the

world like he wants to shoot more questions my way. To his credit, he holds back, letting me take the lead.

I work my jaw to the side. “She told you that, huh?”

They exchange a look, then Beckham holds out his hands. “We get it. You have things concerning her—and obviously Davis—that you’d rather not discuss. But if we’re going to help you, be aware we’re going to hear shit in the process.”

Wilder leans back, resting his hands on the mattress. “Just trying to be up-front with you, man. You should also know, she’s in my art class. I’m learning a lot about her that I kinda like.”

The muscle at the back of my jaw twitches. I blink. “Like what?”

Wilder shrugs his shoulders, staring down at the tattoo on his forearm for a moment and tracing his fingers over the Latin words I know are there.

“She’s ... insightful. She sees too damn much.” There’s something in the way he looks away from me that has me even more curious. I narrow my eyes and lift my brows, waiting for him to expand on his observations. “She just ... gets me. I don’t really know how. It kinda freaked me out, to be honest, at how close she came to my truth with our very first partner assignment.” Wilder releases a sigh, holding out a hand. “I like her, man. And I hope that’s not going to be problematic for you.” His eyes bore into mine, as if he’s trying to tell me something—and that something I probably won’t like. “Look, I’ll keep trying to help you, watch her, talk to her to see what information I can get from her. But you need to know, there might be a point where I have to draw the line.”

Beckham’s eyes connect with mine, and I get a sense he’s thinking *I’m changing the subject because you’re about to go off*. Our resident peacemaker doesn’t like it when we argue, so it makes sense he’d want to steer the course of our conversation. He rubs his hand over his chest, then peers carefully at me. “Are you sure you can’t tell us anything more about Davis? He lives here. You have beef with him. It’d be

easier if we knew why. Just a hint of fucking anything you can share with us. *Please.*”

I prop my hands on my hips and stare boldly at Beckham, then at Wilder. As I walk away, I toss over my shoulder, “Yeah, sure. Here’s a little tidbit. I was driving Davis’s car the night my life went to shit.”

SIXTEEN

BECKHAM

FOR SEVERAL UNCOMFORTABLE SECONDS, WILDER AND I STARE at the doorway Royal just exited through. My head frantically attempts to wrap around the tiny bomb he'd dropped on us about the night that landed him in prison. "Was I wrong to ask?"

"Who the fuck knows. And I sure hope that doesn't mean you're about to get tossed out on your ass for prodding at him for information."

I suck in a breath, considering his words. Finally, I grit out, "I don't get why it's a big fucking deal when we're trying to help him." My eyes scan the room, wondering if there are cameras in here—or everywhere for that matter—that the Sin Keeper watches. Because if so, we've been giving him a lot of spank-bank material—if he's into gay porn, that is. I inwardly chuckle at the idea of the masked freak sporting a huge boner while glued to a computer monitor because he can't get enough. I dare someone to deny how hot we are together. Combustible is more like it.

Wilder's lips press together as he stares at me. "What the fuck are you thinking about?"

"You don't wanna know, trust me." I get up, setting my drink down on the table next to the chair, then walk over to where Wilder still sits half-reclined on the bed. I want to step between his legs and run my hands through his hair. Feel his lips on my bare chest. But I shouldn't. He's my friend, first and foremost, and he made it clear earlier that he doesn't want to discuss our situationship. I think that's what I'd call it

because when the right mood or *situation* strikes, Wilder can be persuaded to join me in a little naked fun.

But apparently broad daylight is not the time to tell him that I love his bedazzled dick, which is what happened right before Royal walked in. I thought it was funny ... but Wilder didn't appreciate the humor in it at all. I can't help that his piercings attract my attention like he's using some sort of Beckham homing beacon.

Come to think of it, I should probably stop thinking with my dick for two seconds. We have some important things to discuss. I crawl onto the bed and lie on my side so I can face him in the same relaxed stance he's taken. "So ... is whatever went down connected to the wreck Davis was talking about, do you think?"

A frown slips onto Wilder's face, and he glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "What? What are you talking about?"

Shaking my head, I poke him in the ribs. "Come on, you remember. The first day Davis was here he asked if Royal was going to wreck another of his cars." I raise a brow at his confused expression. "He said it while Royal was whaling on him. But obviously before he punched him so many times he couldn't speak."

Wilder snorts, turning his head. "Right. Yeah, okay I'm with you now. So, Royal wrecked Davis's car. And Royal says he was driving Davis's car the night everything went to hell."

"Right. Thank fuck. I was beginning to worry that you've taken one too many hits to the head."

He rolls his eyes, then lifts off his elbow to shove me, sending me to the flat of my back. I laugh heartily, ready to tell him to come and get it when he goes from playful to not in two seconds flat. I study him for a moment before I cautiously grit out, "What?" The way he's looking off into space has me worried.

He turns his head, staring intently into my eyes, then murmurs, "Maybe Echo was in the car with him? The night he wrecked."

I flinch because it strikes me that he may have hit on something. “Could be.” My brow pinches together as I consider the entire debacle again. There has to be more to it. “Davis is straight up pissed off at Royal and vice versa. But from what I’ve pieced together, Royal feels like Echo is the one who really ruined his life. He’s angry with Davis, too, but it’s not the same. So that’s weird. But then, if we consider Echo—she’s definitely *more* than upset with Royal. But she’s also ... in a defensive mode of sorts. He makes her anxious in a way that worries me a whole lot. Like she sees his anger-filled thunderclouds coming and is battening the hatches and preparing for the storm, all the while giving him the bird and telling him to fuck off”—I clear my throat—“because she’s a little feisty like that.”

Wilder nods, a hint of a grin on his lips. *Motherfucker*. He really does like her. Internally, I groan, because it’ll probably cause more trouble.

Then again, I should not be one to talk. I’m more than mildly obsessed with the girl. Hell, watching every move she makes is my new favorite pastime. I can’t fucking get enough. We’re all fucking screwed. I release a long, beleaguered sigh. “You’re right. If I were her brother, I wouldn’t be feeling good about Royal being anywhere near Echo.”

“We know she doesn’t drive. Or at least, we haven’t seen her do so.” Wilder’s got this determined, I’m-gonna-get-to-the-bottom-of-this expression stamped all over his face. It does something for me.

Trying to concentrate, I offer, “Maybe we’re reading too much into the whole accident thing.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he breathes out, “but I don’t fucking think so. We might not see it exactly right yet, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t something there.”

Rolling to my side again, I put us nose-to-nose. “You want to know what’s wrong so you can swoop in and fix it. But I think you should put it out of your mind for now.” I lean in, my lips ghosting over his. My whiskey tongue slips out to lick, but he pulls back, inhaling sharply.

“Beckham,” he growls, pushing from the bed and stands, staring down at me. He shakes his head, his dark eyes probing mine. “When are you going to fucking figure it out?” He stalks out the door.

I frown. One second he was fine, then I try to kiss him and — Does he think he’s just a booty call or something? That isn’t what this is. Not to me. He’s so much more. He’s Wilder. And I’ve always wanted Wilder. Dammit, there’s no way I’m allowing this runaway train we’re on together to travel in reverse. But I don’t know how to keep us from derailing if he won’t fucking talk to me. I’m an open book. But he’s so, so closed off sometimes, it’s hard for me to read him.

I hang out in his bed for a while, smelling him on the sheets, until it becomes clear he’s not coming back.



DRESSED ALL IN BLACK, I wait until well after dark falls, biding my time until I can have my Echo fix. I don’t have a clue where fuckin’ Wilder took off to, and Royal has shut himself in his room, not even coming out for dinner. Seems like none of us are happy with how this day has unfolded. But maybe I can salvage at least a small piece of it for myself.

I make one last pass through our house, taking account of where everyone is, because the last thing I need is for someone to see what I’m up to. Most of the SIN brothers are down in the basement watching some UFC recap, and the rest are already in their rooms for the night.

Satisfied, I slip cautiously from the house and circle quietly around to the side facing TZE. I glance at all the windows on this side of our house and find them dark. Good.

My back is flat against the cool stone as I edge along the perimeter of the sorority house. I watch for any indication that the ladies of TZE are still moving about, but find only a few

lights on. Nothing crazy. It's around eleven. I'd think that with another first day of classes happening tomorrow that many of them will be asleep already.

But not Echo. She's just gotten into the shower. There are two windows in her suite—one is in her bathroom, the other her bedroom. I glance at the bathroom window, wanting nothing more than to take a good long look ... but that's not the plan for tonight. I pull my mask over my face and move toward her bedroom window. Hesitating only for a moment, I place my gloved hands on the window and give it a gentle shove upward. Fuck yes. It's unlocked.

A rush of excitement bursts through me. *Fuck*. What if she knows I've come to visit her more than once? Maybe she knows I've been watching. And ... my brain twists because I know. I know it's wrong. But my mind fogs, and I let myself fantasize that the unlocked window is a sign. She's inviting me in. She wants me to come see her. She needs me. One heavy breath after another escapes me as I slowly slide the window up, up, up, until there's room enough for me to fold my body in half and step through. Heat snakes through my body, like a long-lost lover. I inhale deeply. I'm home.

Once inside, I lower the window behind me, then turn around to survey the room. The bedroom is dark, but there's a soft, flickering light coming from the bathroom. The water from the shower rains down in there, audible even through the partially closed door. She's got music playing, probably from her phone, by the sound quality. I lift my mask and walk around, looking at the random things sitting on her night table and dresser. A hair tie. A pen. A framed photo of a couple who I'd imagine are her parents. Another of Echo, Davis, and another girl, maybe an older sister. They look similar enough. I pick up a bottle of lotion, flipping the cap open and sniffing. Smells like her.

Smells really fucking good. In fact, it's the same scent wafting through the door from the bathroom. My heart beats erratically in my chest because I can't resist doing a deeper dive into all things Echo. I slide a drawer open, peering inside. Jackpot. I sift my gloved hands through a sea of panties and

bras. My fingers find what appear to be a silky-soft pair and pull them out, stuffing them into my pocket.

The more I touch her things, the more my longing for her increases. I need to see her, so I pull my mask back down and edge toward the bathroom door. I pause, smiling, when I hear her voice reverberating off the walls of the bathroom. My Echo is a ballad-in-the-shower kind of girl. She's humming along to The Veronicas' "You Ruin Me"—every once in a while belting out a few of the lyrics—and I can't resist easing the door open the slightest bit for a peek.

The room is dim, the light from flickering candles dancing across the walls. It's soothing. A little sexy. And it's easier for me to hide in the shadows. Her back is to me, which means I can push this a tiny bit further.

I stand just inside the door for a few moments—utterly, painfully still—as I let out a steady, quiet exhale. The room is full of steam, and I don't know what possesses me, but since her back is still to me, I cautiously creep over to the mirror, put my gloved finger to the glass, and write her a note.

Pleased with myself, I turn, watching the distorted shape of the object of my obsession through the shower glass. She's fucking divine. All pale, soft skin I'd love to put my lips on, which contrasts with the reddish hue that she's dyed her hair. She's fucking bold, I'll give her that. And she has delicate curves in all the places a man likes to grab hold of. I'd love to reach out and slide my hands over her body. Learn every inch of her. I've already done it with my eyes a thousand times at this point, but I'd let my fingers trail a path from her head to her toes, from her front to her back. And then I'd do it all over again. Drink her the fuck in.

And the thing is, she likes me. She's comfortable around me. That's why despite Royal looking like he was going to kill me for patting her ass last night, her reaction had been quite different. She'd just glanced over her shoulder, shaking her head in amusement at the *What? Sometimes I'm naughty* look I'd shot her. She's a fan of Benneti for fucking sure.

The water shutting off has my eyes going wide. I sidestep into her closet as she leans out to grab a towel. I don't think she saw me. She'd have screamed if she had, right? Using the utmost care, I ease my way behind a couple long dresses, then crouch down. If she turns the light on, I'm still probably screwed.

I listen to the sounds of her pulling another towel off the rack, the intermittent drip of water from the shower ... and then her gasp when she sees the message I left for her. *Hello, gorgeous.*

There's a muttered "What the fuck?" Interestingly enough, she must stand there for a full thirty seconds because there's no sound at all indicating movement. I hold my breath when she finally does turn on the lights, then comes back to blow out the candles and turn off the music. "What is this, fucking hazing?" she whispers under her breath. I hear some light squeaking, which I assume is her hand against the mirror as she swipes my note away. After that, her footsteps head out of the room and the lights go off.

I wait a long time, listening to the sounds of her opening and closing a couple drawers, then the soft whisper of the clothing as it settles over her skin. The mattress creaks a bit, and I imagine she's climbing into the bed. Maybe she's wearing yet another of the concert T-shirts she's so fond of and only a pair of panties. Will she miss the ones in my pocket? Realize they're gone? Did I pick out favorites? I reach my hand inside, imagining how the silky texture will feel against my bare fingers. I groan internally, thinking about them covering her pussy. Blood surges toward my cock, but I have to ignore the growing need. For now.

After a while, I stealthily leave the closet, crossing to the mirror. This time, I pick up a pink lipstick from the counter and write a second note across the surface. I complete the message with a smiley face. With that done, I poke my masked head out the door, then, when I'm satisfied she's asleep, I slip from the bathroom, cautiously waiting for my eyes to adjust. She hasn't said a peep, and as I listen closely, her breathing is steady and even. Definitely asleep.

Her phone vibrates briefly on the table next to her bed with a text notification. Scares the shit out of me because if she opens her eyes ...

She doesn't move, the poor thing. The first day of classes must have worn her out. My brain skips for a second, remembering that Wilder said he has a class with her. Lucky fucking bastard.

Jerking myself back to the task at hand, I figure I may as well take a look at her phone notifications if I can. See if I can discern anything from them. Tapping the screen, I frown. It's easier than I thought. She has no passcode locking her phone. I'd tell her she should fix that, but then again, that'd make everything I've been asked to do a whole lot more difficult. Right now, it's like stealing candy from a baby.

A glance at the top of the message screen tells me the sender of the latest text is a girl named Kara. Based on a cursory glance at the content of the messages, I'm going to guess this is the big sister from the photo.

Davis says you're ignoring him.

Tell Davis to fuck himself.

You're still pissed.

Yes, I'm pissed.

You would be, too.

Yeah, sorry. You're right.

So Davis and Echo are also at odds right now. Good to know. Could be useful.

Like a pervert, I stand at Echo's bedside, watching her for way too fucking long. She's asleep now. Nothing more to see here.

But a moment later, without opening her eyes, her arm darts out to the side, fumbling for the drawer in the table beside her. Holy fucking hell, she's awake. And I am standing right. Fucking. Here. Sliding the drawer open, she grabs at something before rolling over onto her stomach, face in the pillow. Her hand sneaks under her body.

My brows draw together, confused until I hear the telltale buzz of a vibrator muffled by the bedding and her body.

Oh, fucking hell.

With my eyes glued to her, her hips undulate in a steady rhythm at first, but then as she gets more into it, her body jerks out of her control, chasing the orgasm she's after. On a frustrated gasp, she lunges from her prone position to her knees, the sheet falling away from her body. She peels the midriff-baring T-shirt over her head and tears out of her underwear. Fully naked, she hits the mattress again, hand back between her legs, body writhing, movements frantic. How I wish I were her motherfucking mattress, or the cool sheets beneath her. But it's okay. Watching is enough for now. I push my rock-hard dick down. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined I'd be treated to a show like this.

And these moments, they're mine and hers alone. Mine and hers. She's gifting them to me, gifting *herself* to me. I gladly accept, relishing in her quick intake of breath, delighting in every fucking moan. Her pale body is so fucking gorgeous in the moonlight coming in from the window, her skin now soft and dewy looking as her body temperature rises. Sweat forms on her back. *Fuuuck*. I want to run my tongue over her flesh. Taste her everywhere, but most especially between her legs. They're spread wide just for me, and from here, I have the most beautiful view of her pussy and asshole. Yeah. Definitely want to lap up every bit of her with my tongue. She has to be dripping wet if the groans tearing from her lips are any indication. And she's so fucking cute, trying to mask the noises she's making by pressing her face into the pillow. But it's no good. I hear them all the same. They're like music to my fucked-up ears. A sick, sexy symphony.

Regretfully, as she reaches orgasm, and her pants heave from her hips, I cross to the window. Knowing she's way too into what she's doing to notice any-fucking-thing else, I slowly raise the window, then wait there while her body goes rigid, riding right on the edge of bliss before it goes completely lax. She writhes in pleasure as I bear witness to the

way she loses all control. *That's it, baby. That's Beck's good girl.*

I breathe carefully as she finishes. So fucking gorgeous. I wish I could watch her all the damn time. And I really wish I could be here to see it whenever she turns the lights on in the bathroom.

We'll see how she handles the second note I left her.

SEVENTEEN

ROYAL

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE BEING SO PISSED OFF I'M incapable of concentrating on anything. I have reading to do for two of my classes, but that isn't happening when I'm this agitated. I hadn't felt like eating dinner, either, as I'd been afraid it'd roll around in my stomach, creating havoc in my already burdened system. I still feel hungover. Damn Echo for putting me in the position where I had to drink to deal with her actions. *Again.* She'd invaded a place that has been a sanctuary for me the last year. The place I could go to punch the shit out of my demons. But here she is, the ultimate distraction. Not only does looking at her bring back that horrific night, but I'm worried I'm destined to chase her for all of eternity.

With all those thoughts swirling through my head, I've been here for fucking hours. Lying on my bed. Listening to music. Trying not to think about how I can go over to my window and look down to see what she's doing. Is she thinking about me? Second-guessing her choice to come to KU? Well, I fucking hope she's as worked up about this entire clusterfuck as I am.

There's a chance if she stays here that every bit of our past that I haven't wanted to think about ever again and all the things I don't want any-fucking-one to know will come tumbling out. My monsters are on the verge of creeping and crawling out from under my skin where I keep them chained up. And they'll fucking roar their displeasure at being dragged out into the daylight.

I exhale unsteadily, my jaw locked tight. As one song ends and another begins, I swallow hard and close my eyes. Finally, I begin to drift as the saddest lyrics wash over me.

Rage. How could she do this to me? I tip the bottle to my lips again, attempting to drown the thoughts crashing through me.

“Royal. No. Fucking give them to me, asshole. It’s my car.”

Wind blowing in my hair. Speed so blinding, there’s no way we’ll lose. I blink as everything blurs. I’m so fucking drunk. My head lolls, chin touching my chest. Metal screeches, the sound grating. A violent impact. Davis’s screams fill my ears. Heat. There’s so much heat. Something roars in my ear. My eyes flutter open. Flames.

An explosion rocks us. Something hot and jagged slices along my ribs.

Pain. Everything is pain.

What have I done?

I gasp for air, launching myself to a seated position. Holy fuck. That’d felt so fucking real. I swipe sweat from my forehead before grabbing at the back of my neck. My fingers encounter tight knots of tension. I need to put eyes on her right the fuck now. Make sure I haven’t fucking dreamed up this entire ordeal—this fucking nightmare. The fitful sleeps I’d endured throughout my stint in prison have lessened since coming here. But, fuck. That was too much. Felt too fucking real. And I know it’s because she’s here that I’m having to deal with this shit all over again. Exhaling hard, I whip the sheet from my body and stumble out of the bed to the window.

Motherfucking bag of dicks. What the fuck is Beckham doing climbing out of her goddamn window? Without thinking, I storm from my room and down the hall, shoulder checking Herschel Grossman, a broad-chested junior, in the process.

“Hey, fucker. Watch it,” he growls out, his voice low and rough. He gives me a look as I pass that says I really should

probably watch myself, but I don't have time for that right now.

Without turning around, I mutter, "Fuck off," as I hurry down the steps.

I tear through the house to the patio door, because if I know Beckham, he's being a sneaky shit and going to come in the back so no one is the wiser. He'll slip in and if anyone asks, he'll say he was always here, just hanging out listening to music or reading for one of his many psych classes.

Blood pounds a violent beat in my head, rising to the boiling point and threatening to stew my brain. An image of Beckham crawling out of Echo's window fills my head, taunting me and making me want to howl with rage.

He halts about five feet from the door, warily watching as I throw it open. I can tell from the way his face falls, he knows that I know what he's been up to. My chest heaves with effort as I struggle to contain the feelings roaring through my body. Fucker's all in black, and my jaw locks as I notice two distinct bulges. One in the pocket of his hoodie, where I assume he's stashed his mask, and the other is in his fucking pants.

Raw, untamed fury slams through me as my entire body shakes. I take several strides toward him, then without pausing, I plow my fist into his face. I catch his jaw and send him stumbling backward, but that doesn't stop me. I keep coming, grabbing his hoodie with both hands and yanking his body to mine, practically lifting him off his feet. I stare into his eyes. "What the actual fuck do you think you're doing?" I grind out.

"What are you talking about?" Beckham's hands grip my wrists, ripping my hands from him. He backs up a pace, one hand going to his jaw.

I lunge forward, shoving him hard, perturbed by his question. "You know what you did," I grit out, giving him another forceful push that has him toppling over a chair and busting it in the process.

He looks up at me from the grassy patch of lawn he'd landed on, shaking his head as if to clear it. His eyes glitter with anger. "I'm doing what you told me to do, you dickhead!"

"There is no way you thought *that's* what I meant!" And before he can get up from the sprawled position, I launch myself at him. I swing wildly, some hits landing, some not. Each time my knuckles meet flesh, my blood roars, cheering me on.

There's one thing I should have remembered about Beckham. He might not like to fight, but the fucker is more than capable. He gives as good as he gets. His fist rams into my cheekbone. Pain bursts through my face, only enraging me further.

"Get off me, asshole," Beckham gasps out with a grunt as he struggles against me. "You've gone right off the deep end. I suppose it was only a matter of time, considering."

"You know nothing about it," I snarl in his face, delivering a punch to his ribs.

"Whoa, what the fuck?"

I must have missed the patio door opening, but all of a sudden, Wilder is charging toward us. Eyeing the determined look in his dark eyes, I bite out, "Back off, Emory. This has nothing to fucking do with you." Beckham and I roll on the grass, grappling with each other. It's a fight for dominance, and I'm going to win. I'm going to knock his fucking teeth out. We'll see how many chicks and dicks he gets after that.

"Good, then I'll make a great damn referee." Wilder grunts, grabbing at me, but my elbow meets what I can only assume is his face. "Fuck! Are you kidding me? Stop," he heaves out. "Beck. Fucking stop."

"Not until he does," comes Beckham's labored words as he swings wildly at me.

"Oh, shit." Someone else has joined us. And whoever it is snorts with laughter.

I glance to the side, groaning internally to see Davis step out of the house to join the party. He eyes the battle and

crosses his arms, his brow raising in abject amusement.

Unable to make any headway with me, Wilder switches to Beckham, who immediately growls, “Leave us be, Wilder! If he wants to fucking fight me, let him.” He gasps as my fist drives into his stomach. “Fuck! He’s got a fucking screw loose. But I can be his damn punching bag. He’ll feel like shit about it later, and that’s fine by me.”

Beckham’s fist meets the side of my temple, making my ears ring. I shake my head to clear it, then go back after him with a vengeance.

Blood flies from Beckham’s mouth as I land a punch to his jaw. Asshole. Fucking going into her room. Who knows what he was doing in there. Was she sleeping?

From somewhere over us, Wilder roars, “Are you fucking stupid? Get your ass over here and help me.” He grabs Beckham under his arms, and for a second, I think I’m going to be able to use that to my advantage, but before I can act on the savage impulse, Davis locks an arm around my neck and pries me away until I’m kneeling upright. I claw at his arm, then let my fist fly in the direction of his face. I know I caught him at least twice from the number of grunts he expels. *Good.* Fucker should know better than to get in the middle of shit that isn’t his to deal with. Don’t care what Wilder told him to do.

Speaking of my friend, he bands both arms around Beckham, one wrapped around his chest, securing his arms, and the other around his waist. They fall back, sprawled together on the grass. Wilder whispers something furiously into Beckham’s ear, but I couldn’t begin to guess what. His dark eyes dart to me, watching me struggle against Davis’s hold. “You fucking done, Royal?”

I wait several beats, letting out ragged breaths as I accept this is over. I nod at Wilder as I tap Davis’s forearm so he’ll let me the fuck go.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him as he backs away, shaking his head. With a cocksure grin on his face, he chuckles menacingly. “Never should have let you out. You’re

bound to hurt someone else. I'm glad my sister got away from you when she did."

My vision goes red, and I leap to my feet, but before I can take more than a step, Wilder's thick arm clamps around my waist, and he jerks me against him. My breath heaves from my chest, and Wilder's rough voice is immediately in my ear. "Uh-uh. No fucking way. Don't let him provoke you like that." Then without looking at Davis, he barks, "Thanks for the help, but get the fuck out of here."

"What-the fuck-ever. Sounds like you don't know who the fuck you're dealing with." He aims a hateful glare at me, which makes me want to break free of Wilder's arms and tear my former best friend limb from limb. If he knew why we were fighting, he might have joined in.

Wilder seems to sense my agitation because he tightens his hold on me, giving me a bodily shake. "Cool it, Kaplan."

"I'm fine. I'm fucking fine. You can let me go," I growl.

"And after that display, you can let me be the fucking judge of that." With a rough sigh, he releases me, then gives me a not-so-gentle nudge away from him. He stares stonily at me, waiting for whatever is next. Because I guess this next bit is up to me how it goes. I can be a fucking asshole and walk away. Or I can put my jealous ass on display and see if Beckham will tell me what the hell he was doing in her room.

Beckham makes a frustrated sound deep in his chest and wipes blood from the corner of his mouth as he eyes me from where he's still sprawled on the grass.

I exhale hard, my eyes crashing shut, then walk over and extend a hand to him. Accepting it, he lets me help him to his feet. Backing away from him, I thread my fingers through my hair, tugging on it. My eyes flick to the side in the direction of Echo's window before I peer back at him. "What were you doing in her goddamn room?"

Beckham stares at me, a perplexed look slipping over his features. "Are you being serious right now?"

I stare right back at him, cocking my head to the side. “Yes, I fucking am.”

A muscle at the back of his jaw twitches as his blue eyes wander my face. Finally, he throws his hands out from his sides. Frustration bleeds from him. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

Wilder groans, then hooks his arm around my neck, then Beckham’s, half dragging us across the back lawn to the stone half wall that runs the entire length of Greek Row. On weekend nights, there would be idiots partying all along here. But not tonight. Tonight it’s quiet. Probably for the best not to go back inside just yet. We know we’re being watched. Listened to.

Glancing back toward the house, I take a couple of deep breaths. “Good call.”

Wilder eyes both of us before letting go of our necks, then points at the wall. “Sit. Both of you.” Too exhausted to argue, I do as he asks, and Beckham follows suit. He keeps throwing me furtive glances. He’s clearly still pissed off. The entire debacle runs on replay through my head. *Fuck.*

“Royal, can you start from the beginning?” Wilder clears his throat. “I don’t know what the fuck happened.”

My jaw sets as I point to where I saw Beckham exit Echo’s room. It’s barely visible from here in the dark. “I was upstairs in my room. I glanced out the fucking window, and what do I see?” I jerk my thumb in Beckham’s direction. “This joker as he climbed out through her window.”

“And that’s”—he glances from me to Beckham, one brow arched—“*not* what you wanted?”

The way Wilder is questioning what I’ve said gives me pause. “I—” I heave out a breath. I told them to watch her, play with her head, find out whatever they could. Because I couldn’t handle being near her. My teeth grind. *Shit.*

“I don’t think I did anything wrong. I was messing with her, like you fucking wanted.”

My head pounds. “I know I said that, but—” Frustrated, I bow my head, gripping my hair with my hands and pulling until the roots scream. “I know what I told you. I can’t explain what my fucking problem is. The complexities of everything in my head when it comes to this girl ...” I stop, shaking my head. My eyes crash shut. *I fucking can’t.*

Wilder groans before shrugging. “Okay. Well, have you gotten enough aggression out? Because you’re welcome to come at me.” He pats his cheek. “But leave Beckham out of it this round, okay?”

Guilt flows through me, slick and ugly. Sliding my gaze to Beckham’s, I rasp out, “I’m all fucked in the head. I’m fuckin’ sorry, man.”

He draws in a deep breath, meeting my eyes. “I get it. You’re torn. She was yours once upon a time. It sounds like you never let go.” He blinks, tilting his head to the side, his eyes scanning my face. I wonder if he sees the question burning its way through my head. He exhales unsteadily through pursed lips. “Nah, man. Don’t you dare fucking ask me to tell you what I saw, because I have no desire to say a word that will make you haul off and punch me again. But let’s just say, she’ll absolutely know someone is watching her now.”

Wilder ducks his head, catching my gaze. “Tell us if you want us to stop. We started all this with her because you begged us to help you.”

I dampen my lips, thinking carefully. “You have to keep going. Because I don’t know what I’ll do if I get my hands on her again.”

EIGHTEEN

WILDER

AROUND MIDAFTERNOON ON TUESDAY, I SPOT ECHO AS SHE walks past the outcropping of rocks I've perched myself on between classes. There are a bunch of places like this on campus that students use all the time as convenient locations to meet up or hang out. I've got an hour and a half before my next class, so I'd planned to read or listen to music to pass the time rather than go all the way back to the frat house, but now I have a better idea.

"Echo."

She flinches when she hears her name but turns. Her green eyes shine in the sunlight, but her entire face lights up when she realizes it's me. She waits until a crowd of students passes between us, then comes over to join me.

I tilt my head toward the campus coffee shop that's across the way. "Wanna get coffee? Do you have time?"

I can practically see the gears working in her head. The last time she saw me was when I left class, walking out on her and the scary insight she had on me. For a second, I think she's going to say no, but then she cautiously nods. "I'd like that. I actually just came from class. Don't have the next one until later tonight."

"Perfect." I shoot her a smile. "I'd rather kill time with you than alone."

She blushes, and I can tell she's chewing on her inner cheek. I think I make her nervous. But not in a bad way. More like she isn't sure why she has my attention. I could easily lie

to myself and say it's because of Royal, but that's not it, not if I'm being truthful with myself. And that's the crux of the problem. The entire time I was dealing with Beckham and Royal's confrontation last night, I kept thinking it could so fucking easily be me he was punching for getting too close. Because I'll admit, this girl is hard to stay away from. And it's getting more and more difficult to separate the task at hand—keeping Royal from exploding due to her mere presence next door—and what's going on in my head. The thing is, I kinda like this girl. And though I've outright said that to him, I'm getting close to telling him enough is enough.

Fuck. I'm so screwed.

We walk together to the coffee shop, and I open the door, letting her duck under my arm. She glances back at me before looking around. "Is this place good? I haven't been here before."

"It's great. My treat, then." I shoot her a wink, but she shakes her head.

"Oh, no. You don't have to do that."

"Of course I do. It'll be my way of apologizing." We step up to the counter, and I automatically scan the board to figure out what I'm in the mood for.

"Wait, what?"

When I glance down at her, she's frowning, but before I can answer, the barista joins us across the counter. "What can I get for you?"

Echo mumbles, "Oh, um. Just regular coffee for me."

I nudge her. "You sure? The mochas are really good. Like hot chocolate and coffee had a baby."

Biting her lip, she turns back to the barista. "Okay, I'll try the mocha, then."

"Make that two."

"You got it." The girl goes about pulling levers and doing her thing to make the coffee.

And while Echo watches the barista, I watch her. She seems a little anxious. Twitchy, almost. I'm guessing she wants to know the answer to her question about what I'm buying her an apology coffee for but doesn't want to say anything more with an audience.

Once we have the drinks in hand, we find a table in the corner. Echo moves toward one of the seats, but I step in and pull out the other for her. Her brows furrow.

"Sorry. Call it a little quirk of mine." I shrug, like it's nothing. "I like to be able to see everyone who walks through the door." More to the point, I like to know when trouble is coming at me.

She shoots me a perplexed look but takes the seat I've offered. When we're both settled, she takes a sip of her coffee, then leans in and squints one eye at me. "Why?"

"The thing about watching the door?" I work my jaw to the side. This is as good an opening as I'll get. "I need to know I can protect people I care about."

She stares at me for a moment, blinking. "Oh. Right. Hero complex." Her lips twitch, and she hides a small smile behind her coffee cup.

"Yeah. Um. That's why I walked out of class." I pause, taking a deep breath. "I was a little unnerved that you saw me so clearly. Then I got to thinking, maybe I was being dumb, because your hero complex label makes perfect sense if you think I look like Superman." I huff out a laugh to disguise my continued discomfort, then lift my cup, taking a long swallow of my drink.

She slowly shakes her head. "It's not just your looks. You've swooped in to my rescue pretty frequently since we met."

I press my lips together. "I suppose so. Let's talk about something else."

"Okay." Pointing at my cheek, she murmurs, "What happened here?" while her head tilts to the side, studying my face and the purple bruise left by Royal last night.

I sure as fuck can't tell her the whole truth, so I let my lips twist, and I shoot her a smirking smile. "A couple friends needed to work out a few things last night."

Her brows dart together in surprise. "I'm sorry. They had to work things out on your *face*?" A small laugh bubbles out of her.

I lift both hands in a classic I-don't-know gesture. "What can I say, sometimes that's the way it goes. They'd both do the same for me. It wasn't really my fight. I was trying to make sure they didn't pummel each other to death." I smirk. "Caught an elbow in the face for my efforts."

Before I know what she's about to do, she reaches across the table, her fingers brushing over the bruised skin, her touch gentle as her fingers sweep over my cheekbone. My breath stutters as my eyes connect with hers. I'm completely unprepared for the slow burst of warmth that spreads through every cell of my body. Stunned by my reaction, all I can do is attempt to drag air into my lungs and push it back out. The longer she touches me, the more that warmth feels like flames.

"They must have been pretty upset with each other." It's not exactly a question, but it comes out sounding like one.

The corner of my lip finds its way between my teeth, and I slowly incline my head in answer. If only she knew the friends I'm referring to are Royal and her buddy Benneti. And the fight I was refereeing was over her. My head spins and spins as I stare into the abyss of her green eyes.

Almost as if she feels the turmoil inside me, she inhales carefully before hesitantly drawing her hand away. "Well, you're a good friend."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I gave them an outlet. Made sure no one got hurt." I touch my cheek. "Or I tried anyway."

She laughs. But then a moment later, she's yawning.

I look first to one side, then the other, trying to be funny about it, but inwardly a little concerned, as I know something went down in her room last night, even if I'm not aware of all the particulars. "Am I boring you?"

She covers her mouth, looking for all the world like she's mortified. "No. Not at all. Sorry. Um. I didn't sleep very well last night."

I gesture to the coffee in her hand. "Well, thank fuck for coffee, huh?" *Hm. Beck, what did you do?*

"Yeah. Definitely. Thank you." She looks down, staring at the cup as her thumb traces the logo. Over and over and over. Drawing in a breath, she blurts, "I—" But then her face falls—like she wants to say something but isn't sure if she should.

Oh, hell. I clear my throat, then give her a teasing, perturbed look. "Somehow, you've managed to get all sorts of personal shit out of me, yet again. Don't you think it's time you shared a little something with me? Now, what's going on? Trouble adjusting to the sorority? Mean girls? A nightmare about Dr. Kinman, by chance? Don't be afraid of him, by the way. He's all bark, no bite."

She slowly shakes her head, giving a soft laugh. "No. Some old fart who picks on a student who is tardy on the first day doesn't really bother me. It makes me sad for him that he feels the need to get out his aggression that way. And I'm doing okay at TZE. Not that there aren't mean girls. But that's not it."

When she doesn't continue, I nudge her knee with mine. My eyes track the way hers flick down and widen. "What's going on, Legacy?"

"I, um ..." She closes her eyes briefly before opening them again and meeting mine. "You can't tell anyone. I don't know what I'm going to do. Or if it was anything to worry about. I —" With a frustrated shake of her head, she exhales unsteadily.

"Hey. You're okay. Talk to me."

She bites down hard on her lip before her eyes pin on mine and she spills. "Last night, I think someone was in my room."

I sit forward, bracing one forearm on my thigh. *Yep. Knew that.* Even so, my jaw tenses. "Did you see someone?"

Her knee bounces like crazy. “No. I wasn’t going to say anything. I thought it might have been hazing. But then— No. I think it’s not. It can’t be.” Her eyes dart around the coffee shop, and I get the feeling she’s making sure she knows who is here. Ironically, sort of like I did when we sat down.

“There’s no one here that will hurt you,” I murmur, keeping my voice calm as I reach across the table to take her hand. “I’d never let them.”

She nods, a bit of a wild look in her eyes. “I was in the shower. It was around eleven or so, maybe? And when I got out, there was something written on my mirror.”

“Written? With what?”

“The steam, I guess. With a finger? It just read, ‘Hey, gorgeous.’” She presses her lips together, clearly agitated.

My brow arches, and I take a deep breath. *Yep. Sounds like Beckham’s handiwork.* I run my thumb over the back of her hand in slow circles in an attempt to soothe her. “And you don’t think it was one of the TZE sisters? Your big sister, maybe?”

“At first, that’s exactly what I thought. But then when I got up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, there was another.”

“What the fuck?” My exclamation is slow. Cautious.

“Yeah.” She lifts the coffee cup to her mouth, resting it against her lower lip before she finally takes a swallow. “I wiped the first note away under the assumption it was some silly sorority prank. And I guess I haven’t ruled that out yet. But—” She shakes her head, as if she can’t believe what she’s about to say and averts her gaze from mine.

I let go of her hand to grasp her chin with a few fingers so she’ll look at me. “Hey. You can tell me anything. Promise.”

“They used my favorite lipstick on the mirror.” The last few words she says come out a bit agitated. She winces. “I’m sorry. You didn’t ask me to have coffee to hear all my problems.” Her chest jerks as I stare into her deep-emerald eyes. “I’m ruining everything,” she whispers.

My jaw twitches in irritation. Not at her, but at the entire clusterfuck that Royal has created by bringing us into this. “You’re not ruining anything. What did the second message say?”

She draws in a deep breath. “It said, ‘Not hazing, love.’”

My brows pinch together, my brain clicking back to what she’s told me so far. “I don’t get it. How did someone know what you were thinking?”

She gasps out softly, her hand trembling. “Because I said it. Out loud.” I clear my throat. *Way to go, Beckham.* You’ve succeeded in scaring the absolute shit out of this girl. “What do I do? I guess it could be nothing. But what if it’s not? That is, if I’m not totally losing my mind.”

Knowing I can’t *not* tell her the right thing to do, I exhale slowly. “It’s probably someone in the house messing around. You should consider telling the sorority president—or at least ask your big sister if this sounds like something that’s routinely done. And then if you rule out a TZE sister, notify the campus police, at the very least.”

She looks like she wants to vomit at the thought of it, and her hands are shaking, but nods swiftly. “Yeah. You’re probably right.” Then, quietly, she murmurs, “I really don’t want any trouble.”

Pressing my lips together, I point at the phone that she’s set on the table. “Can you open up a new contact?”

She blinks. “Um. Yeah.” Picking it up, she does as I ask, types something in, then passes it to me.

When I pick it up, the name Emory glares back at me. My teeth grit together, but I plug in my phone number and hand it back.

Glancing up at me, she questions, “Do you want me to send you a message or something?”

I hold up a hand. “No.”

Frowning, she sets it to the side.

“I didn’t give you my number because I was trying to get yours. I gave it to you to prove that you can trust me. And if you need me, all you have to do is call.”

NINETEEN

ECHO

OUTSIDE THE COFFEE SHOP, EMORY AND I PAUSE BEFORE going our separate ways. I don't know what to make of this guy exactly, but I do know my assessment of him in class was spot on. So much so that it freaked him out. I don't get why being protective or seen as a hero would have that effect. But the more I talk to Emory, the more I discover layer after layer to explore. "What class do you have next?"

"Anatomy."

I wrinkle my nose. "Sounds fun."

"It's a lot of work but think whatever you want." He winks at me and lifts a hand close to my face, which makes my heart stutter. His gaze shifts to the tendril of hair that he tucks behind my ear. His fingertips graze my jaw as he drops his hand. I blink rapidly, staring at the bruise on his cheek, unable to process that someone who could jump into the middle of a fight could also be capable of gentleness. "Seriously, though. Call me whenever. Think about reporting what happened if your president says they don't subject freshmen to hazing like that." His jaw muscles twitch hard. "Before you go to bed, make sure all the windows and doors are locked." The fierce tone of his last few words and the way his eyes go all steely and cold sends a cascade of sparks through me. So strange that he can make me feel cared for one second and like he'd tear anyone apart who'd lay a hand on me the next.

I draw in a shaky breath. "Thank you. I-I will." With a satisfied nod, he walks away, Superman good looks and all, giving me a wave as he goes. It boggles my mind that he keeps

reappearing. If I'd never run into him and Benneti at the bonfire, none of this would be happening. I would have sat on Royal's bench alone. I'd have walked home alone that night. And I'd be just another girl in his art class. Instead, he's quickly becoming someone I can count on. The phone in my pocket tells me so.

Emory makes me feel safe, but I have no idea what he sees in me. I exhale, expelling the air I'd been holding in my lungs as he turns a corner and disappears from view. Except I do. He'd written the words right on his art project. *Fierce. Determined. Bold. Resilient.* If I channel all those personality traits, maybe I'll get through this transition at Kingston University. My emotions are whizzing around in a blender right now, and I swear, if someone takes off the lid, my confusion and chaos is going to spew everywhere.

In fact, for a moment, with Emory, I thought that's exactly what might happen. I like him a lot. But maybe I shouldn't be letting anyone that close. Look what happened the last time I got attached to someone—Royal left me with scars so deep no one sees them and too much I have to keep hidden.

Not wanting to go back to TZE yet, I sit down on the same rocks where I'd encountered Emory earlier, close my eyes, and let myself remember, even though it's painful.

The forest behind our school where our cross-country team often practices on the running trails is incredibly quiet, the air crisp and cool. Despite the late winter temperatures, my palms sweat in anticipation. Will he find me? How will our chase go this time?

"Echo. I know you're out here. Do you think you can outrun me? We both know you're a fast runner, but not as fast as me. I'm the hunter. And you're my prey."

With a squeal, I dart from behind the tree where I'd been hiding, my heart slamming around behind my rib cage. It wants to escape my chest way more than I'd ever want to escape Royal. The rush I get knowing he's pursuing me is like nothing else. It ignites every nerve in my body; I've never felt more alive than I do when he chases me. What started out as

our coach's idea of a training exercise has become our own private game.

My feet crunch on leaves as I run. Twigs snap under my feet. He's right behind me. His footfalls race along, and I know he'll overtake me soon. He'll catch me. And then how things progress is up to us. Will I give in easily? Or will I fight him? I never know until I'm in the moment. Sometimes the game we play gets so real it scares me. But that's all part of the rush. It makes everything that much more intense.

Royal's strong arms loop around my middle, lifting me right off my feet. All the air whooshes from my lungs. He pushes me up against the trunk of a tree, his body curling over mine. His hot breath gusts in my ear. "Caught you."

"What are you gonna do with me?" I wriggle in his hold, feeling his erection against my backside.

"I'm gonna make you surrender to me, princess." He nips at my neck with his teeth, and his lips and tongue do wicked things to me as his hands begin to roam. I grip the tree with both hands, the bark scratching at my palms, but I don't care. There's only Royal's touch and the way he makes me burn from the inside out. His hands skirt up from my hips to my breasts, and I edge back enough that he can cup them in his palms. "Echo"—he pauses, his voice rough—"I think we should tell your brother. I'm tired of hiding this."

My brows draw together. Oh my god, he wants to die today. "You can't tell Davis. He'll flip the fuck out." Ragged breaths fall from my lips while I wait for Royal's response.

"You're mine, Echo. No one else will ever touch you." His hands squeeze my breasts, and I gasp as pain merges with pleasure. One hand skims over my stomach, then dips down the front of my leggings. His fingers slide through my arousal, and I let out a low whimper. He rubs the pads of his fingers over my clit. A gust of air escapes me. Royal lets out a groan as he thrusts against my ass. "This body is mine. This pussy is mine. Do you understand me?" he rasps near my ear.

I quake in his arms, heat flowing through me at his touch. "Yes."

“Say it. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours, Royal.” I am his. I always have been. After all, I wanted him first. This possessiveness he’s displaying only makes me surer.

“That’s my good girl.” He continues to circle my clit in the way we’ve discovered brings me right to the brink in no time flat, and this time is no different.

I cry out when the orgasm overtakes me. “I’m yours. Yours, Royal.”

He grinds against my ass for a moment, letting me come down before he eases back. His arm belts around my waist, bringing me upright with him. It’s a good thing he has a hold on me, because my legs are like jelly.

A moment later, he grits into my ear, “Run,” as his hand comes down hard on my ass.

And despite the loose feeling in my limbs, I take off like a shot. Blood pounds in my head as well as between my legs, and I’m filled with the thrill of knowing this guy will chase me to the ends of the earth. He’ll never let me go.

I’m his. And he’s mine.

My eyes blink open. At first, I don’t understand where I am. I suck in a breath. Then another. The sun shines down on me, and somehow I’d managed to tune out the chatter of other students around me. I swipe at tears that have formed at the corners of my eyes, desperate to keep them from falling. *Don’t you dare let him do this to you all these years later. Don’t.* I let out a ragged exhale, and look around, trying to get my emotions under control.

The chase was always Royal’s favorite because he knew when I finally stopped running, he took what he wanted. And like a silly little girl drunk on the rush, I let him. I gave Royal more than my heart on that trail. I gave him something I can never get back.

TWENTY

ROYAL

AFTER MUCH THOUGHT ABOUT THE SIN KEEPER CARD I'D received, I figured it won't hurt to head back to the last place I'd called home and see if I can get access to the computer. I assume there's something on that hard drive I'm supposed to see. A file of some sort. Something.

Confusion wars within me. The Franks had been kind to me. I liked them a lot. But there must be something the Sin Keeper wants me to see. What that would be, I have no fucking clue.

I'd purposely taken a route for my run that would bring me past their house. They don't live that far from campus. I slow as I approach, taking in the fact that the neighborhood hasn't changed nor has the house. Nope. It's only me that's different now. The homes in this area are relatively spread out, each on a decent amount of acreage ... and I force myself not to look at the house next door. Too many motherfucking memories.

I haven't been back at all, because let's face it, the minute things went south, the Franks decided I wasn't worth trying to save. Never mind that they had the money to cover my bail. They hadn't done it. I'd never felt quite so abandoned in the days and weeks following the accident and my arrest. No one was on my side. Not a soul was there to help me.

It makes my gut churn, wondering why the Sin Keeper feels this is necessary. I blow out a hard breath, grabbing the back of my neck as I look around while I attempt to appear inconspicuous. There was a time I wasn't out of place here. But now? If I get caught, I'm screwed. But that's also why I

chose to come in the middle of the afternoon. It's too early for most people on this street to be returning from work, so it's quiet.

Jesus, am I really going to break into their house? I bend, reaching for my toes while I pretend to stretch at the side of the road. Never once has a single member of SIN said that they'd been led astray by something they were told to do. Fuck it. I'm in.

There's a prickle of apprehension as to what I might find, but I force that thought down. As I approach, the only question remaining in my head is whether the spare key is kept in the same place it was when I lived here ... and if the security cameras are still glitchy as hell, only capturing footage half the time. No matter. I've brought something to take care of that, too.

I untie my hoodie from my waist, pull it on, then tug the hood over my head to conceal as much of my face as I can. Extracting a pair of thin gloves from my pocket, I put those on, too. I don't want to leave any traces behind that I was here.

I eye the spot where I know there's a security camera. Did they upgrade at some point? The newer ones trigger notifications to smartphones. I can't risk it. I pull out the small can of black spray paint and shake it, then remove the cap. Hopefully, if an alert pops up on their phone, all they'll see is a black screen once I've taken care of things.

With a final glance around, I dart up to the front porch, being careful to come in from the side to spray the camera with black paint. With that done, I turn around and squat down to pick up the ceramic turtle sitting on the corner of the porch. Jackpot. I snatch up the key and replace the piece of pottery before dashing around the house to the back entrance. At the corner of the house, I ease around, spraying the second camera next to the back door.

My heart thunders as I slip the key into the lock and turn. It opens noiselessly, but I stand in the mud room for several seconds anyway, taking care to listen for any sign of trouble. There doesn't seem to be a new alarm system. No panel on the

wall. Nothing. Brave of them to assume they're above having a criminal target them.

And that's me, right? The fucking criminal they never saw coming. My mind twists in on itself at the thought. That's what they think of me or who I am to them, I guess.

Once I'm inside, I glance around, frowning. I don't know what I expected, but the place looks the same. Almost as if I never left, which is unnerving. My head gets bogged down in the memories. Eating breakfast before school at the table off the kitchen. Throwing a baseball with Rich. Doing homework while Katrina supervised. Holidays where I felt safe and loved. *Finally*. But they hadn't wanted me enough to fucking fight for me. With my jaw clenched so hard I'll probably break molars, I shove all those memories aside to focus on the task at hand.

Keeping my head down, I hurry through the house, heading directly for the office on the main floor past the living area. Katrina is a physics professor at KU, and I've done my best to avoid any classes in her department since my arrival. Not too difficult. I have no interest in her courses. She'll be teaching for another couple hours—it was easy to check her class schedule and office hours—so I don't have to worry about her coming home and surprising me.

Rich works from home sometimes, but I remember distinctly that it's usually Mondays and Fridays, and he heads in to work the rest of the week—something about having to show his face as the CEO despite being able to do most things remotely. Really, he owns the company, so he can do whatever the fuck he wants, but I never argued with his logic. In any case, he's not here either, making this whole mission easier for me to handle.

I slip into the home office, finding what I think is probably the same Mac desktop I remember from when I lived here. It beckons to me. I know enough about computers to handle this like a pro—so long as Rich hasn't changed his password. What are the odds he hasn't in the years I've been gone?

I bend over the desk and grasp the mouse in one hand, bringing the computer to life. The screen requiring a password

pops up. I tap in RichKatrina2!, then hit enter.

Bingo.

What can I say? Apparently, my former foster parents should protect their property a little better all the way around. I set about my work, plugging in the portable hard drive I'd brought with me to the USB-C port. It's the size of a stick of gum, yet I'm going to be able to grab every bit of information there is off the computer. I have no idea what I'm looking for, so fuck it. I'll take all the documents and sort through them later. With a few keystrokes, I've set things in motion.

This shouldn't take long at all, but while I'm waiting, my eyes wander the desk. There's a photo of Rich and Katrina with another kid ... in the same frame where there once was a photo with the three of us—as a family. Well, I guess foster children are easy enough to replace. My jaw clenches, and I shake my head. I will never forgive them for abandoning me when I needed them most. I thought there was a good chance they were going to be my forever family. That seems really fucking stupid to me now, one of those dreams foster kids have. Damn. It fucking hurts. I put the photo face down on the desk. I can't handle looking at the happy family.

Ten minutes later, I've transferred everything I need, and I remove the small device from Rich's computer and slip it into my pocket. With a sigh, I right the photo on the desk, but in doing so, the back of the frame pulls free and everything lands with a clatter on the desk. *Fuck*. I carefully pick up the frame and put the glass back in place. But as I go to pick up the photo to replace it, I realize there's a second photo there that was hidden behind the first. My mouth goes dry, like it's full of sandpaper. It's me with Rich and Katrina, a photo from my very first cross-country meet. I blink, unsure what to make of the fact that they didn't get rid of the photo. I've gotta get out of here. I silently curse my shaking hands as they reassemble the frame with the photo of me with the Franks tucked behind the new one. I sure as fuck hope they're good to that kid. Better than they were to me.

Time to go. I'm getting seriously twitchy. I exit the way I came in, locking the door behind me, then circle to the side of

the house, where I squat down for a minute, trying to calm myself down. Didn't fucking realize getting the documents off the hard drive would be the easy part of the task. Seeing my old home again, realizing that I was long forgotten? That totally sucks.

Still unsettled by returning to this place where I was once happy, I return the key to the oh-so-clever hiding spot under the turtle, then jog down the driveway.

I'm breathing easier until I see a woman outside the house next door. I squint, trying to figure out if I know her. But then, it slams into me like a load of bricks. That's Davis and Echo's older sister. I don't remember her name, and never knew her very well, because she was already in college by the time I was in high school. She was mostly just home on breaks from college and the occasional holiday. Definitely not around when shit hit the fan for me later. Fuck, fuck, fuck. This isn't good. I hadn't realized any of the family was still living here. I had wrongly assumed the entire family had moved away.

Flashes of Echo and me sneaking around after dark as our relationship progressed assaults me from all directions. At first, I resisted. Davis would kill me. He'd fucking kill me. She was so young. Too young. But she watched my every move with those sparkling green eyes. And then ... I gave in, unable to resist her.

The oldest Madden sibling bends to fiddle with something in the back seat of her car, and her voice carries as she speaks. Seems like someone is in there. Probably a kid. I rake my hand through my hair. It's times like this when it's very apparent everyone's lives fucking moved on while mine was at a goddamn standstill behind bars. She straightens as I near the end of the Franks' driveway, and her eyes follow me. There's no way she didn't see where I was coming from. *Fuck*. If she says something about me being here, I'm so fucking screwed.

"Royal? Is that you? What ... what are you doing here? Are Katrina and Rich home?" Her eyes dart from the Frank house back to me.

I brace my hands on my hips, working my jaw to the side before I finally shake my head. “You didn’t fucking see me.”

She frowns, green eyes that look just like Echo’s, searching mine. “What? Is something wrong?” She takes a step toward me, but I hold my hands up.

“You and both your fucking siblings should mind your own damn business. Stay the hell away from me. Your family’s done me enough damage to last a lifetime.”

TWENTY-ONE

ECHO

AFTER CONFIRMING WITH CASSIE THAT TZE SISTERS DON'T haze pledges—resulting in what felt like fifty questions, which I had to play off because I wasn't sure I wanted to say anything yet—I've vacillated all afternoon between calming myself down and throwing myself into fits of pure terror. An unknown person was in my bathroom with me while I showered. And now that I know it wasn't hazing, the first note on the mirror is all the more freaky. *Hey, gorgeous.* My eyes flick to the shower stall. How did they come in? When? I gnaw on the side of my finger, contemplating how all this happened.

There's really no way to know. A slow quake rolls through my body. They could have been hiding in my closet before I got to my room. Or under the bed. Maybe behind the door. Or ... they came in *while* I was showering. The thought alone is unnerving. I'd been listening to music. Singing. Had the candles lit to relax.

Well, there will be no taking a serene, peaceful shower for me ever again. I'll be waiting for someone to come after me with a knife like Norman Bates in *Psycho*. I blow out a hard breath, taking a photo of the second message. *Not hazing, love.* I wish I'd gotten a photo of the first, but I really had thought it was Freya or another sister, like Emory had guessed. But nope.

I locate some Windex and paper towels in the cabinet under the sink, so I spend the next few minutes smearing the lipstick residue around the glass before I'm finally able to wipe it clean. There's only one thing I'm totally sure of, and

this may be the worst of all. The bathroom window was locked this morning. No matter how they got in or when, whoever was in here had to have been in my bedroom with me before they exited, otherwise the bathroom window would have been unlocked. A shiver runs down my spine. Whether they left through the window or the door doesn't really matter. Either way, here I was, completely defenseless and asleep.

Oh my fuck. But *wait*. Did the pervert watch me masturbate? I swallow hard. I've been so keyed up about everything else that I hadn't even considered that. My stomach gives a violent lurch, and I'm suddenly afraid that if I stay in this room right now, I'm going to eject the contents of my stomach.

Wanting nothing more than to get out of my room for a while, I grab a hoodie in case the night air is chilly later and stuff it into my backpack. I never thought I'd be thankful as fuck for English class, but there it is. The class is from six to nine tonight—the one I only have once a week. It'll distract me from everything else going on for a little while, anyway.

I hope I don't fall asleep. I'd already been tired enough earlier, as Emory had noticed, but no way in fuck was I napping in the room where some weirdo is leaving me love notes on the mirror. My stomach pitches and rolls again at the thought of someone watching me while I sleep. There is nothing creepier.

I've just picked an apple out of the basket of fruit on the kitchen counter when Freya spots me. "Oh my god, where have you been?"

I tilt my head to the side. "Around. Class and my room, mostly."

She laughs, giving me a big grin. "You know, I've been out with Zane a bunch. We've probably just missed each other."

"Yep."

Nodding to my backpack, she gives me a funny look. "Where are you headed this late?" She pulls a tube of lip gloss

from her pocket and goes about applying it, using her reflection in the microwave as a mirror.

“Back to campus for class. I have English 101 at six.”

She presses her lips together, then touches her finger to the edge of the lower one, making sure the lip product is where she wants it. “Oh, shit. One of those long ones, huh? Good fucking luck. I had an anthropology class in that same block of time, and I routinely fell asleep, missing two-thirds of every single lecture. Makes it really fucking hard to pass.” She grins, then pats my cheek as she begins to back away from me. “Look alive, little sis, look alive.”

I press my lips together, unsure whether I should say anything or not. Just because Cassie said no to hazing being a practice here at TZE doesn't mean it doesn't happen ... or maybe Freya saw something. I'm grasping at straws to save my sanity. “Hey, you didn't happen to see anyone go into my room yesterday evening, did you?”

“No, why?” Her brows pinch together.

Shrugging, I wave a hand. “I guess it just felt funny in there to me. I can't quite place why.” I'm still having trouble trusting anyone in this house. With a sigh, I blurt, “Don't worry, I'm sure it's nothing.”

She cocks her head to the side. “If you say so, chica. I'll see you after class.”

“Yep. Sounds good.”

When I finally head out, I walk as fast as I can to the main part of campus. My English class is in Broadmore Hall tonight in one of those huge lecture rooms, so we'll see how the whole three-hour-long-class thing goes. I'll keep pinching myself if I have to keep myself awake. There's no way I'm embarrassing myself in front of another professor.

Part way to the building, I get turned around, so I pause, and regretfully almost trip some guy walking with a cane behind me. “Sorry!” I gasp out, but he doesn't say a word, doesn't even turn his head to acknowledge my apology. Not wanting to get in anyone else's way, I get off the walking path

so I can try to figure out where the hell I'm going. With my apple in one hand and my phone in the other, I pull up a map of campus. The apple crunches when I bite into it, the sweet-tart flavor bursting on my tongue. I'm still trying to puzzle out what route I need to take when I get a text notification. It's Kara, so I immediately open it, but then quickly freeze in place as I read.

Just so you know.

And I don't say this to freak you out.

Royal was at the Frank house today.

Acted completely weird.

What?

I'm telling you, it was bizarro.

What do you think

he was doing over there?

Was he with one of them?

Nope. He was alone.

Basically told me to mind

my own business.

Anyway, I don't think we have

anything to worry about.

But I thought you should know.

Yeah, okay. Thanks.

I don't know what to think of that. What would Royal have been doing there? I should definitely try to find out how long it's been since he was released. Maybe it makes sense that he'd be checking in with them? He did live there. Then again, my parents had shielded me from a lot in the days following that night, but I do remember some of the whispered conversations that had occurred when they hadn't thought I was paying attention. Something about how the Franks would probably wash their hands of Royal. He wouldn't be released until well after he aged out of the foster system, anyway.

You never should have come here. Those were the words he'd uttered to me in his tirade after he'd chased me down in the woods, and I could swear from the way he was talking that he felt I was encroaching on *his* turf.

I release a frustrated breath because the pieces don't quite fit to explain why he'd have been there if he hasn't recently come to KU, especially when the Franks weren't home. Realizing I've given way too much time to this, I check the time on my phone. *Shit. No, no, no.* I can't be late again.

I pick up my pace and am able to slip inside the lecture room just as the professor is starting to speak and duck quickly into a seat about midway from the back.

As I settle in, I'm pleasantly surprised by this professor, actually. She's older, but full of energy, very interesting, and constantly moving around at the front of the room. I scan the rest of the class—there's easily a hundred students or more—noticing most everyone is paying attention to her antics. No wonder her three-hour class is full to capacity.

With about fifteen minutes left to go in the class, I lean down to get a pen out of my bag and a weird sensation slides down my spine. I stiffen, sitting up straight and looking around. Most everyone is taking notes, whether it be on a laptop or with a notebook and pen. And I should be writing, too, but I can't get the feeling to go away. It's like I'm being backed into a corner, even though I'm clearly not going anywhere. I swear there are eyes on me, but I can't find them. And I don't want to turn around, afraid of what I'll find. Some soft whispers come from behind me, but I assume it's just the normal classroom chatter that invariably happens in the larger lecture halls. Or is it? Swallowing hard, I drop my gaze to my computer screen again. The lighting in the room is dim so we're able to see the screen that's up at the front of the room—that also makes it easier for me to look around and not let on that I'm doing so. My fingers hover over the keys, but haven't budged an inch, as my gaze slips from one side to another, looking at all the indistinct, nameless faces filling the room. I really want to turn around, but that would be too obvious. My

heart rate steadily climbs the longer I'm unable to determine where the source of my anxiety is coming from.

At two minutes until nine, my attention is snagged by Professor Silverton apparently taking pity on us. She smooths a red tendril of hair that'd come loose during the lecture back into the bun tied low at her nape. "Okay, folks. That's enough for day one. You've got your reading assignments and all the info for the first paper. Do yourselves a favor and don't wait until the last minute to get started on any of it. That's a quick road to falling behind in a class that only meets weekly."

Oh, shit. How long was my attention elsewhere? I groan. On edge from everything else, I missed the specifics of our first writing assignment.

The lights come up in the room, and I automatically feel somewhat better being able to see everyone's faces. I'm sure I don't know any of these people, so the gut reaction I'd had earlier, I don't know how to explain it. Sucking in a breath, I clench my teeth together and look behind me, but it's nothing but a sea of movement as people scatter.

Shit, I hope Professor Silverton has the information about the project listed somewhere because ... yeah. I feel like an idiot as everyone else seems to know exactly what they're doing, but here I am, staring around in bewilderment as they pack up their things.

The majority of students take off fast, like they have somewhere else to be on a Tuesday night. I can't believe I let myself get so distracted and anxious. It's just a fucking freshmen English class, for Pete's sake. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I pick up my backpack and put it on the table before closing my laptop and sliding it inside. Slowly, I get up, wondering if I should go ask for clarification or where I can find the info myself.

As I sling my bag over my shoulders to leave, a tall guy in jeans and a button-down who'd been sitting at a desk down at the front of the room makes his way up the stairs. I step back into the row of seats, giving him a clear path to leave, but he stops when he gets to me.

“Hey. Be careful being off in la-la land in this class. You miss too much you’ll get stuck working with me.” He purses his lips before they slip into a smile. “Sorry, that was a bad joke. I’m Brent, Professor Silverton’s TA.”

“Oh.” I feel the blush stain my cheeks even though I can’t see it, and my eyes shut as I exhale quickly. “I’m sorry. I was hoping I wasn’t noticeable, but I suppose people who are distracted rarely realize they are until after the fact. I’ve had one of those days. Sorry, you’re not looking for excuses—”

He holds out a hand to stop me. “True, both about distracted people and the fact that I’m not looking for excuses. But the reason I came up here”—he leans in close enough that I get a whiff of his aftershave, and I automatically shrink my shoulders in, unsure what’s happening—“sorry, didn’t mean to freak you out.” His arm draws between us so he can show me something in his hand. “I think this sticky note was on your back. That’s why there was a bit of commotion toward the end of class. Someone saw it and word spread through the back half of the class like a whispering wildfire.”

I cover my mouth with my hand, my eyes widening. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry.” I don’t want to know what it says. I truly don’t.

Brent clears his throat. “Not your fault at all. Maybe this was left in the chair or something?” He says it like it’s a question, and I see why when I look down to read it.

Little cum sluts don't belong at KU.

Taken by surprise at the vicious content of the note, I step back and almost fall. I would have, too, only Brent has a firm grasp on my bicep before I can topple over. “Um. Obviously you didn’t know it was there.” He chuckles, a hint of apology in it as he lets go of me. “Do you want me to dispose of it?”

My brows dart together. “No. Just in case it was meant for me, I’d rather have it in my possession than not.”

His brows shoot up, concern slipping over his features. “Okay, then.” He holds it out, stuck to his finger, for me to take. “Are you okay ...?” He lets out a frustrated groan. “Sorry, I don’t know everyone’s names yet.”

“Echo. Sorry, I should have said so earlier. And I’ll be fine. Thank you for letting me know it was there.” I shoot him a wincing smile as I pluck the Post-it from his fingertip. “I should get home.”

“Sure. Anytime.”

I slip past him to walk up the rest of the stairs when he calls out to me again, causing me to turn around. “Oh, and Echo? The assignment you missed taking notes on is actually available online. Just go to Professor Silverton’s Bulletin Board page and you can check it out there.”

“Thank you so much. Hopefully I won’t get distracted again.” I shoot him an apologetic smile.

“You’re welcome. Take care walking home.”

Standing in the lobby area of the building, I give a furtive look around. The odd feeling that someone’s watching me hasn’t quite left, and the reality of my situation hits me upside the head. I don’t want to go back to my room at TZE tonight. I’m way too unnerved. I feel a tiny bit like a baby about that decision, though. I won’t be able to run away from my problems forever.

I need reassurance. But strangely, even though my older sister is the first person I think of, she’s not really who I feel will set my mind at ease. I should definitely let her know I’m on my way home, though, so I pull out my phone and shoot her a text.

I’m going to come tonight instead of in the
morning.

Cool. See you soon?

Yeah. Just getting out of class.

You’re sure you’re okay missing class?

Yep. I might actually stay the day.

I need some down time.
And a lot of assignments are online.
We can talk when I get there.
Any chance you have food?
I'm starving.

I'll be ready for you.

With Kara notified I'm on my way, I open my contacts and scroll until I get to the *e*'s. Emory said to call if I needed him. I don't *need him* need him. But something inside me tugs, telling me he'd be okay with me sending him a text. He's the only one who knows everything—well, most everything—about my midnight intruder.

Hi, Emory. It's me.

Echo.

I wait a few seconds, chewing on my lip as I consider what to say.

Um. I hope you don't regret giving me your
number.

This isn't an emergency.

But—

Before I can type out my next message, I see he's typing, so I pause.

Are you okay?

A sudden warmth rolls through me, even though I'm standing in an air-conditioned building. It's my internal temperature that's raging.

Yes. I'm fine.

Kind of.

Spill, Legacy.

You're making me nervous.

I'm too keyed up to stay in my room.

Even if I know it's locked up tight.

There's a brief pause, in which time I figure he either thinks I'm overreacting or he's plotting how to come to my rescue.

I should have known it would be the latter.

I could come over if you want.

There's a rush of untamed excitement that rolls through me, even if I can't allow him to follow through with his suggestion. And then when I don't answer, he continues.

I'd be like a guard dog.

Sit on the floor at the side of your bed.

Make sure no one gets to you.

With my cheeks on fire, I tap out another message.

That's sweet of you to offer.

But I'm going to head home for the night.

Stay with my sister.

She doesn't live far from here.

Try to get my head on straight.

I just—

I need some reassurance I'm not overreacting.

And you're the only one who knows.

You aren't overreacting.

I think it's perfectly understandable.

You're not somewhere freaking out, are you?

No.

Just leaving class to go home now.

Need a ride?

Nah. I could use the fresh air.

And some time to think.

Okay, text me when you get there.

I'm glad you reached out.

Let me know if you need me.

I'm glad I texted him, too. There's something about Emory I can't put my finger on, but even via text, he has an immediate calming effect on me.

With a deep breath, I push the door open and walk out into the night.

TWENTY-TWO

BECKHAM

IT'S BEEN A GOOD FIVE MINUTES SINCE PROFESSOR Silverton's English lecture let out, but still no Echo. I work my jaw to the side. Since visiting her last night, I've been jonesing for another hit of her. I've replayed over and over again every moment we had together. I loved every single second of getting to know her. The whole shower ritual. What she wears to bed. How she prefers to get off. But it's not enough. I need the real thing.

She was worth each of Royal's blows I took to the face and all the punches to the gut, too. And the thing is, Royal should tell us if he wants us to stop. Only I can't. No matter what he says, I have a Sin Keeper card that tells me to watch her, not to mention the twisted-up part of my brain that wouldn't let me walk away from her now, anyway. And she needs me. I know she does. She just may not realize it yet.

The front door of the building clangs open. A couple more students dribble out. Still nothing. I do a quick check of myself while I wait. I have my mask at the ready. My gloves. An all-black, head-to-toe outfit that will probably have me sweating out every ounce of alcohol I've ever drank until I'm dried up like a mummy. At a slight creak at the front of the building, my gaze zooms back to the door. This time, my girl slips out, shoving something into the pocket of her shorts as she goes.

I love the way the moonlight bounces off her red hair, like a flashing warning of what I'll get if I keep after her. But to me, she's enticing. Everything about her screams *I'm a*

spitfire, come and get me! I was made for you, Beckham. I'm not so easily deterred, so follow her, I will.

From a good distance, I begin the trek back to TZE with her, my eyes drifting over her as she walks. She's temptation incarnate to me in her sexy shorts with a backpack secured on her back, resting just over that fine ass. I swallow hard when a flash of her writhing on the bed floats around in my head. I'd had a dream later after Royal beat the shit out of me. A few fingers drift up to my lip that he'd bloodied, and I smile, but then wince as the healing skin splits again and I taste blood. Fucker. He's lucky I figured he owed me a few hits.

The dream, though—it'd been a fantasy inside a dream, really. And in it, Echo had been busy fiddling her Skittle when I came in, crawled on top of her, and pushed inside her tight little cunt. Really, in my wildest dreams, Wilder would join us, too. My tongue darts out, swiping over my lower lip, the metallic flavor exploding on my tongue. Hell, maybe I'd throw Royal into the mix. I chuckle to myself. No. There's no way Royal would ever come with us to Sausageville. He likes pussy. Echo's in particular. I reach between my legs, readjusting things as I walk. Fuck. I'm distracting myself from my mission.

A moment later, I realize I need to pay more attention because at first, I'd been sure Echo was heading toward TZE, but she's made a sudden cut across the field that will take her past the parking lot we use for bonfires if she walks far enough in that direction. Where the hell is she going?

She's picking up speed. Shit, did she see me tailing her? Doubtful, as I'm being careful to stay out of sight, but I duck close to a building and put my mask on, just in case. It's way dark out here on the outskirts of campus. This area is a ghost town. It serves my purposes, honestly. No one will see me in a ski mask in September and wonder what the fuck I'm up to following this girl. The last thing I need is the cops being called out here.

Another few minutes go by, and it's now very clear that she's going to walk along a trail that circles the university, but

also has paths into some of the neighboring residential areas. I have no idea where she's going, but I will absolutely follow.

Our girl is full of surprises. I shake my head, watching as she dives off the dirt trail, through an expansive backyard, and right up to a door at the back of a decent-size house. Frowning, I pause at a distance to watch. A security light goes on, bathing the backyard in soft light, but she doesn't seem bothered by it at all. Instead, she shrugs her backpack from her shoulders, setting it on the decking. Squatting down, she rummages around in the front pocket.

The faint jingle of keys travels to me through the night air as she stands up, quietly opens the door, and lets herself in.

I don't dare go closer, or I'll probably set off the security light or a camera or something. I watch through the glass-paned back door as a woman greets her. Not old enough to be her mother. Maybe a sister. They are of similar height, the older girl is just a little more voluptuous through the hips.

Watching them carefully, I pull my phone from my pocket to shoot Royal a quick couple of texts.

Hey.

We haven't talked since you busted up my face.

Nope. You're right. We haven't.

Fucker. I can't tell if you're still pissed.

I'm on my way home. Are you there?

A minute or so goes by before the little dots on my screen signal a message being typed on the other end.

Beck, what the fuck are you up to?

Tell you when I get back.

I rub a few fingers over my mouth, studying what's going on in the kitchen at the back of the house. The other woman has been in and out of the fridge like four times, pulling out the makings of what looks like a roast beef and cheese sandwich, while Echo is stooped down picking up some toys off the floor.

I grin. *Hey*. I had a dinosaur just like the stuffed one she tosses into the box.

There's nothing crazy going on here. Time to head back to SIN and report in with Royal. I haven't a fucking clue why I feel I owe him that after he smashed up my face ... or if he'll be pissed that I followed Echo after what happened last night. And the fucked-up part is that he has no idea what went down in there. I sure as fuck wasn't going to add fuel to the rampaging fire.

The question is whether Royal has correctly guessed what went on in Miss Echo Madden's bedroom or not. There's a chance that whatever he's imagined is worse than it really was. But what was I supposed to have done? Lay it all out after he'd already freaked the fuck out just from seeing me exit her room? There's no way he would have handled it well if I told him what I'd had the pleasure of witnessing. But now he's made all sorts of assumptions that are killing him. Is what he's conjured up worse than what I did? There's no telling what's in his head. Fuck, if he knew I'd been *this* close to whipping it out and stroking myself in time to her moans and sighs, he'd probably kill me. But he couldn't possibly understand. I look at Echo and all I see is her beckoning to me. With every second I'm near her, she buries herself deeper inside me.

I shudder out a breath, my mind shifting to the man who has me twisted up in a completely different way. He's elusive—one minute, he's right there with me and the next, slipping away. He was none too happy that he had to step in to break up that brawl. I cover my masked face with my hands, breathing deeply, trying to make sense of where I stand with him. Because I don't like it when he doesn't talk to me. We've been close—even just as friends—for a long time, so I know from past experience that he has a habit of pulling back when he's upset about something. We already weren't in a great place before he had to jump into the middle of that fight. I still haven't figured out what the hell is going on in his head.

But ... his whispered words as he held me in his arms have stuck with me for a full twenty-four hours. *I hate that he hurt*

you. But I get why he's upset. I'd mess up someone if I saw them coming out your window.

He has feelings for me. But there's something that's making him withdraw. I have to get to the bottom of it before I lose him for good.



TEN MINUTES OR SO LATER, I enter Sigma Iota Nu to find Dan and Wyatt arm wrestling and swearing at each other over the kitchen island.

“Anyone seen Royal or Wilder?” I ask as I get into the fridge for a bottle of water.

Dan looks up, growling when it gives Wyatt the advantage and he finds the back of his hand smashed down to the counter. Wyatt shouts in victory, jumping from his seat.

“Fuck. You made me lose.” Dan heaves out a harsh breath, eyeing me like that might be the end of me.

I hold up both hands. “Sorry. No harm intended.”

He narrows his eyes again, then nods toward the stairs. “Darts, I think.”

I should have checked there first. Speaking of bull's-eyes, I definitely don't need a target on my back courtesy of an accidental arm-wrestling interruption. Especially not if it's Dan that'll be coming after me. Fuck. No thanks. The guy's a brute.

Jogging down the stairs, I can hear the *thwap, thwap, thwap* of three darts embedding themselves into the dart board in rapid succession.

Wilder inspects where they landed as he pulls them free. “I've almost got you. Better not fuck up.”

Royal rises from the stool he was perched on, darts in hand. He's about to respond when he spots me. He whirls, and before I can even process what he's done, a dart flies right past my face, plunging into the wall behind me.

Stunned, I blink at him, but Wilder is in Royal's face in a flash. He tears the other two darts from his hand. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Royal rolls his eyes. "If I meant to hit him, I would have. I have better aim than that, and you know it."

"What if he'd moved, you asshole?" Wilder's explosion into fury is typically unparalleled and impressive, and honestly kinda warranted.

The two of them are busy staring each other down as I glance back at the wall and pluck the dart out. Taking a deep breath, I throw it at the board. Bull's-eye.

Wilder lets out a huffed breath, then returns the rest of the darts to their container before sitting down on the couch in front of the TV and running his hands over his face. I hear his mumbled, "Fuck," as he groans into them.

Royal eyes Wilder first, then shifts his gaze to me, resting his hands on his hips. "Sorry," he rasps.

"You know I'm a lover not a fighter." When he doesn't respond, but his jaw twitches, I continue, rubbing a few fingers over my swollen lip, then along my cheek where I'm bruised. "You already messed up my face, so can we try talking instead? Because I don't really like not knowing what's going to set you off. I thought I knew you pretty well, but apparently, I don't know what Royal's brain looks like on Echo." Wilder snorts, but I don't see where the lie is. She's like a goddamn drug to him. "And to be honest, it doesn't look like your face could handle another round with me, anyway." I give him a cheeky grin and wait.

It takes a good ten seconds, but a laugh erupts from his lips. At least, I think that's what that awkward noise was. "Fucker." He shakes his head, peering at me. "Tell me what you've been up to."

Glancing over the back of the couch, Wilder bites out, “Would you all have this discussion over here so I can keep an eye on the situation? I really don’t wanna have to play referee again, but I’d prefer to be able to jump in quickly if it comes down to it.”

Royal rounds the end of the L-shaped couch and flops down, leaning against the arm. “From that puffy cheekbone you’ve got going on there, I’d say you did a fucking fantastic job last time.”

“Fuck off. It’s not my fault you were swinging like a fucking maniac. I was bound to catch an elbow.”

“Whoa there, you two.” I jump over the back of the couch, landing next to Wilder. “I don’t want to ref jack shit, so let’s not start another round, okay?”

“Fine, then. Let’s talk. What was up with your texts? Where were you?” Royal arches a brow, pinning his gaze on me.

I meet his bold stare, then turn my head to give Wilder a *yikes* face before facing Royal again. “I followed Echo from class tonight.”

Royal wets his lips. He appears cool, calm, and collected, but there’s a simmering fury in those pale-green eyes. I’m not fooled. This dude is ten kinds of dangerous when it comes to this woman.

I hold up a hand, hoping to keep him from going full crazy on me. “All I did was see where she went—which I thought was interesting, by the way. She walked all the way to one of the big homes on the north side of the university. Let herself right in like she belonged there. Had a key and everything.”

A low rumble of a groan passes between Wilder’s lips, and he looks decidedly uncomfortable. Clearing his throat, he runs a hand through his hair. “I can confirm all this. She went home for the night to see her sister.”

Royal’s head bobs, almost as if he was aware of that.

Fuck, I didn’t even know she had an actual sister outside of TZE. How the fuck am I the one in the dark here?

I give Wilder the side-eye because it's one thing for her to maybe have mentioned to him that she has a sister. But how the fuck did he know where she was going tonight before I did?

Royal leans forward on the cushion, bracing his forearms on his leg. He gives me a perturbed look before settling on Wilder. "Mind telling me how you knew that?"

Beside me, Wilder gives a shrug, clearly trying to make whatever he's about to say not a big deal. "She texted me."

"Excuse me?" Royal bites out, cocking his head to the side as if he's sure he couldn't have heard what he just did.

"You fuckin' heard me. I ran into her on campus earlier today. She told me how freaked out she was because she knew someone had been in her room." His gaze slides to mine. "Great fuckin' job, by the way. She thinks some lunatic has been watching her from inside her room."

"If the shoe fuckin' fits," Royal grumbles, irritation sliding over his features at the reminder.

I exhale hard, working my jaw to the side. Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees. Fuck. I scared her bad. "You told us to mess with her. I did." I look up to see Royal's reaction, but he's still focused on Wilder.

He juts his chin at our friend. "I want to know what was said. Between you. Show me the messages."

Wilder's brows dart together, and he scowls, reluctantly leaning over to pull his phone out of his pocket. He chucks it across the space between him and Royal. "I don't have anything to hide. Beckham is messing with her in his way. I'm doing the same in mine—gaining her trust so when she realizes I'm not on her side, it'll hurt."

My brow raises. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"If it happens, you'll know it." He shrugs, giving Royal a sour look. "At the moment, I'm having trouble understanding why the hell I'm doing any of it."

But Royal isn't paying attention to either of us because he's still scanning the text message thread between Echo and Emory. "Well, you have her believing you're there for her, that's for fucking sure." His teeth grind. "Really fucking cute that you offered to come over for a motherfucking sleepover."

My mouth drops open, and I swing my gaze back to Wilder. "The fuck?"

"What? You can go poke around in her room, but I can't? If I'm there, at least it's with her permission."

I let out a sigh. "Whatever, Wilder." He says that he's trying to gain her trust so he can better fuck with her head. But somehow, I doubt he'd ever fucking hurt her on purpose. I see it in his eyes. He's connecting with her.

It's different than the way I feel. And definitely different from how Royal feels. But this guy doesn't fool me either. Royal and Echo definitely have fucking issues, but I have a feeling it stems from a more complicated history than Wilder and I are aware of. And it might be more than we're prepared to help him deal with. That remains to be seen.

Royal blows out a breath, then pins his gaze on me. "Did you see anything else interesting while you were there?"

"I mean, not really. I couldn't get close enough to read lips or whatever without the security light out back turning on. But it looked like she and the woman—who you're telling me is her sister—were talking. The minute she walked in, her sister started buzzing around the kitchen, making her a sandwich, while she helped pick up some toys that were on the floor. I texted you, then left. That's it." Honestly, I wish there had been more, but it seemed like normal behavior to me. College students leave campus to see friends or family all the time. The only difference here was that I'd obviously scared the fucking shit out of her to the point where she didn't want to stay in her room tonight.

He stares me down a few seconds before he nods. "Yeah. Okay." Then almost as if he's talking to himself, he mumbles, "I should have known when I saw her sister that Echo might eventually retreat there."

Wilder and I exchange a look, and Wilder grits out, “Wait. What are you talking about?”

I frown. “Yeah. What do you mean you saw her sister? Like at their house?” I press my lips together, squinting at him in question. “When the fuck were you there?”

There’s a chance if Royal thinks much harder about whatever is in his head that his brain might overload, melt, and leak out his ears. I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s an all-out war happening in there.

He takes a few deep breaths, his eyes finally finding first mine, then Wilder’s. “I used to live next door to her. Trust me, it was a pretty fucking big surprise to realize the Madden family was back.”

“Wait. You lived next door to Echo?” Wilder is on full alert, and I’m feeling the same, like I’ve missed part of the story.

“Yeah. My, um ... the foster family I moved in with when I was around ten live in the house next to hers.”

A startled laugh bursts from my lips, and I quickly cover my mouth with a hand. “Sorry. This isn’t the time for that. But it suddenly feels like I don’t know you at all.” I didn’t have a fucking clue he was a foster kid. My brow furrows. “What were you doing at the home of this foster family? Are you still friendly? I have so many fucking questions.”

“No, we definitely don’t have any communication. And I can’t talk about why I was there, so don’t fucking ask again.”

Wilder and I exchange another look. We both know what that probably means. Whatever reason he was there was at the demand of the Sin Keeper.

TWENTY-THREE

ROYAL

JEALOUSY BURNS THROUGH ME. I CAN MANUFACTURE ALL sorts of reasons why I need to see Echo, but it all comes down to one thing. That's *my* girl. And the idea that I'm allowing Beckham and Wilder to get close to her makes every cell in my body scream in anguish. I need to fucking see her. *Now*. Want my hands on her, fuck the consequences.

Earlier this morning, I'd figured out which classes she has on Wednesdays so that I could find her, but it'd been in vain. I never saw her. Unless she somehow saw *me* first and slipped past me by using alternate entrances. Why the hell would she miss class, though? Knowing she probably spent the night with her family, I assumed her sister, a teacher—who I found on LinkedIn—would drive her to campus this morning or maybe one of her parents, but that sure doesn't seem to be the case.

And why is Echo's entire family back in their old home? Did they feel they had to be nearby while she and Davis attend KU? Obviously, now that I know her mother was in TZE during her days at KU, it makes sense that she'd come here. Might have even gotten a scholarship from the sorority. Who the fuck knows. But Davis transferred here, too. Why the fuck did he feel the need to transfer for his senior year? I don't get it.

I want to know what the hell is going on, but my brain is also spinning with a new problem. Someone sent me a nasty text from an unknown number this morning. Could have been motherfucking Davis, I suppose. It doesn't seem like

something Echo would do, but I could be wrong. My teeth grind and grind as I read the message for the millionth time today.

Whoever let you out should have kept you on a leash.

I hadn't bothered to answer. I'm not one for this sort of bullshit. If they can't attach a name to their venom, then fuck them. It means nothing to me.

Frustrated as hell by the time I finish my last class of the day, I head home. I'm in a piss-poor mood, and there will be no pulling out of it until I've found Echo, which I realize is in direct opposition to what I say every goddamn time I talk to the guys. I need them to handle her for me, but I don't want them near her. It's fucked-up, but I can't seem to help myself. And the fact she's making it difficult for me to find her is making my head a tangled mess. There are a few more places to look, but I find myself more and more agitated as my search continues on, and that will make things worse for her.

I hit the pathway that runs along Greek Row, but instead of walking up our driveway, I skip it and charge right up to TZE. If there's one thing I fucking hate, it's when other people know my business, but I have no other choice but to ask if she's here. Standing in front of the door, I breathe out unsteadily, threading my fingers through my hair. I grumble for the thousandth time today at how disturbed I am not knowing where the fuck she is. Is she aware I'm looking for her? Is she hiding from me? *Fuck it.* I pound on the door with the side of my fist.

A few minutes later, a girl opens the door. Her eyes widen at the sight of me, but whether it's because I'm one of SIN's resident bad boys or because I made my hair stand on end by tugging on it, I have no idea. I stare at her. I'll be perfectly honest, I haven't paid a whole lot of attention to these girls. I thought they were the typical sorority girl flakes. Now that I know they've probably seen more of Echo in the last week than I have in the last several years, it seems like maybe I should have been paying better attention.

The pretty brunette in glasses stares right back at me curiously. “Can I help you? You’re Royal, right?”

I nod. “And you’re ...?” I give her a faint smile as I rub my palm over the stubble coming in on my jaw.

“Cassie. I’m TZE’s president.”

“Sorry, this is only my second year. And I—” I frown. “Not even going to sugarcoat it. I couldn’t have given a shit about anyone last year.”

Her eyes bug out a bit at my admission, but she hides her surprise quickly. “Okay, well, what can I help you with?”

I grimace, hating that I have to ask at all. Or that I even want to know. “I was actually wondering if Echo is here.”

Quite a few girls have gathered behind Cassie. I groan internally at their antics as they giggle and whisper behind their hands. She frowns, pushing up her glasses on the bridge of her nose. “I don’t remember seeing her at all this morning, sorry.”

Glancing past her, I wave at the other girls. “Hey. Anyone seen Echo around?”

There’s immediate chattering again and a lot of head shakes. *Great.*

“Hey, Royal, is it true you were the one fighting the night we sent Echo as our cage girl?”

I don’t even know who asked the question, but I grab the back of my neck with one hand, tugging on it as I look up at the crowd, then slowly nod my head.

“Oh my god, Royal, what are you doing here?” A girl I should probably recognize—but totally don’t—makes her way through the crowded entryway. Her face is lit up, and she’s positively gushing with excitement. I can’t for the fucking life of me remember her name, though.

Cassie glances at her. “Oh good, Freya. You’re here. Maybe you’ll know something. He’s looking for Echo.”

Her brows dart up. “Oh? Hm. Well, I know she had class last night, but I haven’t seen her since then. I told her I’d see her when she got back, but then I never did. She just kinda disappeared.” She shrugs, a playful glint in her eyes. “I thought maybe she was with *you*.”

What the fuck? No way am I giving this nosy bitch any info because she seems like the sort who gets off on knowing everyone’s business. “Nah. I just wanted a word with her. I’m sure I’ll find her. Thanks.” I pivot on my heel and bound down the stairs of their porch while the volume of overly-curious discourse in their house multiplies by a million. I kinda hate that I’ve given them something to gossip about. I don’t need people talking about me.

There’s only one more place to look for her, and I don’t want to go there any more than I wanted to go to TZE.

Back at SIN, I bolt into the house and tear through, paying no heed to the strange looks I’m getting. I need a fucking car. I don’t have one of my own, so I need either Beckham’s or Wilder’s. I poke my head into every room I come to until I finally catch a glimpse of Wilder out back, shooting hoops. As I slam out the back door, he nails one basket after another, snatching up the ball as it drops through the hoop and going again. Sweat pours off him. He has the most singular focus I’ve ever seen. Apparently, today has been one of *those* days.

When he spots me, he stops, ball clutched between his hands. His face is stony, and I swear he must be working through some shit of his own, but I don’t have time to hold his hand. He probably would tell me to fuck off anyway. He gets like that when he’s sorting through something.

He eyes me, slowly dribbling the ball. He waits me out, knowing I’ll say whatever I need to when I’m good and ready.

My chest squeezes hard. I hate asking people for anything. “Could I borrow your truck?”

He frowns. “Sure. What’s going on?” His brow furrows with the question.

“I—” I stop to swallow, half-worried he’ll say no if I tell him why I want it. Finally, the overwhelming need to find Echo wins out. “I’ve been looking for Echo all damn day. Thought I’d ride around to see if I could find her.” My tongue darts out to dampen my lips. “Was she in art class today?” I never saw her enter the building, but there’s always a chance she slipped by me.

He blows out a hard exhale, turns, and shoots at the basket again. The ball goes through the net with a faint *swish*. “Nope. She left me high and dry on the partnered assignment, too.”

That makes me feel better—the fact that she hadn’t actively dodged me, not the art project because that sucks for him. “Have you texted her today?”

In an explosive move I didn’t see coming, he chucks the basketball as hard as he can at the back of the house. It smacks into the stone and bounces back, sailing past both of us before rolling onto the grass.

“Is that a yes?” I stare at him, expressionless, my jaw twitching.

He places his hands on his hips, his gaze shifting to the ground in front of him. He nods. “I did when she didn’t show up to class. And last I checked she hadn’t responded. She confirmed last night that she’d gotten home safely and was with her sister. That was the last text she sent.” Digging into his pocket, he comes up with the key fob for his truck. “She might just be busy, you know. Or need a fucking break.”

He pitches the key at me, and I catch it with one hand. “Maybe. But I still don’t like it. It’s the third day of class. Seems off.”

“Could be. But has her first week at Kingston University been a bed of roses?” His brow arches. “I guarantee you it hasn’t been. It’s been a straight suck.” He swipes at his sweat-coated forehead with the back of his forearm.

“Some people deserve what they get.”

Wilder shakes his head, then jogs over to retrieve the ball. Back in front of the hoop, he dribbles and shoots. “You aren’t

wrong about that,” he mutters.

I narrow my eyes on him, but he’s back to shooting hoops at a furious pace. I have a feeling that his last statement had nothing to fucking do with Echo. “Thanks for the truck. I’ll be back in an hour or so, I guess.”

He nods, not even turning around as he sends the ball sailing through the air again.

Key in hand, I jog back through the house, receiving more curious looks from our housemates, but I don’t have it in me to stop and talk. Don’t need to waste time explaining my shit to any of these people. Most especially not to Davis—and that motherfucker sits there staring at me. Another fight would ensue if I told him I was hunting down his sister, and nobody has time for that.

I click the button that unlocks Wilder’s big-ass truck and in two seconds flat, have it in drive, and hit the gas. The trip to her house—next to my old house—doesn’t take long. Within minutes, I pull the truck over at the curb between the two houses and let the engine idle for a full minute before I suck in a breath and get out.

There’s a reason why I looked everywhere else first. Coming back here a second time in two days is fucking insanity. It won’t be long before people start asking questions. My body does a full shudder, and the sensation of eyes on me makes me want to turn around and get the fuck out of here. But I don’t. My need to find Echo and set things straight with her overrides every other urge I have. I chuckle internally. Actually, I’m unsure whether I mean to set things straight or teach her a lesson. Possibly both. She knows I’m aware of her friends, Benneti and Emory. She knows I’ve been watching her since the moment she showed her face. So, instead of leaving, I walk up to the Maddens’ front door and knock.

I wait, sweat trickling between my shoulder blades and down my back. Why’s it gotta be so fucking hot even after the sun goes down? I blow out a breath and lean to the side, taking a quick peek into their home through the window next to the door. There’s nothing to see but the arm of a couch off to the

right and the hallway that leads back to the kitchen and dining area at the rear of the house. It's all very familiar to me yet seems so foreign. Like it's somewhere I frequented in another lifetime.

After shifting back and forth on my feet for way too long, I come to the conclusion that she's not home. None of them appear to be. I should probably thank my lucky stars Mr. Madden isn't here to whip open the door and strangle me where I stand. *Fuck*. I grip the back of my neck with both hands and turn around, surveying the neighborhood. It's getting dark now. I guess I could drive around a bit. If she spent all day here, it makes sense that she could be walking back to TZE now. Groaning, I stalk back to the truck and drive off.

I turn over in my head where else she could be. And ponder the disappearing act. I get that Beckham must have scared the shit out of her somehow—don't even fucking want to know what he pulled in there—and made it so she didn't want to sleep in her room. But to be MIA the entire day is bizarre.

A fit of frustrated, frenzied anger slams through me, and, almost as if I'm not in control of my body, my fist smashes down on the steering wheel. My chest clenches hard, and my jaw clamps down mercilessly. I'm definitely not reacting well to having been unsuccessful at finding her. I make a loop around the neighborhood and drive down a few side streets, but there are very few people out and about other than those getting home from work.

I end up taking a street that borders the woods on the backside of Greek Row toward the north entrance to campus. And that's when I spot her walking along the road with her backpack slung over her shoulders. A moment later, she veers off the pavement and into the trees.

What the fucking hell does she think she's doing? True, it's the fastest route to campus, and if she travels in a straight path through the wooded area, she'll eventually emerge at the clearing on the other side and find the half wall that runs

behind Greek Row. Then it's just a matter of climbing over and walking across the back lawn to her sorority.

Not if I fucking catch her first, though.

TWENTY-FOUR

ROYAL

I THROW MYSELF OUT OF THE TRUCK, MY CHEST HEAVING AS I peer through the trees in the direction Echo took. It sends my mind back to every other time I pursued her along wooded trails after practice. The memories expand and contract in my head until I have no choice but to allow myself to sprint after her. I'm rocked by a wicked mixture of anger and lust, and it shakes me to my very core. My breathing is ragged, but I don't care if she hears me coming. Stealth is not the point. It's always been that she likes the idea of me capturing her. And I've always fucking loved catching her to take what I want. She once told me it made everything so much more intense for her—and no matter what, she wanted me, so I should keep coming. And she was fucking right. The times she pretended I was like an animal hunting her—those were the best and gave us the biggest rush.

I'm sure she'll probably regret all that now, but I don't give a fuck. I dash headlong through the trees, hearing the crunch of leaves under her feet and the rustle of branches up ahead of me. It all feeds into that place in my brain that screams *Chase her*.

When will she realize I'm here? I'm not being quiet in the slightest. To my surprise, I catch up to her, finding her squatted down, tying her shoe. Her backpack sits at her side. A deep chuckle rolls from me. Perfect. But she doesn't respond to my laughter, and that's when I realize why she hasn't flipped out—my girl has her earbuds in. She doesn't have a fucking clue I'm here. Time to turn the terror up a notch.

I creep forward, never hesitating as I bend over her to pluck out an earbud. She yelps, her body jolting in surprise. Scrambling around on her knees, her hand flies to her ear while her panicked eyes meet mine. I make a show of putting her earbud in my ear. Music floods my senses. “Little Girl Gone” by Chinchilla. Appropriate.

“How’d your shoe come untied? Did you forget about runner’s knots, princess?”

She jumps to her feet, backing away. One step. Two. “Wha-what are you doing?”

Is she serious? I leer at her, stalking forward. One step. Two. “Chasing you.”

Her eyes go wide, and without stopping to pick up her backpack, she spins around, automatically racing away from me. Almost as if we’ve done this a million times. My heart thuds in my chest at my girl willing to play our game.

I’m off like a shot behind her, marveling at her speed and agility. She jumps over dead trees, darts left and right. She’s trying to lose me. There’s no way that’s happening. I smell her fear. Her sweat. Her lust.

Squinting, I catch sight of her up ahead. She’s stopped behind a tree for a breather. She used to do that all the time. Pause for a bit to let me find her, then she’d be off again. She’s so fucking beautiful the way she looks with her chest heaving for air.

“Better fucking run, baby,” I grit out, loudly enough that she hears me. Her head whips around to spot me advancing on her, and she pushes off the tree and bursts into a full run. That might be her downfall. It’s too fucking dark. She’s bound to trip and fall at some point. Or she’ll pretend that’s what happened. I haven’t forgotten for a second—and clearly neither has she—that she’s the prey and I’m her predator. This has always been the game.

Only now, the stakes are higher. She doesn’t feel the same way about me anymore. And I want nothing more than to

punish her for every time over the last three years that I thought of her and knew I wasn't good enough.

Air punches from my lungs as I realize she's slowing. Tiring? "If you keep that pace, I'm going to catch you, Echo. Is that what you want? I won't be disappointed if you do."

"Leave me alone, Royal!" she gasps out as she continues to run. I love the way the moonlight shines through the trees, leaving a dappled pattern of brightness on her red hair. Her eyes are wild as she twists around to see how close I am. The answer: too close. She gives a shriek of dismay as she pushes her legs to move faster.

"You don't mean that, and we both know it." She's within my reach and because of that, I'm aware that she can hear every one of my ragged breaths, every steady footfall behind her.

Stumbling, she lets out a frustrated cry. I catch her before she goes down to her hands and knees. My body curls around hers, my arms banding her tight against me. My lips coast over the shell of her ear, letting my hot breath cascade over her skin. It elicits the body-racking shiver I'd expected. She hasn't changed. "I always catch you, don't I?"

Her chest jerks, and she struggles, the back of her head colliding with my chin. I grunt hard, not expecting the sudden move. Spinning her around, I push her up against a tree, hands secured over her head in one of my mine.

She pants, our eyes locked on each other. "Why are you doing this?"

Through gritted teeth, I growl, "Simple, princess. You're mine." I mold my body to hers as my mouth crashes down to claim her lips in a brutal, bruising kiss. I can tell by the rigid set of her body that she wants so badly to deny me. I nip. I lick. I bite. And when I don't get a response, I rub my cheek against hers, inhaling her scent and letting a low growl rumble from me. Bringing my hand up to her throat, her pulse flutters madly against my thumb. "Mine." I swipe my tongue boldly over her bottom lip.

A whimper slips from her, and I take the opportunity to plunge my tongue into her mouth.

The taste of her. I never forgot. Sweet and uniquely Echo. I've kissed her so many times, but this feels like a first.

The way she continues to struggle against me, trying to free her wrists and bucking against me ... it makes my blood so fucking hot, I slip my hand from her neck to thread my fingers into the hair at the back of her head, holding her at the precise angle I want her. And fuck I want her. My head goes hazy as my tongue and hers battle, and our bodies war as we continue this sinful dance of hunter and prey.

The chaotic beat of the music playing from her earbuds continues to hammer in my ear, spurring me on. I grip her ass and tug her body tightly to mine. My erection is straining behind my athletic shorts, and if I thought I was sweating before, that was nothing. Heat radiates from my body, my need for Echo a fierce flaming beast trying to claw its way out from under my skin. With one hand, I wrench my shirt over my head and toss it to the side as she watches me with wide, stunned eyes.

I duck back in and nip at her gorgeous lips, letting a low growl of desire rip from my throat.

She pants against my mouth, her facial features twisting into something I don't understand. A moment later, she's gotten her hands free and is whaling on me, hands crashing into my chest and arms.

"Go ahead. Fight me. Bruise me. Show me how you hate me." I shift, grasping the back of her thighs and sweeping her legs out from under her. Lifting her into my arms, her back collides with the tree. Her bunched fists pause their assault on me as her mouth hangs open in dismay of the position she's found herself in.

A moment later, her hands unclench so she can grab my shoulders, and her legs clamp viciously around my waist. I groan aloud in pleasure, even as her nails rake into my skin. She gasps as my mouth and teeth find her throat, and she lets out a strangled cry. In response, I thrust between her legs,

feeling her heat like her pussy's calling me home. I'm so fucking hard for her, my mind is threatening to melt, and I grind there for a moment as I breathe her in. I need this girl, need to remember the way we were together. My tongue darts out, and I lick a savage path from her collarbone, up her neck, to the back of her jaw before I catch her earlobe between my teeth. Her breath hisses from her, and her body shudders.

I trail my hand up her satiny thigh, then squeeze it hard enough to leave my mark. My fingertips dive under her lightweight cotton shorts, and she sucks in a breath. "You've missed my touch. The way I know exactly how to make your cunt weep for me." With no hesitation, I plunge my fingers under the fabric of her panties and rub them through the arousal that's scenting the air all around us. Her breath skitters out past trembling lips, and she quakes in my arms as she coats my fingers in her juices. "You're soaking your panties, little liar." I plunge a digit deep into her pussy, then a second one. Poor girl can't even deny it. She's soaking wet. I finger fuck her while she thrashes and heaves in my arms. She claws at me, and I can't fucking wait to see how she's marked me up. And the thing is, this is the way we've always played.

As I bring her closer to the edge, flicking my thumb over her clit, I whisper in her ear, my voice lethal, "I told you if you ran, I would catch you. If you hid from me, I would find you. And if you stayed, I would make you regret it. Are you regretting it now, baby?"

Her jaw clenches for a second as she stares into my eyes, but then the orgasm rips through her. My name is torn from her lips as she screams into the night.

TWENTY-FIVE

ECHO

MY PUSSY THROBS AND THROBS AS THE ORGASM PULSES through me. This is fucking insanity. I shouldn't want this, shouldn't want him. Every hateful word I want to spew at him is locked up tight in my throat. And really, I should direct them and all my anger at myself anyway. I'm so fucking pissed that he knows precisely what to do, what to say. That our past history has blended with his need to come after me now and created the perfect storm of frustrated want and need that's playing out here on the forest path.

Fuck, the way my heart sped up the second I realized it was him in the woods with me ... My body had reacted immediately, too, the surge of arousal shocking the hell out of me as I ran from him.

And now he's caught me. Do I regret it? That was his question. I probably will the minute it's over. And right now, I refuse to let him know how good he's making me feel. His hands are rough on me, but his touch is achingly familiar. It makes me dizzy with the want of our past lives. I just want to go back. Do everything differently. Fix us. Tears well in my eyes. But I can't. I fucking can't. All we have is the sorrow that dwells in the here and now. And the memories of a love lost.

He gives my clit a little smack, making me gasp aloud before pulling his hand free of my shorts and wrenching my shirt up and a bra cup down. The wetness of his tongue lapping at my nipple snaps me out of the thoughts crashing through my head. Before my lips can form a word, my back

arches, thrusting my taut, needy flesh into his waiting mouth. He groans, sucking it deep while my hands clutch at his arms, fingers digging into his skin as I grapple with the idea that we aren't done here. Far from it. My hunter hasn't taken what he wants yet. And I know, like always, he'll want to take a bite out of his prey.

Excitement zips through me, tangling with the anger I've directed at myself. All of it fuels my actions. I grip the back of his neck with one hand, holding him to my breast, all while I rub myself greedily against his dick. Memories shoot through me of other times just like this. Other times where he took from me what he wanted. Other times ... when we were in love.

Oblivious to the thoughts in my head, Royal grunts in pleasure, going after my other breast. He makes these animalistic noises, moans really, as he consumes me. His teeth scrape over my nipple, sending electricity through my body. I surrender to all of it. I feel alive in a way I haven't in a long, long time.

“That's it. Use me. Use my cock.”

Flames wash over my face. I can't imagine what we look like, writhing up against a tree, against each other, as we are. The suction of his mouth sends jolts of pleasure from my chest down to my clit. I can't handle much more. “Put me down,” I gasp out, one breath after another heaving from me.

“You know what happens if I do,” he rasps after letting my breast go. My flesh being bare to the night air has a ridiculous effect on me. Then again, I've always felt like this with Royal. I've been naked with him in the woods. I've let him chase me, catch me, and fuck me. Untamed need rockets through my system.

His brow quirks for only a second before he lets my feet hit the ground and steps away. He nods.

And I run, heart in my throat. After a count of ten, he's tearing through the woods behind me at a ridiculously fast pace. Blood roars in my ears, and my lungs struggle to deliver air as we crash through the forest. I haven't a fucking clue

where we are, whether we're closer to Greek Row or the road or somewhere between. I shoot to the right to duck behind a tree. Wild excitement batters me from the inside out and in the same breath, I wonder what the fuck I think I'm doing.

Not hearing Royal, I push from the tree.

I realize my mistake a moment later when he grasps my shoulders and spins me to face the tree. "Caught you." He jerks my hips backward, then pins my hands above my head. There's some rustling from behind me, and next thing I know, he's stripped my shorts and underwear down, baring me to him. "Regret this yet?"

I suck in a breath, my chest expanding to take in the damp forest air. I grit my teeth. There's this power he has over me that I can't describe. I shake my head furiously, refusing to let the words out.

He slips his hand between my legs and grunts. "Fuck, you're wet for me."

It's not humiliation that washes over me. It's fire. A fever. Delirium.

I meet his gaze over my shoulder, breathing hard. It's as if we were never apart. As if we didn't ruin everything. He's shucked his shorts over his hips, and one look at his erection has heat flashing through me. He's long and thick, and the way he's using my arousal to lubricate himself has me dying on the inside.

"I caught you," he rasps as he rubs the head of his cock through my wetness. He's fucking toying with me now, teasing. He knows I'm not going to stop him. Another ripple of desire moves through me. "You're mine, Echo. You're fucking mine." And with those words, he thrusts inside my body for the first time in years.

I cry out at the feeling of absolute fullness. It's like I'm a virgin all over again, the way my body clenches down in alarm at his intrusion.

"Fucking hell. You're so motherfucking tight." He groans. "Leave your hands where they are."

I'm too overwhelmed to argue. He grips my hips in his hands and slowly begins to fuck me. Each slow drag in and out makes me breathless. Then, before I'm even used to his presence invading my body, he moves faster and faster. I can't believe I'm letting this happen, but it's so fucking good, I don't want him to stop. The rough slap of his skin against mine is fucking everything.

A moment later, though, he pauses. "I want to see what's mine." He slips out of me, and his voice is gruff when he growls out, "Get on the ground."

I hesitate. I know I shouldn't have. All the air in my lungs ejects as he brings me down there himself, putting me on hands and knees. Behind me, he yanks my shorts and panties down farther and somehow manages to get one leg free of them. He lets out a guttural noise as both hands smooth over my ass and he spreads my cheeks. My heart thuds hard and my mouth goes completely dry. Any hope of speaking is gone, as I'm convinced my brain has left my body. What am I doing? Oh god, what am I doing?

One of his hands skims along my spine to my upper back, pushing down roughly until I get the idea he wants me down on my forearms. Not only am I exposed, but I can't see what he's doing. Or get a read on what he's thinking. He kneels back there, his face hovering inches from my ass, my pussy. A warped shudder runs through me, as I recognize that like so many times before, being at his mercy turns me on in a way not much else does.

I feel his breath first as it fans over my swollen, needy flesh, and then his mouth is on me. The rough stubble on his cheeks and chin scrapes over my skin, but his lips and tongue soothe. He approaches this like he's devouring his favorite meal, the lower half of his face fully involved.

"Need more." He urges my legs farther apart, but my ass tips to a better angle of its own volition. "That's a good fucking girl." It's a good thing there's no way he can see the beet-red color that's just infused my face. I know it's there because my face has never felt so hot in my entire life.

Fuck. Why does he do this to me? Why do I need him like this? I give a shake of my head as bliss washes through my body. His tongue swipes over every inch of my pussy, and his fingers toy with my clit. He rubs me in swift circles that have my arousal seeping down my inner thighs. “Fuck me. Please fuck me. Please.” I hate the way my voice sounds as I beg him for relief.

His cock slams into me with no warning, and my cheek hits the dirt. I gasp, my fingers clawing at the ground, looking for something to hold onto, but there’s nothing. Only leaves and twigs and the hard floor of the forest. As he picks up speed, all I can concentrate on are the groans and gruff sounds tearing from him and the deep, soul-satisfying moans that he’s pulling from me. It’s so good. Too good. I love it. God, I love it. And I hate him for it.

He smacks my ass, and I yelp. “That’s right. Take it. You’ll take whatever I give you. And then you’ll beg me for more.” His hand runs up my back, under my shirt and he flicks the clasp of my bra open. “Take it off.”

I swallow hard but tug my shirt over my head and let my bra fall down my arms. Holy fuck. How the hell did I go from a quiet walk home through the woods to being stripped naked and fucked within an inch of my life?

“This pussy is mine. Your whole body. Mine. You’ll do what I tell you to do.”

I might hate him right now for making me feel so good, but I hate myself, too, for letting him. And to my utter and complete shame, I know in my heart I will do whatever he wants because I can’t imagine not feeling this way ever again. My head goes hazy with all the emotions tumbling through me. Hate colliding with need. Lust crashing into fury. Nothing makes any fucking sense.

He curls around me, his rough hand sliding over my breasts and pinching at my nipples as his hips continue to piston, his cock filling me up with each deep, penetrating stroke. My breathing becomes labored, tension coiling in my lower belly. He’s going to pull every last bit of dignity from

me and throw it into the bushes where I'll have to scrape and crawl to find it again.

“Are you close?”

“Yes,” I gasp, my body slamming back to meet him. I claw at the ground in front of me.

“Good.” The heat of his body at my back leaves me, and a second later, his cock is no longer inside me. “Don't fucking move.”

My body gives an all-over shudder as it gets used to the feeling of emptiness. I look over my shoulder to see him jerking himself, his jaw going rigid. *Wait. What?*

“Fuck. Fuuuck, Echo,” he chokes out as he comes all over my ass in violent spurts.

I blink. Oh, no. He didn't. He wouldn't do that to me.

But he did. Oh my fucking god, he did.

He smacks my ass, then rubs the cum into my skin, like he's giving me a massage. “Fuck, yes. Regrets? Still nothing, little liar?”

I sputter, “What the hell are you doing?” My body is still on the verge of orgasm, and even though his hands are all over my backside, I have the horrible realization that I'll be staying right where I am, hovering painfully on the edge of bliss. No relief in sight.

I have no idea if this was always his plan, because he did let me come earlier ... but he totally denied me on purpose. I should have seen it coming. This was no thrilling dash through the woods followed by a quick fuck when he caught me. Everything about what he did was ruthless. Brutal. He intended to punish me all along.

Royal chuckles as he removes my shorts and panties from my other foot, then pats my ass as he gets up off the ground. I scramble around, my mouth bone-dry. I'm unable to speak, can't even formulate the words I want to say but my eyes are glued to him as he begins to right himself, pulling up his shorts and tucking his mostly still hard dick inside them. My shorts

and panties dangle from his hand, and he studies them carefully before tossing the shorts to me and stuffing the underwear in his pocket.

His lips quirk up at one side into a full smirk as he runs one hand through his perfectly messy hair. “Souvenir.”

“Fuck you, Royal.” If he’s waiting for me to beg him to give them back, he’s out of his fucking mind. He can have my panties. And I hope every time he touches them, he remembers what it felt like to be inside me, because it’d be some sort of divine miracle if I ever allowed that to happen again.

His eyes lock on mine as he jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “Fuck. I guess my shirt is back there somewhere.” And without a care in the world, he shrugs, winks, then takes off through the trees.

TWENTY-SIX

ECHO

MY EYES WIDEN AND MY MOUTH DROPS INTO AN O AS I WATCH Royal's retreating figure disappear from view. Oh god. He's actually leaving me here. I slowly push myself to stand up, clutching my shorts in my hands. Shit, I guess I'm lucky he didn't take the rest of my clothes with him. I wouldn't have put it past him to screw me over like that.

I blink into the darkness, and it hits me that I'm very alone out here. And possibly lost. I turn a slow circle, trying to get my bearings. My backpack—and in its pocket, my phone—is somewhere closer to where I entered the woods. But I have no clue where that would be after running around and around the way I did. Suppressing the urge to cry, instead, I let my head fill with fury.

Fucking Royal. I'm going to kill him. Deciding to ignore the fact that I have cum for lotion on my ass, I jam my feet back into my shorts and pull them up, then put on my bra and shirt. I look down at myself, disgusted. I'm a sweaty, grime-covered mess. My hands shake as I bring them up to tuck hair behind my ears, then I press my palms to my cheeks where they're still flaming hot.

I stand there in the woods for an embarrassing amount of time, a tiny sliver of hope that Royal will come back for me with my backpack and maybe point me in the right direction so I can get the hell out of here. But after a while, it's clear that's not happening. He left me.

On my own, I make my way through the woods, thankfully stumbling back upon the spot where I'd abandoned my

backpack. I frown as I approach, seeing a piece of paper on top of it.

He left me a note. Asshole couldn't help me, but he had the gall to get into my bag, find paper and pen ... and write me a motherfucking *note*.

*Good girls get rewards.
But we both know you've been
anything but good, little liar.*

Steaming mad, I shove the paper into my backpack in the same pouch as I'd put the rude Post-it note. Rewards? I don't want or need his fucking rewards.

With my head full of revenge, I walk back out to the road. There's no way I'm making the trek back through the woods, even if in theory it's faster. I'll go the long way around. It's fine. But fuck, if there was ever a walk of shame, this is it.

The awful feeling gets even worse twenty minutes later when I pass Sigma Iota Nu to get home. Is that fucker in there? Did he pretend as if he'd just gone for a motherfucking run?

Fuming, I snap, marching up their driveway. I bet he won't see *this* coming. Treat me like trash and face the consequences, asshole. I climb the porch steps and hammer my fist on the door. The sound of footsteps tells me that someone is coming, but when the door opens, quite possibly the last person I want to see is standing there.

Oh my fuck. What was I thinking? My eyes crash shut for three agonizing beats of my broken heart.

When I open them again, Davis's have gone wide, taking me in from head to toe. I know I look like I rolled around in the dirt, mostly because I had, but if the horrific porch light wasn't shining down on me, I don't think it'd be as bad. Shaking my head, I cover my face and back away, then turn and flee down the steps and into their yard.

“Echo! What the fuck? What happened?”

I turn around, holding a palm out as my brother comes charging down the stairs. “No. Davis, I can’t do this with you right now.” My gaze flicks to the doorway, where a couple of other SIN brothers are watching. No Royal, though. Distress churns around and around in my stomach. I swallow, blinking back angry tears. I don’t even know why I’m crying, except I never wanted anyone to see me like this, especially not my family. They spent way too much time picking me up and caring for me when things fell apart the first time. I don’t want to go back there ever again. I don’t like feeling weak. I suck in a breath. “I’m good. I’m fine.” I start walking toward TZE.

“Wait, at least tell me this. When you came to the door ... were you looking for me?”

My skin prickles at his question, and I involuntarily cringe. I’m unwilling to answer, but my brother knows me and that’s all he needs to understand that I wasn’t there for him. “That fucker. I’m gonna kill him.” He’s decided for himself what he thinks is going on here. And he’s probably not too far off base, but I’m too embarrassed to come out and say that Royal had— Fuck, I can’t even wrap my mind around what being with him had done to my head or why I’d let it happen. And I’m definitely not going to let all that out with half a house of fraternity brothers standing on the porch to watch the drama.

“No. You’re not. Just stay away from him.” I spin around to face my brother. It kills me to see the worry on his face. “I appreciate you wanting to look out for me. But I can handle things on my own, Davis. I told you that when you said you wanted to transfer.”

“Obviously fucking not, Echo,” he growls, his brows furrowing hard as he glowers at me.

My eyes flash at him, and I’m barely able to hold back. I can’t deal with him and the way he thinks he knows best. I don’t want to do this right now. Ignoring the talk going on behind the hands of the motley crew of SIN brothers, I pivot toward TZE and walk as gracefully as I can with my head held high. Hopefully, if I have some time to myself to get cleaned

up, I'll feel better. Never mind I'm going back to my room where I'm clearly going to be a freaking mess. Will I even be able to shower? Sleep? I exhale hard. All of this is too much at once. But I'll figure it out. I have to. Because if I lose it and Davis finds out, he's going to step in, and then he'll tell Kara I can't fucking handle my own shit, and they'll make sure I'm done here. As if our family hasn't had to deal with enough in the last six months since we were forced to figure it out on our own.

Trudging up the stairs to TZE, I side-eye all the guys still watching me from next door. *Fuck*. Well, great. Now I'm going to be *that* girl at the party this weekend—the chick who raised a ruckus outside the SIN fraternity house Wednesday night. The one who'd come looking for one of them with dirt on her face, clothes that've seen better days, and an attitude to match. I'm sure they'll figure out who I was looking for soon enough. It'll be simple deduction at this point. I clearly wasn't hunting down anyone who was present, and there were more than a few watching the shit show, so I'm sure gossip is about to spin around the mill with fury. Can't fucking wait.

I manage to slip in the front door of TZE unseen and am in the process of darting down the hallway to the far end where my room is, but a door opens midway down and Ireland steps out, blocking my path. "Excuse me." I try to duck past her, but she puts a hand on my shoulder, stopping me, a curious look on her face. She glances to her doorway where Savannah has now joined us.

I can't catch a break.

A bubble of laughter bursts from Savannah. "Oh god, girl. You look like you were ridden hard and put away wet."

As she says that, Ireland covers her mouth with one hand, trying not to laugh, and with the other she reaches toward my head.

I rear back, stumbling backward and colliding with the wall behind me. "What are you doing?"

"Calm down." She reaches for me again, but this time I have nowhere to go. There's a very definite wicked set to her

lips as she plucks something from my hair near my temple. Wetting her lips, she holds her hand out to me. “Were you saving this for something?”

My eyes travel down to her palm where she’s holding a two-inch twig. I swallow, shrugging, and desperate for something to say. “I walked home through the woods. No biggie.” I snatch the piece of wood from her hand, rolling my eyes a bit.

Savannah laughs. “Is that why you have a big ole dirt smudge on your cheek and all over your clothes? Tell us who you were with.”

I glance down, realizing the dirt I’d tried to clean off my hands and forearms is all over my shirt. “Think what you want. You don’t know anything about me.” I try to keep my voice calm and steady, but inside, I’m seething. It’s too much. And I wouldn’t tell her who I was with if she held a knife to my throat.

“And would you look at that?” Ireland narrows her eyes on me, studying my legs. “She’s gone and messed up her knees again.” She shakes her head. “Don’t try to make excuses. If you’re going to whore yourself out, you should do it in your own bed. No need to run off into the woods like an animal.”

I swallow, hating how close she’s come to hitting the mark. “Is there a reason why you’re letting all your mean girl fucking bullshit out on me?” This is too much on top of everything else. My blood simmers as it streaks through my veins.

Savannah crosses her arms over her chest, her brow arching. Her lips twist into a cruel smile. Ignoring my question, she steps closer, getting right in my face as her venomous words spill out. “Unless that’s her kink.” She gives me a cheeky little grin. “Then by all means, you do you, baby. Or should I say ... do whatever stud keeps putting you on your knees.”

My hand flies out so fast, I couldn’t have stopped myself if I tried. It lands on Savannah’s cheek with a sharp crack. Stunned, she steps back, her mouth dropping wide open.

Ireland's dark eyes bug out, and she takes a step away from me as well. "You'll pay for that." She ushers Savannah into her room, flaming red cheek and all.

"Fucking sorority bitches," I hiss under my breath, then force my muscles to move me down the hall. I let myself into my room, then, leaning against the closed door, I slide down to my ass and curl my arms around my legs.

A few minutes later when I finally stop feeling completely sorry for myself, I look up and notice there's an envelope on my pillow. My brows pinch tightly together. That means someone has been in my room, despite me locking it. Trying not to panic, I take a few deep breaths. If something arrived for me while I was away, I do know Cassie has a master key that opens all the rooms in the house. Maybe she left it for me where she was sure I'd see it.

Stiffly, I rise to my feet and cross the room to my bed. Opening the envelope, I frown. It's a photo. Of my parents. Asleep in their bed. And Mom is wearing her new anniversary ring. So that means—

A shudder runs straight down my spine. What kind of shit is this?

TWENTY-SEVEN

WILDER

I'M LYING ON MY BED READING A GRAPHIC NOVEL WHEN there's a knock on the door, immediately followed by Beckham poking his head in. "I, uh, I think we have a problem. Well, it's not really a problem. But it could be useful to us. To Royal." He winces a bit, gripping the back of his neck with one hand and tugging. He's not his usual self. He's twitchy. "It's ... yeah." Giving himself a shake, he comes fully into the room and shuts the door behind him.

I narrow my gaze on him as I slide a bookmark between the pages and set my reading material aside before sitting up. "Does this problem have to do with whatever-the-fuck chaos I heard outside an hour ago?"

"You could definitely say that. I got the lowdown from Grossman." He nods, coming over to sit beside me. Usually, he'd flop himself down and wriggle his brows at me. That's how I know something is up, and, for once, I'm not referring to his dick. "Seems like something must have happened between Royal and Echo tonight. Apparently, she came storming up to the front door, a complete fucking mess, with daggers shooting out her eyeballs."

Our front door? "And she asked for Royal?"

"No. Never got the chance because Davis answered the door. But I would assume that's who she wanted to speak to if she wasn't looking for her brother."

I let out a low whistle. "Shit."

“Grossman said he’d come to the door right behind Davis, so he saw the whole thing. Her brother being on the other side of the door threw her off big-time. She stormed back down the steps and into the yard.” He clears his throat. “Said something about not wanting to deal with him.”

I groan. “Jesus. Can you imagine if you or I had been down there, and she’d seen us?”

“Yeah. Would’ve been bad. Real bad. We aren’t nearly ready to spring Beckham and Wilder on her.” Beck works his jaw back and forth, and I know our heads are in the same place—contemplating the fury that would have struck us down had she discovered our deceit.

I gesture to my key fob on the nightstand. “Royal was hell-bent on finding her earlier, and it sounds like he must have fuckin’ hunted her down. He borrowed my truck. I don’t claim to know what’s in his head, but he was agitated as fuck.” Shaking my head, I let out a sigh. “Anyway, he dropped the key off a little while ago. I don’t know where he went from there. His room, maybe?”

Beckham taps his finger over his lips as he gets a faraway look on his face. I wait for him to process whatever he’s thinking about. Finally, he sighs, shaking his head slowly before he murmurs, “To be honest, I think we should let him do his thing for the time being. I’m more concerned about her right now.” His soulful blue eyes connect with mine. “Wilder, whatever happened ... I think she held most of her emotions in check until she got to her room. I, uh ...” He looks down, taking my hand and pulling it onto his thigh, palm up. He traces his fingertips along the lines on my hand and, at first glance, he appears to be staring at what he’s doing, but I’ve come to realize it’s more like he’s concentrating. It’d weirded me out the first time he grabbed my hand to do it, but not so much anymore.

“You went to watch her again, didn’t you?”

He wrenches his gaze away from our hands to meet mine. “Well, I heard something going down, and I saw her take off for TZE. I checked in with Grossman to find out what the

fuck, then fucking ran so I could have a look.” He inhales sharply. “I thought—” His eyes crash shut as he shakes his head.

I grasp his hand, stopping his manic movements. “I didn’t mean it was a bad thing for you to have looked. Tell me what you saw.”

“She’s a fucking mess. Physically and emotionally. It was hard to see her like that.” He takes a few breaths, then shifts, digging his phone out of his pocket. “Here, see for yourself.” He slaps his phone on my thigh, and I grab it, then hold it in front of his face to open it. I side-eye him, feeling like he needs a tiny bit of levity. “Royal didn’t manage to fuck your face up so badly that your phone won’t open.”

A small smile curves his lips, and I shoot him a wink before I thumb open his photos. Scanning through the ones he’s taken in the last hour, something reaches into my guts and twists them around. Echo looks so fragile, balled up on the floor right in front of her door. And what that burly bastard Herschel had mentioned to Beck had been exactly what I’m seeing. It makes my chest clench to see the dirt on her knees and shins, smudges all over her arms, and even some on her face. It doesn’t take much for me to imagine what happened when he caught her. But what’s worse than any of that is the look of despair and misery in her eyes in the few photos Beckham had captured after she’d pulled her hands away from her face.

“Shit. Okay.” I exhale carefully, then glance to the side. Beckham’s teeth have sunk so far into his lip, the surrounding skin has turned white—so white I can’t imagine it’s not painful. I reach over, grasping his chin. My brow furrows as I stare down at his mouth. When he finally releases his lip, I nod. “What do you want to do?”

His chest rises on a rather desperate inhale. “I was hoping you could text her. Since you went all protective on her and gave her your phone number. It wouldn’t be so strange for you to check in on her, would it?”

“I guess not.” I hand his phone back to him before leaning over and plucking mine from the charger. “Okay. Let’s see if she responds.” I pull up the text message thread between us and tap out a message. I show Beckham before I hit send.

Hey, girl.

Did you get back to campus okay?

Beckham nods, leaning close to nudge my shoulder. “Maybe ask her if the time away helped.”

I hope you had fun with your sister.

Holding my breath as I hit send, I glance over to see Beckham is doing the same. He scratches the side of his head, exhaling hard. “Sorry. I’m just worried.” He roughly clears his throat. “I know I’m not supposed to care about her because she ruined Royal’s life or whatever, but—”

“I get it.” And I do. Because what I’d seen in those snapshots makes me nervous as fuck, too. My phone buzzes with a notification twice in a row.

Hey. Thanks for checking on me.

I’m okay. Kinda out of sorts.

Beckham has moved even closer so he can see how I’m responding.

That doesn’t sound good.

What do you think about getting
out of your head for a bit?

Glancing at Beckham, I catch the quick quirk of his brow as he reads what I sent. “What are you doing?” he murmurs, turning to face me more fully.

I clear my throat, then shrug. “I figured we could pick her up and let her talk if she wants. Every time she and I have had one-on-one time, I get new insight into not only her but also her relationship with Royal. I don’t know if she’ll open up about what just happened, but who knows.”

“Worst-case scenario is a round of milkshakes and burgers.”

“Exactly.” I shoot him a grin, then a knowing wink. “I know someone else who’s a fan of that, too.” We both look down as the next text that comes through.

What did you have in mind?

You’ll see. Promise it’ll be fun.

Can you be ready in fifteen?

Make it twenty and you have a deal.

See you in a few.

Twenty minutes later, I’ve driven myself and Beckham around so we’re approaching TZE from the opposite direction, and it’s not apparent we came directly from next door. “Shit. Do you think it’s a problem for one of us to go up to the door and ask for her? Because that’s running a small risk that someone will use our first names.”

But a moment later, our issue resolves as the door creaks open. Echo steps out in her ever-present concert T-shirt and shorts. She pulls the door shut behind her, then gives the entire area a perusal before she bounds down the steps. Her brow furrows and her gait slows as she comes closer, squinting in our direction. Surely, she recognizes my truck, so I can only assume she’s leery because there are two of us in the cab when she was only expecting me. I hadn’t told her Beckham was part of the deal, so I hope that’s not an issue. “Let her know it’s you. I think it’ll be fine. Turn on that charm of yours, lady killer.”

Beckham snorts, rolling his eyes at me before he opens the passenger door and slips out. He throws out his arms from his sides in a welcoming gesture. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t Calamity Jane.” He crosses the lawn, meeting her halfway, and I’m not surprised when he folds her into a quick hug.

I lean forward, resting my forearms on the steering wheel so I can watch their antics. A tremulous grin makes its way to her lips as she looks up at him. Let’s hope this was the right decision, and Royal doesn’t have an issue with it. I mean, if he

does, fuck him. We're still in his corner, still working on things with her to help him. And if we're getting tangled up with her in the process, that's not exactly our fault.

It's also nothing I'll regret either, though, so there is that.

Beckham slings an arm around Echo's shoulders, which she seems comfortable enough with, then he ducks his head and whispers into her ear. Laughing at whatever he said, she throws her head back, her smile getting bigger. Good. This is what we need.

In a move I didn't expect, he leans in, pops the center console up, and arranges the seat belt before he helps Echo up and over to the middle of the bench seat.

I give him an amused grin. "You know, Benneti, there *is* a back seat you could have sat in, right?"

Getting himself situated, he shoots me an impish smile. "Well, yeah, but I didn't want it to be awkward for you. Nobody likes being the third wheel. And chauffeuring us while I sit in the back next to our girl seems like cruel and unusual punishment." He winks, aiming all his charisma at Echo.

Fucking hell, he's so damn smooth when he wants to be. He could probably charm the pants off a snake. And that snake would turn around and thank him for the pleasure of it.



"WOW, WHAT IS THIS PLACE?" Echo leans forward and peers out the windshield at the vintage-looking restaurant we've parked outside. I'm a little surprised she's never been here before if she used to live in the area. But it's also not in the best part of town, so it's entirely possible her parents never thought it suitable. If that's the case, they were missing out on some of the best food in town.

“Echo, this is Stella’s. It’s our favorite all-night diner.” Beckham grins, giving her this goofy wild-eyed look.

I chuckle. “I hope you like greasy burgers and fries.”

Her face lights up. “I do. Let’s do it.”

Inside, we make a beeline for our favorite booth and let her pick which side she’d like to sit on. Once she’s seated, Beckham glances at me. “I’m sitting here.” He slides in across from Echo. “Well, Emory? Which side’s it going to be? With me or with the beautiful girl?”

A faint blush tints Echo’s cheeks at his compliment, but I see what he’s doing and smirk, shaking my head. I eye both of them, pretending to mull it over in my head. “I think I know the right answer but feel free to tell me if I fuck it up.” I scrape my teeth over my lower lip before gesturing that Beckham should move over.

He holds a hand to his chest in faux shock. “Interesting choice.” Beckham loves to fucking tease me, but it doesn’t happen often in public.

I sit down next to him, shooting Echo a wink. “I can explain. One, if I sit here, I can talk to Echo without craning my neck. And two, we won’t have any jealous third-wheel feelings like you seem to think you’re going to have if we aren’t fair about sharing our girl.”

Echo’s cheeks flush a darker pink than they already were, but she laughs. “You two are too much. I love it.”

Keeping things simple, we order three cheeseburgers and three shakes—one vanilla, one strawberry, and one chocolate. With that accomplished, we settle in to wait for our food.

Assuming she’s not going to jump into what happened earlier this evening, I let the other question that’s been on my mind roll off my tongue. “So. How come you left me with no partner in class today?” I cock my head to the side, my eyes locking on hers.

She wrinkles her nose. “Sorry.” Releasing a deep sigh, she dampens her lip before continuing. “I hadn’t intended to—and am nervous to speak to Dr. Kinman about it—but my sister

needed me at home for longer than she thought. She had an appointment in the morning and needed me to watch my nephew. So I figured why not head there the night before and sleep over since I'd have to get there early."

"That's partly why you went, anyway."

Her eyes slowly move from me to "Benneti" and back. Is she going to be upset when she realizes I told him about her intruder and that she was too nervous to stay in her room? It doesn't make sense to lie to her. And if she knows I told him, does that make things easier? Or does it strain our fragile friendship? The irony is that I couldn't have told him a damn thing that he didn't already know because it's *him* who was in her room in the first place. But that's beside the point. And definitely not anything she needs to know right now.

Under the table, I nudge her foot and give her a quick nod. Her eyes widen, and she chews on her lip for a second. Her eyes pin on him. "You guys are really tight, huh? I guess I should have known you'd talk about it."

The interruption of the waitress bringing our food is a relief because it gives me a few seconds to think about what I need to say. She carefully sets the milkshakes in the middle of the table, then slides our plates to us. "Your napkins are in the container, there, ketchup and mustard are right next to it, and here are some straws for you. Let me know if you need anything else."

Beckham graces her with one of his winning smiles that seems to mesmerize women of all ages, including this middle-aged one who waits on us all the time. "We're good, JoAnna. Thank you so much."

Once she's departed, I draw in a breath, eyeing Echo, who has already sampled one of the fries. She chews thoughtfully, her gaze steady as she observes the two of us from across the table.

"To answer the question you didn't quite ask, Benneti knows about you thinking someone was in your room. We can discuss that if you want. But I want to know what happened today to keep you long enough to miss all your classes."

Especially since it'd thrown our friend into a tailspin for the entire damn day, and then resulted in her having the sad eyes I'd seen in the photos. I reach for the strawberry milkshake and continue to watch her as I take a long pull of the fruity sweet concoction.

Her next exhale comes out rough, but her eyes connect with mine. She drags the chocolate milkshake toward her, taking a careful sip. Swallowing, she sets the drink aside again. "Like I said, my sister was supposed to have a quick appointment in the morning, but then my nephew wasn't feeling well, so she couldn't take him to daycare. She went into school, and apparently it was this whole mess with them trying to find her a sub for her classes, and not being able to. She finally got another teacher to cover the last class of the day so she could come home. By then my classes were all over, so I just hung out with them the rest of the afternoon."

That was a lot of info, but I don't know what's important and what isn't. "How's your nephew feeling now?"

She smiles, shaking her head with a soft chuckle. "Mostly better. I think it must be a cold. He was a little whiny all day, so instead of being in art with you, we were camped out on the couch watching *Peppa Pig*."

My lips twist, and I raise a brow. "I'll share the assignment with you so you can be caught up by the time you show up on Friday."

As I was relaying that, she'd been taking a bite of her cheeseburger. She stops with her mouth to the burger, her eyes widening comically. Finishing the bite, she chews quickly, then grins. "Really? That'd be great. I looked on Bulletin Board, but there was nothing listed for the class. I guess since it's an art class he doesn't put up assignments? But seriously, I'd be grateful because the last thing I want to do is speak to that man again if I can help it. We got off on the wrong foot as it is, so asking him for help isn't high on my list of fun things to do."

"I'll text you all the info later. You can catch up easily enough."

“I appreciate it.” She takes another bite of her burger and glances out the window. “So ... um.” Shoving a french fry in her mouth, she turns to face us again. The way she’s studying us has me a little on edge.

As she finishes chewing, I steal a peek at Beckham from the corner of my eye and find he’s already looking my way. His expression reads something like *What the hell is going on? I didn’t do it*. I almost laugh but keep my amusement with him to myself and refocus on her. There’s definitely something major on her mind. Is she about to spill details about what happened with Royal earlier?

“I got this weird note, and I wanted to know what you thought of it.”

“What kind of note?” My brows draw together. This is unexpected. Odd.

“This was actually the other thing that fed into my decision to go home last night. I don’t know if it’s something major or just a mistake or whatever, but it threw me a bit.” She pauses, staring down at her food.

Beckham reaches across the table and grabs her hand in his. “Hey.” He squeezes gently to get her attention. “Do you have it with you?”

“No. But I took a photo before I left the house.” She shoots Beckham a grateful smile before she squeezes his hand back and releases it. Shifting to one butt cheek, she reaches back and draws her phone from her pocket. Once she has it open, she taps the screen a few times before sliding it over to us. We both peer down at the picture.

I can feel the uneasiness rolling off Beckham as he clears his throat. “Cum sluts. Wow. Who the hell wrote this?”

“I don’t know.” Echo stares at us with lost eyes. “It showed up stuck to my back while I was in my English class last night.”

I side-eye Beckham, and he gives me a subtle shake of his head. Wasn’t him. I know it wasn’t me. And it’s not Royal’s distinctive handwriting either. My jaw tightens. This makes no

fucking sense. She's oblivious to our relationship with Royal, so I can't just say that ... nor has she said she thought it was him, so I really don't want to put that idea in her head. But if it wasn't one of us ... what the fuck?

Pushing the phone back toward her, I let out a hard exhale. "I don't like that. But I don't know what to tell you to do about it."

"Actually, lemme see the phone again, CJ." Beckham holds out his hand, and she drops it into his palm willingly. He opens her contacts and begins to type Beckham into the space for his name until I nudge him with my knee. He huffs out a low laugh, then mutters, "Damn autocorrect thinks it knows my name." He carefully deletes the last few letters, then finishes typing in both Benneti and his number before sliding the phone back to her. "There. Now you can call me if"—he shrugs, throwing up one hand—"I dunno, something comes up."

"Thanks. I appreciate it. I guess I'll have to pay better attention to who I'm coming into contact with. It was just weird, that's all. I don't really know anyone except the girls at the house and you guys."

And Royal. "For sure." I press my lips together, not liking this development at all. "And frankly, if it were just a fluke that you ended up with it, that's a pretty heinous thing to write and then carelessly leave around to randomly get stuck on someone. I'm sorry, I don't know what to make of it. Are you having trouble with any of the girls at TZE?"

She shrugs. "I mean, nothing major. A bunch of them were pissy about the cage girl thing, but is that really something to attack me over?"

I give a half-hearted chuckle. "To a few of them it might be. Still weird that it showed up in your English class if you didn't see any of them right there."

"Yeah." She groans raggedly, and the sound is so damn sad I want to scoop her up and hold her.

Beckham runs his hands over his face. “I hate to say it or give you anything else to worry about ... but it seems like it has to have been purposely done.”

“I agree. And I’m trying not to panic or let it scare me, but it feels like I’ve got a lot of stuff piling up on me all of a sudden.” Echo exhales unsteadily through pursed lips as her gaze moves again to the window, her hand fidgeting with the straw in her melting milkshake. “Anyway, thanks for offering an ear. I feel like every time I see one of you, I’m in crisis mode or something. It’s crap. I hate it.” Clearly flustered—whether by her outburst or just the circumstances, I don’t know—Echo shakes her head. Then, noting our empty plates, she glances at the time on her phone. “Anyway, I don’t want to keep you guys.”

“It’s fine.” Beckham tilts his head, studying her. If I’m not mistaken, this close contact with her is really doing it for him. A moment later, he finishes with, “If you have anything else you want to talk about, we can hang out a little longer.”

She hesitates, her body going stiff for a split second as she looks down at her unfinished burger. She shared both why she wasn’t in school all day as well as that atrocity of a note with us. But she hasn’t said a damn word about Royal, even though we both know he must have fucked with her earlier. And that’s information she’s keeping tightly secured in that head of hers.

Disappointment floods me when she shakes her head. “No, that’s okay. We can go. It’ll probably take me forever to get to sleep tonight anyway.”

Beckham makes a slightly strangled noise at the back of his throat that she doesn’t seem to notice, but I sure as hell do, so I reach over and put my hand on his thigh. I press my lips together. “Yeah. That makes sense. We’ll just get the check, then we can go.”

Ten minutes after settling the bill with JoAnna, we pull up to TZE, and Beckham climbs from the truck to help Echo down. She gives me an awkward little wave. “Thank you.”

I nod, glad to have found her to be semi-stable after whatever went down with Royal, but also wondering if she’s

simply a good actress—one of those people who can compartmentalize their problems so well that other people have no idea when they're going through something. The difference is—we *do* know. I feel like we're on the verge of her trusting us enough to talk about something like that. And I'm getting closer to her with every interaction. "Legacy, you lock up tight tonight, okay? Remember we're here if you need us."

She draws in a quick breath and nods.

My gaze shifts to Beckham, who is giving me the eye roll of all eye rolls. I guess I've officially become his fucked-up version of a cockblocker.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ROYAL

I'VE PUT THIS OFF FOR TOO LONG. SO, WITH ANXIETY FILLING me, I plug the external hard drive that I'd used to grab information off the Franks' computer into the USB-C port on mine. I wait for what feels like forever for the files to transfer, all while gnawing a hole in the side of my cheek. I have no idea if this is what I was supposed to do, if I understood the Sin Keeper's clue correctly, or if I'm way off base. It'd been clear as fucking mud.

Clicking on the drive, I begin looking through the files and realize this is way more complicated than I thought. *The truth you seek is yours to find. Home is where the hard drive hides.* Fuck. Seriously. What the hell am I looking for? I exhale hard, the air blasting from between my lips as I stare at the screen full of documents. This is going to take forever, but I see no other way to make sure I'm not missing something except to meticulously comb through each folder and look at all the files they contain. There's something here the Sin Keeper meant for me to see, but this is *not* happening today. I slam my laptop shut and take off for my weekly Thursday afternoon run.

Up ahead on the trail, I spot Theo. Way back when I first started running cross-country for my high school as a freshman, Theo was one of the college students who came back to help with our training every summer before our season started.

When I first enrolled at Kingston University last year, there was a local running club I got involved with, but I'm not much for running in big groups. Even on the team in high

school, I'd mostly run on my own ... until Echo joined the team, anyway.

I couldn't believe it when I showed up to run with the group that first day, and there was Theo. We ended up veering off on a different trail to get away from all the chatter so we could catch up. Eventually, we began meeting weekly instead of participating in the club, and the rest is history.

Lifting a hand in greeting, I come to a stop where he's doing some light stretches in anticipation of our run. We usually start here at the park, then run the trails around campus, passing by various academic buildings and neighborhoods, and through some wooded areas. Our halfway point is Kingston Cemetery, and from there we double back. It's a good five miles, and usually allows us plenty of time to get our demons out along the way.

I hope he's ready, because today I'm both aggravated and perplexed at how things went down yesterday with Echo. *Fuck*. She didn't react how I thought she would. I can't even wrap my head around the way she'd responded. And then—I left her there. She deserved it. So, why the *fuck* am I still thinking about her?

“Hey, Royal. How's it going?” Theo gives me a welcoming smile before standing up straight, hands on his hips. He automatically has this look on his face like he knows something is up from the two-second assessment he's given me. I blow out a hard breath—the kind that expresses my agitation perfectly. “Not ready to talk about it yet, huh? We've been doing this a long time, Royal. I know you. I can tell you've got something on your mind.” He carefully eyes me again, then nods, pointing up the trail. “Let's go, then. Maybe you'll feel more like talking once we've gone a couple miles.”

I grit my teeth. “Yeah. We'll see about that. Things are shit, Theo.”

His brows shoot up. “Well, fuck.”

Without another word, I take off, letting him catch up to me. We run for a long time in silence until we get to the cemetery—a solid two and half miles. A long-haired blonde

kneeling beside one of the graves gets my attention. She's talking rather animatedly to whomever is buried six feet under. Strange.

As we make the loop around the cemetery grounds and head back in the direction we came, Theo side-eyes me. "You look fucking exhausted. You realize that, right?"

My feet hit the pavement over and over, jarring my body with each stride. It's a full minute before I say anything. "I haven't been sleeping so well." I press my lips together. "Got shit on my mind."

"Really," he smiles, amused. "Could've fooled me. How'd the fight go on Sunday?"

"Fuckin' lost." I shoot him a stony glare. Last week, we discussed the fact that it might be a tough one for me to win. I still don't like admitting defeat, even if it was to a freaking *bear* of an opponent. Pun intended.

"I could kinda tell." His quick response makes me frown, but he gives a nod toward my face. "Your cheekbone and jaw are still bruised."

Injured at the fight. Then the altercation with Beckham. "Yeah. Bear got in some hits for sure. Not all of it's his doing, though. It's been a shit week."

Theo does a double take with a raised brow. "Oh?" Then he holds up a hand quickly. "Wait, let's finish talking about the fight, then you can tell me who else you've allowed to use your face as a punching bag."

"Funny." I give him a perturbed look before motioning that he can continue.

"So, with the fight—did you expect anything different? It was Bear Pierce. The guy is a mountain you may not have been ready to climb."

I heave out a disgruntled breath. "I was hoping I could handle him."

"Well, did you get some hits on him, too?"

“Fuck yeah, I did. He’s got some bruises with my name on them for sure.” I glance to the side, throwing him a devilish smirk. “And we went three rounds. His knuckles were good and messed up by the end. So were mine.”

He snorts. “So, it takes you talking about kicking someone else’s ass to make you smile these days. Noted.” He points to a bench coming up on our right. “Let’s sit for a sec, and you can tell me the rest.”

I nod, and we veer off the trail, coming to a stop. Breathing hard, I immediately put my heel up on the bench and bend at the waist, reaching for my foot to stretch out my hamstring.

“So, you had a shit fight, and you haven’t been sleeping well. What else?” he questions grimly.

I know I can’t hold it in. Theo is the only person I talk to about this stuff. Our running dates have become therapy sessions for me. He’s been my friend long enough that I forget sometimes he’s quite a bit older than me. Then again, maybe that’s why I like talking to him. He’s lived more than I have, and he always gives it to me straight. I can say what I want and know from experience Theo is not here to judge me. He’s seen too much of life, himself, for that.

With my head down near my knee, I grunt out. “She’s here, Theo. She’s fucking here.”

He does a double take as he leans down to massage the Achilles tendon that has been giving him trouble lately. His eyes widen, and his jaw works to the side. “Wait, what? You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Nah. I want her gone. I’m working on it.”

He grunts, turning to sit on the bench as he appraises me. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

“I’ve been through hell to get my life back.”

We’re both quiet for a good thirty seconds before Theo finally speaks. “Welp. You know I’m here for you. Whatever you need. And I’m sure your other friends are, too, right?”

“Yeah. They’re helping. Sort of.” I grit my teeth, wincing as I sit beside him. “That’s where the rest of the banged-up face came from. I asked them to help me because I wasn’t sure if I could even look at Echo again without flying into a rage.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Yeah. Apparently, Beckham really took it to heart, and I think she’s under his skin now, too. We got into it over something he did. Honestly, Wilder is no fucking better. He’s actually got a class with her, and they’ve gotten close—close enough that he offered to stay with her one night after a scare she had.” My teeth grind and grind. “Oh. Wait. And I forgot about the best part of fight night. Guess who my cage girl was?”

“You’re shitting me.”

“Nope. So, there I was, trying to take on Bear, and my girl has herself on full fucking display.” I shake my head, anger filling me all over again. “She worked it, too. And I swear to fuck, she was trying to rile me.” To my dismay, my dick twitches at the thought right here on the running trail. Motherfucker. I shift, trying to ignore the excitement down south. Now that I’ve had her again, it’s going to be a real fucking problem.

Theo removes his water bottle from the pouch strapped to his side and takes a long swallow. “Um. So, tell me to fuck off if you want, but you heard what you just said, right?”

I frown. “What? That she was trying to rile me?”

“No.” He shakes his head with a grimace. “That she’s *your* girl.”

I clamp my lips together, then take a deep breath as I reach for my water. I gulp deeply, trying to erase what he just said from my head, but I know I can’t. “Fuck.”

“So.”

“Yeah. Um.” I swipe at my forehead with the back of my hand as the sweat continues to roll off me. “I’ve shared a lot of shit with you, and I’m not going too far into detail, but we used to have this thing we’d do ...”

“Thing?”

“Uh, yeah. I don’t know if it’s normal or if we’re freaks or what. But it all started with our runs in the woods when we were in high school on the cross-country team.”

“Do you mean the year Coach Craig and Coach Evans decided it would be a fun training exercise to pair up each boy with a girl and have them run the trails as if one was chasing the other?”

I nod. “That’s how it started. If you recall, I was partnered with Echo because she was fucking fast for a freshman. But eventually, it turned into this thing we did. I’d chase her down, catch her. She’d fight me off.” I shrug. “Sometimes not. And then ... it turned into this sexy game. I’d fuck her out there in the woods. We got off on the chase.”

Theo doesn’t say anything for so many seconds, I almost want to shove the words right back into my mouth. But then he nods. “Okay. Is there a reason you’re bringing this up now?”

My chest burns at the memory. “Last night I saw her walking back to the sorority house. She was taking the shortcut through the woods. I, um. I did it again. I chased her through the woods.” My gaze cuts to his. “Like I said, it used to be our thing. But this time, I did it to punish her.”

“Punish her or punish yourself?” He pauses, waiting for my answer, but I don’t honestly have one to give him. “She was into it?”

“Yeah. It seemed like it. It was like old times. Hotter, actually. And then I left her there.” I suck in a breath, hanging my head. “Maybe I was punishing us both.”

Theo gets up, ready to run again. “I’d encourage you to talk to her about it. You have so many fucking unresolved issues between you. And if you’re going to be sticking your dick anywhere near her again, you’d better have your head right before you create an explosive situation.”

With that, we begin running again, and as my feet pound the trail in a steady rhythm, I hear words in my head. Each step taunts me. *Too late too late too late.*

TWENTY-NINE

ECHO

I'VE SPENT THE BETTER PART OF TWENTY MINUTES STALLING on joining the party going on outside my door. Or maybe I should call it a pre-party? The entire sorority is alive with movement and sound as the sisters of TZE prep for the huge rush week blowout at Kappa Delta Kappa tonight. They're primping but also drinking and generally having a good time. From what Cassie said at our impromptu meeting after dinner last night, we all need to be there, as it's rush week.

To be perfectly honest, rush isn't on my radar because I'm not going through it. TZE is pretty selective, so I guess it's clear who will be getting bids this weekend and who isn't, and once they pledge, the freshmen will be around at all the different events and parties. I guess I'm grateful that I already have a bid because I have too much going on to worry about it. I'll have to do more once the pledge process begins, but until then, I'll take that one thing at a time.

There's a whole part of me that wishes I had forgotten about coming to KU altogether. Moving here and attending my mother's alma mater was supposed to be a fresh start. Instead, it's been an unmitigated disaster of epic proportions. I've barely been here a week and I'm ready to crawl into a hole and wait for the world to stop so I can have some time to myself to get my head on straight and figure how the fuck to deal with it all. Mean girl sorority sisters. Royal. A nighttime intruder. Horrible notes. And now, the photo of my dead parents. My throat goes painfully dry. Who is responsible for what? I'm getting hit from all sides and struggling to understand what's happening.

There's nowhere to run. Can't go back to Connecticut—never want to be in that house again. I rub my hands over my face, letting a small moan escape from my lips. Ugh, I don't know what to do.

I'd tried to trick myself into believing everything was okay—and while I was with Emory and Benneti, it'd worked for a little bit, but then as I sat eating my burger, my stomach turned queasy. All I could think about was that damn photo I'd left behind at the sorority house. I know for a fact my dad gave that ring to my mother on their anniversary. So, it was either taken the night he presented it to her or the following night—the night they died. My gut says it was the latter. It feels like some fucking sick joke.

Cold, shuddering fear makes my entire body shake. Why would this photo show up six months later? And who takes photos at a house invasion gone wrong? Shit's not adding up.

I should ask Cassie if the envelope was delivered to the house. If not, I'll have to accept that some psycho was in my room to plant it there. Until I know what I'm dealing with, I don't want to say anything to throw our family into upheaval again. They followed me here so we could be together. How the hell am I supposed to tell them it was a mistake?

The only thing that is clear is there seems to be more than one person who has set out to hurt me. My head swims and swims until I can't think about it anymore.

Someone raps their knuckles against my door. "Echo, girl? You in there?"

I suck in a breath as my head whips up, and I stare at the door like I'm expecting Michael Myers to appear. Shit. Someone knocking on my door shouldn't make my heart rocket out of my chest like that, but maybe under the circumstances it's warranted.

Maybe going to this party tonight is the best thing for me. I'll try to be a normal Kingston University freshman, excited for my first big frat party. I thrust every bit of what's bothering me to the back of my head before clearing my throat. "Yeah, I'm here."

Samantha, who has freshly dyed teal hair pokes her head in. “Hey, Freya asked me to make sure you were getting ready.”

I roll my eyes a bit but smile at her. “What’s the dress code tonight?”

“Eh, maybe a little dressed up. Like for a night at a club or something. It’s the biggest party of the semester—this is the only time pretty much all the fraternities and sororities are represented.” She snickers. “About ten years ago, the university president mandated that we couldn’t have more than six groups at any one party because we kept majorly fucking up the houses and the lawn out back every weekend. That’s why we have the bonfire at the beginning in a different location and smaller parties now.”

“So, what you’re saying is that no one will notice if I show up and leave again.” I wink at her, playfully.

“No joking around. We’re going to have fun. Now, get dressed!”

If only she knew I’m not joking around in the slightest. I plaster a big smile on my face and nod. “I’ll be there. It’s just a few houses farther down Greek Row, right?”

“Yep. We usually go as a group at ten, but just follow the music and drunken shouts of excitement if you’re running late. I’ll let Freya know you’re a go.”

“Thanks.”

She shuts my door again to the noise, and I pick up my phone, which I’d turned off after class so I could nap. Scanning through my notifications, now I see why Freya sent Samantha. She’d texted me several times earlier, and I’d never responded. Oops. Knowing I only have a few minutes before I have to start getting ready, I pull open the texts and scan through them. The funny thing is, every message is about the party tonight, so I guess I should take it as a sign. I stifle a laugh as I read through them, because depending on the sender, their points of view about tonight are wildly different.

From my sister:

Have fun, but not too much! Hugs!

From my brother:

You're not thinking about
going tonight, are you?

From Freya:

You're not thinking about
NOT going tonight, are you?

Pick up your phone, little sis.

Echooooooooo!

From Emory:

Hey, girl.

You seemed quiet in class today.

Hope to see you tonight.

Biggest party of the year.

From Benneti:

Let's forget all the bullshit.

See you tonight on the dance floor!

I quickly tap out messages to all of them, telling my sister thank you, my brother to fuck off, and the rest that I'll see them at the party.

Rummaging in my closet, I locate a stretchy black skirt, and a cap-sleeved deep-purple top that crisscrosses over my chest and leaves my midriff bare. I shimmy into the clothing I've selected, then slip on the heels Freya had loaned me last weekend. I'd forgotten to return them, but I doubt she'll complain as long as I show up tonight.

Once I'm dressed, I apply a quick smoky eye, every so often glancing in the reflection to the locked window behind me. Eyeliner. No one's there. Mascara. Nothing out of the ordinary. Pink lip gloss. I'm fine. I'm okay.

I let out a ragged breath, staring at my reflection. I'm as put together as I ever am. It's two minutes to ten, so if I hurry, I can walk up Greek Row with the rest of TZE. I slip my phone into a tiny black bag and sling the long strap over my head so it settles across my chest and rests on my hip. I'm ready. I think. I shake my head at myself as I leave my room. I'll get used to this whole party thing eventually.

The girls are laughing and talking on their way out the front door, so it looks like I'm right on time. I spot Cassie and sidle up to her. "Hey, I need to ask you about something, but it can wait until after the party. Can we maybe talk tomorrow?"

"Sure. No problem." She's distracted, and rightfully so, as the entire sorority is scrambling to leave. "Are you looking forward to this?"

I twist my lips. "Well, there's no bonfire smoke to send me running, so I'm hoping it'll be a good time." For a second time, I bring a smile to my lips.

Giving me a genuine grin in return, she pats my back. "Good. You deserve some fun. Have a few drinks. Let loose. And no, I, as TZE's president, did not just encourage underage drinking. I'll deny it until I'm blue in the face if you say otherwise." She shoots me a wink, then hurries to the front of the group of girls making their way up the sidewalk.

Exactly as Samantha told me earlier, there's no question which building is Kappa Delta Kappa. The sound punching into the night alone makes it obvious, but the place is also absolutely bursting at its seams. Rowdy drunk people flow out the front, and when we get close enough to glance between houses, the same is happening in the back. The house is like a too-full glass—once it reaches capacity, it overflows all over the lawn.

I take a deep breath as we mount the porch stairs and file inside. I know the TZE girls at this point, and, obviously, my brother. But this is much like the bonfire had been. A sea of unknown faces. At least I know Royal is bound to be here somewhere, so he won't be able to leap out and surprise me this time. And I'm definitely not going for a little walk in the

woods tonight. That fucker. If he comes near me, I'll punch him in the junk at the first opportunity.

Shani, a sophomore in TZE, stands beside me, and she's been nice enough this week, so I hook my hand into the crook of her elbow and whisper, "Okay, where can I get something to drink? I won't make it tonight without a little liquid courage."

She grins at me. "For sure. Come on, I'll show you." She takes me through a few rooms until we get to the kitchen area where there's a bar set up. A tub of something that looks sickly sweet resides on the counter, a keg stands beside the island, and a plethora of bottles and mixers are scattered about. She sees me eyeing the tub with suspicion, and she laughs. "Exactly. Don't even think about it. I don't know where Freya went—" She stops to look around.

"Probably with Zane." I huff out a laugh, which she returns.

"Right." She stops to laugh and point at a couple up against the wall. "You called it. Anyway, I was going to say Freya should have already told you this shit, but always make your own drinks. You'll be in for less trouble that way."

The music pounds so loudly that the dude standing beside us obviously didn't hear what Shani just said to me because he nudges my arm and tries to hand me a drink.

I look up into his face, doing a quick assessment. Drunk off his ass. Flirty. Recovering from a broken nose. I raise a brow.

"Hey, I'm Chris." He frowns when he realizes I haven't taken the cup from his hand. "You don't like this? Lemme mix something for you. I'm a great bartender."

I glance at Shani out of the corner of my eye. "Um, Chris here thinks he's making me a drink."

"That'd be a nope, Chris. Why don't you roofie yourself for a change? Maybe you'll find it fun." She takes a step around me and shoves him by the shoulder. The dude is so drunk, he goes down like a sack of bricks. She cups her hand

around her mouth and raises her voice, “Can someone take this one outside? He needs to be hosed down!”

To my utter delight, a group of young, eager guys who I’m guessing are possibly sophomores—because I can’t imagine they’d have people rushing take care of this sort of thing, not yet, anyway—show up in about two seconds flat, pick Chris up, and haul his inebriated ass out to the back patio. My mouth drops open because what ensues is utter hilarity. “Oh my god, I thought you were joking.”

Shani finishes mixing a couple of drinks, then hands me one. “Nope. Anyone gets too obnoxious or causes a problem, they get the hose.” She laughs. “So, are you ready for Bid Day on Sunday?”

I let my eyes widen playfully. “As ready as I’m going to be.”

She shoots me a wink. “Don’t worry. We’re pretty tame. Lots of mimosas and flowers and frilly tablecloths.”

“That’s a relief, honestly.” I take a sip of my drink, glancing around to see if I recognize anyone.

Lifting a hand, Shani waves to a girl on the makeshift dance floor. “I see a friend over there.” As they wave back to her, I spot none other than Emory and Benneti dancing with a redhead. Shani’s eyes follow mine and her mouth drops open. She huffs out a laugh. “Wow. I’d like to—”

“Be in the middle of that manwich.” I nod, hoping to stem the flow of drool in my mouth by taking a sip of the drink she made me. She sputters with more laughter. My eyes never leave the show of masculine energy on the dance floor as I gesture toward her friend. “Go ahead and hang with your friend. I’m going to people watch for a bit to get my bearings while I work on this drink.”

“Cool. Don’t blame you one bit for that.” Chuckling, she waves. “I’ll see you around.” Within seconds, she disappears into the crowd.

Quickly glancing around, I find a chair against the wall that must’ve been pushed out of the way to make room. I

perch on the arm and slowly sip my drink as I take in every last detail of these men who have become my friends. Emory. Damn. He's sporting a black T-shirt that emphasizes his chest and a pair of dark-wash jeans. I keep getting flashes of a silver belt buckle, too, as his hips move to the music pumping through the speakers. And Benneti—he's no slouch, either, wearing a white tank top that's practically molded to his body, and a lighter-wash jean.

It's like the devil and an angel have taken control of this girl between them. She appears to be immensely enjoying her time as the inside of this hot-guy sandwich. They're rubbing up on her from either side—Emory in front and Benneti in back. Her arms are up as she sways to the hypnotic music, her face one of pure bliss. Their hands are on her hips, but I don't miss for a second the way Benneti's covers Emory's. My brow furrows as I study them further. This girl is so busy basking in the glory of being with them, she doesn't seem to notice the heated connection in their gaze. Emory told me they both like women, but at the moment, they seem very focused on each other.

I like it. It's hot. And I wish the girl were me. Only they'd be paying me plenty of attention, too, if I had my way. A grin creeps onto my lips at the thought of it. I take a long swallow of my drink.

As I continue to watch, the song blends from one into another, and there's a shift to a slower, sexier rhythm, altering the way the three of them move together. I wonder who she is because it's apparent she's the envy of a lot of females in the room ... and quite a few males as well.

Emory's free hand finds her hip, tugging her to him at the same time Benneti's drifts across her clavicle and up to her neck from behind. He urges her tight to his chest, which has her beaming in delight. It's like a sexy tug-of-war, and I'm here for it. As it progresses, the trio gets closer and closer as their legs and arms intertwine. I suck in a breath as Benneti teases his fingertips over Emory's chest before he brings his hand up to grip his shoulder. Emory raises his brow, and I

swear the look on his face reads something like Please keep touching me so I can go along with it.

But really ... should he have to explain himself? *No*. Is being attracted to Benneti cause for embarrassment? *Also no*.

Fuck, it's hot watching them. I find myself wishing again that I could delete that girl from the equation and add myself in instead. Shit, is it getting hot in here? I take another long swallow of my drink, finding it impossible to take my eyes off them. I'm dying here, and no one knows it but me.

A second later, I'm glad I've continued to watch the show because Benneti grabs Emory by the back of the neck and tugs his face within an inch of his own. They're nose to nose, ragged, needy breaths falling from their lips. God, the yearning in their stare. It's going to be my undoing. My nipples have become taut—visible through the fabric of my shirt—and I run the side of my cup over my forehead, desperate to cool myself down, but I doubt there is anything that would stop me from burning up from the inside out.

A voice in my ear has me flinching hard. I come very close to dumping the remainder of my drink all over the floor. I'd recognize that husky, deep voice anywhere. "You like to watch them, huh? Go ahead and tell me you don't want to be the one with them, little liar."

My chest clenches hard, making it difficult to breathe, but I stand, turning to stare boldly up into Royal's pale-green eyes. "You know nothing about me anymore."

He narrows his eyes on me, then ducks his head close to my cheek, his warm breath cascading over my ear. "On the contrary, I know your every gasp and moan. Every needy throb of your pussy."

I see red, and lash out, my hand racing toward his cheek. From there, everything happens in slow motion. His hand darts up to catch mine before it meets his face, he gives me a lethal smirk before spinning me around, then drags me around a corner. I gasp, as the quick motion makes me dizzy. *Oh, shit*. I hadn't realized that the alcohol was hitting me until now. Great timing. Holding me firmly, my back to his front, Royal rasps

in my ear, “Princess, I know you better than anyone at this fucking party. Go ahead and deny that. Even as you struggle against me, your pussy is getting wetter and wetter. Your body recognizes mine.”

My breath heaves from me, and I try to elbow him, but he merely chuckles as I squirm. “Leave me the fuck alone, Royal,” I seethe through gritted teeth.

“You need me to chase you again so you can rationalize that what you want from me is okay? Your little cunt was begging for me to fuck it last time. Admit it.”

Humiliation burns through me because he’s right. I had begged him. For several minutes of insanity, I’d let him have his way with me because it allowed me to relive a time when we were young and happy. But then he fucking left me stranded in the woods. Naked. *Asshole*. I struggle in his hold. “Get your hands the fuck off me.” It’s not that I think he’ll listen, but the way he laughs at my demand has my temper flaring. “I’ll scream.”

He chuckles again, and the sound is rough and dark. It elicits a twisted flutter deep in my abdomen. “Oh, I can make you scream, all right.” His arm shifts, and he cups my breast, pinching at my nipple.

My entire traitorous body shudders at his touch. A memory of Royal holding me exactly like this hits me out of nowhere—I envision my greedy fingers reaching back and threading through his hair as his hands roam over my body. My eyes slam shut with the knowledge that even while he’s taunting me, somewhere deep inside, I want him. He steals my breath and robs me of rational thought.

It takes a commotion rippling through the house to finally make me open my eyes, but I can’t tell what’s happening because Royal has conveniently brought me where no one else is able to see us. A moment later, though, the source of the uproar becomes clear.

My eyes go wide as Davis turns the corner, his stance like a raging beast. His fury-filled eyes are pinned on Royal, his

jaw tight and twitching. “Take your filthy felon hands off my sister.”

THIRTY

BECKHAM

THANK FUCK FOR THE SONG ENDING BECAUSE WILDER encourages Darcy to dance with her friends, and we're able to convene over at the side of the room, our eyes trained on the hallway where Royal disappeared with Echo ... and then minutes later, Davis followed.

I'm just waiting for the bloodbath to ensue.

"We fucking told him this was a bad idea." Wilder shakes his head. "I still can't believe that he fucked her in the woods like an animal and left her there. I mean, I had a feeling based on her appearance in the photos you showed me, but the confirmation from him was just—" He runs his hands over his face, groaning.

I wasn't shocked at all when Royal admitted that he'd fucked her out there. But dammit, he'd fucked with her head, too. "I know. And I don't know how she was able to compartmentalize it so fucking well when she was with us."

"She literally shoved it all aside. She's good at that. But"—Wilder glances at me from the corner of his eye—"I did notice she was distracted. I kept wondering if she was going to say something about it, and then she never did."

"I still think the advice to let things cool down was solid. But I dunno." This whole idea that he should talk to her came from his running buddy. I'd kinda like to throttle the guy. He might know the situation, might even know more about it than we do ... but he doesn't know Echo. I grit my teeth as I run

my hand through my hair. I meet Wilder's dark, assessing eyes. "What do we do?"

He shrugs. "Besides wait for the fallout you mean? I really don't know. I wish we had an idea of what's in his head. And now fucking Davis has inserted himself into the situa—" Wilder's head snaps toward the hallway where there are now very definite sounds of grunts and blows being exchanged and heated voices. I hear Echo, but I can't tell what she's saying. There's no doubt in my mind there's about to be an epic explosion, and it's hard to say who is going to get hit when the shrapnel flies.

She reappears a moment later with Davis following hot on her heels. Her hair is mussed, the pretty purple top she's wearing looks like someone has tugged at it, and she's red in the face. Davis is much the same, only his shirt is torn at the collar and there's a fresh bruise forming on his cheek.

I glance back to the hallway where Royal is standing with his arms crossed. He seems none the worse for wear, and the smirk twitching at his lips tells me a whole lot. He feels like he won that round. I catch his eye, and he nods once toward her before backing away and out of view. "Fuck. Does he want me to follow her?"

"I think so. From his expression, he's pleased with how that went."

"Whatever happened, it doesn't look like Echo appreciates any of it." I swallow, then scan the crowded house. Her red hair stands out like a beacon as she continues to plow her way through the massive throng of people. And of course, because she can't get through, Davis is right in her ear. The sharp glares she's throwing over her shoulder are something to behold. The fucking fire there. I'd like her to look at me with that ... only she wouldn't be mad at me. It'd be passion.

"All right. Game plan. I'll check in with Royal. You see what's going on with Davis and Echo." Wilder exhales heavily. "Why do I have a feeling this is going to get ugly?"

My eyes wander back to Echo and Davis. They continue to argue as they move, words flying fast and furious from both of

them. I need to get closer, need to know what's being said.

Wilder juts his chin in the direction the Madden siblings headed as he begins to walk away. "Watch our girl. Make sure she's okay." With that, he turns and hurries off.

Not a problem. Watching Echo is what I do best. I'm definitely following this fucking disaster as it unfolds. I laugh internally as I sidestep one body after another. This may be the only time I'm glad for a crowded-ass party because they haven't managed to get very far. Up ahead, she pushes her way through, then turns and glares again. "Leave me the fuck alone, Davis."

I stealthily edge closer, creeping through the crowd. The image of her flush-faced and upset is burned into my brain. She's so fucking gorgeous with the heat of anger splashed across her face. I take one breath. Two. She needs me. A burst of adrenaline shoots through me, and I move at a faster pace through the house, dodging dancing fools and sloshing cups along the way. I need to maintain eyes on her. My girl.

At the front of the house, when the crowd finally clears, she marches right along in those sexy-ass heels and an outfit that makes me want to have my way with her in the coat closet. She's got a purse slung over her shoulder that bounces off that pert ass of hers with every step. Her head swivels left and right as she looks around. Where's she going? People see the two of them coming and, interestingly enough, get out of the way.

She storms past a bunch of people waiting for the bathroom and dashes into a room at the end of the hall. The door slams shut in Davis's face. His body jerks as it barely misses hitting his nose, and I gotta say, I jump a bit, too at the loud sound. I step to the side, getting into a line for the bathroom when Davis glances my way.

It's clear as hell that her brother is far from done with her, and she's having fucking none of it. They both must have inherited a stubborn streak from one of their parents because *damn*. He pounds on the door, shouting at her.

"Open the fuck up!"

“No, leave me the fuck alone!” comes her fury-filled voice from the other side of the door.

Good for her. She knows her mind. And Davis. There’s something about him. He makes Royal so fucking mad. He fucking taunts him. How the hell did these two used to be friends? I glance over my shoulder in time to see Davis back up and kick the door open with a grunt. *Shit.*

A moment later, he’s in there with Echo and the door snaps shut behind him. Clenching my teeth, I rack my brain for a plausible scenario that would allow me to listen in and not be obvious that that’s what I’m doing. I have to know what they’re talking about.

Just then, the entire line backs up several paces when three people exit the bathroom. The girl in the center has to be held up, obviously drunk. There appears to be puke down the front of her that they’d tried to clean up. One of the girls with her winces. “Sorry. She didn’t make it to the toilet. Use the bathroom at your own risk.”

Everyone groans as they vacate the hallway in search of another bathroom, and I take my chance, darting to the end of the hallway. Bracing my hands on the door, I put my ear up to it and listen.

There’s nothing at first, and I almost pull away, confused. But then Davis lets loose a frustrated growl. “I don’t get it. What are you doing even talking to him?”

“He came to me tonight, not the other way around. I’m not inviting his advances, believe it or not. He won’t leave me alone.”

“Dammit, Echo. Stay the fuck away from him before you unravel everything we’ve been hiding. What part of ‘don’t talk to him’ do you not understand? You keep saying you want me to back off and keep my distance, but frankly, it doesn’t seem like that’s such a hot idea when you fucking gravitate toward him.”

“Fuck you, Davis. Do you think I asked for any of this? Did it look like we were having a pleasant conversation back

there?”

It seems like her brother is hell-bent on protecting her but has no idea what's been happening if he's under the impression there's been much conversation happening at all.

“For fuck's sake, Echo. Use your damn head. And quit pushing me away. I get it. You're pissed at me from not immediately telling you I knew he was here. But you know what? I had other shit going on. Not everything is about you.”

There's a moment of what I imagine is stunned silence, but I could be wrong. I imagine Echo turning her back on him, arms crossed over her chest.

Quieter now, and more determined, Davis grits out, “You will let me protect you, Echo. He was angry with you before, and he's out for revenge.”

“Davis, this is why I didn't want you hovering. I can handle him.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Can you imagine if I wasn't?”

“I am a grown woman. After everything I've been through, don't you think I deserve the chance to figure things out on my own?”

“Yeah, but we're talking about Royal, not about you going off to college to gain some independence and do a little living. You know damn fucking well that Royal being here changes everything.” There's silence for a moment. “*Everything.*”

Shit. There are so many undercurrents in this conversation, I really wish I were able to see their facial expressions. Sure, I can imagine, but I have a feeling there is a whole fuck ton being said without any words at all.

“I'm taking you back to TZE right the fuck now.”

It's a good thing I'm not new to this because I feel it coming. They're about to exit, either with him manhandling her or with her stalking away again. I back up and shut myself into the room across the hall just in time for the other door to pop open.

Faintly, I hear Echo's response. "You're not taking me *any-fucking-where.*"

THIRTY-ONE

WILDER

ROYAL HAS PRETTY MUCH DISAPPEARED INTO THIN AIR. I'VE opened every fucking door in the hallway where we last saw him, and there's no sign of him. I even asked the couple that I interrupted fucking if they'd seen him. The answer had been a resounding no.

I climb out one of the windows, thinking maybe he'd gone outside, but if he came out this way, I sure don't see him, and I'm not running around the entire grounds of the house looking for his ass. He's gone. He could have gone back to SIN for all I know. Grimacing, I pull out my phone and shoot him a text.

Hey. Where'd you go?

We're still dealing with this situation you created.

I reenter the KDK house through the front door and am stunned by the wall-to-wall bodies. One glance down the main hallway into the living area tells me this party has taken an out-of-control turn with people jumping up and down to the music. It's so many bodies at once, I'm afraid they're going to punch a hole in the floor and fall into the basement.

So, now that the party has officially reached rager status, it's going to make everything more difficult. Hopefully, Beckham managed to follow Echo and keep tabs on that situation. I have faith that Beck is handling things as best he can, but that Davis asshole is still a mystery to us. I don't like it, and I definitely didn't like his body language, his facial expression, or his tone of voice. The way he was hounding her

made my blood boil. It doesn't even matter that I don't know what he was saying to his sister. It still pissed me right the fuck off to see her cringe and push away from him.

My gaze sweeps the room before I move toward the kitchen. And, oh shit. I hear them before I see them.

"You're going home. Now, let's fuckin' go." Davis's deep voice grabs my attention.

"Protecting me and bossing me around are two very different things, you ass. If I want to stay, I will," Echo argues, and it's clear from her tone that she's very upset.

I turn the corner in time to see him grab his sister by the elbow, and none too gently either. It has my jaw immediately locking tight and my eyes blazing. *The fuck.*

And then he makes a terrible, awful mistake: he gets in her face to berate her. "Look at me. Don't be fucking *stupid.*"

Oh no you didn't, motherfucker. Fury blazes hot inside me. My fists clench.

"Don't," she bites out, wrenching her arm from his hold. She shakes her head, backing away. The hurt in her eyes both guts me and sets me off.

The second she leaves the room, I stride forward. Temper flaring, I narrow my eyes on him. "What fucking right do you have to put your hands on her like that?" I grip him by the throat and slam him into the wall at his back. The shock of the impact has his eyes widening as he stares at me. I lean in close and growl, "Stay outta her face. I don't care what you think about her choices. There are other fucking ways to talk to a woman you supposedly care about to get your point across. She's your sister." My hand squeezes involuntarily, and blood pounds through my head. "Your *sister.*"

His eyes bulge. He sputters a bit. But I'm not fucking done. "You will treat her with the respect she deserves, or I will take strips off your fucking hide." I can't handle the mental anguish he just caused her. And the thing is, he's angry because Royal was here and Royal chose to grab her to have their talk. She's at an event required of her by her sorority. She

did nothing wrong. *Dammit, Royal.* My brows flick up as my jaw twitches hard. “Do you understand me?” I give one last vicious squeeze that has him clawing at my forearm before I bring him forward by the neck, then smack the back of his head against the wall. Letting go, he slides to his ass, and when he hits the ground, he sits there, dumbstruck.

I must be radiating some serious don't-fuck-with-me attitude because I swear the sea of drunk people part for me. Looking left and right, I don't see her, so I turn around to go back the way I came, but then, there she is. She isn't far from where she'd exited the kitchen, almost as if she'd rushed out of the kitchen and immediately stopped to lean against the wall right outside of the room. Her hands cover her face, and her shoulders jerk. *Fuck.* I can't tell whether she's overwrought and having trouble breathing, or if she's actually crying.

There's no way I would ever leave her like this. No motherfucking way. I cross the space between us and stop in front of her. “Hey. Legacy. You okay?” Using supreme caution, I reach out, barely grazing the outside of her upper arm with my fingertips.

She peeks from between her fingers, a breath shuddering from her. She shakes her head, eyes darting behind me.

“Don't worry about anyone else. They don't matter.” I turn around, eyeing the few people who are staring at us. “Get the fuck outta here.” There's some murmured cursing and groaning, but they reluctantly give us the area, even though it's obvious they were here to get air because the epicenter of the party is still raging. I pull her to me, and she falls easily into my arms. I inhale the scent of her, even as her body trembles. *Fuck, I'm in trouble.*

She lets me hold her for a full minute as her body quakes before she looks up at me. “Can we go somewhere else? I don't want my brother to find me. He makes me so fucking mad.” She lifts a hand for me to see. “Look, I'm shaking with it.”

Fuck, do I tell her I heard the conversation? I feel like I have to. “Yeah. Come on.” I tuck her under my arm, and we move quickly to the stairs that lead to the basement. Normally, I wouldn’t bother venturing from the main floor at a party, but in this case, it’s a necessity to find some quiet.

When we reach the lower level, there are far fewer people, just a handful of dudes shooting pool and one at a pinball machine. I knock on a door that appears to be a bathroom and no one answers, so I try the doorknob. It’s unlocked, and when I duck my head in, it’s empty. “Here we go.” I let her enter first, then follow, pulling it shut behind me. She leans past me, very decisively locking the door behind us before she rests her back against it. Her gaze is focused behind me somewhere, and I can tell she’s still pissed as hell.

“I need to tell you that I heard the argument with Davis. That’s why I came after you.”

Her eyes flick up to mine, and she nods. “It’s fine.” A hysterical laugh bursts from her, and she throws out a hand. “I mean it’s not fine, but I don’t care that you heard us. It’s his dumbass fault. I told him to leave me alone, that I wasn’t going home just because he told me to.” Her lips press tightly together, and I totally recognize the look. She’s so angry with Davis, the tears are welling up, much like they had after the fight when she was so angry with Royal.

I study her while she attempts to keep the tears at bay. Her gaze locks on her linked fingers, and her chest stutters with each intake of breath. I step close to her and grasp her chin with my fingers. Her eyes fly up to mine as I grit out, “I know he’s your brother, but he shouldn’t treat you like that. I don’t care *what* his fucking opinion is.”

She finally gasps for breath, reaching up to swipe her fingers over her skin. “I just—” Her lips tremble and eyes flash. “He made me so fucking mad. I understand where he’s coming from, but I can’t be the baby sister forever.” She exhales hard. “I’ve made plenty of mistakes in the past. But it destroys me that he doesn’t trust me enough to handle myself. I mean, I’m—” She stops herself, shaking her head. “Never mind.” More angry tears streak from the corners of her eyes. “I

think the worst part is he told me not to be stupid about it. But I already feel plenty stupid about certain things, so it's like a dagger to my heart." She claws at her chest as she breaks. "He's supposed to see me with all my flaws and accept me for who I am because he's family ... But he used it against me to tear me down."

Wincing, I pull her away from the door and into my arms. "No man is worth your tears. I don't care if he's your brother, boyfriend, or otherwise." I run my hands up and down her back. "You shouldn't be made to feel like this. Not ever."

She nods, her face buried in my chest. "Thank you."

I ease her away, cupping her nape, and study her. This time, it's me who reaches up and brushes her tears away. I catch some with my fingertips, but then dip my face to hers to catch a single drop falling with my lips. I find myself savoring it, and it fucking does something to me. A groan rumbles in my chest. I want to sample every fucking part of her. Staring into her emerald eyes, I shake my head, my jaw tense. This is such a bad idea.

But her hands grip the front of my shirt, insistently yanking me closer, and then closer again. I can't help myself at all. My mouth skims down over her cheek, and my heart slams around in my chest as I slowly flick my tongue over her pouty mouth. There's something about her luscious pink lips that drive me insane. It might be the perfect Cupid's bow of her upper lip or the fullness of the bottom one. Either way, I can't resist.

We crash together in a kiss borne of anger, but it quickly morphs into desperate longing and indescribable intensity. Her lips part under mine, and I lick inside her mouth to discover how she tastes. Like heaven. She fucking tastes like heaven. Groaning, I lap her up, my tongue diving in over and over to stroke with hers and explore every inch. Impatient, she grasps my neck and holds my mouth to hers as we war with each other, all while our bodies strain to get closer. She's warm and soft and, god, I want my dick inside her more than anything.

I roughly push her against the door, making it rattle with the force of it. And these nipples of hers that have been calling to me since I first got a look at her across the dance floor, they tempt me like nothing else, clearly visible through her shirt. Deepening the kiss as she desperately claws at my body to get closer, I pull the crisscross of her shirt to one side, and when I look down, it's to see her bare breast on display. No bra. Just a plump mound and a dusky pink bud. My eyes flick to hers and her back arches. On a moan, I dive down, taking her needy nipple into my mouth, and suck, swirling my tongue around. She's a feast for every one of my senses. "So fucking sweet," I growl.

And I will take every bit she's willing to give me. I nudge my thigh between her legs and grasp at the material of the stretchy skirt she's wearing. It needs out of my way right fucking now. I quickly drag it up to her waist and make her straddle my jean-covered thigh. Her body moving against mine has bombs exploding in my head until all I can think and feel is her. Every pass of her pussy over my leg makes her shudder with pleasure. I bring her lips back to mine and voraciously lick and suck on them as her hips buck, seeking out more friction.

I groan, needing her more with every fucking second. Her eyes are dazed, and her lips dewy and pink when I shift the leg she'd been riding to the side, opening her up for me. My gaze slips down between us, noting the lacy black thong. I dip my fingers between her legs. "You're soaked." The words sound rough and gravelly to my ears, like they're being ripped from deep inside me. I pull the thong aside and insert two fingers directly into her pussy, coating them with her juices before slipping them back out to rub circles around her clit.

Her head falls back, thumping against the door, but she doesn't seem to care. She's panting, and I get the idea that I'd like to steal every last one of her breaths. Staring into my eyes as I touch her, she pleads, "Kiss me. I need your mouth on mine." Her words are full of unabashed desire. Longing.

I plunge my tongue back into her mouth, and the result is a frenzy as I bring her closer and closer to orgasm. She gives as

good as she gets, too, biting and licking and sucking, and then ... she goes for my belt buckle, undoing it before she quickly pops the button on my jeans and yanks the zipper down. I strip out of my shirt as my cock springs free, so fucking hard and dripping from the tip.

As I grope inside my pocket for the condom I'd put there on the off chance I'd need it, her gaze falls to my dick, and she blinks. And then blinks again.

"Oh my fuck." She takes a deep breath, her eyes wide.

"You'll say more than that in a sec." I roll the condom on, lift her into my arms and pin her against the wall.

Her legs wrap around my hips, her feet locking behind me in those sexy high-heeled sandals. Fuck, I wish I could see them. I make a mental note to fuck her in nothing *but* those heels next time. She clutches at my shoulders, her breath coming in frantic gusts. "Are we doing this?"

"Do you *want* to do this?" I give her a questioning smirk.

Her eyes find mine, and she nods. "Yes. Yes, I want this."

"Good." Pulling her thong to the side, I notch my cock at her opening and thrust into her body. Her gasp of surprise has my lips twitching, and as I pull back so I can drive into her again, I catch the second gasp in my mouth.

She's so goddamn tight, my eyes practically roll back in my head. Somehow, she's managing to take all of me. It's fucking impressive. I stroke into her, over and over, and I know she's about to lose it. She'd been close to orgasm before, but now? With the piercings gliding inside and hitting her in all the right spots? Yeah. It won't be long.

"Oh god. Oh. God." Her body jerks, and I put my palm on her naked breast, squeezing before I flick her nipple with my thumb. "Oh. Oh fuuuck," she moans out as her legs begin to quiver and quake. Her heart thrums like a hummingbird's wing under my hand. She's excited. Very fucking excited.

The only thing that would make this better is if I could hear my name fall from her lips. But I don't want her to call me Emory. *Fuck*. "Feel good?" I've picked up some speed,

and with each thrust, there's a very definite noise the door makes as we test its limits.

She blinks, staring at me as if she's not really seeing me for a second, then she clutches at me, her mouth finding my neck. Kissing me there, she stutters, "Y-yes. F-fuck." Gasping, she moans, "Oh god. I'm coming. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

The pulsing of her cunt around my cock nearly has me losing it, too, but I'm *so* not done with her. I brace myself against the door for a second while she comes down from her release, slowly sliding in and out of her arousal-soaked pussy. Then, once she seems to have recovered, I shift her in my arms. Her legs are like noodles, and she doesn't argue as I slip my arms underneath each of them, hooking her knees over my arms. My cock hovers right at her entrance, the head just inside. I know she can feel the piercings from the way her chest is jerking and shuddering.

"Oh. Oh my—"

I squint at her with one eye, my brow arched, trying to gauge her reaction as I thrust my hips forward and upward, burying my dick in her pretty little cunt. Her mouth drops open, and I lean forward, swiping my tongue over her lip. She tries to kiss me, but I pull back, shaking my head. "Uh-uh. Look down. Look at us. Watch me fuck you."

Royal's going to fucking kill me. But this was always part of the plan. The question is how badly I'm going to regret it.

THIRTY-TWO

ECHO

OH, FUCK. EVERY STROKE OF EMORY'S LONG, THICK ERECTION is lighting me up on the inside. And he wants me to look at our bodies coming together, which, frankly, with my legs splayed like this, is very, very hard to miss. Over and over again, his huge, pierced dick disappears into my pussy—and I feel him fucking everywhere. Pleasure streams through my body. I've already come once, but I'm pretty sure it's going to happen again.

This guy, who I only met a week ago ... he's fucking me. He's only the second person I've ever been with. But I like Emory. He's hot. He's sweet to me. Protective. And there have been one too many people telling me what I should or shouldn't do tonight. Fuck them. Fuck them all. And definitely fuck Emory. Fucking Emory is the *best* idea.

He comes in close and grinds into me as our lips meet again. This man knows what he's doing. He has me spinning, not quite knowing what to think, except that I feel so fucking good.

An image of him kissing Benneti pops into my head, and like it has from the first time I saw them together, it turns me on. Each thrust into my body results in very wet noises, and I'd be embarrassed, but I can't be. I attack his mouth, thinking now about the two of them going at it is making me gush down below. It's as if I can feel every pump of blood through my body centered in my clit and pussy. Is it wrong that I'm getting off on thinking about the two of them together?

“Emory? You in there?” A hand slaps the opposite side of the door.

I freeze, feeling the vibration throughout my body. Holy shit.

Emory’s eyes lock on mine. In a soft low voice, he says, “It’s Benneti. Do you want him to know you’re in here?”

I suck in a breath, and if I wasn’t flushed in the face before, I definitely feel the heat hitting my cheeks now. “Um. It’s fine.”

As he withdraws a bit, he raises his voice. “Yeah, it’s me. I’ve got Echo with me.”

“She’s okay?”

“I think she’s better than okay, man.” And with that, he pushes himself deep inside me.

I moan. Loudly. Oh god. I cover my mouth with one hand, my eyes widening. Emory pulls back and thrusts again. And again. And again.

I cry out from the intensity of the rippling heat washing over me. “Fuck. Oh, fuck.” My body doesn’t stop. I keep coming, and much to my mortification, I let out another long, loud moan.

“Fuuck.” Emory strokes slowly into me, then stops with a full body shudder and collapses against me. From the way his ragged breaths fan over my cheek, I’m fairly certain he just came, too.

Benneti makes a strangled sound from the other side of the door. “Yep, I think she’s just fine. And I think you might be, too, you lucky fucker. Come find me when you’re done.”

I wait until the sound of footsteps fades away. My exhale flutters unsteadily over my lips. Emory lifts his head as he murmurs, “Are you okay? I didn’t realize you were that close to coming.” He laughs a bit. “Didn’t realize I was either.”

I bite my lip, my brows twitching upward in amusement. “Benneti did both of us in.”

“Yeah, you might be right,” he says with a slow smile. He clears his throat. “I guess we’d better rejoin the party.”

I give a quick nod, and he sets me on my feet, then disposes of the condom while I move in front of the mirror to pull myself back together. I totally look like I’ve been fucked six ways from Sunday. I adjust my shirt and tug my skirt back into place. There’s absolutely no hiding the pink in my cheeks or the dazed I-just-had-two-orgasms look in my eyes, so I’ll have to pretend I didn’t just have some really intense sex.

With nothing more to be done, in the reflection of the mirror, I watch Emory, especially the play of muscle in his back and the movement of the tattoos scattered across his skin as he bends to pick up his T-shirt off the floor. I find myself hugely disappointed when he pulls the shirt back over his head.

He comes up behind me and rests his hands on my shoulders. “I like the way we look together.”

I draw in a shuddering breath as our eyes connect in the reflection. “So do I.”

He squeezes my shoulders. “So, other than the bonfire, is this your first real frat party?”

I nod and pull a face. “Yes, this was the first.”

He chuckles, sliding his hands closer to my neck, his thumbs sweeping up and down my nape. “And what do you think of it?”

“It was pretty much *shit*, I guess.” A laugh bubbles out of me, and I shrug. “I did like this last bit, though.”

“What did you like about it?” He gives me a good-natured smirk.

Staring at our reflection in the mirror, I find his eyes fucking mesmerizing. “You made me feel good. Turned my night around. And it didn’t hurt having Benneti show up like he did either.” I nibble on my lip. “Can I be honest?”

“Always.” His lips twitch, kinda like he has a secret.

“I was watching you guys earlier.”

He winks at me. “Yeah. I know you were. It turned me on knowing you were watching us.”

“It did? You knew?”

“We both had our eye on you from the second you walked into the room. Your presence is not something easily missed.”

“I—” My tongue darts out to wet my lips. “I wanted to watch you kiss again.”

“Yeah?” He waits, cocking his head to the side, almost as if he knows there’s more.

“I thought you were going to for a minute there.” I hesitate a beat before admitting the rest of my thoughts. “I also thought I might like to be in that girl’s place. Only if it were me, I wouldn’t have taken such a passive role.”

He turns me around and cups my cheeks. “You should have interrupted.” His teeth scrape over his bottom lip. “You know how we feel about you, right?”

I draw in a breath and slowly shake my head, my heart beating in my chest like the wings of an excitable bird.

His mouth tugs into a grin. “Well, I’ll let Benneti speak for himself. But I’m totally into you. As if that wasn’t obvious from the last ten minutes.”

I will be thinking about what we did here tonight for a long time to come, because if I close my eyes, I could easily imagine he’s inside me again, making me lose my damn mind. “I still can’t wrap my head around how I was so lucky to run into you that night at the bonfire.” My heart thrums faster and faster. It will not calm itself.

“Maybe it was fate. Call it what you want, but I’m glad it happened.” He leans in and kisses me again.

I can’t believe this gorgeous, *kind* guy is saying all these things. *To me.*

“And speaking of fate, I think we’d better not tempt it by walking out of here together. Your brother’s a loose fucking cannon tonight.”

I pinch my eyes closed for a second and nod. I swear to fuck, if Davis is waiting upstairs to find me and lay into me again, I'll scream. "Agreed. Definitely exit separately. I think I'm heading back to TZE, anyway."

Emory touches his lips to mine one last time. "Let me know when you get home."

I jerk my thumb in the general direction of the glass-paned door I'd seen earlier that leads out to a lower-level patio. "Think I'll just leave from down here. Might be easier to bypass any other disasters."

"Good call." He tucks a stray strand of my hair out of my face.

It's a sweet gesture that has me melting. I look into his soulful, dark eyes and nod. "I'll do that. You should leave first. I'll wait a few minutes." I'm in desperate need of some time to collect my thoughts.

"Okay, then. See ya." He winks, and a second later, he's out the door, and I'm left with an entire swarm of emotions buzzing around inside me that I need to rein in before I can think about leaving this room.

Taking several deep breaths isn't enough to do it. Royal. Davis. Emory. And even Benneti. They all pull at my heart and at my head in distinctly different ways. I have a feeling I'm going to spend this weekend distracted by the torrent of thoughts in my head.

I should text Freya that I'm leaving, *not* that my lovestruck big sister even stopped to say hello to me before she went off to suck face with Zane again.

I'm still shaking my head over what a flake Freya has turned out to be when three unfortunate truths hit me in rapid succession. One, I must have set down the little bag I had with me when I was fighting with Davis. Two, my phone is in it. And three, I'm going to have to go back upstairs whether I want to or not. *Shit.*

Sucking up my courage, I open the door and peek out into the den area we'd passed through earlier. There are still a few

guys playing pool, but they're really into it, and they pay me no attention as I slip from the bathroom and head for the staircase to the main floor. I jog carefully up the stairs in my heels and take a deep breath before making my way through the party. While Emory and I had been downstairs, the drinking and dancing had gone on without us, and the real craziness is just getting started. My gaze swings one way to find a couple that I swear are fucking on one of the couches right in front of everyone, then I look the other way to a crowd out on the patio that appears to be chanting encouragement to some dude who is busy doing a keg stand. There's beer spurting everywhere. Can't say I've ever tried it before, but it seems like a good time is being had. With a shrug, I keep going. The room I'd run to before is just past the open-concept kitchen and down a hallway. Fuck, that's *if* my bag is even still there. I hope no one steals it. There wasn't any money in it. Just my damn phone.

It takes me a bit to make it through the wall of dancing bodies, especially when some guy decides to jump off the couch to crowd-surf during one of the songs. Within ten seconds, two more drunk frat boys join in, and then there's a tangle of shouting, screaming people to push past and flailing limbs to dodge. I'll be lucky to get through here without getting kicked in the head.

When I finally escape the traffic jam of dancers, it's like I'm coming up for air after swimming underwater. I breathe a sigh of relief, but then take a swift imaginary kick to the gut at the scene in front of me. Emory and Benneti are in the kitchen ... talking to none other than Royal. More than talking. The conversation is volleying back and forth very quickly. And from the look on Royal's face, he's pissed as hell. What in the ever-loving fuck?

Some girl screams from the dance floor, grabbing my attention, and when I turn to see what's going on, it's that redhead who'd been dancing earlier with Emory and Benneti. She's crowd surfing. As she coasts atop everyone's heads and hands, she gives another whoop. "Wilder! Beckham! You should come back to the dance floor! Look at me!" Then, she squeals as some dude gropes her ass.

I frown. Who's she talking to? Because she's looking in the same direction I was just looking in. And that makes the hair all over my body stand on end.

My mouth drops open as, in response to her shouts, Emory and Benneti's heads both turn. Benneti lifts his arm, his fist pumping the air as he eggs her on. "Get it, Darcy girl!"

My gaze swivels back and forth several times, and it's very apparent that she was speaking to the guys I know as Emory and Benneti. All the air gets sucked out of the room as I struggle to take a breath, and I feel like I'm stuck at one end of a tunnel while the rest of the party is at the other. Everything sounds hollow and far away. I back up a few paces, so they can't see me and bump right into someone behind me.

"Whoa. You okay?" Freya catches my shoulders, stopping my backward movement. My eyes go wide. Leave it to Freya to show up now of all times. I turn toward her, astonished that she's here with me. "What's wrong, Echo? You're as pale as a ghost."

At first, I can't even speak. Can't formulate thoughts. Then when my brain clicks back into place, I still can't string words together to put voice to any of my questions. But then, I have to know. I nod toward the kitchen area and exhale slowly. "Do me a favor and take a look in the kitchen. There are two guys talking to Royal. Arguing with him, sort of. What are their names?"

She gives me a look like I'm acting crazy—I totally feel like I am, so that's fair—but, with a quick shrug, she pokes her head around the corner. She swivels toward me with a confused frown, flipping her hair over her shoulder with one hand. "Um, I don't get what we're doing here, but the dark-haired one with tats is Wilder. And you know Beckham. He drove you to fight night." Her brows pinch together, and she squints, as if she's trying to poke around in my brain and find out what I'm thinking. I *am* acting weird. I know this. But it's not my fucking fault.

My eyes crash shut, unable to understand how this is happening, and when I reopen them, sure enough, she's still

staring at me like I've gone off the deep end. My stomach pitches. I feel sick. I wrench my gaze from hers, my jaw tight as I ask, "What frat do they belong to?"

"Sigma Iota Nu. All three of them." She shakes her head, then laughs. When I don't laugh along with her, she stops and presses her lips together, her head rearing back. I feel so fucking stupid. I don't know why it never occurred to me to ask what frat they belonged to. I'd been so blinded by their kindness, I'd let it slip. I'm smarter than that. At least, I thought I was. Freya and I exchange the most awkward stare ever, her chocolate-brown eyes doing a slow, concerned assessment of me. She looks completely bewildered, then throws her hand out in the direction of the kitchen where I can still hear them arguing. She whisper-shouts, "Um, I thought you knew them? They were on Royal's bench with you ... I mean, it wasn't weird to me because they're always there. But it seemed like you knew them pretty well with the way they were flirting with you and pissing Royal off. I thought they were fucking with him and you were fine with it."

Without answering her question, I mumble. "What are their last names?"

"Emory. And Benneti." Her perfectly sculpted brows dart together.

Their last names. They gave me their last names. I can't fathom why, unless— "So, they know each other really well."

"Oh, yeah. For fucking sure. They're like bros, but they don't hesitate to mess with each other, either. I think it's all in good fun. Anyway, what's the deal?"

I can only imagine they were afraid someone would say something to me about Royal and his good fucking *buddies*, Beckham and Wilder. My teeth clench together, and I exhale harshly. "I met them at the bonfire. I just—" There's no way I'm admitting to anyone just yet that *Wilder and Beckham* fucking lied to me. They've been playing me all this time. Acting like they liked me. Pretending to be my friends. They let me believe they were totally into me. My stomach roils at

the thought that I just gave it up to someone other than Royal. And it was all a lie. It was all a total fucking lie.

From the kitchen, Royal's voice raises, and it's all growly and deep as he bites out, "I asked you to watch her. To fuck *with* her, not *fuck* her!"

I squeeze my eyes shut, twin spikes of humiliation and fury rising within me. My lip trembles, and Freya tries to say something to me, but I can't deal with anyone else right now. These fuckers. This is the last time they play me.

THIRTY-THREE

ROYAL

BLOOD ROARS IN MY EARS AS I STARE AT MY SO-CALLED friend. I'm furious. Wilder fucked Echo. Literally right here at this party, while I was in the house. I don't fucking care if he couldn't find me. That didn't give him the green light to just take a crack at her. I stare into his eyes, my entire body bristling. He's got a motherfucking death wish. And here he is, shaking his head, as if he can't understand why I'm pissed off.

Beckham runs a hand down his face, his eyes darting between us. Because, yep, he's caught right in the middle of this. Sort of. I haven't fucking forgotten about his stunt the other day. Don't want to think about what he did in her room. Could he have fucked her, too, and kept quiet about it? What the fuck is going on around here? Has Echo just been spreading her legs for every guy who's come sniffing around? I huff out a breath, my jaw clenching so hard I think my teeth will crack.

Wilder's brow lifts as he eyes me. Finally, he throws out his arms in agitation. "Okay, so what do you want to do about it? Do we need to have it out since you don't have anything else to say? Take your frustrations out on me, then. I'm game." He shrugs, patting his cheek like he's done so many times before. "Anytime you're ready."

I don't get a chance to respond *or* throw a punch because a second later, a certain flame-haired female storms into the room. *Oh, fucking hell.* I thought Wilder said Echo had gone back to the sorority house. But she obviously hasn't. She's right fucking here.

Her bold green eyes flash at me, anger and hurt radiating from her. She's all fired up and plows through the crowd until she's facing the three of us. Hands on hips, she aims her death glare at me. "Oh, fucking no, you don't get to respond like that. You aren't the injured party here, so let's not pretend like you are." She draws in a breath, and her body positively shakes with rage. Her lips press together for a moment before she unleashes. "You told these guys about me, gave them the go ahead to mess with me. They were right there the first time we ran into each other. You've been fucking with my life since the moment I arrived at KU, when all I'm trying to do is start over." Her chest jerks, and the pain that slashes over her face will for sure be my undoing.

She spins on her heel and jabs her finger, first at Beckham, then a second time at Wilder. "None of it was real with you two. Not a single second. Got anything to say for yourselves?" Before they can say a word, she waves her hand in the air and gives a quick shake of her head. "No. Don't answer, I don't want to hear a fucking word from your lying mouths. You befriended me on purpose to get to me. For *him*. To what end? What was the plan? What's the endgame?"

I'll give my boys some credit. They stare stonily at her, and as requested, they don't say a fucking word, even though she's continued to spew questions at them. There are way too many people watching this go down. Way. Too. Fucking. Many.

"Echo, let's go outside," I grit out, staring coldly at her.

Turning back to me, she narrows her blazing eyes on me. "Oh, please. Fuck you. I'll do whatever the fuck I want. You don't own me, Royal."

Her words prick at my brain and dig themselves in. She's fucking wrong about that, and I'll eventually prove it to her all over again.

The sound of muffled laughter and murmuring from the crowd that has begun forming grates at my nerves. Fucking nosy assholes. No one has gotten too close, but they can hear every angry word she's saying.

She sucks in a breath and continues her rant. “Don’t ever speak to me again. Do you hear me? Fuck you for all of this.” She cuts her arm through the air before whirling around to Beckham. “Fuck you, *Beckham*. I thought you were my friend.” His eyes crash shut, and he rubs his hand over his mouth, kinda like he can’t believe this is happening. She moves on quickly to Wilder. “And you, *Wilder*. Especially, fuck *you*.” Her hand darts out, and she slaps him. Hard. The crack practically echoes through the room. He takes it, his jaw hardly twitching, even though there’s a definite red handprint already springing to the surface of his skin from the force of it. “I hate all three of you.” Storming out of the room like some sort of beautiful avenging angel, she flips us twin birds over her shoulders.

And then she’s gone.

Fucking hell. How did that happen?

There are some hoots of laughter that stop the second I look at the perpetrators. My jaw works to one side, and I shake my head. “All of you can mind your own goddamn fucking business.” Correctly sensing that the show is over, most of the people who’d watched the violent eruption of Echo’s fury go back to what they were doing. We’re a bit of drama. Something to gossip about. And that’s the last thing I want. I don’t need people fucking poking around to find out more about me.

Wilder scratches his head, his gaze unmoving from the doorway Echo exited through mere seconds ago. “Shit.” He grimaces, continuing in a low voice, “She said she wasn’t coming back upstairs. She said she was going. I swear to you, I didn’t know she was still here.”

“Do you want me to try to talk to her?” Beckham eyes me cautiously, like I’m an already-lit stick of dynamite.

“Fuck no. Bad idea.” I turn on my heel and barrel from the room, exit the house, hit the porch stairs, and don’t stop until I’m all the way in the middle of the street. If a truck could come along and run me down right about now, I might not even feel it. I’m numb.

I don't have any fucking clue how long I stand out there, angry at everything.

When Beckham approaches me, though, I shake my head and hold my hand palm out. "No." I'm way too twisted up over what happened to discuss shit right now, and I would have thought he'd know that.

But the fucker keeps right on coming. "Royal, I know you're all fucked in the head, but—"

"I said no. I'm not talking about it right now." The muscle in my jaw jumps and twitches hard.

"Fine." Beckham shrugs. He walks several paces before I hear him mumble to himself, "I'll just take this back to Echo myself, then."

My head jerks up, and my eyes flick to Beckham's hand. He's carrying something, whistling as he walks. I squint in the dark. Unwinding a strap of some sort, he begins to swing a rectangular object around. It's a tiny handbag. It's Echo's. She had it at her hip when I grabbed her earlier tonight. *Motherfucker.* "Stop."

He turns, his brow raised, while he continues to walk backward. "Why?"

"You're not fucking taking that back to her." The growl that comes out of me would scare most people, but Beckham simply smiles and winks at me.

He huffs out a mocking laugh. "Why not? It's got her phone in it. She'll need it. And if you don't want to take it to her, then I will. After all, it might help my case."

"What are you fucking talking about?" I roar, my chest heaving up and down with agitation. "If anyone is going to see her, it's me." I cover the distance between us in five angry strides, then hold out my hand. "Give it to me. I'm taking it to her."

"You think she wants to see *you*?" He eyes me, his shoulders shaking with laughter. "Hell, I'm not so sure she'll even want to see *me*. And you know me—I can be really fucking charming. I actually highly doubt she wants to see any

of us. None of us will get in the front door if whoever answers the door heard what happened back there.”

He could be right. Don't fucking care. “Give the motherfucking purse to me.”

The fucker winks at me. “Sure, Royal. Whatever you want.” He slaps the bag into my hand, then heads toward SIN. I'm shitty company right now, and we both know it. And, really, there's nothing to be said. This was a huge fuck up.

THIRTY-FOUR

ECHO

BETRAYED. THAT'S THE ONLY WORD FOR HOW I'M FEELING right now.

A knock on my door makes my stomach gurgle and flip. "Echo? It's Cassie." I try to pull in a breath, but my chest is so tight, I can't get enough air. "Um. Royal is on the porch. He has your purse. But he wouldn't hand it over. He said he wants to talk to you."

My eyes crash shut. If I hadn't been arguing with Davis, I never would have left that purse behind ... and I wouldn't know about the utter deception happening right beneath my nose.

My Emory and my Benneti. They're Royal's friends, not mine. *Never* were mine. My heart cracks a little bit more than it already had. And Royal. He planned this. He assembled his friends into a little anti-Echo army to take me down. And that's when my heart shatters and falls to the floor. He set out to do as much damage to me as possible. He meant to slice me as deeply as he could. Who knows what else he would have done if I hadn't discovered what he was up to with Beckham and Wilder.

One breath shudders from me, then another. "Cassie, can you give him a message for me, please?"

"O-okay. What would you like me to tell him?" I can sense her hesitation through the door. Of course. Because he's Royal. He has this presence that makes most girls stupid and leaves most guys in awe. And everyone who doesn't know

what he's capable of bows down to him. Kisses the ground he walks on. Thinks he's a god here on earth. Wait until the people who idolize him find out how he treated me when I needed him most.

"Tell him to fuck right off. And give me my fucking phone back."

I hear her heavy exhale through the door. "Shit, Echo. Are you okay?"

"No. No, I'm not." I'm trying so fucking hard to hold myself together, but all I want to do is curl up in a ball. "Just give him that message for me. Please."

"Okay." She must hear the anguish in my voice because she doesn't question me further. Resting my forehead and palms against the door, I listen as her footsteps fade away.

I swallow hard when the sound of the door opening reaches me. I can't hear what's being said, but I trust Cassie to accurately deliver my thoughts to Royal. There's no way he's giving up that purse without seeing me. I'm not stupid.

Sure enough, thirty seconds later, Cassie's right back at my door. She raps her knuckles lightly on the wood. "Yeah. I'm sorry, he refused. I can ask someone at SIN if they can help? One of the seniors? They don't really have a president like most frats and sororities do. It's a little weird. But maybe Beckham would help? He's pretty nice. He's pretty tight with Royal, too."

"No." The word shoots from my mouth like a bullet. Fuck me, how did I miss what was right in front of my nose? My eyes slam shut. "That's okay. I'll figure it out tomorrow. Thanks for trying."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry you're having a shit night."

"Thanks." I wonder how much of my drama everyone knows about. I was so upset at KDK that I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to who was watching me spew my venom at those three assholes. Pushing off the door, I turn around, bringing my hands to my hot cheeks. The blood is still

pounding so hard in my head I can't seem to calm myself down.

I release a stuttering breath, then jump a mile when there's a sharp knock on the window across the room. Staring at it, I can't see who's outside. But I can certainly make a guess. Of course, he wouldn't leave. Nope. Not Royal.

Shaking my head, I march over, then once I'm finally close enough to see him, I fold my arms over my chest. He motions that I should open the window and holds up my bag for good measure. *Fuck*. If my phone weren't in there, I'd tell him to go fuck himself.

I press my lips together, trying to hold in my fury. *Fine*. I bend over, flip the lock, and tug the old window upward. I extend my hand for it, then raise my brows when he doesn't immediately give it back.

Royal holds the little black bag just out of reach, like the asshole he is.

"I'd like my bag, please. It would've been too kind of you to have just given it to Cassie, huh, dickhead?"

His lips twitch. "That was some message you had her relay to me. I figured the least I could do was hand deliver this to you."

My tongue sneaks out to dampen my dry lips. "I was trying to avoid further confrontation tonight." I narrow my eyes on him. "But I do have a question for you. Were all three of you in the woods with me the night of the bonfire? Hunting me down? Did you ask them to help scare me before they came to my rescue like I was some damsel in distress?"

The low rumble of laughter sounds in his chest, which only serves to piss me off. "Isn't that what you were that night?" He tilts his head to the side. The cocky look on his face infuriates me. And he hasn't answered my question, either, but the fact that he's avoiding it means I'm right.

I squint at him, my blood boiling my heart inside my chest. "How much of the rest of this bullshit has been you?" My exhale is ragged as hell.

“What do you mean?”

A hysterical laugh rips from my throat. “Oh, you know— Beckham, Wilder, the notes, stalking me, breaking into my room on multiple occasions, the fucking photo of my motherfucking *dead* parents?”

Royal sets my bag on the windowsill, his face having gone pale. He takes a step back, his eyes locked on me. The barest whisper leaves his lips. “Your parents are *dead*?”

I stare into his pale-green eyes. He might call me a little liar, but he’s the one who is full of lies and deceit. “Like you didn’t fucking know.” I bat my purse from the sill and slam the window shut with a loud *bang*. Royal remains on the other side, frozen in place. He exhales hard. “Echo?”

I can still hear him through the window, but I can’t take any more. Stepping out of view, my back hits the wall, and I slide down it, emotionally exhausted. He’s lost the right to ask anything of me. I’ll never forgive him now.

About ten minutes later, I crawl forward far enough to grab my bag by the strap and pull it over to me. Taking out my phone, I breathe a sigh of relief that the battery isn’t dead. I shoot my sister a quick text, hands shaking as I jab at the surface of the phone.

I’m coming home tonight.

I hope that’s okay.

THIRTY-FIVE

BECKHAM

IF THE ENTIRE BROTHERHOOD KNOWS WHAT WENT DOWN LAST night, I sure as fuck can't tell. Everyone has minded their own business all day. Hungover and, more than likely, unwilling to get involved. At the very least, Davis would seem to be clueless about what transpired toward the end of the evening, which is for the best for now. But I have a feeling it won't last long. And when he does find out what's been going on with the three of us and his little sister, I have no doubt there will be fucking fireworks the likes of which this house has never seen. It's going to make shit around here unbearable, because I don't see those two coming to resolution anytime soon.

And then there's the question that I've kept to myself—what the fuck kind of secrets are Davis and Echo keeping? I'd been inches from sharing what was said between them, but then Echo overheard Royal lose it with Wilder and all hell had broken loose.

I roll the question around in my head but can only really come up with curiosity as to why their family has come back to Georgia from Connecticut. If whatever happened between Echo and Royal was bad enough to make their family upend their entire life ... then what prompted their return to the area?

I run my hands over my face, rolling everything over in my head, but I can't come up with an answer, so I pick up the glass of vodka that I've nearly finished and throw the clear liquid back.

Last night was a huge misstep. I'm worried about my boys, for sure. Royal's been holed up in his room, won't say a

fucking word to anyone. He'd acted really fucking weird when he got home last night. I don't know whether he and Echo had words or if he even saw her. He didn't come back with her purse, though, so I assume he somehow returned it to her.

Wilder's been at the gym on campus all day and into the evening. I know he's getting ready for his fight next week, but he and Royal are very clearly in avoidance mode. Probably not the worst idea, considering. Eventually, we'll have to repair their relationship—that's not a job for today, though.

More than anything, I'm concerned about Echo's mental well-being and where she's disappeared to—even if it's not really any of my business. She'd probably freak if she knew I went to her window to check on her in the wee hours of the morning. My guilt-driven efforts were for nothing, though, as she wasn't in her room. I have a feeling she went home to her family. I'd be an idiot not to assume that Royal said something to make her run.

“Got any more of that?” Wilder's deep voice startles me from my thoughts.

My gaze darts to him as he approaches. “Yeah.” I lean forward, pouring more liquor from the bottle I'd brought outside with me, then nudge the glass toward him. He pulls out a chair and sits down with me, bracing an elbow on the table. He stares at the liquid as he rolls the glass around, then throws it back quickly as if the bottom of the glass might hold the answers he so clearly seeks.

I study him carefully, my eyes drifting over him from head to toe. He's doing this thing where he keeps sighing, and I expect whatever he's thinking to follow. But it doesn't. It's like he's all caught up in his head. Finally, he pushes the glass toward me and gestures with his chin that I should give him a refill.

He knocks another two fingers of vodka back like it's nothing. His eyes finally connect with mine. “Are you gonna talk about it, or is it easier to destroy your liver?” I shoot him a faint smile, tilting my head to the side.

He roughly clears his throat, his gaze wandering the backyard. There are a few people out and about but not many. “Let’s go out to the wall and sit. I—”

I glance around. Whatever he wants to say, I’m guessing he either doesn’t want to be overheard or possibly recorded. We get up and cross the lawn to the half wall at the back perimeter of Greek Row. It’s four feet high, and it doesn’t take much to hoist myself up to sit on it. Wilder simply stands there facing the woods while resting his forearms on the top of the stone. “I’m all torn up about last night. I—” He shakes his head, his lips pulling into a frown.

My brow arches. Oh, boy. He’s really disturbed, that much is obvious. Spiraling a bit, even. I lay a hand on his shoulder, and he drops his head, his eyes closing.

I wish he’d taken this to one of our rooms so I could put my arms around him. He’s not very accepting of most comforting gestures unless we’re alone. Even then, he’s weird about it most of the time. At least when we’re alone, there’s no audience to see him push me away. Perturbed by my thoughts, I refocus on Wilder, who appears to be having a meltdown.

“I should have handled things differently. The look of distress and torment and ... fucking disbelief on her face. I can’t get it out of my head. It’s ripping me up from the inside out. I never meant for any of that to happen. Not like that.”

“Are we talking about her finding out or putting your dick in her?”

“Both. Sort of.” He exhales heavily, shaking his head slowly. “It was in the back of my head that drawing her in and befriending her, then fucking her—it would’ve been the ultimate dagger to her heart when she found out who I was. I thought it fell in line with what Royal was hoping to achieve when he asked us to help. But ...”

“Then you got to know her.” My brows tug together. “So, how’d it end up happening exactly like you planned if you weren’t so sure about going through with it? Because that’s what you mean, right?”

“Yeah.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a tube of lip balm and applies it. He has great fucking lips. My eyes lock on them for several seconds while I wait for him to continue. “So, I fucking laid into Davis for the way he was talking to her.”

I give him a *yikes* smile. “I can imagine. Because when I followed them, he was being a complete dick. Not listening to her. He was mad—afraid she was fucking things up for them?” I shrug. “Something about secrets that they were keeping.”

Wilder’s brow furrows hard. “She didn’t say anything about that. But fuck, she was all upset. It was that I’m-so-angry-I-can’t-stop-the-tears reaction all over again. I took her downstairs, and we ducked into the bathroom down there because she was losing it.”

I nod, considering what he’s saying. “So, how’d you go from wanting to make sure she’s okay to sex against the door?”

His gaze cuts to mine. “It’s not like I went in there with the intention to fuck her. Like I said, the thought of fucking her in the name of helping Royal had been in my head from the beginning. But last night? It was a natural progression. I was talking to her, we were close. And then we were kissing and tearing at each other’s clothes.”

“Fuck. So, a heat-of-the-moment thing.”

“Yeah.” He exhales steadily. “Trust me, I wasn’t thinking about Royal’s vendetta when I was deep inside her pussy making her moan. And definitely not when you showed up on the other side of the door. It was all about her ... me ... and you.”

I jump down off the wall and turn toward him, putting my hand on his broad back. A muscle in his cheek twitches, but to my surprise, he doesn’t shrug me off this time. I edge closer, our faces within inches. “Tell me what you were thinking.”

He eyes me before looking off into the woods. “I wish I had opened the door and let you in, shared her with you. She obviously would have been into it. As it was, you were the

catalyst for both of our orgasms.” He draws in a deep breath, holds it, then after a second releases it, shaking his head. “Fuck, Beck. The idea of you listening and being right there, and the way her wet pussy was clamping down on my cock. I couldn’t handle it. It was so fucking good.”

A second later, Wilder stumbles backward. My entire body jolts in surprise and my head whips to the side, following his movement to the grass. One second he was here beside me, the next he was flat on his back. Royal is straddled over his torso, one fist clenched tightly at the front of Wilder’s shirt with the other reared back and prepared to pound into his face. I blink hard. Oh fuck, here we go. I knew it had to happen sooner or later.

Royal’s teeth are bared. “Why are you fucking talking about her?” He slams his fist into Wilder’s jaw. The sound of it is horrific, and it’s painful to hear, so I’m sure it hurts like hell.

“The fuck, Royal.” Wilder’s forearms come up between them, and he puts one hand to Royal’s chin, shoving upward. And then, they’re rolling, grappling, and swearing at each other, a mostly equal exchange of blows being rained down on each of them by the other.

“Motherfucker. This is your fault!” Royal shouts, his anger boiling over.

I have no idea if I should jump into the fray or not. I will try to stop it if it gets too bad. Though how the fuck I’ll manage Royal and Wilder alone, I have no idea. This isn’t like a cage match. They won’t necessarily listen to me as their referee.

“How the fuck is this my fault? How did you not anticipate”—Wilder grunts as Royal’s fist hits him in the abdomen—“that when you asked us to mess around with her head that she might not get attached to one of us?”

“Or vice versa. Just sayin’.” Because I’m already fucking attached. I had already noticed her before he asked me to watch her. My heart thuds hard in my chest. Every time I think of her, I want to go to her. I need our relationship like I need water. Air. And she needs me, too. I know it. With how we left

things yesterday, though, I may have to settle for sneaky peeks and following her around, which isn't what I was hoping for. Not fucking at all. I want to be closer to her than that.

Royal's breath heaves from him as he throws a few more punches that Wilder deflects in one way or another. And then they're rolling through the grass again, limbs everywhere as they scramble. Royal takes a hit to his cheekbone, right where he's gotten hit twice in the last week.

"Fuck." I run a hand through my hair, undecided as to whether I should pull them apart or keep watching the display of muscle and symphony of masculine grunts and groans. Reluctantly, I step in, catching hold of Royal under the arms, and dragging him away from Wilder.

I don't dare let go of him just yet. He's still very tense, and I can't see his face to know what he's thinking, but Wilder glares at him, wiping blood from his mouth. We aren't quite out of the woods yet.

Wilder is quick to his feet, his chest jerking up and down from the exertion. He works his jaw, rolling his eyes at our friend. "You going to answer my fuckin' question, you dick? Did you not anticipate this? How the hell did you think this was all going to play out in the end?"

Much to my surprise, Royal's body sags, and his exhale is audible.

More quietly, Wilder rasps, "Did you even think that fucking far ahead, or did you just see her and lose your goddamn mind?" When Royal refuses to answer, Wilder's eyes flick up to meet mine, before running a hand through his hair. "Don't let me agree to do him any more favors."

THIRTY-SIX

ROYAL

THROUGH GRITTED TEETH, I ADMIT THE TRUTH. “I THOUGHT I could fucking handle it.” Behind me, Beckham sighs then pats my chest and lets me go. I turn so I can look both of them in the eye and slash my hand into the air. “I don’t know what the *fuck* I’m doing, anymore. Echo makes me fucking crazy. She threw *us* away.” My jaw muscles twitch hard as I take several harsh breaths before biting out, “She didn’t think I was goddamn good enough for her.” All the things I’m not saying are stuck in my throat like shards of glass, and I still can’t bring myself to voice the whole truth because it hurts so fucking bad. But I’ll tell them this much. “There was an accident. And I fucking *killed* someone. I hurt a hell of a lot of people. Seems like I’m still really fucking good at it.”

Wilder and Beckham stare at me in shock.

“*Fuck* this.” I walk off, not giving them a chance to say a single word and head straight up to my room. I need some outlet for the metric fuck ton of rage I know deep down I should be directing at myself. Maybe Theo is available. I pull out my phone and shoot him a few messages.

Hey, man. You free?

I need to talk.

I’m going out of my damn mind.

Fuck, man. I’m sorry.

I’m working this evening.

I could meet you tomorrow.

???

Yeah. Okay. Sounds good.

Whatever it is, we'll talk it out.

Hang in there.

I blow out a breath and suddenly, all the energy drains from my body. The last thing I feel like doing is going for a run. I wet my lips, stripping out of my grass-stained T-shirt and jeans. Maybe a hot shower will help.

But it doesn't. Ten minutes later, I step out of the steam-filled stall and wrap a towel around my waist. My chest is heavy with regret. I pull on a fresh pair of jeans and a shirt, not realizing until I have the shirt on that I'd picked out a Smashing Pumpkins concert T-shirt. One of Echo's favorites. *Fuck*. Grumbling to myself, I head downstairs to get some food. It's already dinnertime, but I haven't eaten all fucking day.

In the kitchen, I slap together a ham and cheese sandwich, then stand at the counter, forcing it down. It may as well be tasteless because I have no interest in it at all. There's too much rolling around in my mind. I have a single bite left to eat when Davis walks in.

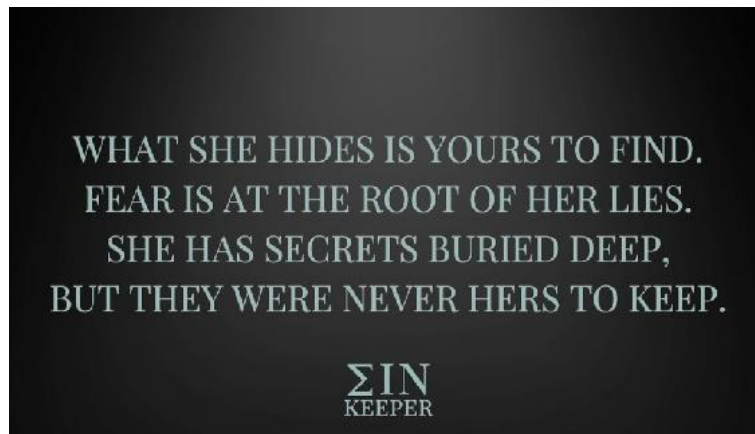
A rumbling sound erupts from his chest, then he grunts, giving me a harsh glare. His eyes flick to the far side of the kitchen island, and he points to an envelope that I hadn't noticed when I came in. He chuckles darkly. "Seems like you're being summoned, jailbird. I wonder what he wants with you."

I press my lips together, and it takes everything in me not to fire back at him. I just can't deal with his ass right now. Rubbing a few fingers over my banged-up cheekbone as a reminder, I ignore Davis and snatch up the black envelope with my name on it and walk away, knowing he's burning twin holes in the back of my skull.

Out on the front porch, I take a seat on the steps and let the envelope dangle from my fingers. Fuck me. I don't want to open this fucking thing.

To be hearing so quickly from the Sin Keeper again is kinda fucked, especially since I haven't had a chance to sort through the files I stole earlier this week. I don't know why I suddenly seem to have all his fucking attention. Every time I look at my computer, I'm overwhelmed, knowing *something* is there, just waiting for me to figure it out. It'd be helpful if I knew what the fuck I was looking for.

I shake my head, opening the envelope, not interested in allowing it to taunt me any longer.



I stare at the words on the card for ages, until they swim in front of my eyes. Whoever the Sin Keeper is knows way too fucking much about me. But also ... he knows things about Echo that I clearly don't, which pisses me off and shakes me to my core.

I'm on my feet and down the steps in a flash, jogging across the lawn to TZE. Pressing my lips together, I march up to their front door and knock without hesitation. Honestly, I'm too keyed up to worry about what anyone else thinks at the moment.

The door opens, and as is my luck, Cassie answers. There are several girls just behind her. If I'd had to guess, they may have been on their way out when I knocked.

Cassie immediately shakes her head. "She's not here."

I rub a hand over my jaw, eyeing her. She's pissed. Definitely didn't like that I wouldn't hand over the bag last night. "You don't know where she is, do you?"

“Look. After what you pulled last night, I’m not telling you anything. Get the fuck out of here with your entitlement and ego. Until Echo welcomes you through the front door, you have no business being here.” She’s fuming. “If you’ll excuse us, we were just leaving.”

Her brows raise when I don’t immediately move out of her way, and it’s really fucking clear I won’t be getting jack shit out of her. Frustrated, I nod, then step aside. Gripping the back of my neck, I watch Cassie as she locks the door behind them. She barely glances at me, shaking her head as she walks down the stairs. “Dick,” she mutters under her breath.

Great, so I’ve made an enemy of TZE’s president, and I still haven’t found Echo. *Fuck*. If she’s truly not here, I can only assume she went home, and maybe that shouldn’t surprise me. But what if Cassie is protecting her? I wouldn’t put it past her, based on the last twenty-four hours. Groaning, I jog down the stairs, and after I’m sure the TZE president and her girls are out of sight, head between the houses and take a peek inside Echo’s window. I press my lips together in dismay. Definitely not here.

Back at SIN, I run directly into Beckham as I burst through the door.

“Whoa.” He grips me by the biceps, stalling my forward motion. I immediately try to pull away, but he’s not having it. “Where’s the fucking fire?”

Exhaling hard, I hope he sees the urgency in my eyes and trusts me enough to know I’m not being fucking crazy. “I need to see Echo.”

He lets go of my arms and backs up a pace, carefully blowing out a stream of air from between pursed lips. He looks down for a few seconds before he peers at me again. “You’re serious.”

“Yes.” Staring boldly at him, I lift the card in my hand, knowing he’ll know exactly what it is.

“Ah, fuck.” He reaches into his pocket and tosses his keys at me. “Be careful with my baby, okay?”

I wet my lips, nodding. He's brave. I haven't specifically told him that the accident where I killed someone involved a car ... but he does know I wrecked Davis's vehicle, so he wouldn't be off base to tell me to use caution. He's smart enough to have started putting the pieces together. "Of course. I appreciate it."

"Royal." His head tips to the side. "I hope you find whatever you're looking for, man."

With a shake of my head, I turn, holding up his keys. "Thanks," I grit out over my shoulder.

Racing back outside, I hop into his car. I'm always very mindful of what I'm doing anytime I happen to get behind the wheel these days, but I've also got a whole fuck ton on my mind. I keep thinking about Echo having some sort of a secret that wasn't hers to keep. I press my lips together. I need to know. Now.

My heart begins to thump out of control behind my rib cage. Blood pounds relentlessly inside my head as I drive closer and closer to her home—the home that I now know is occupied by her sister, not her parents. A wave of concern hits me again. What the fuck happened to them?

I pull the car directly into their driveway and put it in park. I'm out of the car in a flash, hurrying up the sidewalk. There's no point in delaying the inevitable. Drawing in a breath, I ring the doorbell, then plant my hands on my hips. I don't have a clue what I'll do or say if her sister answers the door. Fuck, I don't even know what I'll say even if it's her.

The patter of quick, light footfalls sounds on the hardwood floor in the entryway. My brow furrows. The doorknob turns, and the door swings open.

My gaze lowers. A toddler stands there, staring up at me with wide eyes.

There's some movement at the back of the house before Echo's voice rings out. "Chase! I've told you not to open the door to strangers."

I can't take my eyes from the little boy. They're green like Echo's are—all three of the Madden's have those eyes. His, though, are a paler version, his hair a dirty blond color. Raising my hand, I give him a small wave, which sends him running down the hall in the other direction.

He buries his face in Echo's legs, throwing his chubby arms around them. The blood rushes from her face as she stares at me in open-mouthed shock. Stark fear coats every last one of her features. The child's next words hit me straight in the gut. "Sorry, Mama."

TO BE CONTINUED ...

THE BRUTAL BOYS OF SIN trilogy continues with [BECKHAM](#).

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Krista Dapkey, I MET MY DEADLINE! Are you so proud? Eesh. I've probably jinxed myself for Beckham. Oops.

Michelle Lancaster, love, love, love having Chase on a cover. You do beautiful work. Thank you!

Lori Jackson, thank you again for such a beautiful cover design. I've loved the covers for this world so much, I don't know how I'm going to let go to do something else.

Shauna Mairéad, holy crap, woman. Thank you for your help. All the plotting video chats, all the graphic design, all the pep talks, and all your rhyming help. The Sin Keeper notes wouldn't have been nearly as good without you. Also, tell Andrew I'm sorry for stealing his wife every so often.

Savannah Medina, thank you for always reassuring me I can do it and for taking care of all the details I don't want to deal with. And for all the ridiculously long video chats. Those are fun, though. Haha. Kinda like having a coworker doing their work while I'm supposed to be doing mine.

Alpha Readers, thank you for keeping up with my frantic pace! It's appreciated!

To my ARC and Street Teams, thank you for your unending patience with all my teasing. Hopefully, the books are worth it to you.

To my family, I warned you! Stop reading. Please? Love you!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leila James has one goal: keeping you up past your bedtime turning the pages of her books. She writes emotional, angsty, and dark new adult romances with lots of unique characters and plot twists.

Leila's family will tell you she's as big a reader as she is a writer. And ... she's completely obsessed with both. She resides in Virginia with her husband and two children.

