

THE A-LIST REBELS SERIES



STOLEN LOVE

MISTI MURPHY

Stolen Love

An A-List Rebels Novel

Stolen Love

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About This Book

Not everything that glitters is gold. And not all Hollywood fairytales can have happy endings. But this one does!!

He was Hollywood's hottest playboy. I was shy and frightened of my own shadow.

Our families were at war.

Still, I fell in love with Rogue Maddox. And he fell for me too.

But our love was never going to take an easy path.

On the night we were to marry in secret, Rogue was carted away in handcuffs for a crime he didn't commit.

And the price for his freedom?

Before my twenty-first birthday, I must marry another. A groom my mother chose for me. A man I hate.

Time is running out for our love.

Lost memories, family secrets, and threats work to tear us apart.

But the biggest betrayal of all will be one we never see coming.

Contents

[About This Book](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Chapter One

Ivy

“Wake up, Ivy. Wake up.”

The man’s voice breaks through the silence that surrounds me as I float in an inky black pool. On my back, I spread my arms up above my head, making lazy butterflies that turn into obsidian colored ripples.

There is nothing around me but darkness. I breathe it in and swallow it down. This must be what it’s like in one of those sensory deprivation tanks. Or in the womb. Relaxed and empty. No cares. No worries. My senses and emotions muted.

I am simply here. Existing. And yet, somehow, it feels like it would be okay if I shut my eyes and cease to be. My heavy limbs melt into the darkness and my breath grows shallower.

“Come now, Ivy Love. It’s time to wake up.” I know the man who is speaking, but I can’t place him. There’s

something about the tenor of his voice. A demandingness to his tone that is neither likable nor particularly unfriendly.

It fades away and I am enveloped back into the peacefulness.

“Ivy?” This time the voice is a woman’s. Sweet and as familiar as my own.

It’s accompanied by the sensation of a weight settling on both of my wrists. They burn and itch and I lift one to my face. Oh. It comes into view through the pitch black. Like I’ve lifted it out of water or shadow. Scarlet lines mar my pale flesh. Thick drops of blood ooze from them and roll down my forearms. I’m bleeding. *What happened?*

“She’s not waking up.” The woman’s voice turns urgent. “Oh God, we need to call for an ambulance.”

“No.”

My dark little world quakes like that one word is a bomb that has been dropped inside my head. It shakes the peaceful weight that has settled in my bones. The noise echoes and fractures so that it sounds like many voices.

“You’ve gone too far.” The woman’s voice grows desperate. “You’re going to kill her.”

His response is cool. Disinterested. Strange and distorted. “Does it matter?”

I’m going to die?

Dark hair, tousled. Blue eyes, pleading and fearful. “*I need you to be strong for me, baby. I need you to hold on.*”

“*But I’m so tired.*” A stubbled jaw. I can still feel the bristle of it on my fingertips.

“*Just stay with me. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere, so don’t you leave me, Ivy. Stay with me, baby. Stay with me.*” There’s so much desperation in his voice. Love.

“*Rogue.*” My heart quakes. We were so close to being happy. My playboy turned prince and I. After everything we’ve been through. After he searched for me obsessively and brought me out of the shadows. After we fell in love despite the war between his brothers and mine. Despite my mother’s attempts to keep control of me.

“Ivy?” The woman calls out to me again, this time her voice is clearer, closer. I feel the warmth of her breath caress my cheek. I know her. Dizzy? “West, you have to help her.”

“Dizzy, we need to leave,” the male voice I now recognize as West says. A brightness pierces the darkness like

a spotlight. Once. Twice.

I'm drawn to the light like a moth to flame. Leaving the sweet surrender, I rise up through the inky pool. But the surface is thick glass, and my distorted reflection stares back at me with fear in her eyes. My hands are so heavy as I try to make fists. My wrists sting as I bang on the impossible barrier. Crimson droplets become splatters of color in the blackness, like paint on canvas.

I try to call out, but liquid fills my mouth and eyes and nose. Thick like tar, it chokes me with every breath. Grows more and more suffocating.

"Please wake up, Ivy." Dizzy's voice turns louder. It's directly in my head now. Urging me on. "We didn't come all this way for you to give up. Show me you're not the pathetic and weak person I've seen so far. You are stronger than this."

A loud sound is followed by my head filling with a stinging sensation. My eyes burn.

"Be strong for me, baby, and hold on," Rogue says, but his voice distorts into Dizzy's. "You have to be strong. You're like me. I know you are." It morphs again until it's Rogue I hear. His deep timbre tugging at my heart and making

me beat against the walls keeping me imprisoned. *“I’m waiting, baby.”*

My heart pounds louder as my lungs tighten and burn. But the glass is too thick, and it isn’t giving way. My breathing is as rapid as my heart is loud. My thoughts spin out into the certainty that I am going to die here. Trapped. Alone.

I don’t want to leave Rogue. I’m not ready. I will never be ready. Not when we were finally together. Happy.

And yet part of me knows that I cannot win against my family. That I will never be strong enough to fight them. I have spent my entire life trying not to make ripples. Letting the people who are supposed to love me hurt me. Until I was frightened of my own shadow.

Perhaps this is how it should end. With my life the price of Rogue’s freedom. Perhaps we are like Romeo and Juliet. Star-crossed and ill-fated. Destined to only end in pain.

“I’m sorry, my sunshine.” West’s voice is gruff. “It’s out of our control.”

“You said you could fix her,” Dizzy cries.

“I said I would try.” West sighs. “Now, get up. We’re leaving.”

“Ivy!” Dizzy’s scream is punctuated by a bang that seems to echo long into the silence that follows.

Darkness, peace... the pool laps at my mind, promising relief.

“Come on, little rabbit, it’s time to turn those snow white paws pink.” Dizzy is back, her voice in my ear again, crooning softly as I drift out of the darkness. “There is so much that needs to be done. And you’re almost out of time.”

“Wake up, Love. Time to get out of bed,” Adira calls out as he yanks back the heavy drapes on the floor to ceiling windows and what has always been a dizzying view of the city streets below.

I sit up on a gasp. Adrenaline spikes through my body; my pulse is racing. Dizzy’s voice fades into nothing. My arms are clean and unmarred by blood, although I still wear a cast on one wrist. On the other a long red scar is yet to fade.

My heart slows its flutter as I take in the familiar layout of the bedroom I share with Rogue. Feel the soft and silky charcoal sheets against my skin. Smell Rogue’s cologne and the spice of his skin in the plump pillows, along with my own sugar cookie conditioner and the blackberry and jasmine of my favorite perfume.

The black pool recedes into a blur of a memory.

But not a memory that I lost when I almost died. Just a dream that seemed far too real. Especially when I could have sworn that I never actually made it home last night. I met up with Dizzy.

Didn't I?

I could have sworn I did. She introduced me to her brother, West. He was going to help me remember what Alec did to me the night I almost died.

I signed a contract in the limo. We went to Adira's apartment... to where it happened... to try and recover my memories. I didn't come home. Or at least... I burrow my fingers into sheets that are so very real... I didn't think I did.

I reach for my phone and glasses on the nightstand. Dizzy and I messaged last night. I know we did. Sliding the frames up over my nose, I light up my phone and pull up my text chain with Dizzy.

Dizzy: I saw on the news that Rogue has been arrested. Are you okay?

What? Is that it? I didn't respond back? I was certain... I toss back the heavy covers and narrow my gaze on the blue cotton shorts and white tank I'm wearing. Pajamas? I thought I fell asleep in my wedding dress. "How did I get to bed last night?"

Adira purses his lips as he stares at me. "Uh, the same way you do every night, I suspect."

"Did we..." He mirrors my head tilt while I tug on a loose tendril of my hair. "What did we do after they arrested Rogue?"

"Panicked mostly." Adira wraps a hand around the base of his throat as he turns away from the window. "Rebel and Summer went to the police station to meet up with the lawyer. And we spent hours trying to locate Marty. You were so upset you ended up throwing up and Riot sat with you until you decided to get in your pajamas and go to sleep."

"We didn't..." I glance around for any sign that I did actually leave the apartment last night, but there's nothing. "Go anywhere?"

"We were here the whole night," he says.

“Right.” I shake my head. A headache starts behind my eyes and I cradle my brow in my hand. “It must have been a dream. It felt so real.”

But it isn’t. Of course it isn’t. There is no bringing my lost memories to the surface. No contract with a dangerous man that looks like he should be a long-lost Maddox sibling. If I am meant to recover my memories from before that night they’ll come in their own time. Like the doctor said. Not with some illegal experimentation.

Something a lot like relief floods me. That would have been a dumb decision on my part.

Adira drinks from the mug gripped in his hand. He looks like he’s been awake for hours and is probably pepped up on coffee. Dark shadows under his eyes and more noticeable wrinkles around them suggest he didn’t sleep well as he leans against the thick glass pane. “What was a dream?”

“It’s unimportant.” The fact that he didn’t sleep isn’t surprising. We’re all worried. I don’t know how I did sleep. Only I’ve been sick for weeks. Barely managing to keep anything down. Listless. Exhausted. That coupled with stress... it’s no wonder I’m having a mental breakdown in my sleep. “What time is it?”

“Ten.”

I jump out of bed. Rogue is sitting in some dank holding cell and I'm sleeping in? My legs are shaky and leaden and my head spins a little when I straighten. It takes me a moment to catch my breath. “How could you let me sleep so long?”

“You're exhausted. Sick.” Adira clucks his tongue. “The others and I agreed, there's nothing you can do right now and you're so stressed you're barely sleeping as it is.”

My mother's threats have been constant these past few weeks. Her ultimatum is clear. If I don't marry Nathaniel, she'll make Rogue pay for my disobedience.

Last night she made good on those threats, and I had to watch the cops drag him away in handcuffs while his only worry was for me. I blink back the wetness that wants to spring to my eyes. Rogue is a good man. He loves me. Even while they dropped him to his knees and slapped cuffs on him, he was only worried about me. But I'm the reason that he's being held.

If I went to Nicole now... If I agreed to marry Nathaniel... the cops would let him go. “Is there any news?”

“Plenty,” Adira says, like the word leaves a bad taste in his mouth. He lifts a second mug from the dresser and offers it to me.

“Chamomile.” I sniff the herbal tea. It’s grown on me, but it’s not my favorite syrupy coffee, and I could use the caffeine.

Or maybe vodka. If I’m about to receive more bad news I probably want vodka. Surely that’s an acceptable breakfast when one’s fiancé is facing prison time for a crime he didn’t commit, no matter what news comes after.

I take a sip of the tea and steady myself. “Is Rogue okay? Have we found Marty? Did Mark Anders wake up yet?”

Chapter Two

Rogue

Tick... Tock...

My lawyer stares at the watch on his wrist. It's a nice piece. A TAG Heuer Carrera with a rose gold finish and a brown calf leather strap. My brothers and I bought it for him after Rebel went away for beating the shit out of Alec Hawthorne.

Jason hadn't been able to keep Rebel from doing time, but he did everything he could to minimize the damage. Like he's spent the last two days doing everything he can to get me out of this mess.

I think it's been two days. It's hard to tell in this windowless hellhole. The sun may have come up and gone down a thousand times. Or perhaps only once.

But that TAG Heuer on Jason's wrist keeps impeccable time.

Detective Brody steps back into the room. The lines in his face have grown deeper over the hours we've spent

together, but then none of us have slept. He carves deep furrows into his hair with his fingers as he rolls his jaw. His eyes are cold and make my heart beat a little too hard for a man innocent of the crime they arrested me for.

But with in-laws like mine, I can't be sure he isn't about to announce that they found the evidence they need to lock me up for a very long time.

His partner, a squat man who has sat quietly, for the most part observing, speaks. "Detective?"

Brody drags out the other chair and drops onto it. He presses his elbows into the tabletop as he leans toward me. "Mark Anders is dead."

"What?" My already quickened pulse sets off at a gallop. There's no way I heard him right. The man was in the hospital. In a coma. But they have me in here for an assault that occurred weeks ago. He isn't...

"Mark Anders died last night. From wounds you inflicted. You're no longer looking at intent, but murder two."

Jason glances up from his watch. "That's a stretch. You have no evidence of anything more than what is in that video. Any charges beyond that won't stick."

“You’re correct. We don’t have the evidence we need. At least not yet,” the detective admits. “But we will.”

My stomach heaves and the room spins. Any oxygen in my lungs is squeezed out as they constrict. Less than forty-eight hours ago I was ready to pledge my undying devotion to the woman I’m in love with, in front of our friends and family. Only these two detectives arrested me before we could say our vows. Hauled me out of our apartment while my love cried from fear.

And then they brought me here and told me that I beat a man into a coma. Now he’s dead?

“Bullshit.” My voice is strained by my inability to breathe and the tension making me grit my teeth. I didn’t beat Mark Anders into a coma. I didn’t attempt to take another man’s life because I’m a violent and angry person who is hell bent on revenge.

“It’s definitely not bullshit,” Detective Brody says. “Mark Anders is dead. You beat him. That is fact.”

All I’m guilty of is punching Mark Anders several times on camera for asking about my wife-to-be’s mental health issues within hours of her almost dying. A crime that I

would plead guilty to and pay for if that was what we were here for.

But killing a man... this is a nightmare. "I didn't do it."

"I am advising you again, Rogue. Don't say anything," Jason reminds me.

I don't usually need the repetition when I get myself in trouble with the paparazzi. Or on the occasion where my twin and I have proved ourselves to be a little bit of a public nuisance.

These past forty-eight hours seem to have come out of nowhere though. I've been questioned around in circles in the hopes that I'll trip up and say something they can use against me. I've been forced to look at violently graphic pictures of my supposed victim while they accuse me. I haven't slept. I can't think clearly anymore. Can barely speak coherently. And I keep hearing the buzz of the lights above me and they're doing my fucking head in. "She's framing me. I swear. Nicole Hawthorne wants me out of her daughter's life and she'll do anything to make that happen."

"Why would she do that?" The detective sits and crosses his arms over his chest. He has his badge on a chain

around his neck.

“To keep control of Ivy.” I lean across the table. Jab the cold metal with my finger. “She tried to put me on a restraining order and announced to the world that I was abusive.”

“Rogue,” Jason warns me. “Seriously. Shut up.”

But it’s not his life that is turned upside down. He’s not the one looking at a lifetime in prison, away from the woman he loves. “How can I protect Ivy from her mother if I’m locked up? I can’t, damn it. That’s the whole reason Nicole is doing this.”

“Or perhaps she’s a worried mother who is just trying to protect her daughter from a dangerous man,” Detective Brody says. “After all, your twin perpetuated practically the same crime on your fiancée’s brother, didn’t he? I know if she was my daughter I would be very concerned about her having a relationship with someone like you.”

I snarl. I’ve tried to keep calm. Tried to keep quiet. “I would never hurt Ivy.”

“But you hurt Mark Anders, didn’t you?” Detective Brody snaps back. “Killed him for the things that he said about

her.”

“No.” I huff. “I would never—”

“Your time is officially up, detectives.” Jason stands to his full height. He indicates I should do the same. “We both know that you don’t have the evidence to charge him with anything more than assault. So either you let my client walk, or you can arrest him for the minor assault you do have on video.”

The metal legs of the chair screech on the concrete as the lead detective stands. His partner follows suit.

Both of them stare down at me like I’m scum. Like they wouldn’t mind stepping outside the bounds of their profession and put me in a shallow grave somewhere in the desert.

They’re convinced I’m guilty. Or they’re working for my wife-to-be’s sociopathic mother.

The lead detective sneers as he opens the door for me. “You’re free to go, Mr. Maddox.”

“Come on.” Jason picks up his case and steps into the hallway.

“We’re going to find the evidence, Mr. Maddox,” Detective Brody says as I pass him.

“Great.” My tone is sarcastic. I have no doubt Nicole Hawthorne will make it easy for them to find whatever she’s come up with to use as evidence of my guilt. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“You’re a real smart ass, aren’t you?” The other detective lurches forward like he’s planning to jump me. I don’t flinch, which makes him scowl. “Don’t leave town. We’ll see you real soon.”

“Rogue.” Jason hurries me along.

My fingers start to cramp from stopping myself from forming fists. I give them one last glare before I trail after my lawyer. “Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?”

“You have to admit it doesn’t look good.” Jason stops at the exit to the precinct. Glancing back at me, he takes a breath. “They’re out there in droves.”

“Of course they are.” Vultures. The lot of them. Waiting to catch my downfall on camera so they can sell the images to the highest bidder. They don’t care what the real

story is... they're only interested in the money. Sensationalism sells.

“We can play this one of two ways...” His chest rises and falls stiffly. “Go out there with your head held high and announce your innocence and answer any questions they might ask. Or...”

“Head down. Mouth closed. Your car is around the corner.” I strip out of my suit jacket and put it over my head. Because one question I can't answer will make me look more guilty than hiding from their cameras at this point. “Do you have shades?”

“When do I not?” He retrieves a pair of aviators from the inside pocket of his jacket and holds them out to me.

“Thanks.” I slip them onto my nose, even though there is no sun.

He opens the door and the media rush in like a wave on sand. They race up the steps to meet us.

“Rogue Maddox...” My name is called by a dozen different people all at the same time.

I don't pay them any heed. Don't listen to their questions as I focus on clearing the steps and getting to Jason's

car. The lights flash when he unlocks the vehicle.

I climb into the passenger seat and shut out the paps. A second later, he jumps in and guides us into traffic. The media hounds run for their vehicles.

“There will be more outside your building.” Jason’s gaze is glued to the road as he gets us out of there as fast as possible.

I drag the jacket off my head and crush the material on my lap. I could use a cigarette, but I haven’t had one in over a month and Jason never has. “Did they find Marty?”

“No.” His jaw line sharpens.

“Fuck.” I thump my fist against the door as the back of my neck creeps. She’s the only journalist I trust. And barely at that. We were working together to find the true reason why Nicole won’t let her daughter go. “It’s been more than a week.”

She’s been out of contact for too long.

“What if Nicole realized we were on to her? The woman doesn’t seem to have a line she won’t cross in order to keep Ivy under her thumb.”

His knuckles turn white on the steering wheel. “Do you think she’d hurt Marty?”

“If she suspected Marty found evidence that Nicole paid to have Ivy’s dad murdered, then...” I can’t bring myself to voice my fears. My teeth grind. “I think we need to find her as soon as possible.”

“I know a man. A private investigator,” Jason says. “He’s ex police. Better than a bloodhound at finding people who don’t want to be found.”

It doesn’t surprise me that Jason has a contact for everything. With the way things are shaping up, we can use all the help we can get.

Especially when my usual go to guy is in the middle of a family crisis. Not only do I need to tell Ivy that her mom is more than likely responsible for her dad’s death, but I also have to fill Adira in. Richard Love was his uncle. But more than that he was the only family other than Ivy who supported the queen.

I groan. This is going to be hard. “Get in contact with him.”

He nods.

I slump down in my seat. Everything has become so complicated. Ivy has to be freaking out. And somehow I have to go home and break that news on top of everything else that's going on.

Chapter Three

Rogue

The media outside on the pavement are rabid. They swarm the car before we can reach the code box for the mesh security gate. Pressing their faces and their cameras to the tinted windows, they shout questions at us. Some of them voice their unwanted opinions just as loudly.

A bucket of what looks like blood is thrown onto Jason's windshield and a woman screams "murderer!" Several reporters get splashed and shriek.

"Paint." Jason tsks. "That's going to be impossible to clean off. I should file suit against each and every one of these idiots."

"I'll buy you a new Maserati." Stick a bow on it and call it a Christmas bonus. I burrow my knuckles into my forehead as I hide behind my hand. "I was struggling with what to get you anyway."

Security guards bustle out of the building and usher everyone away from the vehicle as the gate begins to lift and

Jason guides us into the parking garage.

He grimaces and rubs his lips together.

“Don’t say it.” I know what he’s thinking. With Christmas only two weeks away and Nicole Hawthorne hell-bent on framing me for Mark Anders’ death I might not be celebrating the holiday with my family and friends this year.

Christmas has never been a particularly magical holiday, but it has always been one spent with my brothers. Even when we were taking care of mom and barely had food in the house we would still make cranberry and turkey sandwiches and exchange cheap gifts.

Ivy had it worse. All Richard Love’s wealth couldn’t make up for the way Nicole and Alec treated her. I’d hoped to start rectifying all those awful birthdays and Christmas days, starting this year. I wanted to create new memories. Our memories. Happy ones that could erase the loneliness and hurt she experienced.

Instead I’m going to destroy her world, and then possibly I’m going to have to leave her all alone in it. That’s the last thing I’m prepared to do.

My knuckles crack against the dashboard. “Fuck.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

The glovebox springs open to reveal an entire filing system’s worth of paperwork. Between the papers, I glimpse the butt of a handgun. “Are you fucking serious? What do you need a gun for?”

“Lawyers make enemies too,” he says as he tucks the car into a space and shuts off the engine. “I carry it for my own protection. Now let’s get inside.”

My hackles are up as I climb out of the car. Outside, the media and fans and anti-fans are still screaming for my attention. As though I would give them the time of day in this situation. I keep my head down despite there being no one else in the structure. Our footsteps echo on the concrete.

Any of them could have slipped past security when we came in. Or possibly gotten in earlier and have been waiting hours to ambush me. They’re cunning and ruthless when they’re in pursuit of a story or the photo no one else can get.

“It’s going to be a nightmare for a while,” Jason says as we near the bank of elevators. He glances over his shoulder, scanning the area in case we missed something.

“It seems that way.” I shove my hands in my pockets as my shoulders creep toward my ears. It’s been two days since I’ve seen my girl. But it only just occurred to me that she might not be here. She might not be waiting for me in our home. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth as the idea turns my stomach into a mess of knots.

We made a promise to stick by each other no matter what. I made her promise not to make the deal Nicole so desperately wants her to make. But what if she didn’t listen? What if she thought it was the only way out of this mess?

Jason retrieves his wallet from the pocket in his jacket and pulls out the swipe card we need to get up to the penthouse, since my wallet and key are still with my phone in my bedroom, where I left them for the ceremony before I was dragged out, well... unceremoniously.

Running it through the reader, he presses the button to call the elevator. “Perhaps you should consider more security. A separate bodyguard. A whole team could be good.”

What I don’t get about the other night is how the detectives didn’t flinch when they interrupted our vows. Something about that doesn’t sit well. Makes me itchy. “I can handle myself.”

He side-eyes me. “If you’re looking at getting yourself into more trouble, I have to advise you—”

The elevator doors slide open and all I hear is *blah, blah, blah*. Because there, in the back of the box, is my entire world. Fuck, I didn’t know it was possible to miss another person as much as I miss her when we’re apart.

Her big brown eyes. Her dark locks piled up high on her head. And the way she bites her lip in that innocent way that makes me think things that are so very far from virtuous. Especially when she’s wearing nothing more than a flimsy bit of silk that barely kisses mid-thigh and reveals more of her with its sheerness than it hides. I’ve never loved anyone the way I love her.

“Hey.” The corner of my lips creep up as the tightness in my chest melts away.

Her gaze eats me up. Her hands press to the wall like she’s trying to stick to the shiny surface. She smiles shakily. It’s soft and sweet and full of warmth. “Hey.”

“You’ll look guilty,” Jason continues.

I don’t care. Not right now. Tomorrow we can have this entire conversation again and I will listen. I will damn

near hang off his every word to make sure I give me and Ivy our best shot at getting through this thing together. But not tonight. Not when she's right in front of me and I haven't seen her in two fucking days. Not when I need to touch her and make sure she's real.

I press my hand to his shoulder as he tries to follow me into the box. "Go home, Jason."

"Rogue, we don't have time—"

"Go home and we'll meet for breakfast," I say without taking my eyes off Ivy.

The doors shut and Ivy runs to me. "I've missed you so much."

"I was so fucking worried you'd be gone." I lift her up, one arm wrapped around her waist, while I hit the emergency stop button to give us a moment alone. She seems thinner, impossibly fragile. It's only been two days and she's lost even more weight. "You're still not well?"

"It's nothing. Just stress. I'm fine now that you're home." She grips my face with both hands and melds her lips to mine. "And I'm not going anywhere. I promise. I'm right here. No matter what."

I've missed her taste. The way her mouth fits with mine. I have the urgent need to reclaim every soft inch of her.

My fingers catch in her hair as I press us closer together and part her lips with my tongue. The tip of hers darts out to meet mine. We explore each other, every slide and nibble growing more frantic.

She whimpers.

That sound makes me wild. It makes my cock swell. Pushing her back to the wall, I growl against the hinge of her jaw and graze my teeth down her throat as I grind against her. "You are my everything. My heart. My entire fucking world. If I lost you I would be devastated."

I've come far too close to losing her to pretend that she isn't the life pulsing in my veins. Without her I would break and the pieces would never fit back together. There is no getting over a love like ours. No moving on. Not ever.

"Love me." Her hands cling to my neck as she wriggles against my erection. "Show me."

I slap a palm on the wall for balance as all the blood in my head moves south. My breath sharpens as my sole focus

becomes getting inside her. Loving on her. Hearing her cry my name. “The cameras.”

“They’re switched off,” she whispers in my ear.

My scalp prickles. My pulse quickens. “What?”

“Jackson showed me how to turn them off.” She stares up at me through her lashes. “I didn’t want anyone to witness our reunion. And I didn’t want to wait.”

She wasn’t just waiting for me, she was preparing to pounce. Actively watching for the moment I arrived home. Fuck, if that doesn’t make me feel like the luckiest bastard alive. My pulse races still, but now for another reason.

“Rebel and Riot...they’re going to start interrogating you the moment we go inside. Summer has a list as long as my arm.”

“All of them can wait.” I nibble at her collarbone as I reach beneath that tiny blue slip for the even flimsier lace panties I suspect she’s wearing. Whatever we have ahead of us... it has nothing on her waiting for me. My fingers hook into the thin sides. With a yank they give.

She gasps and then scolds with a slap of her hand against my shoulder, “You didn’t need to do that.”

I smirk as my lips tickle her ear. “What did I tell you?”

“You’ll buy me more.” She whimpers as I trace her seam. Tightens her grip on my neck when I sink a finger inside her and seek out her clit with my thumb.

I circle those sensitive nerves as I push my thick finger in and out of her. “My wife deserves all the pretty things she wants. Especially if I’m going to destroy those pretty things to get to her.”

“We’re not married yet.” She closes her eyes as she starts to ride my hand.

I add a second digit and watch her blush with need. I pretended we were married for weeks. Until I wanted it so badly it was all I could think about. But now... with the mess we’re in... it’ll be a while before we can make it real. “I won’t tell anyone if you don’t.”

“I think they know.” She moans as she cups the back of my head, pulls my face to hers. “Or at least they think they know. Summer said it’s been all over social media.”

“Let me pretend for a few minutes more then. While it’s just you and me.” I’m not prepared to let it go. It feels like

we're taking a step back from where we were, and every step back makes me think Nicole could win. Every cell in my body seems to tense. Even my grip on her tightens.

“Rogue.” She takes my face between her hands and peers into my eyes. “I’m with you. I promise.”

I pour every ounce of emotion into kissing her while I put her on her feet. Unbuttoning my pants, I let them drop to my knees while I pick her up again and sink into her. “You’re my home, baby. Don’t ever forget that.”

“And you’re mine.” She clings to me as I wrap my hands around her thighs and lift her up and down on my cock. Her eyes brighten with unshed emotion before they slip shut.

I taste the salt of it in the kisses we share as we make love. She has to be worried and scared and covering that with a brave face. I want to eradicate that for her, but I can’t. Not yet anyway. All I can do is love her with every breath in my body while I try to find the answers we need to stop the Hawthornes for good.

When she comes apart for me, I follow with my own release, my breath catching in the center of my chest with how much I adore her. And how far I will go to keep her. “Baby, I love you.”

“Rogue.” There is fear in the way she says my name.

It catches my attention and makes me stagger.

“Rogue, I...” Her eyelids flutter and her eyes roll back
in her head.

She crumples in slow motion.

Chapter Four

Rogue

“Only you would be caught with your pants around your ankles when you’re facing a murder charge,” Rebel says drily when the elevator doors open.

“Dude, you really do have a tattoo of Rebel on your ass.” Riot chuckles. “That is twisted.”

I spin around. Ivy is deathly pale in my arms, her eyes still closed. Images of that night in Narnia assault me. All that blood. How pale and still she was. How close she came to slipping away...

And yet somehow, I’m on autopilot. “Help me.”

The smirk melts from Riot’s face as he lurches toward us and clamps a hand around the metal door. “Oh shit. What happened? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. She won’t wake up.” I exchange glances with my brothers and Ivy’s bodyguard as I stumble out of the box, my pants still around my knees. “She’s been so

sick. Too sick. But she told me she was fine.” And I believed her. “What do I do?”

“Is she breathing?” Rebel shoves his finger under her nose to check.

“Yes.” I glance down at the woman I can’t imagine my life without. Her skin is almost translucent and barely covered by the fragile fabric of her nightgown. “It was the first thing I checked.”

Rebel removes his hand. “Fuck, that’s a relief.”

Jackson clears his throat. “Should I take Miss Love for you, sir?”

“No,” I snarl at the bodyguard.

“Then I’ll call an ambulance,” he says.

“No,” Rebel barks. “Riot, call the doc. Tell her it’s an emergency and to come right away. Tell her the code for the garage. She can come in that way so the crowd doesn’t get in her way.”

“On it.” Riot pulls out his device to make the call. “Hey, Doc. We have a situation.”

“Give her to me,” Rebel says to me, speaking carefully. *You can trust me with her.* “Your cock is swinging in

the wind, brother.”

“I can’t.” I shake my head. *She’s my world.* And my world right now is naked other than a scrap of silk that barely covers her midsection. What’s left of her panties is in my pocket. My cum is on her thighs. Handing her over to him...
“No.”

“You can’t hold onto her and deal with your pants.”
Do you want it to get stuck in your zipper again?

And Doc may want me to administer first aid. I take a deep breath. I need to get my shit together. This isn’t Narnia. Rebel isn’t the enemy who put my girl in danger. My muscles start to unlock.

The door to the apartment opens and Adira bustles out in a flowing, sparkly gold robe with white trim. He’s paired it with kitten heels that have wispy gold feathers on the front.

“Are they done? Oh.” His eyes widen and he presses his fingertips to his lips. “You two are perfectly identical in every way, aren’t you?” He tilts his head to the side. “Well, except for the piercings.”

“The fuck? He’s seen your cock, bro?” My gaze connects with Rebel’s. *When did that happen?*

Rebel stiffens and his ears turn red. He clears his throat. "I don't remember." *And we don't have time for this.*
Ivy—

"What the hell happened to my cousin?" Adira rushes toward us once he realizes that Ivy is too quiet.

"She fainted," I say.

"Then why are you just standing around with your cock out? Shouldn't we be calling an ambulance? Or at least bringing her inside."

"He won't let go of her so he can fix his pants," Rebel grumbles as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"Considering the state of his pants, I can guess why." Adira raises an eyebrow at me and then unties the sash on his robe, revealing silky green sleep shorts with a black lace trim.

He tugs the sparkly material off his shoulders and drapes it over Ivy. Stealing her from my arms, he holds her against his bare chest.

"Be careful with her." She seems so small and fragile. I reach for my pants and yank them up.

"Believe it or not, I'm stronger than I look. And Ivy is as precious to me as she is to you." He cradles my girl and

drops his head to speak quietly to her. “Your man is sometimes a tad too dramatic for this queen to deal with.”

I hook the button on my slacks and reach for Ivy. “Give her to me.”

I carry her into the penthouse with Adira and Rebel behind me.

“The doc’s on her way.” Riot catches up to us.

“Good.” I march toward the bedroom.

“She said to lay her down and elevate her feet,” Riot adds.

He and Rebel stay in the doorway as I carry Ivy to the bed and lay her down gently. Snagging a couple of pillows, I slip them under her ankles. “Should I cover her up to keep her warm?”

“I-I don’t have a fucking clue,” Riot says. “Doc said nothing about that. She just said to make sure that she can breathe and that her airway remains clear. That and the feet thing.”

“How long has she been like this?” Adira asks.

Riot glances at his phone. “A couple of minutes.”

“I think we should call an ambulance.” This isn’t normal. Losing consciousness like this... “I have a bad feeling.”

“Nicole can’t find out about this.” Rebel claps a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “You know she’ll use it against you.”

Adira glances at me across the bed. “She will.”

“This is Ivy’s life we’re talking about.” Let Nicole do whatever the hell she wants. Ivy is the only thing I’m worried about right now.

“The doctor won’t be long,” Rebel says. “Jackson will make sure security knows to clear her straight away. It’ll be okay. This isn’t like what happened in Narnia. It’s not.”

“Yeah.” This isn’t the same, but Ivy is so tranquil. It’s freaking me the hell out. I can’t stop thinking about how she looked when I found her that night. “It’s freezing in here. I’m going to cover her up.”

I pull the covers to her waist and hand Adira back his robe before tucking them under her chin. Taking a seat on the edge of the mattress, I smooth her hair out of her face before I

take one of her hands between both of mine. “Come on, baby. You’re scaring me. Wake up for me, please.”

Her lashes flutter and her eyes move underneath her lids. A slight sound escapes her lips when they part. “Rogue?”

My heart starts to pump again. My lips tip up as a wave of emotion rolls through me. My shoulders sag while I squeeze the hand I hold cradled between mine. “Yeah, baby, I’m right here.”

“Glad you’re back with us, Love.” Adira smiles softly at her.

“Could you grab me a warm, wet cloth?” I ask him, unable to bring myself to leave her side.

“Sure.” He squeezes my shoulder on his way past.

Ivy’s pupils are dilated. She blinks a few times before she can focus on me and presses her fingertips to her forehead with a pained expression. “What happened?”

“You fainted on me.”

“Oh.” She tries to shove up on her elbows. “I don’t think I’ve ever done that before.”

“Don’t get up.” I press her gently back down on the mattress as Adira comes out of the bathroom with a wet cloth.

He hands it to me. “We’ll give you two some space.”

“Thanks.” I wait for him and my brothers to leave and the door to click shut before I tug the blanket back from her body. The hem of the slip is wrapped around her thighs. I hike it up to her waist and ease her legs apart so I can gently run the cloth over each thigh, cleaning my mess from her skin. “You scared the hell out of me, baby.”

“I’m fine.” She tries to sit up again, but her muscles are shaky and she doesn’t have the energy to keep me from stopping her.

“You are not fine,” I snap. I draw in a deep breath when her eyes widen and grow shiny. It’s fear that has me snapping at her and that’s not okay. I soften my voice as I gather her to my chest and stroke her hair. “I’m sorry, but you’ve been sick for weeks. And you’re obviously not getting better. This isn’t some cold or flu. Losing consciousness is serious, Ivy. It’s time to bring in a medical professional. It’s not up for debate. I need to know that nothing is going to happen to you.”

She pulls back enough to look at me. “I’ll see the doctor.”

“And you’ll talk to her?”

“Yes.” She bites her lip. “I’m sorry I worried you so much when we have so much else to worry about. That man —”

“Let’s not talk about that right now.” I kiss her forehead. That conversation is a closet darker than the ones Alec used to lock her in and I’m still working out how to break it to her. “You are my priority. Your health is my priority. The doctor will be here any minute.”

“Okay. Then I should get dressed.” She yawns into her palm as she once more tries to get up. “Or at least put on some underwear.”

“You will stay right there.” I gently press her back down again as I stand. “I’ll get you something more comfortable.”

“Thank you.” She still sounds weak and so damn tired. She touches the back of her hand to her forehead. “I don’t know what is wrong with me.”

“That’s why we need the doctor. Hopefully she can help us work out why you’ve been so ill.” I step away from the bed.

Adira's things are spread over every flat surface on my side of the room. A wig head piled high with Dolly Parton locks stares back at me from the top of a chest of drawers. A pink boa is wound like a snake around my lamp. I didn't notice before... I was too concerned about Ivy.

He's been with her the whole time I've been gone. Probably hasn't left her side. Sleepovers included. I'll have to remember to thank him later.

Walking into the closet, I shed my jacket and toss it on the hamper before untucking my dress shirt and starting on the buttons. I've spent the last two days in the same clothes and I would kill for a shower. Stripping out of the stale cotton, I settle for snagging a crisp white tee from a shelf and stretching the material over my head.

I grab Ivy a pair of pajamas. The material is fuzzy and soft in my fist. The fragrance of the fabric softener makes my chest squeeze as I inhale it. If we can't find Marty... this time we have... might be all we get.

And with the way things have ramped up so quickly, my gut is adamant that Nicole has to be running on a time limit of her own. Perhaps Ivy's twenty-first birthday means something to her financially, if my suspicions about why she

killed Richard Love are correct. And if that's the case we have less than two weeks to stop her.

But if we can't...

No. That's not going to happen. I'm not going to let that happen. We'll find Marty and the evidence we need to stop Nicole. There is no other option.

Ivy is running her fingers through her hair when I step out of the closet. She hums to herself while she smooths the strands.

It stops me in my tracks. Steals my breath away. I know I love her, but there are some moments when the full force of it slams into me. It's an emotion like no other. A feeling I never thought I would experience. And now that I do... I can't imagine how I ever believed I could live without it. Without her.

"Are you okay?" She lowers her hands to her lap. Her brow furrows as she peers at me. A small smile curves her mouth.

"Yes." I move to the bed and take her jaw in my hand. Rub my thumb over her cheek before I lean down to brush my mouth against hers. "Let's get you dressed."

I help her stand and peel the silk over her head before replacing it with a long sleeved pink top with strawberries on it. “Strawberries, huh?”

“I bought them a week ago. They only arrived yesterday.” She flattens the material down while I crouch at her feet, then rests a hand on my shoulder to balance herself so that I can help her into her panties. “Something about them... made me smile. They’re just so cute. Plus they go with my Pop-Tarts addiction.”

I pull up the matching pants as I stand. Settle the elastic against her waist. Those strawberries have me pretty close to hard again as I recall that epic day we spent together right before she lost her memories. The multiple orgasms, and the fort picnic that ended with me eating a strawberry from between her thighs and then eating her. That was such a good day before I blew it up. I want so many more memories like that with her.

“Rogue? What is it?”

I thought for a second perhaps that could have been the reason... even if she didn’t realize it. But that’s just wishful thinking. “Nothing.”

Adira knocks on the door and opens it a crack. “The doctor is here.”

Chapter Five

Ivy

“Nausea. Dizziness. Feeling under the weather. Fainting. Is that correct?” the pretty doctor asks once Rogue leaves the room.

I guess he must have filled her in when they asked her to come. I wrap my arms around my waist tightly. “Yes.”

“For how long?”

“A few weeks.”

“Any chance you might be pregnant?” She unlatches her bag and rifles through the contents.

“Preg-what?”

“Those are all symptoms that could be explained, if you were.” She takes out a cup and hands it to me. “And the results are easy to find out.”

“But that’s...” I stare at the small container.

“We’ll run some blood work as well.” She starts laying out her equipment. “Take your vitals, of course.”

“Pregnant?” I whisper with a shake of my head. My heart does a funny little flutter. She can’t be serious.

“If you could take that to the bathroom we’ll be able to do a test right here and now.”

“But it’s not...”

“Possible?” She focuses on me. “You are sexually active, correct?”

“Yes, but...” I’m not pregnant. There’s no way. I’m not even late. Only... I don’t actually remember when I had my period last. And that info doesn’t seem to be on my calendar. Or at least not that I’ve noticed. “I’m on birth control.”

“Sometimes birth control fails.” Her posture softens. She smiles at me sympathetically.

“I guess.” A baby? That’s not something I’m ready for. How on earth will I tell Rogue if that’s why I’ve been so sick?

“If you’re not... then at least we’ve ruled it out,” she says.

My stomach churns as I take the cup into the bathroom, but my senses are so heightened that I can't actually pee. Of course I'd get stage fright over something like this.

Okay, I can do this. I'll just pretend I'm wearing bunny ears, and peeing with a doctor waiting to run a pregnancy test is a normal Tuesday.

Eventually I give up. It's not going to happen. I return without the empty cup. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"That's okay," she says. "We can still run a test with the rest of your labs."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I push the long sleeves on my pajamas up past my elbows. She takes her time finding a vein before she fills several vials with my blood. "It seems you're a little dehydrated. I'm going to suggest plenty of fluids and electrolytes. That and plenty of rest should help you feel a bit better while we wait for the results."

"I'll do that." I pull my sleeves back down and grip the edge of the mattress. Although I don't know how I'm supposed to rest while my family is causing drama. And knowing I'm possibly pregnant.

“It’ll take at least a day, perhaps two, to get your results back,” she says as she packs up her bag.

“But it could just be stress? With the media and...” I lift my wrist, still in a cast.

“There’s always a possibility,” she says. “But let’s wait for the blood tests. Then we’ll have a much better idea of what we’re dealing with.”

“Thank you.” I walk her to the door of the bedroom.

“If you get worse or you faint again I want you to go straight to the ER and have Rogue call me,” she orders. “He has my number.”

Rogue is waiting on the threshold. I’m sure he’s been pacing the entire time I was with the doctor. His hair is all tugged up on one side.

He takes one look at my face and his eyes fill with worry. “What is it?”

“Nothing serious.” I press my hand to his chest.

“I’ll take my leave now,” the doctor says as she passes us. “I know my way out. I’ll have my office call with the results. Make sure she rests.”

“Thank you, Doc.” Rogue doesn’t take his eyes off me as she walks away. “Tests? What does she think it is?”

I rub my lips together. I can’t be pregnant. So there’s no point in making it a thing. “She agreed it is most likely stress.”

“Well, that’s good news.” His face brightens and his lips tip up in the corners. He cups my face and presses his lips to my forehead. “Perhaps not *good* news, but at least it’s nothing serious.”

“Mmm.” Unless I am pregnant. That’s pretty serious.

Rogue’s fingers subtly tighten at my waist. “Did she prescribe anything?”

“No. Not yet. We’re waiting on test results.”

“All right. Then let’s get you set up to rest then.” He moves his lips to my ear. Even though I can’t see his mouth I can tell by the way his breath stirs against my skin that he smiles wickedly. “Perhaps I can do a little something with my tongue to help relax you before bed.”

My body bows to his as need pools in my belly. It never gets old... the way I react to him.

Adira clears his throat as he comes into view. “Okay, you two love birds, quit it. The rest of us are worried sick about you, Love. What did the doctor say?”

“Too much stress,” Rogue grumbles as he pulls me against his chest. He rests his chin on the top of my head.

“That’s not surprising with that she-hag constantly harassing you.” Adira scowls and his jaw starts to tic. “I’m getting awfully close to ending up on a true crime show where queens lose their ever-loving minds and stab someone related to them six-hundred-and-sixty-five times.”

I love when Rogue wraps me up in his arms like this. Perhaps some people would look at us and see a man who is more possessive than most, but when he has my back, I feel supported. Stronger. More capable of taking on the things that terrify me. Cocooned by his hard body, I feel safe. And the nausea and dizziness has faded almost entirely for the moment. My stomach grumbles weakly.

“Hungry.” Adira tugs me away from Rogue and tucks me under his arm.

“I could eat something,” I admit. Should probably eat something to keep my flagging energy level up so I don’t pass out again.

“We’ll get you a Pop-Tart.” Adira ushers me into the kitchen.

“Oh my gosh, Love.” Summer leaves her laptop to rush up and hug me. She’s been here the whole time, chugging caffeine and doing damage control. She pulls back, squeezing my forearms while she peers into my face. “You had us worried.”

“What did the doc say?” Rebel steps up to look at me over her shoulder. He studies me like he expects the answers to be clear on my face.

God, I hope my face doesn’t say I’m scared I might be pregnant.

“Stress,” Rogue says as he heads to the cupboard and starts rifling around. “Where the fuck are the Pop-Tarts? Did you jackasses eat them all? My girl is stressed out and there’s no strawberry Pop-Tarts. Are you freaking kidding me?”

“Oops. My bad. I may have had the munchies last night after I tried to unwind.” Riot weaves around us to join Rogue. He pulls out a blue box and thumps it against Rogue’s chest. “I’ll replace them.”

“You got high?” Rogue’s nose wrinkles as he holds the box at arm’s length. “And now we only have one box? S’mores flavor? This isn’t her favorite.”

“It doesn’t matter. I like these too.” I step between the two men to steal the carton of pastries in the hopes that it will help soothe Rogue. All this tension... it’s a powder keg and it’s only a matter of time before something gets blown out of context. “We shouldn’t be fighting amongst ourselves.”

“We’re not fighting.” Rogue hands the box to me before he glares at his brother. “It’s just poor manners, especially when his sister-in-law is barely eating because she’s sick.”

“How many did you eat, bro?” Rebel shakes his head at Riot.

“It’s fine, honestly.” I retrieve a foil packet and rip into it before dumping both pastries into the toaster.

“It was only a couple of boxes.” Riot grips the back of his neck as he blushes. “Maybe three.”

“So much for that rock star physique,” Rogue goads.

“You were being interrogated,” Riot fires back. “The whole trial is falling apart. I’m just as stressed as you two.”

“Whoa, wait on. What do you mean the trial is falling apart?” Rebel asks as everyone falls silent.

The toaster pops.

“Well...” Riot grimaces. “It’s like it sounds. Alec’s lawyers are trying to have the photographs thrown out. They say without the person who took the photos as a witness there’s no way to authenticate them. And even then they could be tampered with to paint Alec in a bad light when they really don’t show anything that the jury can take as proof that Alec drugged Ro.”

“Oh my God.” Summer cups her hand around her mouth.

“He’s going to get away with it.” I’m no longer hungry as I stagger against the island cupboards. “Isn’t he?”

“I think so,” Riot says.

“That motherfucker,” Rebel snarls.

“And Ro?” Rogue asks in an eerily quiet voice. “How is she doing in all of this?”

“Not well.” Riot’s arms are stiff at his side. His hands are bunched into fists. He tucks them into his armpits when he notices me staring at them. “She’s retreating.”

“She can’t,” Summer says.

“Not on purpose.” Riot swallows thickly. “She’s not shutting down the trial. But she’s isolating herself again.”

Rebel clasps his hands behind his head and blows out a breath. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Riot looks broken. “She wants space.”

“From everyone?” Summer asks. “Or...from you?”

Riot races a hand over his face and through his hair. His eyes are suspiciously bright. “Both. She says it’s not the right time for her to be involved with anyone.”

“Okay,” Rebel says. “And how are you doing?”

“Rough,” Riot admits, collapsing into a seat at the small informal dining table. “But I can’t force it if she doesn’t want to be with me.”

“Perhaps she just needs time,” Adira says. “She really is going through a lot because of that bastard. Someone ought to make a piñata out of him.”

I imagine my brother hanging from a beam. Thick chains wrapped around his waist while he dangles upside down and we each take turns beating him with a Louisville slugger until red, red candy spills out. I imagine what it would

feel like to punish him for all the terrible things he's done to me... to Rochelle. And to who knows how many others. I imagine the weight of the wooden bat in my hand. The flex and torsion of my muscles as I swing and the jarring sensation as I connect. I feel the hot, sticky splatter of his blood on my hands and face.

I'm so angry that my family ruins everything good. My brother hurts people and gets away with it. My mother hurts me and I feel so powerless. I hate it so much. But that fantasy... the idea of hurting Alec like that... I've dreamed about it. Fantasized about it. I wish I could feel that strong for real.

Adira is looking at me funny. His gaze flits to the strangle hold I have on the edge of the counter. His expression asks if I'm all right.

I nod. I'm just so angry for what my brother has put Rochelle through. And for Riot's heartache over it. I'm angry for the way that our family has treated Adira when they should celebrate how special he is. I'm angry that they're threatening Rogue to get to me. And that I can't stop any of it.

"What about her bodyguard? Tex still with her?"
Rebel asks.

“Uh.” Riot glances away, taking a moment to compose himself. “As far as I’m aware.”

“So she’s safe then. She’s not alone. She’s protected.” Rebel starts announcing the positives. “We’ll be here for her when she needs us. When she’s ready, whatever happens with the trial.”

But none of us are safe, and Alec keeps hurting people and getting away with it. Because of my mother. Because Nicole makes everything just go away for him. No matter the cost. And I am not powerful enough to make him pay for his misdeeds. I’m not even formidable enough to get her to back off when it comes to my own freaking life. “There’s nothing we can do.”

“Ivy?” Adira calls after me as I dash from the kitchen into the dining room.

I press my back to the wall once I’m alone. Tears blur my eyes, and I take frantic sips of air. I’m going to have to say goodbye to him, aren’t I? There is no other way. That photographer died and Alec will soon be free. Nicole can make anything she wants happen. And we have no way of fighting back.

A noise startles me. I expect it to be Rogue, but as I drag my gaze up to meet his all I see are white roses with blood dripping from the tips of the petals. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of them, with wickedly sharp looking thorns, all in a six foot monstrosity of a flower arrangement. And it's teetering toward me.

Chapter Six

Ivy

“What the hell?”

Rogue’s voice reaches me as I cover my face with my palms and cower, waiting for the flowers to land on me. The arrangement is huge and probably weighs a ton, but it’s the thorns I scramble back to protect myself from.

I stumble over my feet and my head hits the wall as I fall against it. Stars burst under my eyelids. My heartrate spikes. Velvety petals brush against my cheeks, and my breath catches, waiting for the pain that will surely follow.

Only those petals stop touching my skin and Rogue wraps his arm around me and buries my face in his chest. A second later there’s a loud crash right next to us. Water drenches my feet.

A woman yelps. “Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry. They almost fell on you.”

“Are you hurt?” Rogue takes my face and searches it as Jackson comes rushing into the room with his weapon drawn. “I heard you scream.”

“I...” I must have screamed from shock at those roses falling on me.

“Is everything okay in here?” Jackson scans the room before his gaze lands on Dizzy and the mess of roses. He must have heard me too. He holsters his weapon as the boys and Summer rush in. “Are you all right, Miss Love?”

“I’m fine. A little shaken.” The tops of my ears heat. “I just wasn’t expecting that.”

“Of course not. How could you?” Dizzy’s sympathetic voice rings out.

I turn to see my friend with her hands out like she was holding something. She drops them quickly and wipes her palms on her pink mini skirt.

I haven’t seen her since before the wedding disaster and Rogue’s arrest. Well, there was that vivid dream about meeting her brother and going to Narnia. I wanted to help Rogue so badly it must have seeped into my dreams. My subconscious telling me the only way to do that is by

remembering what happened with Alec that night I almost died. Although I'm not sure it would really help when it's my mother who is intent on making my life hell. "What are you doing here?"

"I was worried about you. With everything they've been reporting online... you're like a sister to me. My best friend. I had to come," Dizzy says. "Jackson let me in."

He nods when I glance at him for confirmation. "She's on your approved visitor list."

"Right. Of course." She is. I put her there. I trust her. It's just... I'm rattled. And there's the roses.

"I'm so sorry I scared you." She steps over the mess. The points of her pale pink heels have darkened where water splashed them. "That wasn't my intention. You were with the doctor. And everyone else was busy. I didn't want to get in the way so I thought I would wait in the dining room. I needed to call my brother anyway. And that's when I noticed the roses. I was trying to get rid of them before you saw them."

"Where'd they come from?" Rogue barks. "I thought I said no roses in the apartment."

“I didn’t see them get delivered.” Jackson narrows his gaze on Dizzy. “Otherwise, I would have disposed of them.”

“It wasn’t me.” Dizzy twirls a candy pink tendril around her finger. “I was just moving them because I know how much they affect Ivy.”

I stare at the broken ceramic pieces of the vase and bent stems of roses that have come loose from the arrangement. Snowy petals with crimson tips are littered across the floor. Strands of blood red seed pearls have broken and scattered. So far every arrangement has been accompanied with a threat from my mother. “Is there a card?”

Summer steps around the scattered petals and beads and carefully moves the stems until she retrieves a small white card.

“What’s it say?” I start to shake.

Summer straightens and scans the card before clearing her throat. “To my dearest daughter... Tick. Tock.”

“That absolute bitch,” Adira snaps. “Why can’t she just leave you the hell alone?”

Rogue wraps his arms around my shoulders as I fall against his chest. He smooths my hair away from my face as

he speaks low enough that I only I hear. “Everything she’s doing is to get between us. Don’t let her do that. Don’t let her get to you. We can beat her if we just stick together. Tell me you know that.”

“Yes. I know that.” I want to believe him so badly.

“Remind me again why we’re not reporting these threats to the police?” Riot asks.

“We thought she’d get the message when Ivy didn’t do what she wanted.” Rogue exhales a labored breath.

We thought she’d give up when I made it clear that I wouldn’t leave Rogue. I still don’t understand why that’s not the case. Why she’s so intent on hurting me.

“And now with the assault... the timing... the cops won’t believe us,” Rogue says flatly. “Or if they do it’s probably because Nicole owns them.”

“What?” I sniffle.

Rogue turns rigid. “I want to know how those roses ended up in here.”

“It’s possible it was a member of the security team,” Rebel says. “Right? A couple of them were up here a little earlier.”

“Yes, sir. That’s the most likely explanation.” Jackson straightens. “I’ll check with everyone on shift right now and make sure they understand this isn’t to happen again.”

“No,” Rogue snaps, his tone as dark as his scowl. “I’ll see to it myself.”

“Should I come with?” I ask.

He shakes his head, his eyes softening. “Visit with Dizzy. It’ll be good for you to have some time with your friend. And there’s someone I want to talk to about Marty.”

Dizzy bounces up and down and claps her hands. “We should totally have a girls’ night...” She makes a face as she realizes we’re stuck in a fortress surrounded like Saturn by rings of security and media reps. “...in? Pajama party? You’re already in your jammies.”

“How about an hour or two?” Rogue suggests with a kiss to my temple. “I hate to be a grumpy asshole like my brother, but you’re not well. And I was hoping to have you all to myself at some point tonight.”

“That would be great.” Dizzy beams from ear to ear. “We’ll watch that hilarious show with the detectives who heist all the time. Adira, you’re in, aren’t you?”

Adira nods. “Summer, do you want to join us?”

“I wish I could,” she says. “But I should get back to media watch.”

“Fuck the media, Red.” Rebel wraps his arm around Summer and brings her in close. “Take a couple of hours and hang with your friends. The media circus will still be there when you come back to it. You need a little fun too.”

“But—”

“I know you’re strong and capable. You haven’t slept in two days. That’s not the point. You work so hard to keep our images in order. But this mess is beyond fucked up and if you don’t take care of yourself you’ll burn out. I won’t have that. So I’m stepping in and I’m telling you to take a breath.”

“Okay.” She yawns. “I’ll concede you have a point.”

“That’s my kitten.” He smiles softly and presses his lips to hers.

“I’ll make popcorn,” Summer says when he lets her go. “Anyone else want wine?”

“Bring the whole bottle,” Dizzy says.

“Make it two bottles,” Adira says.

“How many glasses should I grab? Ivy, will you be joining us?” Summer asks.

“No wine for me. I’ll stick to tea.” I press a hand to my belly. “I don’t think my stomach could handle anything harder.”

Summer disappears into the kitchen with Rebel and Riot in tow.

“I’ll be back soon.” Rogue touches his lips to my temple before he follows them out of the room.

Adira wraps his arm around me and guides me over to the couch. “After that scare, I for one could use a little pampering. My heart is still pounding.”

Mine too. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“How about a facial and mani-pedi while we chillax?” Adira squeezes my shoulder. “You need a little normal to center you. In fact, it’s exactly what the doctor ordered, I believe.”

“She did tell me to try and rest.” This would be one way to follow those orders. Though I don’t expect I’ll actually relax. But it can’t hurt to try. It’s not like we have a plan on how to deal with Nicole anyway. Not yet. Not tonight.

If we don't work out how to bring down Nicole, who knows how many nights with my friends I'll have left. Friends, other than Adira, that I'm only just getting to know again since I have no memory from before. Friends that know this version of me... not the shy person I used to be. And the idea of saying goodbye to them... of being alone again... I hate it.

"I'll collect everything we'll need." Adira swans out of the room.

Dizzy kicks off her heels and takes a seat beside me. She tugs at her skirt. "Did the doctor have any clue why you've been so sick?"

"Not really. We're waiting for test results." I rub the lines in my forehead. "How did you know the doctor was here?"

"Jackson mentioned it when he let me in." She crosses her legs and leans in my direction, her brow gathering tightly in the middle. "Does she think it's serious? Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so." I reach back and gingerly touch the spot where I thumped my head against the wall.

There'd been something in that split second... my whole body reacted like the danger was far worse than it actually was. I didn't think I hit my head that hard, but the sweet bloom of an ache that makes me wince says otherwise.

"Ivy, what is it?" Dizzy lifts her hand and the pink diamonds on her gold bracelets glitter as they slide down. A horizontal welt half an inch thick runs across the inside of her wrist. The skin there is marbled in yellow and green.

I reach out and grip her elbow. "What is that?"

"Oh." She glances at the welt and licks her lips. A smile tugs at the corners of her glossed lips. "I wouldn't do what I was told so West chained me up in the basement of his club. He told me he wouldn't let me out again until I learned to be a good girl. He's going to be so surprised when he finds me gone."

"Your brother did that to you?" I touch my throat as my heart beats wonky. That's why I haven't been able to contact her in days.

She laughs. "I had you going for a minute, didn't I?"

It's not funny. Not after I told her about Alec. Or maybe I didn't tell her. I can't be certain. Everything in my

head is so confused these days. “Then where? How?”

“Sex. I was constrained, but I approved wholeheartedly. Well...” She leans in close. Winks. “Kinda.”

“I’ve got snacks and beverages.” Summer carries in a tray loaded with crackers and fruit and chocolate all prettily arranged. Behind her Jackson brings the wine and glasses. “Could you grab that table from over there, Jackson?”

“Yes, Miss Heart.”

Dizzy jumps up to take the wine and glasses from him so that he can move the heavy looking table nearer to the couch.

When he’s done, Summer sets down the tray. “Thanks for your help, Jackson.”

“Oh em gee, that charcuterie is so cute. Seriously, how did you throw that together? You’re so talented. I hate you.” Dizzy opens the bottle of red and pours a glass while Jackson leaves to give us privacy. Lifting the goblet to her nose, she sniffs at it delicately before she takes a sip. “It would take me hours and it still wouldn’t look perfect like that.”

Adira bustles back into the room with his arms full of beauty products. “I have mineral mud and hydrating masks

and..." He lifts a bottle of nail polish into his line of sight. "A color called Sweet Delilah's Pussy Pink."

"That one's for me." Dizzy jumps up to take it from him. She holds it to her chest and pats the lid like she's holding a kitten. "I look so good in pink."

Summer flips on the TV and sets up the program we want to watch while Adira hands out the masks. We quote our favorite lines and Adira and Dizzy start a drinking game around the show's catchcry.

I manage my cup of tea and a couple of crackers while Adira paints my toenails in Dazzling Night Sky. It's navy with flecks of silver and gold, and my absolute favorite.

Summer falls asleep before she's even touched her first glass of wine and Dizzy rescues the goblet from her hand before she pours chardonnay in her lap.

It's all so perfect. What I would do to be able to live this life forever.

My phone vibrates against my thigh. The caller ID makes my heart stop.

Richard Love.

My dad is calling? That's not possible.

Chapter Seven

Rogue

I march out of the elevator with gritted teeth and my knuckles white from balling my hands. Rebel and Riot are a few steps behind me as I move toward the black Range Rover at the end of the parking structure.

Not one of my security team or building security owned up to putting the roses in my apartment. I didn't really expect them to. Not a fucking one of them saw anything suspicious either. A six foot eyesore gets delivered to my home and no one bats a fucking eye. That's the part that has me wanting to take both fists to the closest cement column.

"Bro, you need to calm down," Rebel warns.

How the hell can I calm down when I don't know who I can trust? Ivy. My brothers. Our inner circle. The bodyguard I vetted with a fine tooth comb. These are the people on our side.

Everyone else is suspicious. Anyone else could be working against us. “There wasn’t even anything on the cameras. Nothing.”

The only camera that wouldn’t have failed us, it turns out, is the one inside the elevator. The one Ivy turned off to greet me when I first got home. The one that didn’t get turned back on because we were all freaking out about Ivy fainting.

“Where are we going?” Riot asks as we bypass my Jeep.

My ride would be too obvious and we wouldn’t be able to outpace the paps. It reminds me of the first time I brought Ivy home. The photographers had chased us across town for that magic first picture of her and me together. They were practically salivating for it. I’d managed to leave them in the dust, but barely. “I have an idea of how to find Marty.”

“Well?” Rebel asks.

I unlock the Range Rover and smirk at him. “Get in the truck.”

Understanding dawns in his eyes and he balks. “I’m not going to like this, am I?”

Even in this shit show, my smile widens at his discomfort. “No, you’re not.”

“Fuck.” He groans, but he climbs in the passenger seat.

Riot slides into the back. The lighter in his hand clicks over and over next to my ear. That sound echoes in my skull and makes my anxiety spike. I start the truck and creep the Range Rover out of the garage.

A group of photographers and reporters with their cameras and their press IDs are gathered on the pavement. Their flashes would be blinding if not for the heavy tint on the vehicle. They knock on the windows to try and talk to us. Call out their questions.

“At least this time there’s no paint being thrown,” I say as half of them rush toward their own transport.

As soon as I get clear of the ones still hovering around the car, I slip into traffic. When I see an opening, I floor it. They’ll try to catch up. For a few minutes, at least, they will probably succeed, but I’m not going to make it easy on them.

Forty-five minutes later, I’ve lost the paps and we’re parked in the driveway of the home Marty grew up in. Two car

doors slam behind me as I stare at the older home with its peaked roof, light gray cladding, and four panel, shaker style front door.

“You could have called,” Rebel grouches.

“We both know he would have hung up on us,” I say.

“The yard is still as flawless as I remember. This grass always looked so soft and springy and inviting when I was high.” Riot touches his toe to the immaculate edge of the grass then practically jumps back as though expecting Martin Kendall, Marty’s namesake and grandfather, to come barging out onto the vast porch with his baseball bat perched on his shoulder.

God, it brings back memories. “He’d march right down those stairs as he threatened to take that bat to our knees if we didn’t get off his goddamn grass.”

“He took a swing at my head with that bat the first time he caught Marty and me kissing.” Rebel rubs a thumb along his bottom lip. “Swore he’d take out both my knees with it if I ever touched her below the waist.”

“As if you two weren’t all over each other all the time.” Riot rolls his eyes.

They'd been so close until they weren't. Until Marty sold us out for her career. A career Martin had always encouraged her to chase as hard as she possibly could. It was pretty obvious he never thought my brother was good enough for her. That Riot and I weren't good enough for her to associate with.

Even when things turned around for us he didn't think Rebel and Marty were good for each other. And he was right. Seeing Rebel with Summer really highlights that fact. The way they push each other to be better. They care for each other on a level we had no idea about until Summer and Ivy came into our lives.

"That was a long time ago." Rebel rubs a hand over his hair as a light turns on inside the house. "Another life."

The porch light shines brightly over the emerald lawn as Martin Kendall steps out onto the decking in his robe. His baseball bat is perched on his shoulder. "If you don't get off my property—"

"Hey, Martin." I take a step toward him. My memories of his lawn might be accurate, but the man in front of me... where used to stand a giant black man with a tight afro and too many tattoos to count... has shrunk. His brown hair has

started to gray. There are more lines worn into his face. How old would he be now? In his mid-sixties, from memory. “It’s been a long time.”

“Seven years.” He sighs and his shoulders drop. “I thought I was done with you hell raisers. And you... get off my lawn.”

I glance at Riot who is still pressing the toe of his boot to the springy grass. “Can you not?”

“Yep.” He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket and draws his shoulders to his ears.

“Do you think we could come inside?” Rebel stomps up the steps. “You don’t want us here. We don’t want to be here. And none of us want the neighbors to post pictures of the three of us on your front lawn right now.”

“It’s about Marty,” I say, grounding the conversation where it needs to be and not on their mutual animosity.

Martin scans the street as though expecting a bus full of shutterbugs to come barreling along the road. “Come on in then.”

He makes tea in a kitchen that is too small for four men. He lives alone so it’s ample space under normal

circumstances. Even when Marty was here it was only the two of them.

When we did drop in to spend time with our favorite girl, I don't remember ever taking up this much space, though. It's cramped. At least he couldn't spin the bat at us in the confined space, even if he does keep it propped against the cupboard in front of him while he pours steaming hot water into a cup from a stainless steel urn on the counter. "Do you boys want one?"

"No, we're good." It feels like we're wasting time. Every second Marty is missing things become more dire. Not just for me and Ivy, but for her. "Have you heard from her?"

"What did you assholes get my grandbaby involved in now?"

"You know Marty never needed our help to get herself into trouble," Rebel says, low and bitter. "You encouraged her, if I'm not mistaken. Told her to follow her instincts no matter the consequences."

The dark shadows under the old man's eyes get darker. The lines on his face, deeper. His eyes flash with anger. "You can leave. All of you. Now."

“We’ll leave. But not until you tell us whether you’ve heard from her.” Because she wouldn’t go completely silent on him unless something happened. They’re too close for that. Always have been.

“Why?”

“Because she was looking into something for me,” I admit. “She found something and she followed her instinct to dig deeper, and now I’m really fucking worried about her safety. But you know how she gets when she’s on a mission to learn the truth. So I need to know if she’s been in contact, because that’s the only way I can be certain that she’s only staying away because she needs to be.”

Martin stumbles back against the cupboards. His hands swing down to stop him from falling and the mug shatters on the tiled floor at his feet. Dark brown liquid spreads across the tiles.

Rebel and Riot both stare at me. “What?”

“Martin?” I need him to answer me. Not stand there looking like he’s seen a ghost.

Martin swallows roughly. “When she didn’t check in this week I told myself it didn’t mean anything, but she never

misses a call. Every week without fail since she moved out.”

The world spins and tilts. It takes a moment to regain my steadiness. I rub at the dread building in my chest. “But not this time?”

“No, I...” He steps over the mess as he lights up the phone he pulls from the pocket of his robe. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll...”

No one breathes as that call goes straight to voicemail. He hangs up and tries her number again. Same thing.

“I called her multiple times too.” Praying that the next call would yield a different result, but none of them did. But I’d had hope. I’d had this notion that at least she would contact him even if she’d felt unsafe contacting me.

“You called her multiple times? And you’re only just telling me.” He grabs my collar with both hands. Tea on his breath, he drags me into a stoop. “If my grandbaby is hurt because of you...”

“Did she send you anything?” I fire back. He’s not wrong. If anything happened to her that’s on me and I will never forgive myself. But right now there’s too much at stake to get bogged down in the what ifs. I can only deal in

absolutes. Marty is missing. Ivy is in danger. And I am this close to losing everything. “Did she tell you anything about what she was working on the last time she called?”

“I warned her you Maddox boys were bad news,” Martin snarls.

“Anything you remember could be how we find her,” Rebel shoves a palm into both of our chests, prying us apart so he can step between us.

The old man presses his fingers into his forehead, his fingertips turning white from the pressure. His exhale is anguished. “Nothing. She called and said she was on a little trip and that she’d see me when she got home. That’s all.”

Marty could be hurt. Or worse. And I have no clue where to start looking for her. Or how to stop Nicole when all I have is the bare minimum to go on. We’re wasting precious time. I shove both my hands in my hair and stumble through the house and out onto the lawn. “Fuck.”

Boots clatter on the steps behind me as my brothers join me.

“We have to go.” I climb into our ride.

Rebel and Riot jump in as I start the engine. My phone connects and music blasts the speakers as I back the car out of the driveway.

Rebel shakes his head, his lips form a thin slash in his face as he glares at me. *What the fuck haven't you told us?*

Chapter Eight

Rogue

I think I want to buy a huge fir and have it delivered to the apartment. We can set it up in the living room and decorate it however Ivy sees fit. Baubles and bows. Bunny ears and beads. Whatever she wants. We'll surround it with presents. And then we'll have a small party with just our close friends and family on Christmas Eve to celebrate her twenty-first birthday.

We'll have a band and a champagne fountain and a cookie decorating station. We'll be a real Netflix Christmas special. And then I'll kick everyone out and spend the last hours of her birthday celebrating her and wearing her thighs as ear warmers.

“So basically, you're saying we're fucked.” Rebel's sharp tone brings me back to reality as the elevator hurtles toward the penthouse.

He's been silent since we pulled out of Martin's driveway. At first because I had a lot to say. And then because, well, it's a lot to fucking take in. "I wondered how long it would take you to process."

"You're totally fucking screwed," he reiterates.

"Way to go and be positive about it," I say. "Where's the... it's not that bad, bro. We'll figure it out... huh?"

"Jokes? Seriously?" He raises an eyebrow and his temple starts to tic.

"How are you going to tell Love?" Riot asks from my other side.

"Well..." I push out my lower lip and exhale through my mouth. "I'm going to march in there and comes straight out with it. Baby, your dad's death wasn't an accident. Your mother killed him."

Rebel winces. "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes."

"Me either." Riot stares at the ceiling.

A tree. What kind of tree can I get this late in the season?

The elevator doors open. I straighten my shoulders and step out of the metal box. Time to get this conversation

over with.

Jackson is in the control room and Summer is asleep on the sofa. The show the girls were watching is still running on the TV with the sound turned down. A tray with a few bites still left on it sits on the coffee table along with several empty glasses and two bottles of wine.

“I’m going to take her to bed.” Rebel gathers Summer into his arms like she’s weightless and heads toward one of the spare rooms.

Riot glances about like he’s looking for purpose. Ro’s distance has him a little lost, it seems. He ruffles his hair. “I suppose I’ll go look at the lights from the balcony one last time before I turn in.”

“Don’t eat all the Pop-Tarts this time. My kitchen is not your one stop munchies shop.” I walk into the bedroom. It’s quiet. Peaceful. Empty.

My heart starts to pound as I move to the bathroom. After her fainting earlier the quiet puts me on edge “Ivy?”

“Hey.” She’s sitting on the floor in the walk-in. There’s a navy box covered with sparkles on the floor in front of her. It’s about the size of a shoe box and the contents have

been spread around her in organized piles. Letters. Small trinkets. A champagne cork. A pair of bunny ears. Her cheeks are blotchy. “You’re back.”

I rub the deep lines in my forehead. Your mom killed your dad. Five impossible words that have my tongue in knots. “Dizzy left?”

“Adira too. He said it was about time he slept in his own bed.” She has a piece of notepaper clutched tightly in both hands.

Damn. I was hoping to tell them both at the same time. Get it over and done with. “So what are you doing?”

“I thought there might have been something...” She glances around as though waking up from a dream. “I...uh... got a phone call from my dad’s old number tonight.”

“What?”

“It was really odd, actually.” She crinkles her brow. “I thought it was disconnected after...”

“Do you think Nicole got a hold of your number?” Because if that’s the case I’ll order her a new phone right now.

“M-maybe.” Her gaze skips from treasure to treasure. “I kind of freaked out and froze and by the time I answered it,

whoever it was had hung up.”

I squeeze the back of my neck as the feeling of being watched slinks over me. Dead men don’t usually use the phone. “They didn’t leave a voicemail?”

“No.”

“And that prompted this?” I gesture at her treasures.

“Oh... Adira and I were trying to remember if Nicole disconnected dad’s phone, and I thought I had his old phone from when they gave us his belongings...” She presses her lips together as she stares at the paper in her hands. “I found this and got distracted.”

My heart moves into my throat as her eyes grow wet. “What’s that you’re holding?”

“It’s the note that I wrote.” Her voice is barely there. “In Narnia.”

“Why do you have that?” I kneel on the carpet in front of her and pry it from her fingers. I didn’t have the guts to read it that night. I never went back for it. But she kept it?

“I guess I figured it might hold the key to my mental state at the time.” She wipes her face with her hands. “But it doesn’t mean anything to me. That’s not me. It’s not who I am.

I'm stronger than that. And the way it all went down... that's not me. The sedatives? Doing it in Narnia? When I know Adira installed hidden security... even though Adira was angry at me... I just wouldn't."

"You're so strong, baby." I crush the note and toss it away. "I don't think you hurt yourself."

"Rebel said it was Alec who hurt me in Narnia." She purses her lips. "And I think he was right. I think maybe it wasn't the first time. I'm not sure that Alec saved me the night I almost drowned. All he does is try to hurt me. He's always hated me so much." Her eyes are wounded and her chest hitches. "I don't understand why he harbors so much animosity toward me. I've never done anything to him. Except be born."

"I don't know, baby. Perhaps it's not about you at all. He's just fucked in the head. I only know that as long as Alec is in the public eye you're safe from him, and that means he can't be our biggest concern right now." I tug her onto my lap. "I have to tell you something that is going to make everything a hundred times worse."

She looks up at me. "What is it?"

My mouth is bone dry. I have to work to get enough saliva up to swallow and clear my throat. “Your dad’s accident wasn’t an accident.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t an accident.” Her eyes widen. “You think it was on purpose.”

I tighten my grip around her waist. Steady my voice. There’s no running away from this conversation. No putting these secrets back in their box. “Marty was absolutely certain. That’s why she went to Phoenix.”

Her head jerks like I’ve slapped her. “Marty? She knew about this too?”

“She brought the information to me.” I want to hold onto the words even as they fall from my lips. But we’re done with keeping things from each other. “That night at Rebel’s when you thought there was something going on between her and me.”

“That’s why you wouldn’t tell me.” She rubs at the plaster covering her wrist. Her gaze is steady on mine. “Isn’t it?”

“She wanted permission to dig deeper. And after what happened to you... I wanted to be certain what we were up

against.” My throat thickens. “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to worry you until there was a reason to be worried.”

She scrambles off my lap and stands, wrapping her arms around her middle. Her fingers tap her sides as she stares me down. Almost as though she anticipates the worst. “And now you think there’s a reason?”

I stand slowly. The words are weighty on my tongue. “We believe Nicole paid the man who caused your dad’s accident.”

Her brow crinkles in the middle. “What? Like some kind of compensation? I don’t know why she would compensate him when he was in the wrong.”

“No.” I take both her hands and hold them tightly. “Like hired him to cause the accident.”

Her lips part on a gasp. Her eyes widen. My grasp on her hands isn’t enough to keep them from trembling. “You’re saying Nicole had my dad...”

“Murdered.” I hold onto her like she might float away if I don’t. As I fill her in on the details, I can’t imagine what she must be thinking or feeling.

“Why?” She tugs away from me to pace the width of the walk-in over and over. Her hands move up and down her upper arms like she can’t seem to get warm. “Why would Nicole do that?”

“Money maybe.” I grip the hair on the top of my head. If Marty were here we would have more information and more understanding. “Your dad was worth a lot.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” She shakes her head. “Nicole is independently wealthy. She doesn’t need money. Even if she needed more than she has, I cannot imagine she needs it enough to kill for it.”

I spread my arms wide. “Perhaps she isn’t as wealthy as she claimed. Or maybe she ran out of money and your dad was her cash cow.”

She continues pacing. “It doesn’t make sense. There has to be more to it.”

“Well, you said you thought he was planning to divorce her. What if she knew? What if he was going to leave her with nothing? Or what if she hated losing control of the situation?” My chest starts to hum as unpacking everything heightens my senses. “She’s obsessed with controlling you. If they’d gotten a divorce she would have lost that opportunity,

right? You would have stayed with your dad. If it isn't his money why else would she be so consumed with marrying you off to that creep, Croft? Why are you so valuable to a woman who treats you like you're a commodity?"

She stops and holds her head with both hands like it could explode with all the new information. "I'm not sure. This is a lot to take in."

"I know, baby." I replace her hands with mine, smoothing them over her cheeks and digging my fingers into the hair at her nape. "You've already been through so much. You shouldn't have to find out something like this as well."

"It's too much." Her knees wobble as she crumples against my chest.

I scoop her up and carry her to bed before I switch off the lights. Stripping down to my boxers, I climb in next to her and arrange the covers over us. I pull her against me so that we fit like two spoons.

"It feels like I'm losing him all over again," she whispers, her voice filled with unshed emotion. "It was bad enough when it was an accident, but now... I need to know why, Rogue. I need to know what could be so important to her that she would kill my dad for it."

“Whatever her reason... we’ll make sure she pays for it.” I tighten my hold on her. “With enough information we can finally get her to leave us alone.”

“That’s why Marty went to Phoenix, isn’t it?” She turns to face me. “She was following the breadcrumbs?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you think she’ll actually find anything?” Hope colors her voice.

“If anyone can... it’s Marty.” She probably already has enough to get a criminal investigation under way. It wouldn’t surprise me if she had all the evidence we need by now. And that’s what worries me.

“Then where is she?” Ivy asks.

I shake my head. “Laying low is my guess.”

“You don’t think anything has happened to her, do you?” Ivy plays with the smattering of hair on my chest.

“We need to stay positive.” I steal her fingers and kiss the tips. Tomorrow we’ll make a plan and put it into action. We can’t wait around to see what Nicole’s next move will be. Or if Marty will turn up. “She’s smart and good at evading trouble. We will find her.”

I just hope she'll be in one piece when we do.

“Okay.” She starts to settle, and for a while there’s nothing but the sound of our breathing before she speaks again. “There’s something else... I need to tell you. The timing is terrible.”

My heart skips a beat. “What is it?”

It takes her a long moment to answer. So long I think she might have actually fallen asleep. Then she blurts, “I might be pregnant.”

Chapter Nine

Ivy

Narnia is different since the last time I was here. The cream carpet has been ripped out and replaced with a beautiful sapphire blue shag that my toes sink into with every step. It's so soft underfoot, it's like walking on clouds.

The white walls are now a muted gray-blue where they peek out between rows of costumes. The wall behind Adira's special edition footwear is clad in an almost golden colored wood panelling that matches the new console in the middle of the room. Thick white drapes hide the only window and serve as a backdrop to the costume try on area.

It's beautiful. My fingers trace a line on the silky smooth surface of the console as I walk around it. A huge gold bowl sits in the middle. It's filled with candy wrapped in blue and gold cellophane.

My mouth waters. I'm so hungry. I press a hand to my growling belly as I stare at the spot where Rogue found me.

My memories overlap and the bloodstain starts to appear on the new carpet. It grows more and more discolored as I stare at it.

“Ivy?” Adira’s voice pulls my attention back to the present. Rather, to a different point in the past. “It’s such a shame about your dad’s accident.”

“It wasn’t an accident.” I turn to face my best friend.

“What?” he asks at the same time my phone starts to ring.

I glance down at the device in my hand. My heart stops. The name on the screen... I can barely voice it. “Daddy?”

He can’t be calling me, because I saw him in his casket. I was there when they lowered him into the ground. I was there. This isn’t possible.

“Go on. Answer it,” Adira says. “You’re running out of time.”

I swipe my finger across the screen to pick up the call. The name has changed. My chest lightens. “I must be seeing things. It’s Rogue.”

“Lover boy is obsessed with you.” Adira sashays across the room and starts searching through the costumes. “What am I going to wear to the funeral?”

“The funeral?” I hold my phone to my ear. Rogue is apologizing. Telling me he loves me. Telling me he’s on his way. Telling me to hold on. “I don’t understand.”

“Fight for me, baby.” He grows more panicked by the second. *“I need you to be strong for me, baby. I need you to hold on.”*

My stomach flutters. I’ve been so queasy lately, but this is different. It’s a sick, twisting kind of feeling that sets me on edge.

Adira picks out a somber suit in black velvet. He holds it to his chest and twirls. “What do you think?”

“I...” I gasp and fall back, clutching my empty hand to my chest as Alec walks toward me in Adira’s place.

He holds the velvet suit up in front of him, a vindictive smirk on his lips. He throws out his other hand and indicates the stain seeping up through the pristine carpet. It’s blood red in a sea of blue. “Your funeral, of course, you silly bitch.”

Rogue stops begging me to fight and a feminine voice fills the line. “Do you know what I would do if I were in your shoes? Haven’t I told you? Haven’t you worked it out yet?”

“Dizzy?” I gasp as I try to open the door and run from Alec. But the handle won’t turn. As much as I pull on it, it doesn’t budge.

“Oh, little bunny, you are not going to get away so easily.” Alec steps in close, framing me with his arms so that I can’t move. I can only turn to face him. He smiles that pearly white smile as he wraps one hand around my neck and starts to squeeze. “You were so devastated by what happened with Rogue Maddox that you came home and decided to end it. By the time I found you... called an ambulance... got you help... it was too late.”

The phone falls from my hand and bounces on the carpet. Dizzy’s voice comes through louder now as my lungs burn from the lack of oxygen. “We didn’t come all this way for you to give up. Show me you’re not the pathetic and weak person I’ve seen so far. You are stronger than this.”

“Do you think she’ll remember what happened here?” a strong masculine voice asks. It sounds so far away, and at the same time like it’s right inside my mind.

I stop struggling against Alec as my attention catches on the man leaning against the wall beside me. “West, help me! Please?”

West watches me with those dark, dangerous blues as dark spots dance in front of my eyes. The pressure in my head is immense.

One corner of his mouth turns up in a manner that is so familiar it grips my heart. He looks so much like Rogue when he smiles like that. Only there’s no sweetness to it, no warmth, not like there is with Rogue. He cracks his neck from side-to-side. “I’ve done all I can.”

“Please,” I beg as the feeling of Alec’s hand around my neck grows stronger and becomes unbearable. I can’t fight him off... I’m not strong enough... not yet... not on my own.

Alec holds up something that glints in the light from the chandelier overhead. A small metal blade. “One cut is all it will take.”

Oh my God. I fight harder, but now I’m fighting my own body. My limbs don’t budge no matter how hard I try to move them. When he spins me around and shoves my cheek against the wall, I open my mouth to scream but I can’t make a sound.

“Quiet now, Love.” West lifts one finger to his lips. There is a tattoo of a compass on the side of the knuckle. “I want to see if you have a spine.”

“Wake up, baby.” Rogue’s deep voice is rough with sleep. “You’re having a nightmare.”

I bolt upright. My lungs are screaming for air, but I inhale too hard and too fast and it sends me into a coughing, choking fit. My chest spasms and heaves as I fight to suck down air in between coughs. “Oh my God, it was a dream.”

“Yeah.” Rogue sits up beside me. His hand rubs soothing circles between my shoulder blades. “You screamed in your sleep.”

“I did?” It was all just a dream. Of course I would have some twisted and scary dream when I have so much on my mind. That’s all. It wasn’t real.

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Uh. Alec... he...” I can still feel his hand around my throat. My lungs are still burning. It felt so real. More real than the last one.

I toss back the covers and scramble out of bed. Stumbling to the bathroom, I turn on the light to look at my aching throat.

There's nothing. Not a single mark on my neck. I pile my hair in my hand on top of my head as I turn this way and that, looking for a row of red ovals or the semi-circle of his nails embedded in my skin. Anything that suggests it was more than a dream. But the only color is an angry flush to my face.

Rogue slips into the bathroom behind me. His concerned gaze catches mine in the mirror before he stands right behind me. "You look like you're burning up."

"Do I?" I press my fingers to those hot strawberry spots on my cheeks. My fingertips are like ice. And the pressure in my head is almost blinding.

He rests his palm on my forehead as I lean back against him. "You're so warm. I think you're running a fever."

"What?" I blink. My vision is still bleary from sleep. I can barely think straight with that nightmare still so vivid. And it feels like everything aches. Plus the tiles are super cold under my feet. So cold I'm shivering.

He wraps his hands around my hips and lifts me onto the counter. Holding me with one hand, he digs through a drawer and pulls out a fancy digital thermometer that he rolls across my forehead. “Shit, you’re too hot. Shit. How do we handle fever again? We have to bring it down.”

“Rogue, it’s okay.” I can barely keep my eyes open. Pins and needles are making my toes hurt. “I’m okay.”

“I’m calling the doctor.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” I manage through clicking teeth. “You’ll wake her.”

“I don’t care.” He reaches for his phone before he realizes he’s only wearing boxer briefs and his phone is on the nightstand. “You’re pregnant, baby. Now you have a fever. You’re not brushing this off like it’s nothing. And the doc said —”

He didn’t say anything when I brought up the possibility hours ago. Not one word. And I didn’t know what else to say to him about it because I have no idea how I’ll come to terms with it if that’s why I’ve been so sick. So instead we lay in this awkward, heavy silence until sleep overtook me.

“We don’t know that.” The test could come back negative. I cover my belly with my hand.

I don’t know what terrifies me more. What the result of the test will be or that Rogue might not be happy about it if it’s positive. The timing is terrible. “We might not be pregnant.”

He looks like he wants to say something, but then changes his mind.

“I’m still calling the doctor.” He stalks into the bedroom and comes back with his phone on speaker while he waits for the doc to answer. “What do you need for me to pack for you, before I take you to the hospital?”

A moan escapes me. I truly feel awful, but the idea of going to the hospital... when the last time I spent time in one Nicole tried to force us apart. “Please don’t make me go.”

His jaw stiffens as he considers my request.

The doctor picks up. “Hello?”

“Hey, doc. Ivy has a fever. Is that going to hurt the baby?”

“Rogue, we don’t—”

He presses a finger to my lips, his gaze stern as he takes her off speaker and puts the phone to his ear. “Doc, hypothetically, is she going to hurt the baby?”

She must ask him questions because he fires back answers before he nods. “A lukewarm bath then. Tylenol. And sleep. We’ll check in tomorrow.”

When he hangs up, he places his phone on the counter. “I’ll get the Tylenol and run the bath. Are you going to be okay if I leave you for a minute?”

I nod lethargically.

Rogue turns on the water in the bath and then leaves. He comes back with a glass of water and a bottle of pills. Twisting off the cap, he tips two into my hand. “Take them.”

My throat hurts as I swallow the pills with the water. And when I shut my eyes I can still see Alec’s face as he holds up that blade. There was so much hatred in his eyes. It sends a shiver down my spine.

Rogue helps me strip out of my pajamas, then puts a cover over my cast. Looping my arms around his neck, he scoops me up and steps into the huge tub. Arranging my arm with the cast on his shoulder, he holds me as the water gushes

into the tub, soothing the heat from my skin as it slowly covers us.

I settle into his chest and he strokes my hair back from my face. “Is the temperature okay?”

“Mmhmm,” I mumble, my eyes closed. His heart beats strong and steady beneath my cheek and his deep breathing relaxes me even more.

“It’s okay if you fall asleep,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ve got you. No matter what.”

What if I’m pregnant? Has he got me then? Or is he as terrified as I am?

“It’s going to be okay, baby.” He tips my chin gently. His blue eyes are such deep pools. His gaze drops to my midsection and his jaw moves when he swallows. “Whatever it is. Baby, no baby. Whatever is making you sick. It’ll be okay. I will always take care of you.”

“I love you,” I whisper. “Will love you always.”

“Nothing will come between us,” he promises. “Not Nicole. Not your brother. There is nothing that could ever make me stop loving you.”

I choose to believe him. Because I feel the same way.

Everything around us has turned to quicksand, but in his arms I feel loved. I feel safe. And I love him back just as fiercely.

I want to believe that something this right has to be strong enough to survive whatever comes next. That we'll find a way to stop Nicole from tearing us apart. And that we'll find a way to prove she killed my dad.

His chest vibrates as he starts to hum something that sounds a lot like a lullaby.

It's comforting and haunting and nostalgic all at the same time. It stirs up a feeling or a memory or... whatever it is, it stays out of my reach. The harder I push to figure out its familiarity the more my head hurts. "What is that?"

"I don't know." He runs his hand over my hair and water droplets sprinkle over my shoulder, causing goosebumps to form on my bare skin. "I think you might have been humming it earlier. Now rest."

Chapter Ten

Ivy

I wake up feeling better. No trace of fever. No aches and pains. Whatever had gripped me in the middle of the night must have run its course. The only thing lingering are scenes from that awful nightmare. And this twisting in my gut... this feeling that it wasn't all a dream.

Are my memories so close to the surface that they're seeping into my nightmares? Is that possible? I have to assume so. But how am I supposed to work out what is nightmare and what is real?

I push up against the pillows and my brain stutters. Rogue is already out of bed. Half-dressed in gray sweats, he tugs thin, stretchy cotton over his head.

I love the way his shoulders flex as he brings it down his torso. It makes my mouth water and my insides warm. I rub my thighs together and the tiniest amount of friction ignites a need so strong that I moan.

He spins around, eyes full of worry, but then he catches my gaze locked on the front of his sweats and the deepening lines smooth out as he smiles. Prowling over to the bed, he leans down to kiss me. “Feeling better? You look better.”

“A lot better.” I bite my bottom lip as I graze my fingertips along the ridges of his abdomen to the drawstring at his waist. I slip my hand inside his sweats and brush the tip of his cock. “Let’s not waste it.”

He threads one hand through my hair and crushes his mouth to mine in a demanding kiss. “I haven’t had breakfast yet. And I haven’t had your pussy in my mouth in days. If you’re not careful I’ll be eating you for my next meal.”

“Oh God, yes.” I smile against his lips.

“Insatiable minx.” His chuckle vibrates his chest as he pushes me down and yanks me to the edge of the mattress. A hand gripping each knee, he splits my legs and rests them on his shoulders. Lowering his head, he drags his tongue over my pussy.

I whimper at the sweet torture.

“Like that?” His lips vibrate over my clit.

“Yes.” I gasp as he laps at me again, this time digging the tip inside me.

His hands on my waist keep me firmly against his mouth while he eats me in earnest. My fingers dig into his hair, tug at the strands. I grip harder the closer he brings me to climax. It makes him feral. When he bites down on my clit I’m done for. Within seconds I come undone. But he doesn’t let up.

He keeps his mouth glued to me until I’m too sensitive and have to push him away. And when I do, he rips his sweats down and flips me so that my belly is on the edge of the mattress and my pussy is over his cock and then he fucks me slowly. He leaves kisses on my neck and shoulder while he plays with my nipples. Until another orgasm makes my toes curl and my eyes roll back in my head. He makes it last until I’m practically boneless and then he finally lets go, filling me with the warmth of his climax.

His cheek presses to my shoulder as we come down from the high. “I would do anything to spend all my time inside you like this.”

“Me too.” I wrap my hand around his arm when it settles on my waist. For a few minutes it was easy to forget all our problems. Everything we’re up against. When we’re in our

own little bubble it's easy to push away all the fears and doubts about our future.

But the truth is I'm lost, and I think he is too. If we don't find answers soon we might not have much time left to spend like this.

"We should get up. Join the others." He slowly lifts me from his lap and then stands. "Jason is on his way so we can work out my defense."

In case we can't find Marty. Or stop Nicole. And it comes down to a trial. "Are you scared?"

"I'd be a lot more confident if we knew where Marty is." He swallows hard. "But Jason is really good at his job. You need to trust that. As long as we stick together everything is going to be fine."

I'm not sure I believe that. I want to, but if Nicole killed my dad, she's more unstoppable than I thought. "I should get dressed."

"Ivy?" Rogue narrows his gaze on me. He takes my chin in his hand and lifts it until our gazes lock. "Tell me you believe that as much as I do."

I fight the urge to look away. "I believe it."

“Thank God.” He drops a kiss on my lips. “Do you want me to wait for you?”

“You go ahead,” I tell him.

“Okay.” He leaves the room and I take my time in the bathroom, brushing my teeth and hair. Is it just me or is it getting thinner? There are more strands caught in the brush than normal. Is that a symptom of pregnancy too? Something to do with the change in hormones probably.

I turn my attention to my makeup. It’s less about putting on my armour the way it used to be. I don’t need it in the confines of our home, surrounded by friends and family who care about us. It’s more about needing a few minutes to push away my fears and doubts.

I find myself humming as I pick out nude tights and a flirty checked skirt that I pair with a high necked taupe sweater and gray over the knee boots. Humming that same tune that Rogue had last night. For some reason, it settled my jagged nerves then and does the same now. He’d said he picked it up off me.

That didn’t register last night. But then I’d been sick and exhausted. I’m not surprised I passed out again without giving it much thought. I can’t place the tune though. I even

try to hum a few more bars while I latch the clasp on my necklace, but now that I'm thinking about it I've lost it.

Whatever. It doesn't matter. It's probably some jingle from the radio or TV. I collect my phone from the nightstand before I leave the bedroom.

There's a message from Dizzy about how last night was fun. She still feels guilty for scaring the crap out of me with the roses.

It was so weird how she appeared out of thin air. And the way she was standing with her hands out... for a minute I'd thought she'd pushed them to make them fall. I'm the one who has something to feel guilty about. Imagining she did it on purpose when she's one of my closest friends.

I text her back, telling her she doesn't need to feel guilty about anything.

I move on to a message from Adira, who wants to know if I've had any more random hang up calls from my dad's old number. He's spending the day at Mojito because he's craving some normal drama, but will drop everything if I need him.

I crave the queens' level of drama too. It was so much easier than this mess that Rogue and I are in.

I start typing out a message to tell Adira we need to speak, but when I'm done I darken my phone and don't send it. My dad was his biggest supporter. Adira was devastated when he died. And I'm not ready to open up that wound for him again. Not when it feels this awful. Not until we know more.

I slide my phone into the top of my boot before I enter the living room where everyone has gathered. Rebel and Rogue stand like twin statues. Their eyes are wide, jaws formed from granite as the screen shows images of firefighters attending to a burnt out vehicle on a desert highway. There are cops everywhere too.

"...her body was found early this morning when firefighters were called to put out a car blaze on..."

"Oh God." Summer clutches at the pendant around her neck. Her eyes are watery-bright.

Riot drops onto the arm of the sofa and cradles his head between his hands. "It can't be her. It can't be."

“There had to be identifying markers. They’d have to be certain.” Jason’s back is rigid, his arms crossed at his chest.

I move closer to Rogue.

“The woman was burned beyond recognition,” the reporter drones on.

Rogue reaches for me without taking his eyes off the scene on the screen. His movements are stilted, but he hangs onto me like I’m his lifeline.

“What we’ve learned is the car is registered to Hollywood Juice’s beloved celebrity gossip queen, Marty Kendall.” The reporter touches his earpiece as his face falls and he forgets for a second that he’s on air. “Is this accurate? It’s Marty Kendall?” Then he shutters his emotions and straightens his spine. “At this point in time it’s not certain whether the deceased is in fact Marty Kendall. Police are trying to locate her.”

I didn’t know Marty well. Or at least I don’t recall getting to know her. But my heart hurts at the pain I see in the faces surrounding me. She was a good person, who was trying to help us... trying to help me. “She didn’t deserve this.”

“It’s not her.” Rebel shakes his head. His blue eyes are stormy and a little wild. “She was onto that bitch before any of us. She’s too cunning to dig a hole big enough to bury Nicole in without being prepared for the possibility that someone would try to put her in a grave of her own. It’s definitely not her.”

“What if it is?” Rogue says, his voice almost deserting him. “The implications...”

Are too much. If Marty is dead we have nothing. No evidence to our theory. No dirt to paint Nicole with. And what’s to say she won’t find a way to pin this on Rogue too. Make this another way to get me to do what she wants.

Summer lowers herself onto the sofa. “How long do you think it will take them to identify the body?”

“Usually a couple of weeks. But it’s Marty. They won’t want to sit on this,” Jason says. “I suspect we’ll have an answer before the day is over.”

“We have more information.” The reporter clears his throat. His eyes grow glassy. “It’s now been confirmed. The woman has been identified... It’s Marty Kendall.”

Chapter Eleven

Rogue

I place my phone on the bar and pick up the decanter. My hand is shaking so much as I pour several fingers of whiskey into cut glass tumblers that the glossy surface of the bar cart darkens from the drips.

I can barely screw the lid back on the bottle or swallow around the lump in the back of my throat. I thought for sure that she would call by now to set the record straight.

The car blaze, the body.... It's all an elaborate set up to protect her cover. There is no doubt in my mind that she's running around behind the scenes gathering the evidence we need to prove Nicole Hawthorne is as much of a monster, if not more of one, than her son.

Well, almost no doubt. Because that is the only thing that makes sense.

Except she hasn't called to tell us that. Hasn't texted. Hasn't found a way to contact us via fucking Morse code.

Tugging at my collar with my finger, I lift one of the glasses to my lips and knock back the dark liquid. It burns but does nothing to clear the constriction in my chest and throat that won't let me think, let alone say the words that they keep repeating on the news. Marty is gone.

I wasted so much time holding a grudge for what she did to us, and then I put her in danger. The scene that they've shown from a hundred different angles until it's seared into my brain...I did that. I caused that.

Ivy fidgets with the locket around her neck. She curls her fingers around the small trinket again and again as her gaze flits to each of us, interspersed with the images on the TV screen. She's barely spoken since they identified the body.

I'm supposed to comfort her. I'm supposed to walk over there and wrap my arms around her and bring her to my chest. I'm supposed to tell her that none of this is her fault. That I didn't kill Marty and she isn't my reason for doing so. But I can't bring myself to do that when it feels so damn much like my fault.

I take another drink. I would take the risk again if it kept Ivy safe.

This woman holds my entire world in her hands. Possibly carries my child in her belly too. God, that was the last thing I was expecting her to tell me last night.

The timing couldn't be worse. Even if we weren't in the middle of what can only be described as a war, it wouldn't be great timing. We need time, just the two of us, after everything we've been through. But a baby... becoming a dad...giving Ivy the loving family she craves... now that I've had time to get past the shock, yeah, I can imagine that. And I'll do whatever I have to in order to keep it.

But I should have made sure Marty was protected. It was foolish on my part to agree when she told me it would be easier for her to dig unnoticed if she was alone.

“Do you think Nicole did it?” Ivy asks.

“Probably paid someone.” Riot stares at the glass he's cradling between his knees. “Like she did with your dad.”

Some reasoning settles between my teeth, and I lock my jaw on it. Nicole is behind this and somehow I am going to make her pay for taking one of our own.

Even as I think that, though, the full weight of our helplessness pushes down on me. Whatever Marty was

looking into was our only lead. Without her... where do we even begin? Vengeance is a fine idea, but we have to be realistic. All I have are a few documents that Marty emailed me that support her idea that there were pieces missing to the story of Richard Love's death. It's not enough to build a case from. It barely scratches the surface.

"I can't stand it anymore." Rebel flips through the channels but the photo Marty used next to her byline is everywhere. His brow is furrowed as tightly as his jaw as he finally stabs the off button on the remote. "This is bullshit. It can't be her. She's too smart to end up like that."

Summer's eyes are red-rimmed as she tucks herself into his side. Her hand clings protectively to his shoulder. Seeking support as much as offering it. She'd become fast friends with Marty. "But the dental records..."

Riot picks up one of the glasses I poured and carries it to the couch. His focus is glued to his phone. "They're organizing a memorial for her. It's on all the socials."

"She was a celebrity in her own right. In her own way. The public love her," Rebel says. "Her funeral will be a big deal."

Summer sniffles and wipes at her tears as she stands. “I should know the details. It’s my job. I should be on top of it.”

Rebel catches her hand. “Red, she was your friend.”

“I... I can’t just sit here. I need to work.” She covers a sob as she hurries out of the room.

“There will be an investigation.” Jason scoops up a tumbler and takes a drink.

“If it smells like arson and looks like a murder...”

“This could be a good thing.” Jason grimaces as he stares at the dark liquid. “It’s not, of course. But you know what I mean. The investigation. If there’s any proof of wrongdoing... it’s possible it could help us with your case.”

“We don’t even know what they’re going to throw at me yet.” I doubt Nicole will leave anything up to chance though. She’s desperate to sink her claws back into Ivy.

Ivy stares quietly down at her hands, picking at her nails.

“Do you think it will help?” Rebel joins us. “Do you think you can make a damn bit of difference when this

psychotic bitch is killing people we care about to prove a damn point?”

Ivy weaves in place, her hands falling limp. Her chin trembles.

“Stop it,” I snap at my twin, losing eye contact with Ivy to put him in his place. *Now is not the time. You’re scaring the fuck out of her.*

He glares back. *She needs to understand how much danger she’s putting you in.*

She’s traumatized. And she’s my priority.

“You’re doing that telepathic thing again, aren’t you?” Ivy’s shoulders gravitate toward her ears. “Because you think I can’t handle the truth. I’m putting you in danger.”

“Yes,” Rebel says.

“Baby, no.” I stare Rebel down. *It won’t take much more to make her run to Nicole, if she thinks doing so will stop this madness.*

She dashes out of the room, her skirt swishing with the fast pace.

Rebel winces. “That’s not—”

“Oh, hell no.” I won’t let her put a wall up between us. Not now. Not when we need each other more than ever. Ignoring him, I chase after her. I snag her elbow before she gets more than a few steps toward the foyer. “You are staying right here. Right by my side.”

Her eyes shine when she lifts them to my face. Pain and terror war in those pretty orbs. “Rebel’s right, though.”

“No, he isn’t.”

“We both know he is.” Her voice is watery.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say.

“I can’t let you—”

“You don’t have a choice,” I tell her. “I chased you long enough to be able to tell when you think you have no choice but to run. When you think that your only option is to put yourself in harm’s way for the sake of others. But that’s not happening this time. You are not facing off with your family.”

She brings a shaky hand to her forehead. Her voice is choked. “Marty died because of me. And we both know Nicole won’t stop there. But if I do what she says—”

“I understand how guilty you feel over Marty. I feel it too. But Nicole is the only one responsible for her death. Giving in to her isn’t going to bring Marty back. And it’s not going to save me.” Jaw tight, I press her palm to my heart. It beats only for her. Has since the first time I locked eyes on her that day I was shot and she helped me escape. How different things were back then. The only danger I had to worry about was getting close to the wrong women, and my biggest fear was falling for the mysterious girl in a princess costume. “You need to understand that you’re what I care about. No matter what she throws at us, I can only face it as long as I know that you are free of her.”

She steps back. “She wouldn’t hurt me.”

“Yes, she would.” My jaw bunches as I stare over her head. I don’t want to think about it and I don’t want to scare her but she has to be aware... “She absolutely would. If you do what she says and she gets what she wants... then you’re no longer worth anything to her.”

“I could end up like my dad.” She blanches. “That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

“That’s my biggest fear.” I already know what it feels like to lose her. Watching her bleed out almost broke me. I

can't let her get hurt again. "The only way out of this is to bring her down. Together."

"So then what do we do?"

"We keep working the angle Marty was working. She had to be close to getting the answers we need. Otherwise Nicole wouldn't have risked so much public awareness. I just wish I knew what her next move was after she met with the man who killed..."

"My dad." Ivy's shoulders slump. The ache in her eyes becomes even deeper.

"Right." Knowing how he really died is causing her grief to well to the surface. I hate that no matter what happens she has to hurt. "Do you want me to tell Adira?"

She shakes her head. "It should come from me. I just hoped I'd have more information first. But now... I'll tell him today. And I'd... I'd like to visit my dad's grave too. Do you think that's possible?"

I press my lips to her temple. "We'll make it possible."

Ivy startles when someone clears their throat behind me. I glance over my shoulder. I have no idea how long

Rebel's been standing there without interrupting. "What?"

He holds up my phone. I must have left it on the bar.

"Doc wants to talk to Ivy about her test results."

Chapter Twelve

Rogue

Ivy's breath sharpens and she turns pale while she stares at my phone like it could grow legs and fangs at any moment. Her hands automatically move to rub at her upper arms. "Now?"

I lift the device to my ear. "Hey, doc, could you please give us a minute?"

"Sure," the doctor says. "Let me know when you're ready."

"Bro?" I glance at my twin, whose feet seem to be stuck, as I put the call on mute. *I know not much is, but this is private.*

"Yeah." He walks away.

Phone to my shoulder, I take Ivy's arm and usher her into our bedroom. "You're freaking out."

"What if I'm pregnant?" She covers her mouth with her hand and talks through her fingers. "What if she's about to tell us there's a baby?"

My heart is thudding hard against my ribcage. “I’d be lying if I didn’t say I’m freaking the fuck out too.”

She whimpers against her palm. “You don’t want it.”

“I’m not scared because there could be a baby. That’s not my fear.” I grip her elbow and tug her to me. Cupping her neck with my hand, I brush a thumb along her jaw. “I could never regret starting a family with you.”

“But the timing couldn’t be worse,” she whispers.

“No.” I let out a heavy breath. “It couldn’t. And that is what worries me. How am I going to protect you and our child? How do I keep you safe when I might be ripped away from you?”

“I hate this.” She squeezes her eyes shut and a tear drips from the corner of her lashes.

“Me too.” But I will do whatever it takes to keep my family safe. I rest my forehead against hers. “I promise you, no matter what, I’ll protect you both.”

She swallows wetly. “I better talk to the doctor.”

“I’ll put it on speaker phone,” I tell her as I press the button to take it off mute and hand over the device.

“Hi, doctor.” Ivy rubs her lips together. “We’re ready.”

“There’s been a slight hiccup.” There’s irritation in her tone. “We had an issue with processing the test results.”

“What do you mean there was an issue?” I growl.

“I just got off the phone with the lab. There was a quality control issue,” the doc says. “Most of your tests weren’t affected, Ivy. But, unfortunately, the test to tell us if you are pregnant was.”

“So we don’t know?” Ivy glances up at me. The lines above her nose deepen as she tucks the edge of her thumbnail between her teeth and then thinks better of it.

There’s a weird sense of urgency in my chest. “Do we need to do another blood test or…”

“I’ll pee on a stick,” Ivy says.

“A home test will be fine,” the doctor agrees. “You can pick one up at a pharmacy. DoorDash delivers them. Any type will do.”

“And if I’m not pregnant?” Ivy asks, moving away from me to stand in front of the windows.

“From what tests we were able to run, nothing else showed up,” the doctor says. “Are you feeling better today?”

“So much better, physically,” Ivy says. “The fever broke and I got a good night’s sleep.”

“And there’ve been no more fainting spells?” the doc asks.

“No, nothing like that,” Ivy says.

“As long as you’re feeling better there’s probably no reason to run more tests,” the doctor says. “And no matter what the result of the pregnancy test is I suggest you keep resting and hydrating.”

“I can do that.” Ivy hangs up as I walk over to her.

She sinks against my chest. “That was...”

“At least nothing worrying showed up.” I pocket my phone when Ivy hands it to me over her shoulder. Her gaze stays locked on the view outside and an awkward silence follows.

My tongue seems to thicken in my mouth. That was not the phone call we were expecting and not knowing is its own special brand of purgatory. Part of me desperately hopes I’m going to be a dad. Part of me is terrified that if it’s positive I’ll end up being like my own father. Absent from my child’s

life. The idea that I won't be able to protect Ivy and our baby is a weight on my chest.

“Are you okay?” Ivy asks.

“I am if you are.” I massage the back of her neck. “I'll get my assistant to run over a test.”

“Isn't she on vacation?” Ivy reminds me. “After the screening, she said she wanted time off. You told her to take six months on you.”

“Well, I'm a generous boss.” It seemed pertinent to give her time off with everything going on in my personal life. But six months?

“You were distracted.” Ivy giggles.

“I'll just DoorDash it then.” I pull out my phone to order a test along with several boxes of Pop-Tarts and a few brands of prenatal vitamins, before I decide that's a terrible fucking idea. The last thing we need is some random delivery person cluing in on Ivy's state.

“You were serious when you said you'd take me to see my dad's grave?” Ivy asks.

“Yes, but...” I'm about to say getting a test is more important, but we could kill two birds with one stone. “I'll get

Jackson to swing by the pharmacy while we're out."

She brushes past me. "Let me grab my purse."

I stand there awkwardly, my gaze glued to her as she flits about the bedroom like she isn't on tenterhooks like I am, and I can't work out whether she hopes she is or isn't pregnant. A funny little vision pops into my head...

Ivy holding our baby. A girl. Or a boy, even though another Maddox boy is just asking for trouble. With her chestnut hair and my blue eyes. Surrounded by the love of her uncles and aunt and drag aunty.

"Rogue?"

Considering how out of reach that future has felt recently, I want to grab onto the idea with both hands. "Huh?"

She has a hand on her hip. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah." I shove my doubts and hopes to the back of my mind as I follow her into the foyer.

"I'll message Adira on the way," she tells me as I help her into her coat, tugging the sleeve up over her cast.

"Okay."

"It's drizzling out," Jackson tells us.

“Fitting,” Ivy murmurs.

I collect a couple of umbrellas before we leave the apartment. The ride down to the garage is done in silence. Ivy seems lost in thought.

When we climb into the back of the Range Rover she slides all the way across the seat, instead of staying close like she normally would. Perhaps it's fear that has her putting off the test. Or she doesn't want to see two blue lines. I tried to reassure her, but what if I haven't?

“Baby, what's going on in that pretty head of yours?”

Her eyes sparkle and she turns to the window before swinging quickly back when she realizes we're about to exit the garage. “Sorry. Visiting my dad is making me emotional.”

“You're sure you're not upset about the possibility of having a baby?” I lean forward between the seats and tap Jackson on the shoulder. “I'm going to need you to stop and grab a pregnancy test.”

Jackson stiffens in the front seat. “Yes, Mr. Maddox.”

“And Jackson, this doesn't go any further than the three of us.”

Chapter Thirteen

Ivy

The drizzle has steadily gotten heavier since we left the apartment. Umbrella over my head, I stand at the foot of my dad's grave. Alone.

Of course it would rain today, when it barely ever does. The gray skies suit the mood I've been in since the doctor called with my test results. Or lack thereof, I suppose.

Rogue and Jackson stand a few yards away. Close enough to protect me. Far enough away that I have some privacy for when I find the words I want to say to my dad. Privacy I desperately need with the way Rogue keeps checking in with me.

I turn the rock on my finger around and around. He's only loving me. I know that. But his concern is too much right now. I feel like I'm suffocating under the weight of everything that's happening to us. It makes me want to scream. Add to this the realization that I could be pregnant...

“I didn’t even want a baby, Daddy.” I can’t believe these are the first words out of my mouth to him, but they are. It’s like an avalanche has been set off inside me since the doctor suggested I could be pregnant. “Not now anyway. Not when I just found out that Nicole paid someone to kill you. And I don’t know if Rogue and I have any kind of future where we get to be together. The timing is just so bad. So why am I hoping that I’m having Rogue’s baby? And why am I crying about it like it’s breaking my heart?”

I kneel in the damp grass. Touch the earth with my fingertips. “You died and I didn’t know if I could ever recover from that, you know? It took medical intervention and a lot of therapy. Although I’m not entirely sure I would have gotten that bad without Alec’s help. Did you know he was a monster? Did you realize how much he hurt me as a child? Did you have any clue that every time you told me to keep the peace you were condemning me?”

The silence is painful. He can’t have been a monster too or what hope is there for me? I can only hope that he didn’t know what all went on when he wasn’t around. Because otherwise everything I knew about him was a lie, and I can’t face yet another piece of my life crumbling right now. I need

my dad to have been a good man. Even if that good man failed when I needed him most.

“You could have taught me to stand up for myself. To fight for the things that matter to me. Instead you left me alone to work it out for myself. And I am drowning. All these things keep happening to me and I feel so powerless. I don’t even know who I am. How can I want a baby when I don’t know who I am? How can I be so sad about the chance that we might not be starting a family when ours are so screwed up?”

“Because our family won’t be screwed up, baby.” Rogue touches my shoulder. I didn’t realize he’d moved until he spoke, but his touch brings me comfort. I find myself grateful for less distance. “Whether that’s now or later. It will be full of the happiness and love that we share.”

And that love and happiness is what I crave. The safety I feel with Rogue... the warmth and comfort...it’s everything to me. I want to spend the rest of my life surrounded by it.

I straighten and brush off my knees. “It feels like it’s slipping through our fingers. Like it’s only a matter of time before it will be nothing but the ashes of a memory.”

And I don’t know how to make it stop.

“We won’t let that happen.” He wraps his arms around my shoulders and kisses the top of my head. Tiny raindrops cling to his hair and eyebrows and coat.

I want to believe he’s right as I hand him the umbrella to hold over both of us. I stare at my dad’s headstone. My brow wrinkles as the sense that I’ve been here recently rolls over me. But it’s been a year and a half. Maybe more. So why is it that I’m having *déjà vu*? “He had to have an inkling that something was wrong before he went on that trip.”

“What makes you say that?” Rogue’s warmth seeps into my back.

“He didn’t just make me promise to be good. He made me promise not to get on my mother’s bad side. He told me he was sorry for not taking my side more often, but then he doubled down on making sure I didn’t make her angry.”

“It sounds like he wanted to protect you,” he says.

“He could have taken me with him.” I’m glad he didn’t because if he had I would be next to him in the cemetery and not standing here with the man who owns my heart. But part of me still wishes my dad had whisked me away and protected me from having to go through all this pain and heartache.

“Unless he knew he was going to die,” Rogue says.

My heart squeezes. I try to recall my dad’s face the last time I saw him, but time and trauma has muddied the details of his expression and the tone of his voice. “Do you think he did?”

“Perhaps.”

“What I don’t understand is why he didn’t warn me,” I say. “If he didn’t take me with him because he thought there was a chance he was going to die, then why didn’t he warn me about her?”

Jackson clears his throat, interrupting us. “Someone is approaching.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rogue

Nicole Hawthorne strides across the lawn toward us in a chic, black pantsuit and killer heels. A white coat hangs about her shoulders and her hair is pulled back in a classic chignon. As usual her makeup is flawless and there is a string of pearls around her neck.

Nathaniel Croft, that asshole lawyer, walks beside her, holding an umbrella over her head, leaving the rain to darken the lapels on his navy Tom Ford suit.

My grip on Ivy tightens. “What the fuck are they doing here?”

Ivy averts her eyes as she touches her hair. That look explains more to me than I wanted to know. “Tell me you didn’t know she would show up here?”

“I didn’t.” She draws those two words out far too hard to be innocent. “But I suspected she might.”

Now that I think about it, I would be unsurprised if Nicole has someone watching the cemetery. She probably paid

the caretaker to tell her if Ivy showed up. I take Ivy's hand and tug her toward the car. "We're leaving."

"I can't." Ivy digs her heels into the sodden grass.

"The fuck you can't," I growl. We never should have come. If I'd realized... I would have vetoed this trip immediately.

She slips her hand free of mine. "I need this."

That stops me in my tracks. "You wanted to see her?"

"I need to look her in the eye and see if there is any part of her that feels guilty over killing my dad." Her voice is laden with emotion.

Well shit... she needs this like therapy. Like closure...

Jackson takes a step in our direction, his hand twitching near the hip where his gun is holstered.

She needs this parlay with Nicole. Who am I to say no to that? I gesture at the bodyguard to stay where he is. "Five minutes. That's all."

"That's all I need." Ivy turns to face her mother.

"Did you come to your senses, my wayward daughter?" Nicole glares at me over Ivy's shoulder before

turning her glacial gaze on her daughter. “Perhaps you found your family loyalty?”

I don’t like her tone or the way she looks down her nose at Ivy. It raises my blood pressure and makes me want to change my mind. The only reason I don’t is because the woman will never get this close to Ivy again. I will make sure of it.

“My loyalty is to Rogue.” My brave girl trembles as she steps out of the safety of my arms. Without her to hold onto it’s a fight to keep my hands loose at my sides. “He’s more my family than you have ever been.”

“You ungrateful little brat.” Nicole’s tone turns chilled. “After everything I’ve done for you. All I’ve given you...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Jackson is getting itchy. His posture is rigid with tension ready to be unleashed at a second’s notice.

Nicole sighs dramatically. “Your father would be so disappointed in you turning down the arrangement he made for you.”

“What?” Ivy gasps.

“What arrangement?” I demand.

“The one he made with Nathaniel for her hand.”
Nicole smiles smugly. Her cruel eyes gleam. “It was in his will.”

Ivy presses a hand to her chest, her fingers splayed across her breastbone. Her voice turns to a whisper. “I don’t believe you.”

“If you had paid any attention, instead of wallowing in self-pity—”

“I was grieving,” Ivy cries. “I was depressed. I’d just lost my daddy.”

“If you had paid attention,” Nicole repeats, “you would have known...” She raises her voice and gestures at the prick, “...that it was your father who approached Nathaniel about taking you as his wife.”

“You’re lying.” Ivy shakes her head and takes a step back.

Jackson mirrors her, moving closer.

“T-there’s no way my dad would do s-something so awful or c-controlling.” Ivy clutches at herself, but she doesn’t

shrink or go quiet. “You’re a liar. And a murderer. Y-you killed my father and now you expect me to believe your lies.”

“How dare you talk to me like that.” Nicole presses her hand to her chest and has the nerve to look affronted. “I loved that man very much. I could never have hurt Richard.”

How dare Ivy? If it weren’t for Ivy telling me she needed this... this conversation would be so fucking over.

“No, you just p-paid someone else to kill him.” Ivy sobs.

Nicole raises an eyebrow. “These allegations you’re making are foolish. He’s filling your head with such ridiculous theories.”

“Truths,” I grind out between my teeth. “And Ivy knows it.”

Nicole’s mouth tightens, but she ignores me, focusing on Ivy instead. “Can’t you see that he’s trying to come between us? All I want is the best for you. It’s what your daddy wanted for you too.”

“Ivy, I can show you the agreement.” Nathaniel takes out his phone and starts looking for something. “I have a copy of it right here. He signed it.”

“What?” She stares at the document on his screen.

“No doubt it’s fake.” I cross my arms over my chest, burying my fists in my armpits while I glare at what looks like an official document. But shit like that can still be fraudulent, and from everything that Ivy has told me about her dad, there’s no way he would do that to her.

“The original is in the drawer in my desk.” Nathaniel speaks so softly, it’s almost like he actually cares about Ivy. But if he does, he has a fucked up way of showing it. He extends a hand to her. “Let me show you.”

“Touch her and I will rip your fucking arm off,” I snarl at him.

Nathaniel blinks rapidly then slowly withdraws his hand.

“My dad would never have made that deal.” Ivy steps back. “He wouldn’t.”

The stupid bastard doesn’t give up. “It’s real, Ivy. Just come to my office...”

I wrap a hand around her elbow. “They’re trying to hurt you. Trying to confuse you. Don’t let them.”

“You have no idea what you’re meddling in, you selfish prick.” Nicole’s ice queen pretense starts to slip.

“Are you good, baby?” I bring Ivy’s back to my chest. I want to whisk her out of here, but unless she gives me a signal, I have to trust that she is tough enough to handle this.

“I’m good.” She straightens and lifts her chin. My strong girl can handle anything, but she shouldn’t have to be subject to such cruelty. “I’m finished here, actually.”

“Let’s go home then.” I take her hand and lead her away from them.

“She’s my daughter.” Nicole marches after us. “And you’re just an unfortunate entanglement that she’ll be free of shortly.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I spin around, bringing Ivy tight to my side. I’m so sick of this bitch thinking she has some right to Ivy’s life. “You, on the other hand, are running out of time.”

“Don’t threaten me, Mr Maddox.” Her eyes flash.

“I’m not. You killed Richard Love. And I am going to make sure everyone knows it. By the time I’m done you won’t be able to get anywhere near us.”

Nicole smiles as she runs her fingers over the pearls at her throat. “When do you plan to have time to do that? When you’re behind bars? Because that’s your future if you keep holding my daughter back from fulfilling the arrangement her daddy made for her.”

“The fuck that’s happening,” I snarl.

“Rogue, don’t.” Ivy clings to me. “I’m not going to do what you want, Mother. It’s over. Let me go.”

Nicole shakes her head at Ivy like she’s a wayward child. “Nathaniel, talk to her. Make her see sense. I am running out of patience.”

Nathaniel takes a step forward.

“Stay the fuck away from her.” I block him, shifting Ivy protectively behind me. “Do you hear me, you fucking creep?”

“Ivy...” Nathaniel’s gaze seeks her out. He holds out his hands, palms up. “Be smart. Mark Anders is dead. If we have to we’ll use that to separate you two. And trust me when I say the case will be airtight. Agree to the proposal now and your lover goes free. Can you really live with sentencing him to a lifetime behind bars? Or worse?”

Ivy yelps. “Oh my God. You can’t—”

“Did you just threaten me?” Ice in my veins, I snarl at him.

“You won’t get to be together.” He ignores me as well as Jackson, who is moving closer, to continue pleading with Ivy. “I know that you don’t want to hear that, and I’m sorry it hurts you. But it’s the way it has to be. But, Ivy, I promise, I will do whatever it takes to make you happy again. I made your dad a promise and I will keep it.”

I’m this close to losing my damn mind and letting my fists do the talking. It’s only because Ivy’s clammy hand is gripping mine, and the fact that they’ll use it against me and Ivy if I do anything, that keeps me from lashing out. “Don’t listen to them, baby. You can’t trust anything they say.”

“Too many people have died already for me not to take them seriously. My dad. Marty. Mark Anders. I can’t let you be another casualty. I won’t let you die.” Ivy turns to her mother. “If I do what you want... you won’t hurt him?”

“I won’t hurt him,” Nicole says.

She glances up at me, her eyes full of emotion. “You’ll let him live his life as though he never met me?”

“I can’t... I won’t...” Does she not get that’s not possible? She is everything to me. The sun, the moon, the fucking stars in the sky. The air I breathe and the blood that pumps through this organ in my chest. I will never ever move on... not without her, not from her.

“I will forget Rogue Maddox ever existed,” Nicole promises.

“She’s lying.” I plead with Ivy to understand. She can’t believe a word that comes out of this woman’s mouth. And even if she can... we’ll fight it.

Ivy licks her lips and swallows. “You promise?”

“No, baby.” It’s not happening. I won’t let this happen.

Nicole sighs. “I promise.”

“I need time.” Ivy’s voice brims with pain.

“If you think dragging your feet is going to change the outcome you’re mistaken,” Nicole says without a hint of emotion. “I’ve agreed to your conditions. Now you’ll do what’s expected of you.”

“Give her a day. Or two,” Nathaniel tells Nicole, his gaze on Ivy, full of sympathy that doesn’t make sense. Except

for the fact that he seems to be fond of her. Perhaps even actually thinks he is in love with her.

He probably spent years grooming her for the role he imagined her in. Possibly right under her father's nose while coating it in being a good business associate and friend.

Of course he thinks he's in love with her. But he doesn't even know her. He doesn't see the real—the talented and caring and brave, sometimes ridiculously innocent, sometimes bratty deviant—person that I do. The woman who shines so brightly when she's out from under her mother's control. The woman I could not help but fall in love with.

He only sees the beautiful shell he hopes to manipulate into loving him.

I will never let that happen.

“Five days,” Ivy argues. It's still plenty of time. You're asking for my future. Let me say goodbye to my past properly.”

“Over my dead body.” I turn on my wife-to-be. “All this is bullshit. Not happening. Let them come at me. Just don't let them tear us apart.”

“We can do that, can’t we, Nicole?” Nathaniel asks, but it’s no question. “That’s still a week until her birthday.”

Nicole rolls her eyes. Her hands flutter at her hips. “Fine. Five days, but no more.”

“Thank you,” Ivy says.

Five days to find a way to put a stop to this crazy or to say goodbye to her? It’s not enough time. No amount of time will ever be enough.

“You can’t have her,” I snarl as Nicole comes to stand right in front of us. “You won’t come between us. We will work out what you’re hiding. We will prove you killed Ivy’s dad.”

She slips her fingers from one glove and touches Ivy’s face in a gesture that would be warm if she were anyone else. Her voice is barely a murmur as she brushes a damp tendril away from Ivy’s cheek. “Ivy, my darling, if you do not come to me in five days of your own volition, I will make you. And I will have you institutionalized after the wedding. Do you understand?”

“I’ll ask you to take your hand off Miss Love now,” Jackson orders, flashing his weapon before I can raise a hand

to the psychotic bitch.

She removes her hand. “Nathaniel doesn’t want that. He wants to look after you. He cares about you. But I have the power to make sure you never see the sun again. So don’t disappoint him, hmm?”

Ivy shudders.

“That’s enough,” I say frostily.

Nicole offers a pert smile as she tugs on her glove. She walks away, leaving Ivy trembling beside me.

Nathaniel falls into step beside her, but she hesitates and turns back to us. Smiles. “And whatever you’re doing that’s making you look so gaunt... keep it up, so you’ll fit in the Oscar de la Ranta gown I bought you. It will fit you perfectly. The photo spread will be gorgeous.”

Chapter Fifteen

Ivy

I stand mute and immobile as my mother leaves. With Rogue at my back, I watch her cross the sweeping lawn to a black town car.

Nathaniel opens the door and she disappears inside without another glance.

How could I have been so blind for so long to how vicious she is? But it's *my* reaction that scares me. A visceral, graphic desire to physically make her bleed keeps me as still as a statue.

"Let's go." Rogue's jaw is a study in tension. His blue eyes are burning with coldness.

"We didn't have any other choice." I try to reason with him. "Not while we have no way of proving Nicole is a monster and a murderer."

"Fuck." He bellows and lifts me off my feet.

Jackson meets us at the car. He holds the door open.

I'm dropped into the back of the car.

"Rogue—"

His jaw bulges. His eyes flare. "Stay."

"You can't—" The door shuts in my face.

He rests his hands on the roof as he takes deep breaths. I watch his chest move through the window.

I flinch when he brings his hands down on the roof. At the roar that follows. He spins away from the vehicle, his shoulders heaving. His hands are bunched into tight balls at his sides.

I scoot back across the leather when he turns and attacks the back panel again and again. Each blow lands with a bang and I cover the sound that tries to escape with a hand to my mouth. Not because I'm scared of him, but because I'm the reason he's lost control.

The helplessness he's feeling, I feel it too. We're careening toward a loss neither of us will ever recover from and there doesn't seem to be any way to fix it.

When even my own father wanted me to marry Nathaniel... then perhaps it's time to stop fighting the

inevitable. There must have been a reason my dad wanted the arrangement. I have to believe he did it out of my best interest. Perhaps even to protect me from my mother.

He had to have known his time was short. That she would win.

If he couldn't survive when he knew more about her motives than I do, what hope is there for Rogue and me?

The blows slow and then stop. His head hangs between the mountains of his shoulders, rising and falling with his breaths.

Jackson climbs in the front. "Are you all right, Ivy?"

"Yes," I whisper as my tears stain my face. At least in the way he's asking, I am. I'm not scared of Rogue's fury. It isn't directed at me. I know he would never hurt me.

My beautiful, sweet man lifts tormented blue eyes to mine.

I press my palm to the window. "I'm sorry."

I'm sorry I can't see any other way. I'm sorry I won't let him give up his life for mine. When the time comes, I will do what it takes to make sure he doesn't pay too much for loving me. Doesn't pay with his soul for trying to protect me.

His face contorts in pain. He shakes his head and opens the door. "Jackson, get out. Take a walk."

Jackson scrambles to give us privacy as Rogue shuts us in together. He can't flatten his hands as he places them on his knees. His knuckles are grazed.

For a moment he looks anywhere but at me.

I hate how much I've hurt him. I hate myself for putting him in this position. "Rogue, we need a plan."

Slowly, he glances up at me. His eyes are flooded with pain and hurt, love... the world disappears.

Suddenly I'm in his lap, my knees sinking into the supple leather on either side of his hips.

Our lips crash and cling. Our tongues slide against one another as we tear at each other's clothes. Shoving up my skirt, he rips a hole in the seam of my tights while I undo his jeans and wrap my hand around his cock.

"I will fucking hire a hitman, baby. If that's what it takes." He grips my hips as I tug my panties to the side. Lifting me up, he brings me down on his hard cock in one thrust. "I will fight fire with fire and I will pay someone to take that bitch out before I ever let her marry you off to that

creepy fucking prick. Or let her lock you up. How's that for a plan?"

"If that's what it takes to be with you." I moan as I wrap my arms around his neck. His words, which should be horrifying, turn me on. I savor the pain from his fingers digging into my flesh. Moan again when he yanks me down so hard on him.

"Good." He fucks me hard. Bottoming out again and again. As though he needs to be as deep inside me as possible. "Because I am not ever letting you go."

"I don't want you to." I need his desperation and the pain that comes with it. I need him to love me with every piece of his soul. I memorize this moment. Every touch and sound and scent. Revel in it. Let it consume me until it shatters me.

His lips steal my cries as my orgasm rolls through me. He holds my hips down as he follow, pumping a couple more times as he spills inside me.

Even when he's done, he doesn't let me up. He holds me on his lap with his cock buried inside me. "I mean it, Ivy. You're not giving her what she wants. You're not going to give them you or my child. Forget the deal you just made. It's not happening."

“I can’t let them hurt you.” And we don’t even know if I’m pregnant.

“I will die before I let you marry him.” He tips my chin up so I am confronted by the agony in his eyes. “That’s how much you mean to me.”

“Why do you think I had to agree? We know she killed my dad. And Marty. And Mark Anders. We can’t prove it yet. We can’t stop her. And I couldn’t live with myself—”

“That’s not going to happen.” He presses his forehead to mine.

He catches my hand and holds it against his chest. Stares at me in a way that breaks me wide open. He’s always had that ability to see me for who I truly am. See my emotions, my hopes, my fears.

How much I love him. I can’t lose him like that. I won’t survive it. “I had no choice but to play along. Until we come up with a plan, I need to look like I’m succumbing to her wishes.”

“I hate it,” he says.

“I know.” I hate it too. But we’re talking about his life. And while Nicole seemed content with torturing me into doing

what she wants, Nathaniel's threat made it clear that she's determined to get what she wants no matter the cost. "I should straighten up, before Jackson comes back."

"You're not going anywhere," he says.

"But..." I push at his chest.

"Be still." He wraps his fingers gently around my wrist and holds me trapped. "I'm having an epiphany."

"Oh my God, it was an orgasm," I retort. "And you are not knocking me up if I'm not already pregnant, do you hear me?"

He chuckles. The sound reverberates in his chest. It brings a sense of lightness that we'd lost. "I would never."

"I'm not buying it." I wiggle off his lap and fix my clothes.

"I want a family with you, Ivy. I want to watch you grow round with my child. And I want our home to be full of all the things you wanted growing up. The love and family you deserve. Is that so wrong of me?" He fixes his pants and then texts Jackson. "But, if you are not pregnant, which I highly doubt because we sure as hell have given it our best game,

then I will wait until you come to me with your birth control in hand and tell me it's time to toss it in the trash.”

With everything feeling like it's happening to me and my response is inconsequential, his putting the choice in my hands means so very much. If we weren't fighting a bitter war with my mother, I might be inclined to hand the pills over right here and now, but until there's a future to plan for, I can't make decisions like that. I have to focus on protecting what I already have. “Then what?”

“I was thinking that—”

My phone rings.

Rogue slides it from my boot and hands it to me.

“It's Adira.”

“Take it,” he says as Jackson climbs into the car.

“Hey.” I fidget with the hem of my skirt as I answer the video call.

“I'm still at Mojito.” Behind my bestie, the dressing room is a bustling hive of activity. “I can't get away. Do you want to meet me here? Or do you want me to come over after the club closes?”

The conversation we need to have is going to be a hard one. I'm not sure how he'll take it. But I can't put it off. Not when we only have five days up our sleeve. "We'll come to you."

After a quick detour to pick up a pregnancy test, we arrive to find Mojito closed. One of the queens unlocks the door and we slip into the main room where the waitstaff are prepping tables and restocking the bar. The club won't open until later this afternoon and by then it will be magical as it always is.

We follow the sound of laughter and witty jibes that are being tossed back and forth in the crowded dressing rooms. God, I miss this place. It feels like so long since we've been here but it's only been weeks. Before I got so sick. When I still believed Rogue and I were already married.

"There's our bride-to-be," Magnolia Clitterbean announces when he sees me. He exaggerates a wink with his sky high faux lashes. "And our hunka hunka burning love."

"Hey." Rogue acknowledges them with a nod.

"I don't know whether you're channelling Elvis or gonorrhoea." Adira elbows Magnolia in the ribs on his way to us. "You said you needed to talk."

I glance down the hallway toward his dressing room.
“It’s kind of private.”

“Ah, so it is gonorrhoea,” Ivanna Bey Yulava says.

“They’re in fine form today.” Adira shakes his head as he wraps his arm around my shoulder and escorts us toward his private room. “I heard about your friend. I’m so sorry. Are they looking at it as suspect, do you know?”

“They haven’t said either way,” Rogue says. “But we know better.”

“Oh really?” Adira’s voice lowers as his gaze ping pongs between us.

“This isn’t the kind of conversation we want overheard.” I indicate the room in front of us.

“In we go then.” Adira herds us inside.

Once we’re enclosed in his dressing room, racks upon racks of costumes surrounding us on three sides, Adira sits on the stool in front of his favorite makeup station. “Want to fill me in? I’m assuming this Marty news is what couldn’t wait?”

I pluck at the bottom of my sweater sleeve as Rogue leans against the other vanity. He looks so good there. Edible,

with his hip wide stance and his fingers wrapped around the edge of the table. Under other circumstances...

My Rapunzel wig flows down my back to my heels. It's full of tiny flowers. And he is looking at me like he isn't sure whether to believe his eyes as I get on my knees in front of him.

"Princess? Uma?" He grips onto the edge of the vanity until his knuckles turn white. "Are you sure?"

My reaction is visceral. My mouth waters and my nipples tighten.

"Ivy?" Rogue's eyes are narrowed, as though he's confused.

If that was a fantasy... why Rapunzel? Why not The Little Mermaid? Wait. What? No. Why? Why is that who I think of? I'm a bunny through and through. Unless... did that really happen? I gasp as my knees buckle and I almost fall into a costume rack.

Rogue leaps up and grabs my waist. "Are you okay?"

It felt so... "Uh-huh."

He presses his palm to my forehead. "You sure?"

“You looked like you were going to pass dead away,” Adira says.

“I’m fine.” I grip Rogue’s forearm to steady myself. The imagery was so vivid. Could it have been a memory? “Seriously.”

“Is that why you have a death grip on my arm?” He peers into my eyes like he’s looking for answers. “Let me take you home.”

I drop my hand to my side. “Not until we tell Adira everything.”

Adira raises an eyebrow. “That sounds dire. And considering the hell we’ve been through these last few days...”

“It’s worse.”

“So go on then.” He rests an elbow on the surface behind him. “You better lay it on me. There is no point in drawing it out.”

“Nicole killed my dad.” Each time I say it it’s like reopening the wound.

Adira stiffens, his hand flying to his throat.

“She paid the man who caused the accident,” I continue. I just want to get this over with.

Adira frowns and his hand slips to his lap, his fingers twining. “That’s some allegation. Do you have proof?”

“I...” I thought he would believe me when I told him. That he would see the truth as clearly as I do. “You don’t believe she would?”

“Nicole is as vicious and cold as they come. She had to be to birth your brother, that devil spawn.” He leans forward. “So yes, I believe she could and would do it. But a car accident... that’s not a bullet. Or a disappearance. Especially when the man who caused it is doing time. It’s an accident and even if it were caused on purpose there’s no guarantee on the end result.”

I gape at him.

“What?” He wipes a palm over his short skirt. “I like crime shows. And I know things about cars. Every queen should.”

“So you think Ivy’s dad’s death might not have been the end result Nicole was looking for?” Rogue nods, deep in thought.

“There’s airbags, and crumple zones, and anti-locking brake systems,” Adira says, rattling off safety-features. “It’s a big risk for something that isn’t guaranteed. It’s certainly not how I would choose to do it.”

Rogue moves to one of the racks. He starts flicking through the costumes without paying any attention to them. “Perhaps she didn’t need to kill Richard. Or even mean to kill him. If it is about money...”

“Then making sure he couldn’t leave her would have been enough.” And that’s worse. Did she hope he wouldn’t come home? Or that he would come home a broken, crippled man unable to fend for himself? Would she have tried again if it didn’t go as planned or would she have made his life a living hell?

“But when he died that worked too. She still had you under her control,” Rogue says. “She had access to the money either way. You were going along with her plan to marry you off to that bastard in whatever deal they worked out between them. Until you ended up at Sunny.”

“I only ended up at Sunny because Alec saved me from drowning. And I’m not even sure that’s true anymore,” I say. My memory is too unreliable. Not just the months I lost

with Rogue, but before that. The past is like a photograph with holes burned into the most important visual cues. There are too many pieces missing for me to be sure what's real and what's not. "But we also have no proof that Nicole's motivation is the cash."

Adira tilts his head. "From what I understand she had plenty of her own money. Although I suppose that could have been hearsay. It's not like either of us had intimate knowledge of your parents' finances, other than Nicole made such a big deal of taking away the trust fund she had set up for you when you came to stay with me instead of going to live with her."

"What if that trust fund is a lie?" Rogue asks.

I shake my head. "I saw the paperwork. Both Alec and I have one. He was granted access to his years ago. And this is all conjecture without anything to back it up."

"What we really need to know is what your dad was doing in Phoenix," Rogue says. "He must have been there for a reason."

"It was a business... trip." I stumble over the reasoning he gave me before he left. Right before he also made me promise not to get on Nicole's bad side. "But now I don't know. He also, possibly, signed a contract with Nathaniel

for my hand in marriage. Something I would never have imagined he'd do."

"He did what?" Adira gapes at me.

"I still think it's bullshit," Rogue says.

"What do you think?" I turn to my bestie. If I can trust anyone to know, it's him. "Could my dad do that?"

"I wish I knew, Love." Adira frowns. "He was as likely to do that as he was to do business in Phoenix, but it certainly looked like a business trip on the books."

"Marty seemed to think there might have been more to it. That was right before we lost touch," Rogue says.

"So he could have been there for some other reason then." But what? I turn to Adira. "He didn't mention anything to you?"

"Not that I can recall." Adira rubs his temple. "But thinking back, he was off that week. I must have disregarded it because it was the same week I opened the club, and I was positively overwhelmed with preparing for it. I wish I'd been more aware."

"We didn't know." I hug my bestie, try to ease the guilt I see on his face. "Not about Nicole or the deal with

Nathaniel. Or... that he wouldn't come back. But we need to work out why."

"There has to be some way of finding out why he went to Phoenix," Rogue says while my phone vibrates against the back of my knee.

I take it out of my boot and check the message. "It's Dizzy. She wants to know where I am."

Adira's gaze sharpens on my phone. "Oh my God."

Chapter Sixteen

Rogue

“I can’t believe it didn’t fucking occur to me.” I lock eyes with Adira. “We’ve been looking for a lead and it’s been right in front of our faces the whole time.”

“I was so against you spying on our girl,” Adira says, his thought process on track with mine.

“What the hell?” Ivy glances from me to Adira and back again.

“Lover boy had tracking software put on your phone before he gave it to you,” Adira tells her. “I made it very clear that I would kick his ass if he used it for anything less than a kidnapping.”

“You were spying on me?” Hurt flashes in her eyes.

“It was for your protection,” I argue. “In case Nicole tried to kidnap you. Because she wants you so badly that I couldn’t be sure she wouldn’t just take you. She’s a killer, baby! Don’t be mad at me because I was protecting you. And

after what she said today about you not having a choice, I'm glad I did it."

"Tell me you haven't used it," she demands.

"Once," I confess. "When you took off on Jackson at Mojitos. We didn't know where you were or if something had happened to you. I was so fucking scared that she'd gotten to you."

"And he had a point. You walked your ass right into the lion's den that night," Adira says.

Her lips form a thin line before the tension eases from them. "Tell me how you wanting to spy on me helps us."

"Because you can stalk people on Google Maps if you know how." Adira picks up his phone and starts tapping on the screen.

"Uh." Ivy's nose wrinkles. "How do you know that?"

"I'm not stalking anyone, if that's what you're asking." Adira smirks.

"Will the location data go back far enough? We're not talking weeks here." I want to touch Ivy so badly, reassure myself that we're okay, but when she glares at me I thread my hand through my hair instead.

“The data can be held indefinitely. It’s retrieving it that will be our problem. But if we can, we’ll know where Big Dick went in the days before he died.” Adira lifts his device to his ear.

“Do it,” Ivy says. “It’s the only lead we’ve got.”

He nods as his call connects. “Hey Sweets, I need you to do a little hack job for me.”

Ivy slips into my arms. Her sugar cookie shampoo seeps into my senses. “If we find out where he was then we can work out what he was doing. We can follow his last days. If there’s anything that could help us...”

There’s hope in her voice and that hope settles beneath my ribs. Perhaps I won’t have to kidnap Alec and string him up by his feet like he’s mistletoe.

That was my epiphany while my cock was deep inside her in the back of the Range Rover.

I never set out to be a criminal, but if they’re going to make me out to be one, I am going to get my hands dirty first. And I sure would like to get those hands on Alec Hawthorne for all the things that he’s done to my girl.

And to Ro.

And because it would straight up be a pleasure to make Nicole hurt, and for some reason the heartless bitch loves that sociopathic prick like she should have loved Ivy.

But I couldn't tell Ivy that I've decided to kidnap her brother when she's so hellbent on saving my soul. She thinks I'm a good man, but any good man can be pushed right over the edge for the right reasons. And she is my reason. My sanity. My life.

So yeah, If I have to, I'm going to kidnap her brother. I'm going to string him up like a boxing bag and beat that piece of shit until he looks like Mark Anders did before he died. Then I'm going to send Nicole photos of her baby boy with a warning about what will happen if she tries to force Ivy to do anything she doesn't want. Hell, I'll let my little bro get his hands dirty too. Rebel's already had his turn. It'll be the whole Maddox trifecta, swinging blows like we expect candy to explode out of Alec if we just hit him hard enough.

“What are you thinking?” Ivy stares at me curiously.

“Nothing, baby.” I shove my darker instincts deep below the surface and wrap an arm around her neck. I kiss the back of her head. “How about we buy a Christmas tree after we finish here. Take it home and decorate it. I know Christmas

hasn't been the best holiday for you in past years, but this is our first one together, and I want to make memories with you that will obliterate every bad one you have. I want you to plan a birthday party for Christmas Eve too. Let's celebrate your emancipation." I want to surround our love with positivity. When I wake up on Christmas morning it will be to her tucked in my arms. Her beautiful smile. I refuse to believe there is any other possibility. And if I plan for violence in the meantime... well, there's no harm in being prepared for the worst.

She tucks her hand around my arm so that her fingers are in the gap below her chin. It takes her so long to answer that I expect her to tell me the flaws in my plan when she finally says, "I'd love that."

Adira hangs up and stows his phone in his balconette top. "Sweets is going to work a little magic and get back to me with the info as soon as he can. We should know where your daddy was in the next twenty-four hours, and hopefully we can use the information to our advantage."

Jackson throws open the door to the dressing room. "Excuse me, Mr. Maddox."

Yvanna and Magnolia rush in behind him.

“I don’t care how cute you are, sugar. If you don’t get out of our way...” Yvanna tries to push past him.

“It’s fine, Jackson.” Ivy moves toward the queens as they edge past the bodyguard.

“We just wanted to give you the heads up.” Magnolia puffs. “Someone alerted the media that you were here because there is a gaggle—”

“More like a mob.” Yvanna rolls his eyes.

“At any rate the whole club is surrounded.” Magnolia rests both hands on one heavy hip.

“Positively surrounded,” Yvanna reiterates. “With photographers. TMZ is out there. E News. Hollywood Juice. I don’t think they like you very much.”

“They’re gunning for you, hot stuff.” Magnolia nods. “But also...”

A man approaches from behind the two drag queens. He pulls a small white envelope from his pocket and holds it out to Ivy. “Richard Love wanted me to give this to you.”

“Who are you?” Ivy stares at the envelope for a long pause. “What do you mean my dad wanted me to have this?”

“The phone call and now this?” Adira asks. “What on earth is going on?”

That’s what I’d like to fucking know. I march over to the man. “How did you get that? And when?”

“I’m a messenger,” he says. “It was on my schedule for today.”

Ivy slowly reaches out and takes it. “What’s in it?”

“Open it and find out,” the man says, and leaves.

“How did he know we’d be here?” Ivy glances from me to Adira and back to the envelope.

“Probably figured it was safer delivering it here to the club than anywhere else,” Adira says while every one of us is staring at the white envelope in Ivy’s hands. “He could count on us being friends no matter what.”

“That’s definitely true,” Ivy says as she digs the tip of her pinky under the flap.

Chapter Seventeen

Ivy

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Rogue asks as he helps me out of my coat while Jackson shuts the door. “You were so quiet in the car.”

“Mmhmm. Fine.” I clutch the key resting against my breastbone. It’s nondescript, silver, with a round head and a three digit number on it. Two. Zero. Two.

I haven’t been able to let it go since I liberated it from its envelope and threaded it onto the chain I was wearing around my neck.

I don’t know what it’s for. Or how my dad managed to send it to me now. Or if it means anything at all considering there was nothing else inside or on the envelope. I ripped it apart just to make sure there was nothing written on the inner flap.

“I know you’re not,” Rogue says. “Talk to me.”

“It’s just overwhelming.” My entire life is a lie and my mother is trying to destroy my future.

I’m pretty sure my brother either wants to make me suffer or he wants to kill me. And the only reason he isn’t actively trying at the moment is because he’s busy avoiding public scrutiny over the court case with Rochelle Kitt.

My memory is so faulty I feel like I’m gaslighting myself. Like, are these dreams and images and memories that I see real? Or am I losing my mind? Is it only a matter of time before I end up back at Sunny, but this time for keeps, with or without a hand from Nicole?

As if that wasn’t enough, my dead dad is haunting me. Calling me. Sending me packages. Making deals to marry me off to Nathaniel freaking Croft. Why couldn’t he send me a note that explains any of it? Or give me a clue as to what this key is for. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“Hey, you’re back.” Dizzy appears from deeper inside the apartment.

Rogue frowns at her over my head. “What are you doing here?”

“I like your place better than mine.” Her hands clasped in front of her, she swings from side-to-side at the waist. She giggles while her pleated pink dress flares with the movement. “Besides, I’m waiting for Jackson.”

“What about your brother?” She told me not ever to mention Jackson around... but that wasn’t real, was it? That was in a dream, right? I rub at my head, which is starting to hurt.

“West?” Her gaze lands on the key at my throat. Probably because I can’t stop touching it. She wrinkles her brow. “Oh, we’re not talking to each other right now. That’s kind of why I’m preferring your home to mine.”

Rogue hangs up our jackets. “Because—”

“We’re roommates.” She takes my arm. “And I’d much rather be your roommate than his. Trust me, he’s no fun when he gets like this.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know how to explain.” She pushes her hair back from her face and winces.

There are more bruises. My stomach lurches. “You can stay with us for as long as you need. Right, Rogue? We

have plenty of room.”

“I guess...” He glances toward the living area where his family is congregated. His brother’s grim faces bring a similar expression to his. “We’ll make it work.”

“Oh, thank you. You’re the absolute best,” Dizzy says. “If you need me to go online and like sing your innocence and praises—”

“That’s okay,” he says. “Best if we leave it up to Summer. It’s her job.”

“Yes, but they’re still saying you killed that guy. And with the funeral soon and the court case over—”

“What? The court case is over?” He stiffens.

“It didn’t go the way we wanted,” Riot says woodenly from across the room. He adds the shot glass in his hand to the line of them on the coffee table. The usual happy go lucky air about him missing.

“He’s already been spotted out in public,” Summer says.

“Taking his victory lap.” Riot slams his fist down on the arm of the couch.

“Tequila?” Rebel swishes the clear liquid around in the skull bottle in his hand before he dribbles it across the top of each cup.

“Alec’s free?” I grasp at my stomach. Of course he is. The timing... it’s perfect... it’s probably why Rogue is alive. Why Nicole chose framing him over killing him. All the media hoopla, all the reporters tailing us, they weren’t paying attention to what my brother was getting away with. That would be just like her. But does that mean her reason for keeping Rogue alive no longer exists?

“You’re shaking.” Dizzy spins me to face her. “Are you even breathing? You know if you don’t breathe, you eventually pass out, but you don’t die because once you pass out you’ll start breathing again. Unless you cover your face with like a pillow or something. Or, like, a hand around the windpipe.”

“What?” I gasp. My entire body is covered in goose bumps.

She wraps her hand around her windpipe and demonstrates cutting off her air supply. “Like that. Only you’d keep going until their chest spasms and stills, because otherwise you can’t actually tell if they’re faking or just passed

out. But a better way would be to use a mix of baking soda and citric acid inside a plastic bag. Pop that over your head and, no problem, you won't be worrying about breathing anymore."

"What the hell, Dizzy?" Rogue growls.

"I was distracting her," she tells him while squeezing my arm. "Did it work?"

I pull in a deep breath and let it out again. My brother is no longer the subject of judicial scrutiny, and that is a very bad thing. But for some reason, Dizzy's little spiel about killing people helped. "How do you know all that?"

"Crime documentaries. Dark romance. There's, like, a whole fandom who want to read about villains falling in love." She giggles.

"Alec Hawthorne isn't someone to romanticize, Dizzy," Rogue says.

"Oh no, I would never." She reaches up and tugs on her ponytail. "I just find serial killers fascinating. Fictionally. There's something about a man who loves you so much he will do anything for you. Gah, I love romance. Is that too much information about me? I feel like it might be."

“It’s fine.” I brush her off. It’s a little off-putting that she’s so obsessed with death, but the documentaries and dark romance... I get that.

“You know I won’t let him anywhere near you,” Rogue promises me. “Never again.”

“I know.” I just wish that Alec was like Rebel or Riot or any of Summer’s brothers that I’ve heard about. The kind of brother that is protective and decent. Who wouldn’t take joy in hurting me.

I think that’s why I believed him when he told me I was weak. When he told everyone I tried to drown myself and he was the one who saved me. I wanted him to be the good brother so badly.

Now I know the truth, or at least I’ve put two and two together. I just wish I could prove it.

Along with everything else that I’m uncertain about. At least I can finally find out for sure if I’m pregnant. I have the test Jackson picked up for us stowed in my purse. “We should probably do that thing.”

“Can I borrow you for a minute, brother?” Rebel asks as he comes to join us.

Rogue makes an apologetic face at me. “Can you give me a minute?”

“Take as much time as you need.” It’s not like waiting a little while longer to take the test will change the outcome. “You should be with your family. My brother hurt them too.”

“You are my family.”

“I know. And I love you for putting me first, but I’m okay.”

He nods. “You need me, come get me.”

“I will, but Dizzy and I are just going to hang out for a little while. We need some girl time, don’t we?”

“Absolutely.” Dizzy bounces on her toes.

He kisses my cheek. “Dizzy, no more conversations about serial killers, okay?”

“Yes, Rogue.” She salutes him with her tongue in her cheek.

It makes me laugh. She’s the weirdest, bubbliest person I have ever met. Some days I do not know what to make of her, but I swear her heart is one hundred percent in the right place. I’m not sure Rogue feels the same way about

her though. He'd probably be more comfortable if we weren't constantly under threat.

“I'll make this quick,” he says.

“Don't rush,” I tell him as he joins Rebel. “Dizzy and I have things to chat about, don't we?”

Like how she really got those marks on her wrist. And why I have such a vivid image of her brother in my mind when I don't remember meeting him. Unless of course... I did meet him that night in the limo.

Chapter Eighteen

Rogue

“I can’t believe in this day and age that men like Alec Hawthorne still get away with this bullshit,” Summer says as I choke back the shot of tequila.

“We knew how it would go,” Rebel says. “As soon as the validity of the photos came into question it was all over.”

“It’s totally fucked.” Riot sloshes the clear liquid over the rim of his glass as he fills it for a third time. He has that glassy eyed, ruddy cheek glow already. “Ro’s gone through reliving this trauma, and for what?”

Summer stares moodily at the untouched glass cradled in her hand on her lap. “They’ve made her out to be at fault for what happened to her. Why is it always a claim that the woman sent mixed signals? Or was a little too flirty? God, it makes me so mad.”

Across the room Ivy and Dizzy slip into the kitchen together.

I don't know what it is about that girl, but she gives me weird fucking vibes sometimes. All that serial killer talk, but then she's sweet as pie. How well did Ivy really know her before she lost her memories? Because I could swear they hadn't really been all that friendly.

But that might have been because Dizzy was dating Ivy's friend Ben and there was a time when there were feelings between him and Ivy. I had issues with him when Ivy and I started seeing each other. Mostly jealousy on my part.

But Ben hasn't been back since his dad got sick. And Dizzy is still around.

It's probably nothing. I'm just being hypervigilant because of the situation we're in. With running into Nicole at the cemetery and then that messenger showing up. God knows what that key is supposed to be for. Or if it even really came from Ivy's father.

There's too much that doesn't make sense and too much on the line to not have Jackson look into Dizzy a little more thoroughly. At least then I'll be able to write her off as something I don't need to worry about.

"Want to tell me why I have hives?" Rebel scowls as he itches his shoulder. "Want to explain why I started itching

two days ago and haven't been able to stop?"

"Not really, no." *It's none of your business.* At least not yet.

"If this is because you have a plan," he says through gritted teeth. *Get your head out of your ass. It's all of our business.*

He thinks I'm talking about the Hawthornes. He doesn't have a clue that he might be well on the way to becoming an uncle.

I put my empty glass on the table. It clinks on the glass top. "Summer, you are probably not going to want to hear what I have to say next."

"No." She leans forward and places her glass on the table too. She hasn't touched it. Her eyes are red rimmed with worry over Ro. Her voice is steely though. "I think I do."

This thing with Alec and Ro is hitting her deep. Not only because she went through something similar, but because she's the one who talked Ro into finally telling her story and pressing charges. And it wasn't just because she loves my brother. She seriously cares about Ro.

Rebel's gaze swings and locks with mine. *As much as I'd like to hurt him, this isn't the time.*

You won't change my mind.

He wraps an arm around her shoulder and hangs his head next to hers. "I have a feeling what we talk about next could be considered a crime. Even discussing it could be. Let me handle talking the jackass out of it."

"I'm in," Riot says. "No details necessary. If it hurts a Hawthorne I am so fucking there."

Summer looks at my brother like she's horrified. "Riot, no—"

I don't think it's the idea of hurting Alec that upsets her. More the way all this has worn him down. It hasn't escaped any of us that he's using more substances to maintain his chill. And barely managing it at that.

"It's not happening," Rebel says.

"So you're the only one who gets to bloody his fists?"
Riot glares at him.

Dizzy and Ivy reappear from the kitchen and then disappear toward the bedroom. Ivy still has her purse tucked under her arm with the pregnancy test secreted inside. Is she as

nervous as I am? There are so many answers we need, but at least this one, I intend to have within the hour.

“Yep, okay.” Summer sighs heavily and stands. “This is one of those moments between brothers.”

“Red.” Rebel squeezes her hand.

A look passes between them that speaks volumes.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” she says to all three of us before she leaves the room.

I drop into an armchair opposite my brothers. Pouring the remains of the tequila into our glasses, I say, “I’m going to kidnap Alec Hawthorne. You’re not going to talk me out of it.”

“I am fucking glad Jason isn’t around to hear something so stupid come out of your mouth.” Rebel doesn’t even flinch. “Why? And when do you propose to do this? Marty’s funeral is the day after tomorrow and you’re constantly surrounded by the media. There is no chance of you getting anywhere near Alec, let alone kidnapping him. You’ll be arrested so fast your head will spin. And you will do serious time.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy.”

Rebel cradles his head in his hands. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

I roll my eyes. If he didn’t like the first part of my plan, he isn’t going to like the second. “There’s another problem.”

“Which is?” Riot asks.

“Nicole expects Ivy to hand herself over in five days. And since I’m not going to let that happen, I have a feeling I only have a handful of days before Nicole comes gunning for me again.”

“So you want to kidnap Alec to send a message?” Riot nods. “Makes sense.”

“It’s time to respond in a language that she understands.” I narrow my gaze on my twin.

Rebel’s brows draw tightly together. “You saw her? When?”

“At the cemetery. She had someone watching the place. She made it very clear she won’t let anything or anybody get in her way.” Not me. Not Ivy. Not the law. I fill them in on everything that happened at the cemetery. And then

the conversation with Adira. And the arrival of the key from Ivy's dad.

“You don't know what the key is for?”

“No clue. Ivy doesn't remember seeing it before. And Adira was certain he hadn't.”

“Do you think it will be enough to stop her?” Riot asks. “Alec for Ivy?”

“I think if she doesn't back down when we send her photos of her pride and joy trussed up like a Christmas turkey then I don't know how to stop her, except to put her in the ground.”

“Are we considering that?” Riot asks. “Because Summer's brothers have those pigs.”

“Burke told me.” I nod.

“Do not entertain him,” Rebel points a disciplinary finger at Riot. “You might be inebriated. But he's serious.”

“I'm serious too,” Riot says.

“Uh-huh.” Rebel brushes him off and turns on me. “Back to this key. Do you think it could be related to what Marty was working on? If we can—”

“We have no idea what Marty was doing and we may never know.” If only she’d given me more to go on. Then I might be able to walk away from this war with my soul unscathed. “And this key could be anything.”

“So we look into it,” Rebel says.

“Way ahead of you.” I tap my leg. “But if this is the only option I have—”

“No, it’s not.” Rebel shakes his head. “It’s literally the worst option. We’re not bad people. Not stone cold killers. I have to stop you there, brother. Before you do something you can’t come back from.”

“If the media could see us now.” Riot lifts his glass above his head.

“I’m just done with this war we’re locked in with the Hawthornes. Ivy’s...” My gaze connects with Rebel’s as I get to my feet. I’d almost said *pregnant* and there’s a flare of realization that I’m keeping more from him in his eyes. “Ivy is my world, and I am done with my world being threatened.”

“Then we come up with a plan.” He stands too. “One that Marty would have come up with. One that she would be

proud of. A plan that doesn't leave your hands covered in blood, because that shit never goes away."

"Do you think Marty would want them to get away with what they're doing?" I stare him down. *Because that's what's happening right now.* I swallow around my guilt over getting her messed up in this in the first place.

And my hands have been stained with Ivy's blood for weeks now.

Rebel scowls. "I think she'd want you to burn the Hawthornes and their world down to the ground after what they did to her. But I think she would want to do it the right way."

"I don't know if I can do that." I wish it were that easy. But every which way I look I'm cornered. If it comes down to keeping Nicole from hurting Ivy, I'll do whatever I have to.

Chapter Nineteen

Ivy

“Did you notice Summer wasn’t with them when we walked past just now? What do you suppose they’re talking about out there?” Dizzy rifles through the clothes in my wardrobe. “Do you think Rogue and his brothers will go after your mother? Or maybe kidnap your brother, now that he’s been released, and do unspeakable things to him. Do you think they’d let me go with them? I do love a good party.”

“No, it’s nothing like that. Rogue is a good man.” And the caffeine Dizzy put in her peppermint mocha latte was clearly too much if the speed at which she’s firing questions at me is anything to go by. Not to mention the questions she’s asking.

“Even good men have a breaking point.” Her back to me she pulls out a yellow dress with white daisies, smocking, and a collar. “Cute.”

What she's talking about should be far-fetched, but after what Rogue said in the car about hiring a hitman to take out my mother, I have an inkling it's not.

They're pushing him too far. Turning him into something he isn't. And I don't know how to stop it.

Leaving him isn't something I want to do. It isn't even an option. We need a plan. And not one where I do what Nicole wants.

I only agreed to her demands to buy time. I have no intention of marrying a man I don't love to make her happy. Deal with my dad or not.

All this time I've been fighting to stand on my own feet and live my own life. One with real love and connections. One where the monsters are vanquished because I am finally strong enough to fend for myself.

I've found that with Rogue. I've learned my worth and my strength. And I won't let anyone take it from me. Not without a war. All the secrets, threats, and pain only make me more certain that I can't give in.

But wars have casualties, and we are losing. We have lost so much already; Marty, my dad. How long until they turn

Rogue's love for me into the very poison that will destroy him?

My hand goes automatically to the key at my throat. Perhaps because right now it's the closest I can feel to my dad. Or maybe because this is the only clue that we have. And figuring out why he sent it to me is the best shot we have.

When that man handed me the envelope in Adira's dressing room, I thought there would be some explanation for why Dad had to leave me. Or a list of his suspicions. Or even a justification for why he would make a deal to marry me off to Nathaniel Croft.

Because there had to be one. If my dad did make that deal, which I'm still struggling to believe, then he must have felt like he had a good reason for wanting my marriage to Nathaniel.

But there was none of that. There was no letter at all. Just this key.

Dizzy continues pulling things out of the wardrobe. A red dress with a mid-thigh hem and ruffles. A sheer floor-length gold gown.

She's occupied so I slip into the bathroom and open my purse on the counter.

"This is divine. It must look so cute on you." She holds out a blue corset and floaty skirt. The corset has tiny white flowers that look like stars beaded onto it.

"I made it." She's making heart eyes at my dress so I'm not too worried when I pull out the pregnancy test box and drop it in the top drawer of the vanity.

With everything else going on, I'm struggling with knowing that I could be pregnant and not having taken the test yet. I'm getting quite desperate about the answer.

My belly fills with butterflies and I press a hand to my abdomen. At this point I'm like ninety-eight percent sure that I'm pregnant. It's that two percent possibility that I'm not that feels huge. This is supposed to be one of those momentous life-altering moments, right?

"Well, it's gorgeous." She drapes the material across her torso.

It doesn't matter what the test says if we can't work out this key or find a way to make my family back off without Rogue having to give up a little bit of who he is in the process.

The idea of being pregnant while dealing with my mother... and now with Alec on the loose... if anything happened to our baby I would never forgive myself.

I think that's probably why I'm so nervous to take the test. I close the drawer and rest my hip against the countertop. None of this stuff can wait, but right now it has to. Adira is looking into the key and Rogue is with his family. I can only focus on Dizzy and those bruises. On her brother, West.

She fingers the blue lace frill around the top of the bust. There's a wistful expression on her face. "I wish this color suited me."

"I think it would actually," I say. "Why don't you try it on?"

"Really?" Her eyes light up and she flaps her hands at her side like a hummingbird's wings. "Do you mean it? I can try it on?"

"Go ahead." She's acting like she's never played dress up in a friend's closet before. For some reason that bothers me. Probably because I know what it's like to be that lonely.

"Eek. This is like..." She starts stripping out of her dress. "Growing up with West... well, he's seven years older

than me, so he left to go to college when I was eleven and came back home when I was seventeen.” She pulls the blue dress over her head. “So those teenage years were lonely. And I used to make believe that I had a sister and that we’d share clothes and do each other’s makeup and hair.”

“I know what that’s like.” In a lot of ways her life seems to parallel mine. Except I had Adira and the queens. I think she only has West. “Tell me about the bruises, Dizzy.”

She smooths the dress down before reaching for her wrist. “Oh, these?”

“You said you’re arguing and you can’t be around him right now,” I remind her. “And then you have those.”

Alec is free and I’m on edge, so maybe I’m putting my own problems on her. But after all the years that I suffered in silence, I wish someone had asked me if I was all right. Given me a chance to see that the monsters weren’t in my head. But I guess it wasn’t that obvious. Not even my own father had seen.

“Um... he can be...different. Sometimes.” She averts her gaze, glancing at the bathroom, where my favorite makeup is displayed in acrylic organizers. “Do you think I could play

with your makeup? Try to come up with a look to go with this dress?”

“Maybe I can do your makeup.” I follow her into the bathroom where she’s checking herself out in the mirror.

“I would love that.”

I drag out a foldable chair. Indicate she should sit. When she does, I hand her a headband to keep all that pink hair out of her face. “What do you mean, he’s different?”

“West says I’m not allowed to talk about it.” She pulls the stretchy elastic over her hair and presses it into place. “That you won’t understand because you’re the lucky one.”

He’s at least partially right. “I don’t understand, Dizzy. I know he’s your brother, but if he’s hurting you—”

“He’s not hurting me.” She grows less animated, and she can’t quite keep eye contact before she starts examining the products I have lined up. “You don’t know West.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. I don’t.” Although I feel like I do. From my dreams. And from Dizzy. But maybe my concerns are more about Alec than they are about the enigmatic West.

She returns to staring at herself in the mirror. She plucks at the top of the corset covering her torso. “It doesn’t feel like me. But it’s fun.”

I grab my makeup wipes and hand her a few. “Have I ever met your brother?”

“I’m not sure.” She scrubs her face clean and tosses the wipes in the small trash can. “Do you think you did?”

“I was told I had a therapy session with him at Sunny before the memory loss.” I pick up my moisturiser and mix in a primer. It’s quite possible that’s where I’m remembering him from, if the weird dreams are made up of a hodge podge of my memories breaking through. “But I... I think I met him more recently. Like a few days ago. In the back of a limo. Did that happen, Dizzy? Or am I losing my mind?”

“He won’t be happy.” Her mouth seems confused. It fights to show her emotions, but can’t pick between happy and sad. “If I answer that.”

“So I did meet him. He was going to help me get my memories back.” I spread the lotion on her face because I need to do something with my pulse racing like this. “Why won’t he be happy?”

“Because.” She shakes her head.

“Dizzy.” My hands free of most of the lotion, I grip the seat arms and lean over her. “What happened that night? Why don’t I remember it? What did West do to me?”

“Nothing. He did nothing to you.”

“That can’t be true.” I remember signing that contract. My memories for an introduction, which I assumed would be with Rogue, because he looked like a damn twin to the twins. Only colder. I remember going to Adira’s apartment, which was empty because Adira had stayed by my side after Rogue was arrested. I remember stepping foot in Narnia and West asking about my health and then... “What happened, Dizzy? Tell me.”

“Nothing.” She touches the back of her head.

I mirror her movement. I still have a sore spot from knocking my head against the wall. Unless... “Did I hit my head?”

“You remembered something,” she says. “You fell. It happened too quickly for either of us to grab you.”

“What did I remember?” What shocked me so much that I fell?

“You freaked out.” She grips my face between her hands and stares into my eyes with so much seriousness and stillness it’s unnerving. “You wouldn’t let either of us near you. West, he’s really protective of me and he doesn’t understand... he wouldn’t let me stay. He told me not to come here again.”

“Baby, I think we should...” Rogue appears in the doorway. His jaw slackens as he takes in Dizzy and then me. His brow creases. “Is everything okay in here?”

“Dizzy, if you know—” She shoves me away and runs out of the room. My hip hits the counter before I land on my butt on the tiles.

Rogue starts toward me. “What the hell was that?”

Chapter Twenty

Rogue

“You have to go after her,” Ivy whimpers as I pick her up off the floor. “I need her to tell me what she knows.”

“She’s not my priority.” I put her ass on top of the vanity. “Are you hurt?”

“Just my hip.” She rubs at the tender flesh that hit hard enough to bruise as she wiggles to the edge of the countertop. “I need to stop her.”

“You need to tell me that’s the worst of it.” I cage her in. She went down hard. Dizzy will leave or she will keep until I’m certain Ivy is fine.

She pushes at my chest. “There’s no time. She knows...”

When she stops and swallows, it’s obvious I’ve missed something here. “What does she know?”

Ivy stares at my chest with a little too much interest. “I was desperate, Rogue. You were arrested and Dizzy’s brother said he could help me remember. And the reason I didn’t tell you was because I was confused. I thought maybe I was losing my mind. But just now she told me I fell. I want to know what happened. We need to go after her.”

“Dizzy will keep.” Right now I want to know a whole lot more about what went on while I was locked up. I grip her chin and lift her gaze to mine. “Remember... as in... everything?”

“No, I don’t remember. Or maybe I do.” There’s confusion in her caramel eyes. “I don’t know what’s real and what’s not. I’ve been having these dreams... nightmares really. They could be because of everything that’s going on. But they feel so real. And then when we were in Adira’s dressing room earlier I imagined being dressed as Rapunzel and getting on my knees—”

“Real.” I clear my throat. Is she really starting to remember me? Us? All that we were to each other and all that we’ve been through. “That was real.”

“Rapunzel?” She smiles and her eyes fill with tears. She laughs. “Oh God, that was my first time giving a blow

job.”

“And you were phenomenal, princess. You blew my mind.”

“Really?”

“From the very first moment.” I can’t stop my grin from widening.

Her nose wrinkles. “Why do I have this feeling that I was supposed to be a mermaid?”

“Because the first time I hit on you... while you drove me to the hospital, I asked you if—”

“I had a mermaid costume.” She covers her mouth with her hand. “You were shot. And I was a birthday party princess. You told me, but now I actually remember.”

If I have to convince her to fall in love with me every single day for the rest of our lives I will, but this... this is better. I bury my face in her shoulder as the happiness I’m feeling brims from my eyes. “You’re coming back to me.”

She clasps my face between her hands. “I’m remembering. Not all of it. But maybe...”

“In time.”

Her smile falters and disappears. “I wish that’s all I needed to remember. I wish I wasn’t having dreams about Alec.”

I hate asking her to think about him, but if they’re memories... if she can finally remember what happened that night... “What dreams about Alec?”

She shudders and hunches into her shoulders, like the very thought of those dreams makes her want to hide away. “I’m in Narnia and he’s holding a blade as he tells me the ambulance will never make it in time.”

“It’s not enough,” I say bitterly as I wrap her up tight in my arms. Though I’m more certain than ever that she didn’t hurt herself at all. And if... no, when... I get my hands on him I’m going to make him regret ever harming her.

But when it comes to taking this to the cops... If all we have is Ivy’s version of what happened that night, a glimpse of what could be argued was only a dream wouldn’t be enough. I rest my chin on the top of her head. “Tell me what Dizzy and her brother have to do with all this.”

“West is a therapist.” She returns to examining the cotton covering my chest. “I met him at Sunny, though I don’t

actually remember it. Dr. Keller's receptionist told me that much when I went to see Dr. Keller a few weeks ago."

"Okay."

"You were arrested and I couldn't stand not doing anything to try and help. I was so mad that I couldn't remember anything when what I've forgotten could be so damning for Alec." Her eyes plead with me. "Enough that Nicole might actually leave us alone to protect him."

"I've had that thought too," I admit. I literally discussed kidnapping the bastard with my brothers for that exact reason.

"Dizzy said her brother could help, and I jumped on the chance to meet him. If he could bring back my memories it felt worth it. But I didn't remember. At least not then." She touches the back of her head. "I think I fell and knocked myself out before West could take me through the process. But since then..."

"You're remembering?"

"Yeah." She smiles softly.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

“I woke up the next morning in our bed. In my pajamas. With no idea how I got there. I convinced myself it was a dream. It made sense that it was a dream.”

“And Jackson? You didn’t take him with you?”

She makes a face like the words on the tip of her tongue are the last thing she wants to taste. “Dizzy told me to come alone. West is very protective.”

“After everything we’ve been through...” She went without backup. Anything could have happened. “Damn it, Ivy.”

She shakes her head. “I know it was stupid. I was desperate. I was willing to do anything to get Nicole to back off.”

“Including risking yourself.” I grip the back of her neck and stare deep into her eyes. “What if this West is working with Nicole or even Alec? What if he’d wanted to hurt you?”

I might have lost her.

“I felt safe with him,” she says. “He doesn’t seem to like me very much, but I don’t think he would hurt me.”

“You don’t know that.”

“There’s something about him,” she says, “that you need to know. It’s kind of weird.”

“Okay.” My breath catches.

She presses her lips together, her gaze full of concern. “He looks like you and Rebel.”

Like me and Rebel? The hushed way she announces that. The way she’s looking at me... it makes the hairs on my arms stand straight up. “What do you mean?”

“West looks almost exactly like you and Rebel.”

That static feeling grows. “What are you saying?”

“I think maybe... is it possible that you’re not twins, but triplets?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Rogue

There's a ringing in my ears.

Triplets? Another brother we don't know about?

"That's not possible."

Except... there are all those times my mom called me Ruin. All those times I played it off as part of her illness. Another hallucination where her mind tricked her into thinking I was the devil.

"Rogue?" Ivy calls my name and she feels so far away. Her hands find my shoulders and climb up my neck to my face. When she brings our foreheads together, the ringing fades away. "Are you okay?"

Hardly. I'm trying to reconcile what she's saying with what I know. Rebel and I are twins. We have been for twenty-seven years. We have that twin telepathy. We've worn each other's identities. We'd know if there was a piece of us missing. "We would know."

Wouldn't we?

I put Ivy's feet on the tiles before I turn on my heel and stalk out to where Rebel and Riot have moved onto a bottle of Rebel Rye.

My twin glances up the moment I enter the room. Why? Because we're twins and he fucking knows my mood by vibration. He doesn't need to see my face to tell I'm about to drop an atomic bomb. He surges to his feet as I cross the room.

Ivy is close on my heels. "Rogue, maybe don't—"

But that's the thing. I can't keep this from Rebel even if I wanted to, because of those damn telepathy hives. And something about this news Ivy just shared rings true. Because of all those times our mom seemed so convinced that I was someone else.

He offers me the whisky. "Bro?"

The bottle shakes in my hand.

"You know how mom always calls me Ruin when she's going through a spell?" Like I'm the devil. Like I ruined her life. Like I could destroy her.

"Yeah." Rebel's brows draw tight in the middle.

“Remember how I told you she called me Ruin on her last birthday.” I lift the bottle to my lips and let the whisky burn a path through my chest that loosens my lungs enough so that I can draw breath. “She asked about my girl, the one I was searching for, and we talked about Ivy.”

“Kinda hard to forget, considering what happened next.” Rebel wobbles his head from side to side as he alludes to the night I got so drunk I didn’t push that girl away when she kissed me in front of Ivy.

“Yeah, well, what if I’m not, have never been, Ruin?”

He arches back. “What are you saying?”

“You know what I’m saying.” I take another swig from the bottle and hand it back to him as his eyes widen.

“What if Ruin is a real person?”

“Holy shit,” Riot says. “You’re a—”

Rebel glitches as his thoughts stumble. “You think we’re a—”

“Triplet,” I say.

“How?” Rebel drops into his seat. He covers his mouth with his hand. “Why do you suspect that?”

“Because I’ve met him and the resemblance is uncanny,” Ivy says. “He goes by West. And he’s a therapist.”

“And Dizzy’s brother,” I add. Wait. What the absolute fuck? “If he’s our triplet is Dizzy our half-sister?”

“I don’t think so,” Ivy says.

My brain is fucking melting with this overload. “How does that work?”

“It’s complicated, if I remember correctly.” A pained expression crosses her face. “The other night... he said that he was adopted. And that Dizzy’s mom was already pregnant when she met his dad.”

“Is that why that chick has been hanging around all the time?” Rebel asks. “Scoping us out for him? Weird vibes from that girl.”

I’m glad I’m not the only one who noticed. “Possibly.”

“Oh.” Ivy touches her lips. “That didn’t occur to me.”

My girl believes everyone is sweet until proven otherwise. It’s a luxury we can’t afford. As much as she argues otherwise, we don’t know that this guy isn’t mixed up with the Hawthornes. Or that he doesn’t have an agenda. “Is this guy

using my girl as an in to get to know us better? Or is he trouble on our horizon that we better prepare for?"

"Do you think we should visit Mom?" Rebel asks. "See what information we can find out. Try and work out whether this guy is legit or—"

"Yeah. We should do that." We need to get in front of whatever this is. "And this guy has an office there. I want to see him with my own eyes."

"Me too." Rebel stands again.

"Should we alert Summer?"

"No. She's napping. The last few days have been hard and..." He shakes his head. "This is insanity. We're twins. We're not..."

"Triplets." Riot lurches to his feet. Sways. Fights with his jacket as he tries to straighten out. "God help me, three older brothers... that would have been fun growing up."

"Go sleep it off," Rebel orders him.

"Yes, Dad." Riot salutes him with a middle finger and then, surprisingly, weaves his way toward a bedroom without argument.

"I'll drive," I say.

“Are we bringing the bodyguard?” Rebel asks.

“Better.” I pull out my phone and text Jackson to meet us at the elevator.

“I need to find Dizzy,” Ivy insists. “I need to find out what happened the other night.”

“We will.” I take her hand and tug her into the foyer with me. “But first we’re going to Sunny. Going to pay our mom a visit. And then we’re going to pop in and meet this Dr. West.”

“The other night?” Rebel glances between us as he shrugs into his jacket.

“Yeah, good job, protecting her.” I snort. “Ivy just told me she left in the middle of the night to meet this West because he promised to help her with her memories.”

His jaw slackens. “When?”

“The night I was arrested.” I snag the keys to the Range Rover from the table.

Rebel’s eyes widen. “Seriously?”

Ivy shrugs. “It’s not your fault. And it did help.”

“Debatable,” I say as I close the door to the apartment.
“We don’t know that you weren’t remembering anyway.”

“I have a bump on the back of my head that says something about that night helped,” she argues as we join Jackson in the elevator.

“Do not try and use the fact that you were injured to make this sound like a positive.” I bring her in close, bow my head so that my lips brush her ear. “What if it had been worse?”

“But it wasn’t,” she says, as the doors open on the parking garage.

Rebel walks ahead with Jackson, the two of them giving us space.

I catch her arm and bring her to face me. “If anything had happened to you it would have destroyed me. So we are done with trying to save everyone by going it alone, okay?”

“Dizzy was with me,” she murmurs. “I know she seems strange, but for some reason I trust her. So I wasn’t alone.”

“Yeah, well, I remember you not liking her when you first met,” I tell her as we start walking toward the Range

Rover.

“I didn’t like her?” Ivy climbs into the back seat and I follow before shutting the door.

“You did not. And I don’t trust her. So she doesn’t count. I didn’t trust her before you told me about West. But with this new complication... she could be anyone, Ivy. She could be a really bad person. We don’t know anything about West.”

Her lips part. “But—”

“Just because he looks like me and Rebel doesn’t mean we’re anything alike. We have no understanding of what he wants. Your gut instinct when Ben introduced her was to be standoffish. We should have stayed that way.” I take her hand and twine our fingers.

“And I don’t know if that means anything, but I’m going to treat it like it does until we know more about her and this West.”

Jackson glances at me from the front seat. “I have information about Dizzy.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ivy

“Her legal name is Dizzy Sunshine, but prior to two years ago, Dizzy Sunshine didn’t exist,” Jackson says. “I searched everywhere I could. Talked to my contacts. I can’t pick up a trail earlier than that. Whoever she is... however she ended up Dizzy Sunshine... she must have powerful allies.”

“Allies like Nicole and Alec,” Rogue mutters.

“It’s very possible. Even highly likely.” Jackson offers me a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry, Miss Love. I know that isn’t what you want to hear.”

“What about West?” Rebel asks. “They’re supposedly siblings. How does that tie into all of this?”

“Adopted,” I say. “She said he was adopted.”

“I didn’t find anything on a sibling,” Jackson says. “Or parents. But I’m still waiting for some of my contacts to get back to me. It’s possible that if we find out who Dizzy was before she was Dizzy then that will be explained as well.”

“That’s all right, Jackson.” I slump against the leather. I don’t know how I could be so bad at reading people. I know it took me a long time to realize that the monsters weren’t in my head. That I wasn’t weak or useless or pathetic. That it was my own family who were the monsters. But I thought I’d learned how to tell the difference.

Dizzy not existing before two years ago... that’s a giant red flag. And honestly, there were other signs. I just didn’t want to see them.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Rogue says.

I bite down on my lip when my eyes burn. “How could I be so stupid? How am I so naïve?”

“You care.” He puts a hand on my belly. “You want to see the good in people. That is never a bad thing.”

“But it is when I can’t tell the difference. When I ignore the flags that are clearly there.” When she could be another cog in Nicole’s scheming, and I’ve been an open book. Becoming her friend and telling her my secrets. Well, not all of them. “I believed she was on my side.”

She even offered to end Alec in a weirdly serious way. And encouraged me to stand up to Nicole. And then there’s the

fact that I ended up safe and sound in my bed after hitting my head the other night.

But then I had this niggling feeling that she toppled those roses in an attempt to scare me the other night. I'd brushed it off when she said she was moving them so I wouldn't have to see them, but I shouldn't have.

And there's every time she's popped up randomly. The weird and violent suggestions she's made. How she acts like we're the closest of friends when Rogue says we weren't.

I guess the only thing I know about her that is probably true is she wasn't lying when she kept talking about what it was like to love a Maddox.

"I wish I could tell you that she is on our side," Rogue says. "But I think we have to be prepared for the worst."

The crowd swells in as we clear the garage. They put their cameras up to the tinted windows and shout out their questions. One of them slams up against my door with his whole body. A black sweatshirt fills my view.

I flinch back from the door as our eyes lock. He's wearing a ball cap over his sandy hair and his sweater has one

of those necks that sits up around his jaw, but the malice in those eyes is unmistakable.

“Alec?”

“You...” he mouths as he jabs the glass barrier between us. “I’m coming for you.”

“What the fuck?” Rogue roars as he lunges over top of me, only to be jerked back by his seatbelt.

Alec grins like a demon and then he steps back into the crowd. I surge toward the window while Rogue fights with his seatbelt, but my brother has vanished. He might as well have never been part of the crowd.

“What?” Rebel turns to face us.

“Alec,” I say as Rogue scans the throng of bodies. “He was in the crowd.”

“How the hell is he here?” Rogue bellows in the too small space of the vehicle. “How didn’t any of them notice him?”

“They’re like fucking zombies,” Rebel snaps. “You two are the objective right now. Your building. Your car. They weren’t expecting him to rock up here anymore than we were.”

Rogue yanks on the door handle, but the central locking is activated. “When I get my hands on him—”

“You’ll what, bro?” Rebel thunders back. “Are you gonna handle him in front of this crowd? Like that isn’t exactly why he’s here.”

Jackson calls in to building security. “Alec Hawthorne has been spotted in the vicinity.”

“He threatened her,” Rogue snarls. “And we both know he’s capable—”

“Only if he can get Ivy alone.” Rebel plays the voice of reason. “And that’s not going to happen. We are never going to let him get her alone again. But if you go after him with that crowd around...”

“Don’t,” I beg, gripping Rogue’s arm. “We’re stronger together, remember?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Rogue stiffens before he eases back against the seat. His hand settles on my leg, the tension in his grip obvious even though he tries to relax. “He can’t get near you, Ivy. You know that. You’re safe with me. He can’t do anything but make empty threats.”

“I know.” I rub at my forearm. I have a feeling if I took my coat off I would see that I’m covered in goosebumps.

“You’re totally safe within the confines of the car, Miss Love.” Jackson makes eye contact with me in the rearview mirror. “Mr. Maddox, I suggest we continue to our planned destination. Unless you would like me to take us back inside.”

Rogue rubs at his forehead. “No, we can’t put off going to Sunny. The sooner we know the truth about this Dr. West the better.”

I bite my thumbnail as we leave the media circus and my brother behind. He wants to kill me. He said he was coming for me, and I believe him. He’s already tried to murder me twice. Once when I almost drowned in the bathtub. The second time in Narnia when he must have taken a blade to my wrists. “Third time’s the charm.”

“What, baby girl?”

“That’s the saying, isn’t it? The third time is the charm. And Alec has tried and failed to kill me twice.”

Rogue releases my seatbelt and lifts me onto his lap. He tips my chin up when I try to avoid his gaze. “You can’t

think like that. You can't let him play on your thoughts like that."

"No, that's not... why is my brother so hell-bent on ending my life?" I don't understand. "My mom wants to marry me off and he wants to kill me. They're not playing on the same team. It doesn't make sense for him to threaten my life now, if they are. He'd have easier access to me once I did what Nicole wanted."

"He's obsessed." Rogue's brow creases. His eyes darken with thought. "He could have realized that you're no longer under her control. But it might not matter that much. Whatever his reason, he must feel the need to finish what he started."

"Perhaps." But I can't shake the feeling that there's something we're missing as we pull into the parking lot at Sunny and pile out of the vehicle.

"West or Mom first?" Rebel asks as we cross the concrete.

"West," Rogue says. "You know how Mom is."

"Chances are she won't actually be able to answer our questions." Rebel's expression grows darker.

“Better check in with reception first,” Rogue says. “We can ask there what kind of day she’s having.”

I tug on Rogue’s arm until his steps slow and a small distance grows between us and the others. “Can we go visit Nathaniel after this?”

“What do you want with that creep?” Rogue spreads his palm over the small of my back, leaning in protectively as we walk into the building.

“He cares about me in his own twisted way.” I might not like it, but talking to him could be helpful.

“He wants to fuck you, Ivy. He wants to own you under the guise of love.” Rogue’s voice grows dark. “The man groomed you for years. You realize that, don’t you? If you think I trust him anywhere near you...”

“I don’t trust him either.” I turn to him while Rebel leans over the desk and asks the receptionist where their mom is. “I don’t want to be anywhere near him. But he wants this marriage. He wants me. I’d like to try using that to our advantage.”

Rebel joins us. His brow is creased, but the darkness in his expression has faded. “It sounds like mom’s doing better

lately. They said she's in her favorite spot."

"The bench under the trees," I say.

At the same time Rogue says, "There's a bench outside."

"She loves it there."

"You remember that?" Rogue asks.

"Yeah." I glance around at the open foyer of the care facility. At the tinted glass windows overlooking the rolling lawn. I remember Sunny. Those memories didn't disappear, but Rogue did. Now, I see him... spending time with his mom. Flirting with the receptionist. Carrying daisies. Standing right in front of me with only a pane of glass between us. "Yeah, I remember that."

"Let's go," Rebel says. "Where's this doctor's office?"

"Ivy? Is he—"

"He's taken over Dr. Keller's office until she comes back," I say.

"This way." Rogue takes my hand and leads the way.

The receptionist stands in the doorway of one of the offices when we enter. She scratches her head before she

notices us. When she sees the twins she does a double take. Her gaze swings back into the office. “Huh. I did not see that coming.”

“Dr. West?” Rebel asks.

“Uh...” The woman turns her back on the room. She wipes her hands on her charcoal pencil skirt. “I’m sorry. I don’t know where he is.”

There is another office on the other side of the reception desk. The door is closed and there’s a nameplate on the door for a Dr. Truman.

“That one is Dr. Keller’s,” Ivy points at the vacant room.

There’s an empty spot where there would normally be a nameplate on the door. The desk is clear of anything personal. The bookshelves behind it look like they’ve been tossed. A few loose papers are scattered on the floor. “This is Dr. West’s office, right?”

“For another two weeks, yes.” She moves to her own desk. “Can I book any of you an appointment?”

“Does his office normally look like that?” Rogue asks.

“No.” She presses her lips together.

“Would you mind if I take a look?” Jackson asks the woman.

“Uh. That would be highly unusual.”

“I won’t touch anything,” he says. “I just want to assess the situation.”

“Do you think I should call security? Do you think something happened to Dr. West?”

“More like Dr. West bolted,” Rogue mutters.

“Give me a few minutes to check out the area and I’ll give you my opinion.” Jackson strides into the room and starts actively looking around. He opens drawers and peeks behind curtains. “It looks like it’s been cleared out.”

Rogue shares a look with Rebel.

Damn it, Dizzy. I thought you were my friend.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ivy

“It looks like he left in a hurry,” Jackson says.

“Try calling Dizzy,” Rogue orders me. “If she doesn’t respond then we’ll have our answer. They know we’re onto them so they took off. That just proves they can’t be trusted. If this West was a good guy he would have come to us.”

I make the call while all three men watch. It rings out so I try again. That call goes to voicemail too. Icy cold fingers wrap around my heart. “What if she’s in trouble, Rogue?”

“Do you really believe that?” he asks. “Because I don’t. And I thought we were on the same page on the way here.”

“But she had those bruises.” So maybe it isn’t as simple as he’s making it. Clutching my phone, I drop my hand to my side. Or I really am a bleeding heart. “West hurt her.”

“We don’t know that. We don’t know anything about him. Or her for that matter.” He huffs out a breath as he drags

his hand through his hair. “But Mom might. He’s been here for weeks. Probably visiting her. Possibly telling her about Dizzy. Learning as much about us as possible.”

“Let’s go find her then,” Rebel says.

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Rogue warns Rebel as we leave West’s office. “Just because she’s having a good day, doesn’t mean we’ll be able to get any information out of her.”

We find Momma Maddox on her favorite bench under one of the leafy shade trees.

Her eyes light up and she smiles when she sees two of her boys strolling across the lawn to her. She stands unsteadily as we approach. Puts her arms out to receive them. “My boys.”

Rebel keeps his distance. “Mom.”

Rogue hugs her. “Mom. How are you doing this week?”

“Where’s Riot?” She glances around the two men.

“He couldn’t make it, Mom,” Rogue says.

Her eyes dim when she realizes he isn’t with us, but then they land on me. “I know you, don’t I?”

“We’ve met a few times.” I take a seat on the bench and gesture for her to sit. “I lived here for a while.”

“Oh.” She smiles and her eyes crinkle in the corner. “It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“I liked it.” I nod.

“My boys make sure I’m well looked after.” She squeezes her fingers in her lap as she smiles at one then the other.

“You seem to be in good spirits.” Rogue’s shoulders lift with one less worry.

“New meds,” she says with a soft smile.

Rebel clears his throat. “Mom, who is Ruin?”

“Ruin?” Her voice turns wary. “How do you know that name?”

“You called me that a lot growing up.” Rogue sits on the other side of her. “I thought it was because of the illness. Because you thought I was a demon. But that’s not the truth, is it?”

“Do we have another brother?” Rebel scowls down at her. “And if so why the fuck don’t we know about him?”

She crumples inward, her chin dropping to her chest. For a very long time she says nothing.

Rebel shifts from foot to foot, his gaze burning into the top of her head. Rogue taps his thumb against his knee at an agitated tempo. Eventually he clears his throat. “Mom.”

“You have another brother,” she says quietly as she lifts her head. Her eyes are full of regret. She shakes her head. “You’re not twins. You’re identical plus one. Ruin is your fraternal triplet.”

Holy shit! It’s true then... Meeting West and seeing him with my own two eyes... seeing the resemblance... I could almost convince myself it was in my head, but having it confirmed... that he’s their triplet brother... holy shit.

“What the fuck, Mom?” Rebel explodes into action, tossing his hands up and walking away.

“How is this possible?” Rogue asks. “How did we not know about this?”

Rebel stalks back. A muscle tics in his cheek. “How the hell could you keep this from us?”

“You have to understand...” Momma Maddox’s eyes entreat him. She places her hand on Rogue’s, like she needs

his strength. He covers it with his other while he waits for her to go on. “I never wanted to give Ruin up. I was so young when I met your dad. In college. He was a couple years older, and so good looking. He bought me expensive things and took me to fancy parties and on luxury trips. He was charming and funny and intelligent. He had this confidence. People flocked to him. I fell so hard. I didn’t know what he was capable of. Ruin’s father... your father... he came from a dangerous family. It was only months into our relationship when I discovered that I was pregnant. When I told him, he told me to get rid of you.”

“Fuck, Mom. Was he married?” Rebel asks.

Her mouth slants down even more. “You really think that little of me?”

“I don’t know what to think,” Rebel mutters. “All our life the one constant has been your unreliability.”

She flinches. “I know I’m not the mother I should have been. The mother you deserved. But I tried.”

“You were barely with us,” he snaps. “You knew about your illness. You could have handled it better.”

“It’s not always that easy.” She starts to extend a hand and then lowers it to her lap. “I’m sorry I was a shitty mother. That was never what I wanted. The new meds are helping. I’m doing better now.”

“Can we get back to what’s important right now?” Rogue asks. “You couldn’t terminate us. But you didn’t want to keep all three of us either?”

She shakes her head. Her eyes fill with pain. Her chin trembles. “At first I didn’t know. I thought I was pregnant with one baby.”

“But then you found out there were three of us?” Rogue asks.

“Yes.”

“And it was too much?” Rogue looks crestfallen while Rebel shakes his head and stares into the distance.

“No. That’s not... I planned to keep you all. I wanted to love you all.”

“But?” Rebel’s voice is full of bitterness.

“I didn’t have a choice.” She glances from Rebel to Rogue, begging them to understand. “I left him. I went to stay with a friend. He had men take me from my bed in the middle

of the night and deliver me back to him. He told me that he would kill me if I didn't do what he'd ordered me to do."

I pull in a quick breath. It's loud compared to the utter silence of our group. I can't comprehend what that must have been like for her. Not fully. To love someone and have them turn out to be a monster. To be pregnant and alone.

"I was scared. I went so far as to go to a clinic. He had someone follow me so he knew when I didn't go through with it. But then he changed his mind. His father had convinced him that he should raise the child to take over the family business after him. That our baby would be the next heir. He demanded I hand over the baby or he would kill me and our child."

She buries her face in her hands for a long moment. Her shoulders shake. When she looks at us again her eyes are wet. "It was the last thing I wanted to do. Handing over a sweet and innocent baby to a monster. And then I found out that there were three of you. I did everything I could to hide the fact that I was carrying triplets from him. It wasn't easy. Carrying three of you... my belly was so big. I used support garments and baggy clothes to minimize it. And I kept my distance from your father."

“Christ, Mom.” Rebel starts to pace.

“It helped that he wasn’t really interested in our child. He became obsessed with a new girl. He was travelling and partying with her. I started to have hope that I’d been completely forgotten.” Lost in the past, she grips Rogue’s hand tightly as she pales. “Then you came early... as triplets tend to...”

“He came for Ruin, didn’t he?” I ask softly.

“I didn’t think he would.” Tears slip down her weathered face. “He didn’t come to the hospital after the birth. He didn’t contact me at all. I was discharged from the hospital a few days after I delivered, but you boys were in the NICU for weeks. I visited you every day. Spent every hour I could holding all three of you close. I believed I’d gotten lucky. I’d escaped him and I had the three of you.”

Rebel drops into a crouch in front of her. There’s a storm of emotion in his expression. Pain, anger... compassion. He reaches out and puts his hand on her knee. “Go on.”

“I had a friend with a spare room, ready to let us stay with her. Someone I met after your father and I ended. Someone who had nothing to do with his world. I trusted her to help keep us safe. When you were finally strong enough to

go home, she drove me to the hospital and accompanied me to the nursery. All we had to do was transport you to the car. I watched my friend carry you two out as I finalized the paperwork. Watched her buckle in your car seats and turn to wait for me. We were home safe.”

She covers her mouth as a moan slips from her lips. “That’s when your dad caught up to me. He took Ruin’s carrier from my hand and walked away without a word. I chased him into the parking garage. Begged him to give me back my baby.”

“He handed the baby off to the woman in his car while the two men with him held me back. Then he warned me to never try to contact his son. That he would kill me if I did. After that he got into his car and drove away.”

My heart breaks for her, and I find my hand itching to touch my belly. I couldn’t imagine going through what she has. Wanting my baby and having him stolen from me.

“His goons roughed me up and left me unconscious in the parking garage. I ended up back in the hospital with broken ribs. My friend must have realized what was happening, thankfully. She took you home with her and kept you safe. I came for you as soon as I was released.”

Rogue catches my gaze over her head. I can see he's thinking the same thing I am. He would tear the world apart looking for that baby if it were ours.

"I grieved your brother," she says. "For weeks, before I packed you and everything we owned into a couple of bags and hopped on a bus. Found a quiet suburb and settled far enough away from your father to not have to constantly look over my shoulder."

"Christ, Mom." Rogue's emotions are clearly written on his face. "Why didn't you report it to the police?"

"I did. Your father had influence. No one was going to help me. The cops didn't believe me when I tried to report the kidnapping. Or the beating." She sobs. "I was scared that if I tried to push it that he would find out about the two of you. And that he would take you too. I couldn't deal with that. I made the choice to pretend you were twins. Not knowing if I would ever see Ruin again..."

"That why you misused your meds all those years?" Rebel asks. The anger, though still there, has diminished, replaced with hurt, but also understanding. "Why you started using when Riot was little?"

“It hurt so much.” She curls inward. “My heart was never whole. I couldn’t get over it... I couldn’t move on. Not until he showed up here. I was sitting right here and he walked up to me and called me Mom and I knew.”

“He calls himself Henry West now,” I say.

She smiles and takes my hand. Squeezes it. “Henry is what his dad called him. West is for her. The girl he came to L.A. to find.”

“Our dad or his adopted dad?” Rebel looks at me, probably because I’m the one who told him that West was adopted.

I nod. That’s what Dizzy told me. It could have been another lie.

“Ruin was only adopted on paper,” their mother says. “It was a part of removing any trace of me from his life. His adoptive father is your father.”

“And the girl.” Rogue glances at me. “That has to be Dizzy.”

“He’s so tall and handsome. Just like you two. But he’s been through more than you could ever imagine at the hands of that man. He wouldn’t speak of it, but I could feel it.

The coldness in him. The pain. He had no one until the girl. And even then his father no doubt manipulated his interaction with her.” She appears haunted as she clutches at her stomach. “I was a shitty mother, and that was not okay, but at least you had each other. He’s not like you boys. I need you to promise me that you won’t approach your brother. He’ll come to you in his own time. When he’s ready for you to know who he is.”

“Too late for that,” Rogue says. “If he didn’t want us hunting him down, he shouldn’t have spied on us or come after Ivy.”

“He’s less compassionate than you, Rogue. More angry than you could ever be, Rebel.” She stares at them both with a sharper eye than I think either expects. “Damaged in ways you can’t even begin to understand.”

“Because of our dad?” Rebel asks.

“He did things that no normal person would do.” She shivers. “But I didn’t know that until it was too late. By the time I found out I was on his hook. It took everything I had to get away from him with you two. And even then I was always waiting for him to find me. When I read that he died a couple of years ago, I cried tears of joy. All these years of fear... the weight lifted off my shoulders in an instant.”

I feel a little dizzy. It's all so much to take in. All this time they had no idea what their mother went through or was hiding from them.

"He's dead?" Rogue's expression flickers with indecision.

"Hang on." Rebel frowns. "You said he died a couple of years ago, but you let me take that movie role seven years ago. You weren't worried that our dad would notice when we became famous?"

"I..." Betty stares at her hands in her lap.

"Mom." Rebel shakes her knee. "Tell me."

"I thought maybe if you were famous you would be untouchable. I thought he might not be able to hurt you if you were surrounded by photographers and reporters and bodyguards. And you were so good... so charismatic... so desperate to make it... that I knew you would. And he didn't come for you. And he didn't come for me." She shrugs. "I thought maybe..."

"We were safe." Rebel exhales.

"Then I heard about your fight with that boy."

Rebel and Rogue and I exchange glances. She has to be talking about Alec. What has my brother got to do with this?

“What about Alec?” Rebel asks.

“His last name is Hawthorne,” she says.

“What?” I don’t understand.

Rogue’s brow creases. “Mom, what’s our dad’s name?”

“Robert,” she says. “Your dad’s name is Robert Hawthorne.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Rogue

A lone bird flutters its wings and makes the leaves rustle as it hops from branch to branch above us. A car engine hums close by. Someone laughs across the lawn.

Rebel, and me, and Ivy; oh, we couldn't be more silent as we glance at each other.

"Did you..." Rebel slips a finger inside his collar and tugs it away from his neck. *Did she...*

No, she couldn't have... Because that would be... well, that would mean... "Mom."

"Did you say Robert Hawthorne?" Ivy beats me to the question.

"Yes." Mom twists her hands in her lap.

There's no way. "It's not true."

But what if it is? "Oh my God, we need to google."

Rebel already has his phone in his hands, his thumbs are practically a blur.

Ivy is the color of paper. She opens her mouth and closes it again. Shuts her eyes like she's struggling with the thought as hard as we are. Whimpers. Opens her eyes again. "He's not related to a Nicole Hawthorne is he?"

"Fuck me," Rebel exclaims, stopping what he's doing to stare at Ivy and then me. His thumbs start to move faster.

"What you're saying is...?" No! Just no! We're not going there. We are not considering the implications of Ivy being a... *No! There is no fucking way!* I leap off the bench and stumble backwards. "Mom, tell me it isn't true."

She rubs the heel of her palm against her chest. Sniffs. "I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you differently, but Robert was your father. I am one hundred percent certain of that fact."

"My last name used to be Hawthorne," Ivy's voice is quiet, strained. "Before my dad changed it legally. I was born a Hawthorne. My mom's name is Nicole Hawthorne. Have you ever heard of her?"

"You have to tell us that you don't know her." I grab her by the shoulders. This is a coincidence. What are the

chances that our father and Nicole are related? “It’s a common enough name. There are a lot of people with that last name.”

“Rogue.” Ivy covers her mouth with her hand. Shakes her head.

“Rogue,” Rebel calls my name.

That tone... the way he clears his throat... the way I can sense he’s watching me before I turn around and see the awkward apology in those identical blue eyes.

“Don’t say it.” All I want to do is grasp Ivy’s hand. Pull her against me. Protect us from the words I know are coming next without having to hear them. But I don’t reach for her. “Please don’t say it.”

He holds his phone up and turns the screen for me to see. “Nicole and Robert Hawthorne are siblings. They were born and raised together in Phoenix. Alec Hawthorne is our cousin. Ivy—”

“Don’t say it,” I snarl.

“Is our cousin.” He pushes the information on me.

Ivy whimpers behind me, and I whip around to see the woman I love stare at me with absolute agony and horror in her beautiful eyes. “No.”

“No, baby.” My own eyes grow blurry. I take a step toward her. It isn’t true. “It can’t be true.”

Not after all we’ve been to each other. What we are to each other. And the possibility that Ivy is carrying my child.

She trips as she backs away from me. “What if it is?”

“Then...” I don’t know. The hand I’d reached out to steady her drops to my side. “It’s not. Think about it... have you ever met Robert Hawthorne? Or our brother?”

“No, but... I never met any of Nicole’s side of the family.”

“Ever heard her mention them?”

“No,” Ivy whispers.

“What about Alec?”

A crease forms between her brows. “I...I don’t know.”

“That’s your dad.” Mom points at the man in the picture Rebel is showing her. “I remember her too. She could be so cruel.”

And yet, fate, it seems, is crueller and far more damaging than Nicole could ever possibly hope to be.

An orderly approaches. “Betty, it’s time to go in.”

“I think I need to stay,” Mom says.

“You need to take your meds,” the orderly reminds her.

“Right.” Mom glances around like she’s searching for something. “But I—”

“It’s okay, Mom,” I say softly. We got what we came for. Even though I want the result to be something else. Anything else.

She smiles at us. “I wish the circumstances of your visit had been different. It was lovely to see my boys.”

We watch the orderly escort her away before Rebel says, “You can legally marry your first cousin in California.”

“That’s not fucking helpful,” I snarl at him before I turn to Ivy again. “We don’t know that it’s true. We don’t know that our dad is this Robert Hawthorne. Mom isn’t the best with reality. And she’s clearly had her head filled with who knows what by this West. We don’t even know if he’s our brother.”

“He’s your brother.” Ivy shakes her head. “That much you can’t explain away. And I can’t—”

“You can’t be out here all alone.” Rebel walks over and takes her arm with a warning glance for me. *I’ve got her. Let’s get out of here.* “It’s not safe with Alec on the loose. And we don’t know anything factually yet.”

“Okay.” She bows her head and lets my twin... uh, triplet... lead her to the car.

I fall in behind them. If all of it is true... if Ivy is my cousin... Nicole won’t even have to try to tear us apart. It’s already happened. And God, that hurts like a cannon ball to the chest.

We pile into the Range Rover. Jackson is driving, but this time I’m in the front while Rebel sits beside Ivy. He talks to her quietly while she stares out the window at the scenery.

I pretend that I don’t hear her crying. Even though every fiber in my body fights to jump across seats and haul her against my body, hold her, and tell her that everything is going to be all right. That I love her. That I will always love her. What we have isn’t perverted. We didn’t make a huge mistake. We simply didn’t know.

When we get back to the apartment, she walks ahead with Jackson. And barely looks up from her toes the entire ride up in the elevator.

Jackson leaves us for the control room the minute we alight. Rebel disappears inside like his ass is on fire.

“Ivy?” I say her name at the door to our home. The one we’ve been sharing for weeks now. Part of that time as husband and wife, even though it was fake as shit. But it was everything to me. “We should talk.”

“I can’t,” she says and hurries toward the bedroom we’ve shared for so many nights. Blissful evenings spent with her wrapped around me. Where we’ve fucked until the sun rose. Made love. Enough that she’s most likely carrying my baby.

I don’t go after her. This chasm that’s opened up between us seems too big for either of us to cross.

I stand there for a long minute and then I grab a bottle of tequila from the drink cart and head out to the balcony. I need a cigarette and more alcohol than any human should consume.

We can take out Alec. We can fight Nicole. But how the fuck do we fight DNA?

Rebel joins me halfway through my second shot and my first cigarette. He drops onto one of the wicker lounges.

“You didn’t know.”

“I know that,” I grump.

“We don’t even know that it’s true.” He leans forward with his hands between his knees. “You said it yourself. Mom isn’t the most credible person.”

“I’d agree, but Ivy met our brother.” I draw in a jagged breath. Exhale a cloud of smoke. “She told us about him. If he exists, then...”

He steals my tequila and swallows a mouthful. “Chances are that this one time Mom is actually telling the truth about our dad.”

My world is imploding with every breath. “Truth that she’s avoided telling us for twenty-seven years. And if what she told us today is true, then it makes sense why she didn’t come clean earlier.”

“So we have to assume that Ivy is our cousin.” Rebel scrubs a hand over his mouth. “Fuck.”

We fall silent as I butt out my cigarette. The flame flickers while I try to light a second. I don’t really need it. Or even want it. But I need something to do with my hands. With my mind. With my time. Or I’m going to march in there and...

I don't know what I'll do. That's the part that I'm avoiding. Because I can't imagine I'll ever be able to turn off these feelings I have for Ivy. "What do I do?"

"DNA test." Rebel's knee bounces. "Hope it comes back a hard no and that all this is a bad dream."

Pregnancy test. Hope that we're not... "Fuck. This is so messed up."

"We need to make sure Ivy is still on the same page about Nicole. If not we need to talk her into sticking with us and letting us protect her no matter the status of our relationship."

She might even throw herself on Nicole's mercy if there's no point where we get to be together. She already agreed to Nicole's terms when she bought us more time. It's only a small leap to her surrendering herself. And that will mean she'll end up married to Nathaniel Croft.

She's supposed to be mine. And I can't just stand by and let her marry another man, one who has spent years grooming her to be his perfectly meek wife.

If I can't be the man who loves her, I will be the man who protects her. Until another comes along who can love her

and protect her the way I thought I'd spend the rest of my days doing, I won't leave her safety to chance.

That marriage isn't going to happen any more now than it was before we found out the truth of our birth. That creep's smug face comes to mind. The way he didn't seem bothered about giving her time. The certainty he had that she would show up when she was told to.

"He fucking knew." I climb to my feet and toss the cigarette in the sand trap. "Fucking hell, I'm going to kill him."

"Alec?" Rebel follows me inside.

"Nathaniel Croft," I spit. "He knew we were cousins. He knew Ivy would go to him."

"Whoa." He rushes after me as I enter the bedroom, which is empty. "That's a leap."

Through the closed bathroom door I can hear water running, so she's probably in there. Hiding from me. From the truth of what we are. Possibly deciding she might as well marry that prick and save us all a fight. "That asshole isn't getting his hands on her. Not as long as I breathe."

“You’re upset right now. Shaken. Not thinking straight.” Rebel is in my face.

I stalk into the wardrobe and punch the keycode on my safe and take out the gun I keep there. Not that I’ve ever wanted to use it. Or perhaps I should say I never thought about using it. I only bought it as a precaution. But now... what have I got to lose?

I load the clip while he keeps telling me how much of a stupid idea this is.

“You can’t be serious.” He steps into my path as I tuck the weapon into the waist of my pants. “Today has been a lot. I’m right there with you, brother. But going after the lawyer isn’t going to change what you’re really pissed about.”

I snarl at him through a haze of red. “Get out of my way.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ivy

Eyes swollen and red, I sit on the edge of the tub while the water whooshes in. This can't be happening. It can't be true. Rogue and I can't be related. It isn't fair. After everything we've been through... all the nights we've spent together.

I'm struggling to drag air in and out of my lungs as I stand and move to the vanity. Opening the top draw, I take out the box I placed there hours earlier. I was scared to be pregnant. Nervous. But I wanted it. And now... everything I hoped for is wrong. My heart is wrong. My images of the future... impossible.

Blackberry scented bubbles sweeten the air. Steam thickens it. My stomach churns again. My throat still burns from vomiting up stomach bile when we got back to the apartment.

Rogue is my cousin. I'm in love with my... cousin. I might be pregnant... with my cousin's child. Kill me now. This can't be happening.

I peel the plastic from the box, my fingers shaking so much it's almost impossible to remove the wrapping.

For the first time since the doctor suggested I might be pregnant I am truly terrified that the result will be positive.

My heart is breaking. The man I love... he was never meant to be mine, was he? It's like fate is playing the cruellest of tricks on us. Laughing at us.

Tears brim over my lashes. A painful sound comes from somewhere deep inside me.

We're supposed to be happy. In this together. But I've never felt this torn apart. The box taps against the hard surface as I brace myself.

What am I going to do if it's positive? How am I supposed to ever look Rogue in the face again either way?

Taking a deep breath, I rip into the cardboard. Better to get this over and done with now. At least once I know, I can work out what to do.

Tipping the box end up, I drop the pregnancy test and instructions out on the counter. Unfolding the paper, I read the steps.

Okay, this is straightforward. Just take the cap off and pee on the end. Then wait for the one or two lines to show up.

I go through the motions and wash my hands and set the timer on my phone. And then I hold that stick two inches from my nose while I turn off the water in the bath.

“Get out of my way,” Rogue roars.

“You’re pissed.” Rebel raises his voice. “I’d be angry too. But I’m not going to let you be this stupid.”

Rogue roars again.

It’s followed by a bang against the door that makes me jump. Another bang sends the door flying open. Rogue and Rebel tumble in.

Rogue’s trying to throw fists at his brother. Rebel wraps his arms and legs around him in an attempt to lock his limbs in place.

I scream as I jump out of their way. The plastic stick goes flying out of my hand. Up, up... down.

“Shit,” I shout as I scramble to catch it.

“Is that a...” Rebel gapes as I juggle the test, almost save it, then lose it again. He takes a fist to the side of his jaw. Grunts. “...pregnancy test?”

It lands with a plop in the bathwater and sinks beneath the bubbles.

“Motherfucker.” Rogue groans as he scrambles up from the floor and dives a hand in after the test. Beating me to it, which is good considering I’m still stuck with the cast.

Rebel flops onto his back and starts to laugh. “Dude.”

“This isn’t funny,” Rogue snarls as he searches the bottom of the tub for the plastic stick.

“It kinda is.” Rebel holds his stomach and grunts. “Sorry, you don’t see this from the outside, but I did not have you knocking up our cousin on my bingo card.”

“I swear to God, bro.” Rogue has both arms in the bath now. His sleeves are drenched.

“The test?” I want to reach out and squeeze his shoulder and tell him it’s okay, but we are so far from okay. It can’t be true. This can’t be how we end. It just can’t be true.

He pulls out the sodden test. Shakes it off. The indicator paper shows nothing. “Well, at least we know the

bath water isn't pregnant.”

Rebel laughs harder and starts to wheeze.

Rogue drops onto his ass and rests his head against the rim of the tub. He stretches out a leg and manages to kick Rebel with it. “Shut up, fuck face.”

I put the test in the trash. We need another one, but it's late now. It'll have to wait until tomorrow. “What if we are pregnant, Rogue?”

He catches my hand. Curls his fingers around mine. “You know this is all bullshit. We're not related, Ivy.”

His fingers on mine feel so right, but I can't shake the feeling that it's wrong. Holding onto hope is a fool's errand. We're wrong. And nothing we can do can ever fix that.

I withdraw.

Rogue's face falls. The pain in his eyes is like a knife to my heart. I've hurt him. But this is hurting me too.

Rebel puts no effort into moving from flat on his back, but his shoulders have ceased shaking. His blue eyes are dark with thought. “You can't leave, Ivy. You understand that. You two might not be able to be together, at least not until we have a DNA test to back up or deny what we learned today, but

you're safe with us. With Nicole you're not. With Alec out there I'm not sure you're safe anywhere else."

I sit on the edge of the tub. Brush the wetness from my eyes. Stare down at Rogue's upturned face and wish that we never went to Sunny today. Wish that I could go back to being blissfully unaware so that my heart wouldn't feel so shattered at the pain I see in his eyes. "I get it. I'm not going to leave. As long as you're okay with me being here."

His eyes shutter before he turns away. "Yeah, of course I am."

He wears his emotions on his sleeves. I love that about him. But now he's hiding them from me. Our connection is so far out of my reach. It's isolating in a way I didn't expect.

"No matter what, you're our family, Ivy." Rogue swallows and it's all I can do to fight the thoughts I have about how much I love his Adam's apple. "We'll find a way to be okay. Besides, if you do surrender to their demands and try to marry that douche, I'm going to have to kill him to make sure that doesn't happen."

"He's serious." Rebel drags himself up. "Dickhead has a gun and everything."

“You do?”

He drags the weapon from the small of his back. Shows it to me then rests it on the tiles beside him. “Safety is on.”

“Why do you have that?”

“For emergencies.”

“Going after some hotshot asshole lawyer doesn’t count as an emergency.” Rebel snags it by its barrel and puts it on the counter above his head. “What I want to know is when did you decide owning a gun was something you needed to do.”

“Right around the time Alec tried to kill Ivy,” Rogue says.

“Makes sense.” Rebel nods. “But this isn’t how we’re going to solve this problem.”

“No, it’s not.” Rogue curls up his fingers on the tiles. “We need a DNA kit and a pregnancy test.”

“We need to find out more about Robert Hawthorne and our long lost brother,” Rebel says. “I cannot believe we’re cousins with that asshole Alec.”

“I still think we’re missing something with him.” My fingers toy with the key resting against my breastbone. “If we’re all related why does he hate you so much and want me dead?”

“I guess it helps explain why Nicole hated the idea of me and you so much,” Rogue says.

“That’s another thing. Why not just come out and tell me?” Surely she would have loved to have been the one to share that news. And it would have been much easier to manipulate me into marrying Nathaniel.

“Perhaps because then she would have to admit she’s related to us.” Rebel gets up in one fluid movement. “Although I think we got the worse end of the deal.”

“She would only have been admitting it to me.” It’s not like I would have shared that information with anyone. Okay, I would have shared it with Adira, but that’s as far as it would have gone. “It doesn’t make sense to go to the effort of a restraining order. Or framing Rogue instead of just telling me something that would have stopped us from being together in the first place. We’re missing something.”

“Yep, well, we’re not going to work it out on empty stomachs.” Rebel’s words are punctuated by a loud grumble

from his abdomen. “Let’s order some food and fill Summer and Riot in on this development.”

He snags the gun from the counter and walks out with it.

Rogue straightens to his feet. The sleeves of his shirt are soaked from wrist to shoulder. He reaches for the hem and drags it up over his torso.

I slap a hand across my eyes and turn my back to him. I’ve seen him naked a thousand times. Maybe even more. But that was before... now it all feels so wrong. Especially when my body reacts by tightening in anticipation.

The wet garment splats on the tiles.

He clears his throat. “You can have the bedroom. I’ll move my stuff out. At least until we have DNA proof that we’re not...”

“Or we are.” God, I hate this. “You don’t need to do that. This is your house. I can move my things.”

“I want you to be comfortable, Ivy. I want you to feel safe. Even if we...”

The silence is awkward and uncomfortable. I can’t stand it. “Thanks.”

“Yeah.” His voice is laced with pain.

He leaves the bathroom and I drop my hands from my tear-filled eyes. I feel like I’m dying inside. Hollow, shattered. Everything in me is screaming that this can’t be real. I love Rogue so much.

That can’t be wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ivy

I can't sleep. Everything about this room reminds me of Rogue. Our bed... the pillows... they smell like him. The sheets feel cooler against my skin without his body heat to warm me up.

I glance at the clock on his side of the bed. Normally I would have to peel my head off his chest to see it.

“Ugh.” I bunch my fists and slam them into the covers. Every muscle in my body is taut. Strung tight enough to snap.

Rogue had a way of fixing that. I can practically feel his mouth on my skin, weaving a trail up my arm to my shoulder and then down my torso to my...

Growling, I flop onto my stomach and punch the pillow beside me before I drag it over my head to muffle my scream.

I thought after all the tears I've cried I would be able to sleep, that I wouldn't be recalling every moment Rogue and

I have shared in this bed. Well, all the ones that I can remember. Which seems to be more and more. Reliving them. Seeing them in a different light. I'm done. I'm fucking done. How can this be my life?

My phone vibrates on the nightstand beside me, and my breath catches.

I drag the pillow from off my head as I reach for my device. Stare at the screen.

I scramble to answer the call. "Daddy?"

"Ivy, sweetheart, listen..." the voice is quiet like it's far away from the phone. The line is full of static.

My heart climbs into my throat. "Dad?"

"One. One. One. Three. Zero. Three."

"Daddy? Is that you?"

"Listen, Ivy, I don't have much time. They're going to kill me. Write that number down now. You're going to need it."

"Please, Daddy, I don't understand." A part of me knows from the breaks and pauses in his speech that this is a recording. I'm talking to a ghost from the past, but the ache is overwhelmingly fresh.

“I’m sorry.” He makes a strangled sound. “I’m sorry I didn’t know to protect you.”

The line goes silent.

“Dad?” I swing my legs over the bed. It hurts when he doesn’t answer, even though I don’t expect him to. He knew Nicole was dangerous, but we’ve already worked that out. He knew she would kill him.

I open the drawers in my nightstand and scrounge around for a pen, but there isn’t one.

Rogue’s nightstand yields the same result. So I rush into the bathroom, uncap my eyeliner and write the number on the mirror. “One. One. One. Three. Zero. Three.”

“Are they supposed to mean something to me, Dad? Because they don’t.” My hand strays to my breastbone, but I took the key off before I crawled into bed. His messages are cryptic and clueless and I’ve never been more confused. More lost. “What am I supposed to do without your guidance?”

A knock on the bathroom door alerts me to his presence before Rogue says my name.

“I could hear you moving around, talking to someone. I was worried.” His eyes are bleary and his hair sticks up at

odd angles. The whites of his eyes are threaded with pink. I throw myself into his arms. His bare chest is hot against my cheek as he brings an arm up around my shoulders. “What’s wrong? What’s with the numbers?”

He smells so good. Too good. And if I don’t put space between us I may never be able to. I reluctantly pull away and he barely manages to let me.

I push the hair out of my face. Will this ever get easier? “I had another call from my dad’s number. This time I answered before the call dropped. It was him. It was his voice. He sounded just like I remembered.”

“Your dad... It can’t be him.”

“No, I know.” I wipe under my lashes. “It was a voice recording. He gave me these numbers. Told me that I would need them. That he knew they were going to kill him. That he was sorry he couldn’t protect me.”

“They?” Rogue raises an eyebrow. “He said *they* were going to kill him?”

“Yes. Do you think it matters?”

“Probably not.” He bites his lip. “He could have been talking about Nicole and the man who caused the accident. Or

he could be talking about Nicole and that creep lawyer. It's safe to assume he's as deeply a part of this as Nicole."

"I want to talk to Nathaniel," I say. "I think I need to see this deal my dad made on my behalf. Because he wouldn't have made one without a good reason."

"He doesn't need a good reason, Ivy. Not when it's fake."

"We don't know that it is." Because apparently we don't know anything about anything. That has become dreadfully obvious in the last few days. I'm even more determined to meet with Nathaniel after our visit to Sunny. His feelings for me could be his weakness. "And if it's real... then maybe there is something in it that will explain why my dad felt he had to make that deal."

Rogue rubs the top of his thumb over his bottom lip. "I'm not sure—"

His hesitancy is totally understandable, but meekness has never gotten me anywhere, and I have a feeling about this. "If I can just talk to Nathaniel, without Nicole around, I might be able to get him to admit why they need this marriage to happen. He seems eager to show me that he cares. Maybe I can use that to my advantage."

“So we’ll go talk to him.” Rogue’s jaw softens.

“No,” I say, quiet but insistent. “I need to do this without you.”

His neck cords, the muscles prominent. “The hell you’re going to see him alone.”

“Rogue, this isn’t a discussion. I’m telling you that you’re not coming with me.”

“Baby.” He winces when the pet name drops from his lips. His skin turns a subtle shade of green. “Ivy, even if you’re right... and you might not be... you’re talking about confronting the man who wants to marry you so badly he’s willingly played a part in covering up your dad’s murder. He helped Nicole murder another man so she can frame me. All the while hiding that we’re related. If you go to him alone, he will not let you go.”

I cross my arms over my chest and jut out my chin. “Then I won’t go alone.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ivy

“Tick tock. Tick Tock,” Dizzy says with a big smile that lights up her eyes.

She’s wearing my bunny ears on her head, but the tips of the ears are as pink as the tips of her hair. She takes my hand.

Twining our fingers together, she tugs me along. “We can’t be late.”

“Late for what?” I hurry to keep up with her, my heels clicking on the marble floor as we run toward the railing on the second level. Below us a double staircase leads to the foyer of my family home. There are wrought iron panels every few steps where the iron has been twisted and curved into filagree spindles.

The wooden handrail is smooth under my palm, glossy and silken from constant polishing. Red satin bows, gold bells, and holly hang from it.

A chandelier is suspended between the two staircases, heavy with crystals. Below is a circular stone table with a huge spray of red roses in a tall vase. A pair of turtledove figurines sit beneath it.

“To your birthday party, silly,” she calls out, already halfway down the stairs.

“What? How did you get so far ahead? Wait up.” And what does she mean, I’m late to my birthday party? That’s the last thing I want to deal with right now. “I don’t have time for this, Dizzy. I need to work out how to stop Nicole.”

“Everyone will be there.”

I catch up to her at the bottom of the stairs. She wraps her hand around my wrist and drags me along.

When did my cast come off? And why is Dizzy in my childhood home? “What are you talking about?”

“Where’s your invitation?” she asks.

“What? Why do I need an invitation to my own party?” I start to pat my pockets only to discover that I’m wearing a white dress. It has a fitted bodice with a sweetheart neckline that makes my boobs look phenomenal. And a top layer that is cut out to look like leaves.

I have coveted this dress online. Obsessed over the delicate stitching and lace work. It's beautiful. It doesn't have pockets though. "I don't have one."

"Of course you do." She looks at me like I'm the one not making sense. "It's in your hand."

"Oh." I look down. The envelope I'm clutching is the same one I received from my father when I was at Mojito. On the front are six numbers.

"Open it." Dizzy giggles as a shadow passes over us.

I shiver, the hair on my arms standing up. Tearing into the envelope I pull out a key. "Is this the invitation?"

"Hush. He's coming for you." Dizzy puts a finger to her lips and smiles. "We better hurry."

Somewhere inside the house someone starts to whistle. That song. It was Alec's way of letting me know he was coming for me. My pulse quickens as the shadows around us grow longer. "Are you working with Alec? Did you know he's Rogue and West's cousin?"

"Oh I know everything," she says. "He told me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I dig my heels in as she drags me toward a set of double doors. "He told

you what? Who is he?"

"We can't be late." She snatches the key from my hand and inserts it in the lock in the double doors. Twisting the handles, she opens both doors at once.

"We're here, Miss Love." Jackson's announcement drags me out of the memory of last night's vivid nightmare and returns me to the backseat of the Range Rover.

Alec barely made an appearance in the nightmare. West didn't at all. And I'm certain most of it was conjured by the stress we've been under. But I can't shake this ominous feeling that's taken up residence in my spine.

We are running out of time. There are only three days left until Nicole realizes that I have no intention of doing what she wants and takes it out on Rogue. Which means we have three days to work out why she's so determined to make me go through with marrying Nathaniel and how to stop her.

I have no idea how we're going to do that.

My fingers close around the key at my throat. The presence of the warm bit of metal still makes no sense to me. The numbers from last night's phone call could be for the

Lotto as much as anything else. I'm having dreams where Dizzy and West are taunting me with things that I should know but don't.

All I have are questions, when what we need are answers.

I glance out the window at the building that houses Nathaniel Croft's law firm. I haven't been here in years. Not since my dad was alive. But that deal he made... it doesn't make sense... so there had to be a reason. Something that will help us understand the big picture. So we know what to do next.

He pulls the car up to the curb. "Let me get your door for you, Miss Love."

"Thanks Jackson." I unclip my seatbelt and take a few deep breaths to center myself while he hops out and walks around the outside.

Rogue was shut away with his lawyer when we left.

It was probably for the best. Not being around him is easier than having to shy away from his touch or watching him flinch like I've burned him.

Just like me, he is devastated because we were meant to have a lifetime of happiness. And instead all we have is tragedy.

The door opens and Jackson stands there. “Miss Love?”

“I’m ready.” A shiver runs down my neck as I step out of the car. The street is busy. The pavement is a river of moving bodies, filled with rips where people fight against the flow.

I feel eyes on me from every direction as Jackson cuts a path through the pedestrians for me. From the vehicle pulling up to the curb two cars down from ours. From the woman walking past who probably wonders why she recognizes my face but can’t pinpoint it yet. From the corner of the building, just out of sight.

“Not Alec,” I murmur to myself. We checked. Not fifteen minutes ago he was across town, eating breakfast at his favorite restaurant. Even if he knew this was where I was coming, he couldn’t have made it here yet.

I swipe clammy palms over the front of the lace dress I’m wearing. White like a wedding dress, chosen for that very reason. I’m hoping Nathaniel will read my wardrobe choice as

a subtle hint that I'm preparing myself to be his wife and that he'll drop his guard.

His office is on the fifth floor. It's a short elevator ride, but the entire time I'm counting the numbers and scratching the pads of my thumbs with my nails.

We walk down a short hallway before glass doors open into an expansive reception area. I cross the honey wood floors ahead of Jackson. Abstract art and a curved white desk give the space a modern feel while tinted floor to ceiling windows let in the mid-morning sun.

The twenty-something woman at the desk has red pin curls and several phone calls on hold. She gives me the once-over as I approach her, then raises her hand when I open my mouth. "One moment."

She finishes her conversation before looking at me again. Her gaze scuttles to Jackson, who is, as usual, making note of everything he sees. "How can I help you?"

"I want to see Nathaniel," I demand.

Her eyes round in the corner. "Do you have an appointment?"

“He’ll want to see me.” I glance over my shoulder. I still feel like I’m being watched. Jackson doesn’t make me less aware of the danger, but he does make me feel safer.

There was no one in the elevator with us. And there is no one behind me now. Paranoia? Of course I’m paranoid. Rogue was right when he said this was a risky move. Even with Jackson here it feels like I’m sticking my fingers to the fire, knowing full well that I might get burned.

But I would rather fight for my freedom than have my fate dictated to me and not try to stop it.

The receptionist puts a call through to her boss, and before I can take a seat the door to his office opens. He fills the space in a black Tom Ford suit and gelled back hair. His eyes light up and a tentative smile flips up the corners of his mouth. “Ivy, I wasn’t expecting you.”

Bile threatens to rise in my throat. I almost put a hand to my belly to calm the nerves as I walk toward him. If I’m going to get anything from him I’m going to need to act like I’m at least planning on keeping my word.

“I want to see the contract.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ivy

His lips thin as his smile widens. His gaze narrows on the bodyguard trailing me. “Of course. Come into my office.”

He shifts aside and I step into his office. The rectangular room is decked out almost entirely in black, from the bookshelves that line the wall behind his desk to the matching client chairs that sit in front of it.

At the other end of the room there’s a modern sofa with round arms and no back. In front of that is a smoke-tinted glass topped table.

A small bar is built into the wall, complete with glasses and decanters of no doubt top shelf liquors.

The sound of the door clicking shut makes me jump. I hope he doesn’t notice the way my shoulders tensed. Or the claw marks I’m leaving in the center of my palms.

Jackson takes a vigilant but relaxed stance near the door.

“Where is it?” I ask.

“How about something to drink?” He moves to his desk and picks up his phone. “Sigourney, can I get a pot of coffee? Oh and an assortment of those creamers. Thank you.”

“That wasn’t necessary.” He has a great view of the street. I can see the Range Rover at the pavement from right here. Did he see me from this window? Was it him I could sense watching me this entire time? “I’m not staying long.”

“Of course.” He takes a seat on his desk. His fingers move over the curved edge almost nervously.

I guess Jackson is enough to make him uncomfortable, which might work against me if I can’t get him to forget that my bodyguard is in the room. Fortunately the man is good at blending in with his environment.

Nathaniel crosses his legs at the ankle. “Your friend isn’t with you today?”

“It didn’t seem appropriate.”

“How so?” The lines around his eyes crinkle with his smile. They make him appear friendly and kind. It reminds me of the way I used to see him. Before I knew better.

“You know why.” I let the heartbreak I’m feeling seep into my tone. Let him believe I’ve given up and that I plan to come to him willingly.

The warmth in his face falters, the friendly lines flattening before he fixes his smile on more firmly. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” As much as I want to ignore his comment and the way my skin crawls like I’m covered in ants, I smile for him. I want this reaction. It’s why I dressed the way I did. Why I took extra time on my makeup and hair. I want to distract him. I want to lull him into feeling confident. I want him to slip up and tell me something that will end this nightmare. “The contract?”

“Right.” He moves his bone colored chair, the only hint of color in the room, out of the way and unlocks the bottom drawer of his desk. He pulls out a file and slides it across the desk to me. He keeps his hand on top of it. “Ivy, you know that I only have your best interests at heart.”

He doesn’t remove his hold until I feign acceptance with a nod. When he withdraws his hand, I pick up the contract and take a seat on the couch.

He sits beside me. Too close for comfort. I'm hyperaware of the way he watches me while I scour the pages. Of the way he leans his head toward mine, his eyes following the words too.

My eyebrows climb up my forehead. It's all there. Everything he's told me. My dad had plans in motion for me to marry Nathaniel. He had a trust set up to pay for the wedding. Nathaniel was to receive a wage every single year like some character from a Jane Austen novel.

But it's the why that makes it real. I cover my mouth with my hand as I read the provision that he was to take over guardianship in the event that I wasn't mentally able to take care of myself. My dad was trying to look after me because the daughter he knew was definitely not at a place where she could look after herself. And he must have known Nicole was a danger to us by then. He just didn't realize Nathaniel was too.

"You see, Ivy." He cautiously pats my knee before allowing his hand to settle there. "This is what your dad wanted for you. This is what he knew you needed."

His touch repulses me. I fight my desire to rush out of his office. Right now I need information and if that means I

have to allow him to paw me, I can handle it.

“I understand why my dad thought it was a good idea.” I turn my knees toward him. Angle in like I welcome his attention.

I warned Jackson on the way over here. Explained that he wasn't to intervene unless I couldn't control the situation myself. All it will take is one word from me if I feel unsafe, but there is a vast difference between disgust and fear.

Nathaniel's nostrils flare and his eyes round. He can't be certain I'm coming around, but he's hopeful.

“You've seen how far I've come, though, don't you?” I ask. “How much I've grown since my days in Sunny. Dr. Keller has helped me so much.”

His pupils have darkened and he seems fixated on where his hand still rests on my knee.

God, I am going to need to take a hot shower and to scrub every inch a hundred times for my skin to stop crawling.

He clears his throat. “You've grown into quite the woman, Ivy. Beautiful.”

“Smart too. Capable.”

“Yes. You are all of those things.” His brow creases.

I reach out and lift his chin. Bring his focus up to my face. “So why, if you know that I’m capable, are you insisting that I’m not?”

The spellbound look in his eyes fades. “This fling you’re having with Rogue Maddox, it has to end. There really is no other choice.”

Does he know that we’re cousins? Was he aware all this time that Rogue and I are related? “You said that I had five days.”

“Three now,” he reminds me. As though I can’t hear a clock ticking down the seconds. “And you know what comes after.”

“If I don’t marry you, Rogue will be charged with murder. You used to be a good man, Nathaniel. I’m sure of it.” I trusted him once upon a time. He was kind to me. And not in a sleazy, romantic way. “What happened? How do you get to framing an innocent man to blackmail me into marrying you?”

His shoulders hunch as he lets out a low sigh. “Perhaps I’ve become jaded.”

That is not the word I would use for him. “You want to hold me hostage for the rest of my life while you call it

caring.” He’s no different from Nicole. “And I want to know why.”

“The things I know would scare you, Ivy. And I care about you. I want to protect you from them. That’s all I am trying to do. I just want to keep you safe. That’s all I’ve ever attempted to do.”

There’s a knock on the door.

He blinks several times as Jackson steps to the side and opens the door.

The receptionist carries in a tray with a coffee pot and cups. She sets it down on the table in front of us. “Will there be anything else?”

“That’s fine, Sigourney.” He adjusts his tie, looking every bit ruffled.

Jackson shuts the door behind her when she leaves.

“Nathaniel?” I want answers.

“He thought it might help if he explained it to you,” Nathaniel says. “He knew you would never be mentally able to look after yourself. Not long-term. How many times have you already hurt yourself?”

“I’m not sure that I actually hurt myself at all.” I stand and the contract falls to the floor.

“W-what?” He levers to his feet.

“I think Alec tried to kill me,” I say. “I think he tried to drown me in the bath before I ended up in Sunny.”

He blanches, the color of his face growing whiter than his shirt collar. “No. That can’t be—”

“And I think he’s the reason I almost died a month and a half ago.” I lift my bare wrist up so that he can see the red scarring. The other is still covered in a cast. “I think he drugged me and took a blade to my wrists, Nathaniel.”

He swallows and crams his pointer finger into the inside of his tie, tugging it away from his neck as he tries to back up and almost falls over the couch. Righting himself, he captures my wrist and brings it to within a few inches of his face. There’s surprise there as he studies my scar. “Did you go to the police?”

“How can I?”

The fabric of Jackson’s jacket rustle as he moves away from the wall, inserting his presence in case Nathaniel is getting any ideas.

“I don’t actually remember it. At least, not entirely. But I’m certain it happened and it’s only a matter of time before it becomes clear.”

“You can’t go to the police.” Nathaniel’s eyes are bright with fear as he drops my wrist and moves around me. “At least not until you give me a chance to find out who... Nicole owns them. They won’t help you. We need to work out who isn’t under her control.”

“I’m aware.” How is it possible that he didn’t seem to know about Alec?

He rifles around in the bookshelves behind his desk. “You’re being manipulated. I want the best for you. That’s why I need you to stop thinking of me as your enemy. Marry me and I can look after you. That’s what your dad wanted.”

“He wouldn’t want that now. You have to know that.”

“I care about you, Ivy.”

“No you don’t. If you did you wouldn’t be working with my mother.”

He makes a frustrated sound. “Sometimes you don’t get a choice.”

I feel that way about my whole life. And all it does is make me more determined to fight for the right to make my own decisions. I won't let him and Nicole take any more of my choices away. "I will fight you every step of the way. I will not be your wife, Nathaniel. Surely you knew that the only reason I agreed to marry you was to buy time."

"I know you think you can handle the real world, Ivy, but you can't. You're not prepared for it." He pulls out a book and flips it open to the middle. Lifting the envelope hidden there he holds it out to me. "Your dad left you this. It should help."

I stare at my name written in his handwriting on the front. Snatching it from Nathaniel's hand, I hurry to the door. "I have to go."

"You think you can find a happy ending with Rogue Maddox. But you can't." He sounds sad. When I glance back he shakes his head. "I'm so sorry, Ivy. I won't tell Nicole you came here today, but this is the way it has to be. You just don't have any idea—"

"Because he's mine and Alec's cousin?" My fingers are wrapped around the handle.

"What?" He leans on his desk.

“You didn’t know?”

He shakes his head. “I—”

“Well, now we both know.” I open the door as Jackson falls in behind me. “And I still will not marry you.”

He calls after me as Jackson takes point and we make a beeline for the exit. “I’m just trying to keep you safe, trying to keep you both safe...”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ivy

Nathaniel doesn't follow us, and by the time I make it to the elevator my curiosity over the envelope in my hand is too much to ignore. Jackson presses the call button, and while we wait for the elevator, I rip open the letter.

Dearest Ivy,

On the eve of your wedding,

If you're reading this note then I unfortunately won't be there to see you walk down the aisle. But I'm sure you will make a beautiful bride. As lovely as your mother was on our wedding day.

You have to know that marrying your mother was one of the best days of my life. She was my sunshine. And then you were born and our little family was perfect. We had everything. Happiness. Love.

If only I had known what was to come. Or realized it sooner than I did. I would do anything to change our past.

I can only pray that by now you know everything and you understand why I made this deal.

Trust Nathaniel.

The man you are marrying is one that will fight much harder for you than I did for your mother. He will make you feel loved. He will ensure you have all the happiness you deserve.

Yeah, right. Dad obviously didn't know Nathaniel was working with Nicole behind his back.

The doors slide apart and before I can enter the box, the open space is immediately filled by tattoos and feral blue eyes. Jackson jerks back as he works out which triplet it is. He reaches for his weapon, but it's already too late.

Jackson crumples to the ground as I stumble back. My bodyguard is unconscious and West is looking at me like... like...

I spin around to run.

West drags me back by my hair before I can make it two steps. I don't get a chance to scream, as he wraps his hand around my neck and shoves me back against the wall so hard my head bounces on impact. Spots dance in my vision as his fingertips squeeze my windpipe. The letter falls to the floor.

For a second I have several moments of clarity...

A snapshot of falling leaves and a little girl with the whitest hair and the bluest eyes and the pinkest coat and mittens. Of a woman with equally white hair and the saddest hazel eyes in the world.

A ballroom full of people watching Rebel Maddox beat the crap out of my brother while I press stop on the recorded confession of my brother's monstrous behavior.

Rogue begging me not to run in an alleyway outside a club.

Handcuffed to a bed in Bianca Del Ray's house.

Rebel sitting opposite me at the island in Adira's kitchen while we make a deal to bring Alec down.

Alec holding my arm above my head. My body so drugged, I can barely fight. His gloved fingers wrapped around

my hand as the blade in his other hand bites into my fragile flesh while he confesses that he tried to drown me.

Tears prick my eyes. The onslaught of memories leave me breathless.

West drags me into the elevator before I can gather my wits. As soon as the doors close he thumps the emergency stop button and puts his mouth right next to my ear. “Where is she?”

I claw at his hand with both of mine. “Let me go.”

“Where is my sunshine?” He growls. “Where is Dizzy?”

“I don’t know.” I gasp, my lungs burning for oxygen. But all I can manage are the tiniest swallows of air. Where is the cool and aloof man I met in the back of the limo? This man smells like he hasn’t showered in a couple of days. His clothes are rumpled. And as much as his moves are controlled, I have this feeling he could snap at any second.

“She’s obsessed with you.” He grinds his teeth. “If you know where she is you need to tell me.”

“I don’t.” Dizzy has always been extra. But fixated? “What do you mean, obsessed?”

“I need my sunshine,” he snarls. “I need to keep her from doing anything stupid. I need to protect her.”

“Is she stalking me?” My heart rabbit kicks in my chest.

“No, that’s...” His grip eases but he keeps me pressed to the wall. “You were no doubt the last person to see her. Tell me about it.”

The last person to see her? I suck in a breath and my head swims from the rush of oxygen. I take a few smaller breaths. “I remembered what happened the other night in Narnia. I remembered... I’m starting to remember things.”

I’m so close to remembering everything. The only thing I’m not sure of is what happened the night West was supposed to help me get my memories back.

“Go on,” he orders.

“She said you wouldn’t like that. She was scared of you. She is scared of you.” But if she is stalking me then that could have been an act.

They grew up as siblings in a dangerous family. I’m not entirely sure what that entailed, but if their father could threaten to kill Betty and her unborn child, and West can hold

me hostage like this, then it would be stupid to think Dizzy wouldn't be capable of similar behavior.

“You don't know what you're talking about,” he snarls.

I shove at him, struggle against him, but all I manage is to flop around ineffectually. “I know you and Rebel and Rogue are triplets.”

“Rogue and Rebel know about me?” His nostrils flare.

“We visited your mom yesterday. She told us everything.”

His eyes widen and then narrow. “What else do you think you know, little Love?”

“I know you're a Hawthorne. That we're cousins.” I don't know why I can't just shut up. All I can put it down to is the surprise in his eyes gives me hope. I've been scared of everything for so long and it hasn't kept me safe. My world is still falling apart around me, and I am so freaking tired of it. All I have left now is the fight, and if I can disarm him then I can get free. “I know you hurt Dizzy. And that you did something to me... I don't know if you meant for me to hit my head, or if it was an accident—”

He seems to waver, his grip loosens as he allows me to slide down the wall. “So you know some things.”

“All of it.” I pry his fingers from around my neck. It might not be true, but I’m getting closer, remembering more. Putting the puzzle pieces together one piece at a time. And West seems less inclined to hurt me now.

“Not all of it.” He hits the button that starts the elevator again. “If you don’t know where my sunshine is then you’re of no use to me.”

The doors slide apart on the fourth floor and he presses the button for the fifth on his way out. “You forgot your bodyguard.”

“What about your brothers?” I call after him.

“Do I seem like a man who needs brothers?” he asks before I’m shut inside the box alone.

The minute he’s out of view the tension and adrenaline that had me fighting back deserts me. The tears I’d had under control roll down my cheeks. His sunshine is probably lucky to have gotten away from him.

The elevator bumps and the doors spring open, revealing my dishevelled bodyguard. He sways on his feet and

uses a hand on the wall for support.

I still have no idea how West took the man down so easily. Jackson is trained to deal with situations like that, but West made him look like an amateur.

“You okay, Miss Love?” He scans the empty elevator before he steps inside. He straightens, his hand resting on his service weapon.

But West didn't come here to harm me. He came for Dizzy.

“Yes, Jackson.” I run my fingers under my eyes, removing any traces of my eyeliner and mascara before I move onto smoothing my hair.

My throat hurts from where West squeezed it. If the bruises haven't already come up they will soon. But honestly, I don't think he wanted to hurt me.

He might not trust me and he clearly doesn't like the fact that I've become the target of his sunshine's obsession, but I don't think he harbors any actual malice toward me.

His entire world is wrapped up in Dizzy.

It's a feeling I understand only too well. I can't breathe knowing that Rogue and I can never be. That we can

only be as close as family. He is the one man that I have ever opened up to. The one man who found a way to crack open my shell and reach inside me.

Like the art of kintsugi, where you take shattered pottery and fix the cracks with gold, Rogue took my damaged soul and filled me with his love. The pottery becomes more attractive. I became braver, stronger, capable.

But losing him... as slow as it will be... it's already like I'm being broken all over again. Not in the same way or the same order. No, this feels like drowning. I'm kicking and screaming and fighting. He helped me find that strength.

But when the fight for my freedom is over, then I'll have to fight a whole new battle. And I'm not sure that I can convince my heart not to love him, no matter how hard I try.

That's how I think West probably feels about Dizzy. And that's why he came after me.

Why he scared me so much so it forced the memories in my head to explode behind my eyes like so many fireworks.

And now I know that if I ever see my brother again, he will kill me.

Chapter Thirty

Rogue

I knew I shouldn't have let her go to see that creep without me. It's why I planned on going despite her arguing against it. But then Jason had insisted we meet—he'd been gifted some inner knowledge of the case the police have built against me—so I'd agreed that she could take Jackson instead.

They're going to arrest me again soon. And this time it won't be so easy to walk away. There will be an arraignment, and the chance of being offered the option to post bail is low, given the severity of the crime.

The fact that we're still looking down the barrel of this particular shotgun gives me some hope though. The arrest will be followed by a court case that will no doubt be a media circus. The spotlight on me perhaps has never been brighter. Which makes me believe that Nicole isn't likely to try to have me taken out. Or at least not for a while.

It tells me she thinks I'm more useful as collateral against Ivy. Whatever her motivation, she must be desperate. And Jason agreed with that theory.

He also told me that his informant is working undercover to expose the corruption around my case. So we're not fighting alone anymore.

The whole time I was with Jason I couldn't shake the feeling that something would happen to Ivy without me there to have her back. But I'd have put money on that asshole Nathaniel trying to constrain her. Not on my evil triplet abducting her for an elevator joyride.

"Christ, evil triplet is such a cliché," I say to Rebel as I switch directions and cross the glossy white tiles of the foyer again. "Would it be too much to find out we have a nice, well-adjusted clone out there?"

"I think that cliché is supposed to be evil twin." He raises an eyebrow. "She said she was okay."

"I know that," I bite out. She called from the road, not twenty minutes ago to tell me that there'd been a scuffle with West and they were on their way back.

When I asked her what happened she told me she was still a little shaken and needed to concentrate since she was driving. Jackson was riding shotgun because he took the brunt of the attack. But that doesn't make me feel any better about it. All that does is tell me we need more security detail. At least two men on Ivy at any given time would be a great start.

"Take a breath," he says.

"Fucker," I mutter under my breath. I won't calm down until I see her with my own eyes.

There's a noise just outside the door and then it opens and Ivy walks in. Jackson is right behind her, shutting the door and saying something about making her tea.

"Thanks." She nods but her eyes are on me.

Probably because I'm stalking toward her.

I pick her up and she wraps her legs around my waist as I push her hair away from her face and run my eyes all over her. My gaze narrows on the oval prints on the sides of her neck. They'll darken into bruises before the day is out. I run my finger over a couple of them. "West did this? I'm going to kick his ass."

She clasps both hands to my face and forces my gaze to hers. “I’m not hurt, Rogue.”

“But you could have been.” I touch my forehead to hers. She means so much to me that the idea makes me physically ill. “I don’t know what I would have done—”

“Cousin.” Rebel coughs. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

She winces as she recoils from me.

My spine goes rigid. The way I’m holding her... it’s not how we are anymore.

Careful to keep an inch between us, I put her feet back on the floor.

The electricity of her skin against mine... I’m an addict going through withdrawal. God, I know it’s wrong, but I still want her so fucking bad.

But as long as there is a question over our family tree we will never be able to go back to what we were. Gnashing my teeth, I take one step back. And then another. “What happened?”

The ache in my chest is mirrored on Ivy’s face before she blinks it away. She turns her focus to my twin. “I could really use that cup of tea.”

Spinning on her heel, she exits the foyer.

“Better follow.” I sigh. What we need is time and space apart, but those are luxuries we can’t afford with the wolf at our door.

Rebel goes first and I trail after.

Jackson is handing Ivy a mug when we enter the room. Steam wafts over the lip and a tag on a string is twisted around the handle.

“Chamomile?”

“It’s calming.” She lifts it to her mouth and sips while Jackson leaves.

I love that she believes a small bag full of plant clippings can remedy the stress she’s under. But then again my younger brother is out on the balcony rolling plant clippings from a little bag into a smoke that he believes will have the same effect.

“What did West want?” Rebel asks.

”He’s looking for Dizzy. He said I was the last person to see her.”

“It’s weird. How possessive he is of her...” That he would go after Ivy in the hopes of finding her.

“It’s next level.” Rebel shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. *Except I’d go to the ends of the earth for Summer.*

Just like I would for Ivy. Will, when I get arrested for a murder I didn’t commit. Or do whatever else it takes to protect her.

“I don’t think she was hanging around because of him.” Ivy touches the base of her throat. “I think he might be hanging around because of her. He called her his sunshine.”

She drags her lip between her teeth and chews on it.

“What?”

“It was something I read in my dad’s letter before West showed up.” She makes air quotes with her fingers. “She was my sunshine.”

“It’s a fairly standard term of endearment.” Rebel says.

The arch of her nose wrinkles. “Yes, but Dad never, not once called Nicole his sunshine. And he never called me his sunshine either. I never heard him call anyone that. Until the letter.”

“Can I see the letter?”

Her gaze gets kind of distant and her mouth turns down. “I dropped it in the scuffle and by the time I realized, it was gone.”

“Do you think West has it?” Rebel asks.

“Maybe.” She lifts and drops one shoulder. “But West doesn’t seem interested in me other than as a means to find Dizzy. And he wasn’t interested in you two at all when I told him you knew about him.”

“He wasn’t interested in us?” Rebel’s brows roll together in the middle.

“Only Dizzy.” Ivy shakes her head. “And the only reason he came after me is because she’s obsessed with me. Or at least that’s what he said.”

“Obsessed or not... either way she’s bad news.” I snort. “Raised by that family.”

“I was raised by that family too.” Her gaze drops to her tea before she lifts her chin. “Or at least parallel to them. Nicole is my mother.”

“You are nothing like them,” I say bitterly.

“Nothing,” Rebel echoes.

“There’s something else.” She shivers and wraps her hand around her upper arms. “West attacking me...it brought up a lot of memories. More than I thought I’d lost. But definitely the night Alec tried to kill me. While he sliced open my wrists, h-he confessed to trying to drown me the first time. He wants me dead.”

“We won’t let that happen.” Not as long as there is breath in my body.

She turns to Rebel. “He said you stole everything from him. He was talking about his career. And Rochelle. He was so angry.”

“He’s unhinged,” Rebel says.

“I know.” She lifts a hand to push her hair out of her face. It’s shaky. These memories of Alec... her mind hid them from her for a reason. They must be hard to digest now that she’s reliving them. “It just feels like there should be more to it.”

Summer enters the room and makes a beeline for the coffee machine. “The memorial for Marty is this evening.”

“Haven’t forgotten.” The fact that we’re starting the process of saying goodbye to Marty is a weight on my chest.

It's so heavy, so constricting, it burns.

Rebel goes over to help her make her coffee. Tears spill over her lashes again while he murmurs to her and she nods.

I scratch the back of my head.

“Alec will be there.” Ivy’s words are strangled as her cup clinks on the counter. And when my eyes meet hers, they’re as round as saucers in her pale face.

“Probably.” My knuckles turn white from clenching them tightly into fists. “But he won’t try anything. Not tonight. There will be people everywhere. Media. Security. Cops. It’s too risky.”

I hope.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ivy

We take two vehicles to the memorial. Rogue, Jackson, Adira, and I in one. Rebel, Summer, and Riot in the other. The car ride is quiet, conversation minimal.

Alec is expected to show his face this evening. Adira's contact still hasn't gotten back to him with the location data. My dad hasn't sent me any more phone calls or messages from beyond the grave. And everything else would feel like it's small talk at a time when tragedy is so thick in the air that no words could possibly lessen it.

We shouldn't be saying goodbye to Marty today. She isn't supposed to be dead. And the fact that she is... because she was trying to help me. It doesn't matter that I wasn't aware. It's almost too much to bear.

The crowd starts to thicken two blocks from the venue. News vans are parked on both sides of the street. A

queue of cars moves slowly forward, passengers emptying from each vehicle before a valet attendant hops in to park it.

People dressed in black shuffle into the venue. Their expressions are sombre. Even the paparazzi seem muted today as they crowd the pavement along with a sea of mourners.

It reminds me of when my dad died. I massage my temples. Especially with the phone calls and the envelopes lately. God, I wish he were still here. I wish he had given me the information I needed instead of leaving me to work out these clues for myself.

My stomach roils and I press my hand to the aching spot when it's our turn to alight.

Adira tips his head and tugs his mouth to the side with his teeth as he joins me on the pavement. He's wearing platinum shoulder length waves with a black Audrey Hepburn inspired dress. One manicured brow raises ever so slightly.

I shake my head. With everything that's happened I haven't had a chance to get him alone and spill the tea about my multiple attempts to take a pregnancy test. Or that Rogue's my cousin. And his cousin, once removed.

There is so much I need to tell him, but there will be plenty of time to explain it all later. I let my hand drift back to my side. After the memorial, when our family and friends gather at the penthouse, I'll pull my bestie aside and fill him in.

Rogue steps up to my other side. He places his hand at the small of my back as we move with the others going inside, like we talked about before we left the penthouse.

It doesn't matter that I told Nathaniel I know that Rogue is my cousin. Or whether he alerted Nicole to that fact. It only matters that we present a united front in case Alec shows up here. After how easily he slipped through the crowd yesterday, any inch we give him might be too much.

Rogue leans in and speaks softly in my ear. "I will not let anything happen to you."

I nod. He's reassuring me that I am safe, and I should be, between our security and the media and the cops that have all shown up in force tonight.

Jackson is watching my every move. I can sense his eyes on me as we pass the media who are here to cover the funeral as much as to say their farewells to their queen. There is audio equipment and cameras everywhere.

And tonight it appears the media have called a truce on Rogue Maddox. No one asks about Mark Anders or the investigation. They don't ask whether we're married. Or about me being a Hawthorne. Tonight we are all here to mourn our loss.

Our pain has brought us together in a way we didn't expect.

Inside the venue we find Marty's grandfather and offer our condolences before we're ushered to our seats.

"I'm surprised he wanted you this close to the front," Rogue says to Rebel as I sit and fix my skirt around my thighs.

"He's speaking," Riot says. "Aren't you? I saw you preparing your eulogy."

Rebel adjusts his shirt collar and shows them a small wad of paper that he pulls from his pocket. "Martin asked me to talk about her younger years."

Rogue squeezes his twin's shoulder. "Of course he did. You were the one who knew her best."

Adira sits down next to me and takes my hand. "Not feeling well again?"

“Just nerves.” I stare at the picture of Marty on the dais. The shot was taken a few years ago. She’s relaxed. A smile lights up her eyes.

If not for me, Marty would not be going to her final resting place tomorrow. I steal my hand back and squeeze my fingers in an attempt to relieve the pins and needles.

Minute by minute the room becomes more crowded. Louder. Stuffier. The air thickens. I almost want to claw at my throat. I feel like I’m suffocating.

A young girl of maybe five or six sits in the row in front of us with her parents. She has big blue eyes and a blonde braid that reaches to her waist.

It makes me think of the beautiful angel I saw while West was squeezing the life out of me. And the little girl dressed in pink.

“What are you thinking?” Rogue asks as he takes my hand again, slipping his fingers between mine before curling them up to the knuckle.

It’s supportive and for show, but my heart latches onto that feeling like an addict. “I think... there’s something important that I need to remember.”

Adira angles his body toward mine. “Alec—”

“No. Before that. From when I was little.” I frown but then purposely smooth out my brow when the girl turns around in her chair and stares at me. “I haven’t thought of them since I was four or five years old.”

Rogue tips his head toward mine. “Who?”

“I...” I shake my head. “A woman and a little girl... I wish I knew who they were.”

“Can you tell us anything more?” Adira asks.

“Uh... the woman and the little girl both have long blonde hair.” I tug on a strand of Adira’s wig. “It’s whiter than this. And the little girl is wearing pink.”

Adira and Rogue exchange glances. Adira shakes his head.

“Anything else?” Rogue asks.

“All I know is that I must have met them in a park because I remember there being play equipment. And it must have been cold because they were dressed in puffy winter jackets.”

“And you’re certain this is important?”

I have a visceral reaction when I think of them. I can practically smell the bark chips and hear the squeal of other children in the distance. And my eyes blur with the need to cry. “I can’t be certain. It just feels like it has to be.”

“White hair?” Adira taps his chin with one black fingernail. His face contorts in concentration. “It’s not ringing my bell.”

“My knee hurt for some reason.” I touch the knee in question. I have a small scar there, barely noticeable after so many years. And yet somehow I know this memory is of the day that I got it. “I think I tripped and fell. I was definitely crying before I saw them.”

The memory doesn’t grow any clearer no matter how hard I try to focus on it.

Eventually the assembled mourners hush as the memorial begins. Rebel trudges to the stage when it’s time. His shoulders collapse forward as he adjusts the mic and glances down at the paper in his hands. “What can I say about Marty Kendall?”

He stumbles on his words a few times as he speaks about a friend he lost and then found again. A woman who

was passionate and so very driven. A woman who would never allow herself to be silenced without a fight.

His words turn watery and get stuck in the back of his throat a few times. They bring tears to the gathered. And the occasional sprout of nostalgic amusement.

Her grandfather sobs quietly throughout the whole thing.

“Marty was always in pursuit of the story,” Rebel continues. “There was no stone she would not turn to shed light on the truth. Even if sometimes we’d rather she hadn’t. But it was that same dedication that we appreciated so much in her. That made her so loyal and so brave.”

I think... I’m certain... I’m being watched. Of course there are a lot of paparazzi here, and while they came to mourn Marty that doesn’t mean I’m not still a person of interest to them. But this is different. It makes me squirm. Uncrossing and crossing my legs, I tug the hem of my skirt as close to my knees as possible. But the creep factor sticks like static cling.

Pretending to turn and whisper to Adira, I catch his eyes on me.

His mouth twists into an ugly smile.

Alec is here.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Rogue

I can tell when Ivy spots Alec because she turns to stone next to me. Her spine is rigid and she doesn't pull a breath for the longest time. Her fingers curl on her thighs, the nails digging into her flesh.

Her eyes round as she swings her attention back to Rebel while he offers the podium to anyone else who wants to say a few words.

I slip an arm around her shoulder and glance over mine just long enough to catch Alec's lips stretching over his teeth. The way he watches his sister... there's something so vicious about it. A gleam in his eye that makes me want to jump up and rush him across the many rows of mourners between us.

I make eye contact with Jackson, who nods. That eases the tension in me an almost insignificant amount, but if

Alec tries to make a scene or gets close to Ivy on our way out, he'll handle the situation.

A few familiar faces get up to share their memories of Marty. Then her editor. And her cameraman who apparently she was dating. Something I would have known if I hadn't spent years holding the grudge of all grudges.

Our last few run-ins had revolved around Ro and then Ivy. I wish I'd taken the time to find out what was going on in her world too. I pinch the bridge of my nose and bow my head as the burn behind my eyes increases.

Then the memorial is over and people start to rise. They clump off in groups to console each other or talk in murmurs to Marty's grandfather. They walk through the exits and back to their lives.

I stare at the picture of Marty. Of the girl I knew so well growing up. Sadness coats the back of my throat as Rebel presses his shoulder to mine.

My hands form fists. We've lost so much. Our friend. Our very identity has been thrown into turmoil.

Ivy touches her forehead like it pains her. She's pale and drawn and can't take her eyes off Alec now that we're on

our feet.

I tug her in closer. My fucking heart is lost too. Once we're in the car we'll put the appropriate space between us again. Thinking about it makes my teeth ache.

“Ready?” Rebel asks me and Riot.

I nod. Swallow around the wetness in my throat. The funeral tomorrow will be quieter. Only close family and friends. Somehow Martin found it in his heart to put us on that list. I'll have a chance to say what I need to say to her then.

We file into the aisle, Rebel tugging Summer in between him and Riot. Ivy stumbles and I catch her elbow to steady her. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she says. “My foot fell asleep on me.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I ignore it. Whoever it is can wait until we leave. Alec stands at the mouth of the aisle, smoothing a hand along the length of his tie.

Adira brings up the rear with Jackson, who slips past the three of us, his attention on putting himself between Ivy and the threat.

“That prick is really going to try and cause trouble at a funeral,” Adira says.

“Would you expect any differently?” My phone finally quits vibrating against my leg, but then starts up again almost immediately. Whoever it is must really want my attention. Too bad, I have eyes only for Alec.

“You should answer that,” Ivy says.

“It can wait.”

Another group enters the aisle, separating us from my brothers, forcing us to almost stop. It seems like providence so I check my phone.

Jason’s name is on the screen.

What is he calling for? He knew about Marty’s memorial. He wouldn’t call unless... I press the device to my ear. “What?”

“They’re waiting for you outside.”

“Who?”

“The police,” he says. “They’re going to arrest you tonight. My friend said they have enough to move on you now.”

“Fuck.” My heart starts pounding and the temperature rises between my ears. I squeeze my neck as I glance around the emptying venue.

“What is it?” Ivy asks me.

“Are you sure?” I ask into the phone.

“I’m about five minutes away.” I hear his car engine rev as he switches gears. “Dawdle.”

But Alec is here and even if he doesn’t plan on doing anything right now, the idea of being stuck in a holding cell while Ivy is out here alone... can’t fucking do it. “Or I could —”

“Don’t even think about it,” Jason snaps.

Ivy takes my face between her hands, capturing my focus. “What is going on?”

“They’re going to arrest me. When we go outside.”

Jason keeps yelling my name through the phone.

“She said she would give me the time.” Ivy’s eyes fill with fear.

“She’s benching me,” I say. We knew it was coming. Just not yet. “She wants you to think she holds all the power. That she can change her mind and there’s not a thing we can do.”

Ivy nods and sticks out her chin. Her voice comes out firm. “Then we are going to change the rules on this game.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to show her just how far I’ve come. It’s not only the cops out there. It’s the media too. I’m going to stir up the hornet’s nest.” She lifts up on tiptoe and touches my face. “Go with Adira. Switch outfits. Leave the back way. If they want to arrest you let’s make it as hard as possible.”

“You want me to run?”

“Just for now.” She looks at her bestie. “Help us?”

“Love, I am going to have so much fun dressing this man up again.” Adira wraps his arm around mine.

“If you do that you’ll look guilty!” Jason is screaming through the device in my hand.

“What’s the hold up?” Rebel asks, coming back to us.

“I’m about to be arrested,” I fill him in. “Jason says it’ll make me look more guilty if I avoid it.”

“You thinking about running?” Rebel raises a brow.

“She’ll make you look guilty anyway,” Ivy says. “Nathaniel promised an airtight case. I believe him.”

From everything she told me about her visit, he's actually pretty damn honest for a creepy douchebag.

"She has a point," Rebel says.

I lift my phone to my ear. "Did you hear that?"

"She better have more than a point," Jason says. "Because if you do this you're fucked."

"I don't want to leave you," I tell her. Alec is still watching her like a predator. Waiting for her to get close enough for him to torment in this public space, just to prove that she will never be safe.

"You're leaving me either way." She presses her lips to my cheek. "At least this way you won't be in jail. Go."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ivy

Breathe. Just breathe.

I'm about to do something I thought I never would. It's terrifying. Electrifying. My heart is beating at a million miles an hour as Jackson and Rebel walk with me pinned between them. My fingertips are burning from the anxiety sizzling inside me.

My lungs catch on each and every breath.

Adira is dragging Rogue into the back of the venue. Every cell in my body wants my eyes to linger on Rogue until he's gone, but I don't.

Alec's lips twitch and bare his teeth as we close in on him. He steps into the mouth of the aisle. "Ivy, my sweet little sister."

My steps falter, but that's the only sign he'll get that he scares me. I lift my chest and pull back my shoulders. "Alec."

“What happened here? I heard you’d had a rough time recently.” He raises a hand to touch my cast.

Jackson smacks his hand away. “Do not touch Miss Love again.”

“Right. Gotcha.” Alec nods at my bodyguard as his gaze skims the back of the room. “Where’d your boyfriend go? Scared that his brother-in-law won’t be accepting of your relationship?”

“Scared he’ll beat the shit out of you.” Rebel folds his arms over his chest.

Alec peers down his nose at him. “The apple really did not fall far from the tree with you lot, did it?”

Rebel lurches forward with a snarl. “Want to find out?”

Jackson inserts himself between us and Alec. “It’s time to go, Miss Love.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t visit you after you were hurt,” Alec tells me. “I feel like a terrible big brother for not being there for you. But I promise, now that I’m not preoccupied, I plan on spending more time with my baby sister.”

“The fuck!” Rebel’s voice is a thunderclap in the almost empty venue.

The stragglers turn to stare at us.

Alec smirks.

“Let’s just get out of here.” Alec is a diversion and the only reason I’m giving him the time of day is because it might buy Rogue time. My focus needs to be entirely on what I’m about to do.

“See you soon,” Alec says as we push past him.

“Looking forward to it,” I taunt him. “I’ve been remembering some things lately that I would love to ask you about.”

His eyes widen and for a second I swear I see a flicker of panic in them. I turn my back on him as we walk away.

“That was risky,” Rebel says. “Now he knows you’re a threat to him.”

“Not as much as I’m about to be,” I say as the cops converge on the entrance of the building. I’ve always been a threat to Alec. I never knew why. Never understood it. Still don’t. But whatever his reason for hating me or fearing me...

it's time to stop looking at it as a weakness and step into my power.

The leading detectives—the same two that came into our home and arrested Rogue—separate from the others as the media notices and circles.

Rebel adjusts his tie and clears his throat. His fingertips brush my lower back as he brings me to face him. His touch firms, pushing me up on my tiptoes against his chest so that I have to catch my balance with my hands on his shoulders.

Leaning in, he tickles the shell of my ear with his lips. “Do you think my brother would kill me if he saw us like this?”

“I think Summer might.”

“Probably. I'll make it up to her later.” He wraps his fingers around my throat and brushes his lips over mine.

The whole situation is bizarre and painful. Kissing Rebel while he pretends to be Rogue... it makes me miss Rogue's touch something fierce. But it's also wrong. Because it's Rebel and because he's my cousin. And even though it's

all an act and we need to buy Rogue time... the whole thing sits like a lead balloon in my stomach.

He lets me go and we walk out side-by-side to meet the crowd. Jackson sticks close, only a few steps ahead.

“Rogue Maddox.” One of the detectives approaches. “You’re under arrest for the murder of Mark Anders.”

Camera lights flash. A murmur runs through the crowd then hushes as cuffs are produced and rights are read. The energy is charged as the detectives put hands on Rebel.

Riot and Summer watch from a few yards away. Summer’s brow is creased as her thumbs blur over the screen of her phone. She and Riot must have worked out that it’s not Rogue that’s being arrested right now.

She tucks her phone into her purse and starts toward us.

A car roars up the street and double parks in the middle of the road. Jason climbs out and slams the door before he rushes across the pavement.

“I’m his lawyer,” he tells the detectives, then turns to Rebel. “Don’t say a word.”

“You’ll have to meet him at the precinct,” the detective with dark scruff and a leather jacket says.

“You two are aware that isn’t Rogue Maddox, right?” At some point Alec came out of the venue, now he inserts himself. “That’s Rebel Maddox.”

“But...” The taller detective’s gaze moves to me. “He’s with her.”

“It’s a trick,” Alec offers helpfully. “They swapped. Rogue Maddox left via the back. Probably wearing a dress and heels.”

“Is that true?” Leather Jacket asks. Without waiting for an answer, he turns to a few of the cops that have been controlling the crowd. “Go check it out. Search everywhere.”

They burst into action, spreading through and around the venue.

“You.” Leather Jacket turns to Rebel. “Take out your ID.”

“Kinda hard with these cuffs.” Rebel shrugs. “But help yourself. It’s in my pocket.”

The detective slips the wallet out of Rebel’s jacket and then digs out the plastic card from inside the leather. His

mouth turns down in the corners. “You do realize this is obstruction. I can arrest you for aiding your brother in avoiding arrest.”

“I didn’t aid him.” Rebel smirks. “You didn’t ask who I was. I figured since we’d been through this before that you must have known it was me.”

“Take the cuffs off my client,” Jason demands.

The media start to pelt us with questions.

It appears our truce is over, and while I would have liked this evening to pass without incident, I never expected it would.

Summer rushes to join us. She inserts herself between us, preparing to address the crowd.

But this is my time.

“Miss Love,” Jackson warns as I move ahead of him to stand beside Summer.

There are so many people. It is absolutely terrifying and I don’t have my bunny ears. My stomach climbs into my throat and my heart pounds in my ears. I’m pretty sure as soon as I’m finished here I’m going to need to vomit. And Alec is

watching me. I can see him staring at me out of the corner of my eye. His hatred burns into me. I fight the urge to cower.

Summer's eyes widen. "Ivy?"

"Ivy Love, do you believe that Rogue Maddox is a murderer?" A man shoves his mic in my face.

My throat is dry and wet at the same time. I can barely swallow and I'm not sure I'm actually breathing. I take a step toward him. "I have something to say."

"Great. If you could say it into the microphone," the journalist tells me.

My hand trembles as I lift the mic to my face. I clear my throat. "Rogue didn't kill that man. He is being framed... by the same person that had Marty Kendall killed... my mother, Nicole Hawthorne."

Silence. Dead silence.

The crowd stays frozen for only a fraction of a second before they erupt with a million questions.

"Let me start at the beginning."

Marty's memorial becomes the backdrop of the only interview I'll ever do. While I didn't know Marty all that well, after listening to everyone speak about her integrity and her

courage and her commitment, I have to believe that if she were here, she would have encouraged this. Even urged me to set the record straight. For all our sakes.

Alec watches me the whole time I speak about our mother. He doesn't interject. But his smile grows as I explain how I believe she killed my father and how Marty was looking into that tragic event when she was murdered and why Nicole is trying to frame Rogue.

When one of the reporters approaches him and asks for his thoughts on what I'm saying, I expect him to make a comment on my medication or mental health. I expect him to make me sound crazy.

He strolls toward me. "My sweet little sister, are you really going to vilify our mother like that after all she's done for you?"

My knees weaken and my heart beats erratically the closer he gets. The back of my neck crawls and that sensation spreads as he stands right beside me.

"Are you worried about defamation?" one of the other reporters calls out.

“Of course she isn’t.” Alec side-eyes me. “You do have proof, don’t you?”

“I...” I clear the clog from my throat. “I don’t have proof. But I’m hoping that—”

“Don’t worry, little sister.” Alec turns to me. “You can blame your outcry on your mental health when you come to your senses.”

“I need you to help me prove it,” I appeal to the crowd. “I need you to help me bring Marty’s killer to justice. I need to know why Nicole Hawthorne killed my father. I need to...”

“You need to stop this insanity,” Alec says to me in a tone full of faux compassion.

“I need...” I can’t breathe. My vision swims.

“You need professional help.” Alec addresses the crowd, “She’s not well.”

“Help me prove...” I clutch at my throat.

“Ivy?” Summer yells, her voice laced with worry. “Something is wrong with her.”

“Miss Love.” That’s Jackson, pushing Alec away from me when he raises a hand in my direction.

I clutch Jackson's arm. "Help me. Please."

Everything goes black.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ivy

My tears fall thick and hot on my frozen cheeks as I cradle my knee. My tights have torn. Little flecks of crimson dot where my skin is scraped. It hurts. It hurts so much. My wrist hurts too, from where I landed on it funny. “Why’d you push me, Alec?”

“That’s what you get for being so weak and slow,” my big brother says before he runs off. His laughter is cruel.

He’s always mean to me. Our new nanny doesn’t even notice.

The last one was nice. She smelled like vanilla and had a soft hug. She tried to stop Alec when he attempted to lock me in the closet.

I hate it when Alec does that. It’s pitch black and I’m always so scared of the monsters, but it doesn’t matter how much I beg he never lets me out. It’s always a maid or our nanny that finds me.

The vanilla nanny said Alec isn't a nice boy. She went to my mom about his behavior. After that mom said she had to leave.

I liked her a lot. I miss my old nanny. I sob harder.

"Are you okay?" A little girl crouches in front of me. She has white stockings and shiny black shoes. Her big blue eyes seem to take up most of her face. Her hair hangs around her face like a shiny waterfall. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Mmhhh." But it doesn't hurt so much anymore. "Your hair is white."

"Mom says it's blonde." The little girl shrugs in her puffy pink jacket. "And as bright as the sun. She calls me her sunshine."

A woman approaches. She looks like a giant version of the little girl. Her blue eyes crinkle around the edges when they land on me. She presses a hand to her chest. "Oh."

"Is that your mom?" I turn back to the little girl only to find Dizzy in her place.

She smiles as she gathers her bright pink locks over one shoulder. In her other hand she holds a razor blade. "Yeah. You'll like her, I promise."

Gasping for air, I open my eyes.

It was just another vivid dream.

“Hey, you’re back with us.” A calm voice breaks somewhere above and behind my head before a man I’ve never seen before comes into view. He has dark hair and kind eyes. “I need you to keep fighting for me, Ivy. Can you do that?”

“What?” I can barely speak between small, agonizing gasps. Lights flicker and flash somewhere close by. I’m disoriented and the pain in my head is too much. It’s blinding. “Where am I? Where is Rogue?”

“You’re in my ambulance,” the man says. “And the people who were with you... your friends... they’ll meet us at the hospital.”

“What?” I try to reach up to touch my head, but my muscles scream in protest. Electrical currents run up and down my limbs. I’m so weak I barely manage to lift my arm an inch. Something tugs at my elbow. It stings and I wince, but I’m too exhausted to keep trying. “Rogue?”

The paramedic's uniform comes into sight as he stops me. "Don't try to move. We're almost to the hospital. You're very sick."

We never did manage that pregnancy test. And I'd started feeling better, but this... is agony. "The baby?"

"We don't know anything yet," the man says.

My eyes start to slip shut.

"Hey." The man's voice is insistent. "You said the name Rogue. Who is that?"

"My... fiancé."

"Great. Tell me about him."

"I'm so tired."

The ambulance comes to a shuddering halt. The doors are thrown open.

"Hey, what are you doing?" The paramedic's voice changes and becomes strained.

I drag my eyelids up the width of my lashes. A second man fills the space above me. He has his service weapon trained on the man working on me. "Jackson?"

“You can leave now.” Jackson says as I struggle to keep my eyes from sliding shut.

“She needs treatment,” the man argues.

The report of Jackson’s weapon being discharged in the small space is deafening. A heavy weight crumples on top of me.

I can barely lift my head from the bed. The paramedic’s eyes are wide open. He doesn’t blink. His body doesn’t move with his breath because he doesn’t draw one.

Is he dead? He’s dead, right? Oh my God, he’s dead. Jackson just shot him. Adrenaline surges through me. My heart is screaming in my chest, my pulse is racing so fast. “Jackson? Why did you shoot him?”

Jackson’s expression is cold and hard. Yanking the IV from my arm, he scoops me up. “Time to go.”

My arm stings from where he pulled the line. Something wet trails down my arm. I fight the tears that try to overtake me. “I trusted you.”

“Shut up.” He grunts as his feet hit the asphalt.

Did he do something to me? Is that why I’m sick? “Where are you taking me?”

“There was quite the bidding war over you,” he says.
“You have no idea how much you’re worth, do you?”

“I’m betting billions.” If Rogue is right about Nicole wanting me for my money, which seems more and more likely. I whimper as the darkness starts to reach for me again. “Let me bid on myself.”

“The thing is, little bunny”—he twists the cute pet name Rogue sometimes used into something cruel—“I’m a man of my word. The money has already been transferred. He owns you now. All that is left is for me to deliver.”

“He?” Alec? It has to be.

He stops at a car and tosses me on the backseat. “It’s been a pleasure, Miss Love. I’d suggest you lay off the chamomile tea in your next life.”

“You poisoned me?” He put something in the drinks he made me. Of course he did. I’d been sick for weeks, but then I got better. Until today... “Why?”

“Because your brother likes to watch you suffer.”

“He was watching me?” His gaze had been so keen when he saw me at Marty’s memorial. He knew that I would collapse at any moment. He was waiting for it. But before

that... was Jackson recording me for Alec? Giving him an inside view of my life?

I feel so violated. He crept into every area of my life in order to hurt me.

“It won’t kill you. He wanted that to be at his own hand. Luckily for you, he didn’t have the... what the hell?” He grunts as he crumples to his knees. A stunned expression taking over his face.

Pink hair and blue eyes appear over the top of his head. She grips his shoulder with one pink gloved hand as she slides a blade across the front of his throat. A line of red wells in its wake. A cotton candy smile breaks on her face as he wraps his hand around his throat and starts to gasp.

“Dizzy?” I try to crawl deeper into the backseat. She’s been stalking me all along. Rogue could tell she wasn’t right. West tried to warn me. And... and I know she was there when Alec tried to kill me.

I remember her telling me she thought I would be stronger. Her hands wrapping around my wrists. Her fingers slipping and sliding in my blood as she dug beneath my skin. What did she say exactly? That she hoped we were the same.

“Such a shame. You were so freaking hot.” She giggles as she catches a drop of his blood on the tip of one gloved finger and smears it with the thumb. Her blue eyes lift when he topples to the side. They narrow on me.

“Stay away from me.” I shuffle as far back as I can, until the door keeps me from retreating any further. I yank on the handle, but it doesn’t budge.

Crouching down, she sifts through Jackson’s pockets. Her eyes light up when she holds up the keys. Standing, she claps her hands together in front of her chest. “Road trip.”

“No, please...” I try to climb past her but the fight is deserting me. My strength is waning.

She pushes me back with one finger. Grabs the seatbelt and drags it across my torso before clipping it into place. “Now, you just stay put while I grab some things from the ambulance. It’s going to be a while until we get where we’re going.”

“Dizzy. I thought you were my friend.”

She slams the door shut and hits the central locking button, then waves at me through the window. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

I struggle with the seatbelt as she enters the back of the ambulance. She's worse than West said. She killed Jackson. I have to get out of here right now. The handle is useless. The child protection locks must be engaged.

I drag myself between the front seats and push the button. It clicks and I twist around to reach for the door in the backseat.

Click.

She's locked it again, and all I can do is sink into the leather and try to catch my breath.

"I can play this game all day, girlfriend," she calls out as she trots back to the car with her arms full of medical supplies. She opens the door and drops it all on the floor before reaching for my arm. "But I don't think you have any more energy left, do you? All that poison is just kicking your sweet butt."

"Don't touch me." I try to jerk my arm free as she opens a new catheter.

"This'll go a lot smoother if you stay still, silly." She straddles me, trapping my other arm to my thigh. She's tiny

but so very strong. I gasp when she forces the catheter into my vein. “There you go. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

She hums as she hooks up a new line to the catheter and hangs the IV bag from the hook above the door. “There we go. That will be better now.”

“I know you’re working with Alec.” She’s going to take me to him, and he’s going to kill me. “I’m never going to see Rogue again, am I?”

“You are so funny.” Dizzy reaches for a container of pills and twists off the lid. She pops a pill in my mouth and clamps her hand over my lips. “Swallow.”

I shake my head and struggle against her.

“Swallow,” she screams in my face.

I fight until the urge is too strong and the pill slides down my throat.

“That’s better.” She smiles as she climbs off me and into the front. She turns on the radio. Heavy metal blasts through the speakers and she squeals in delight. “This is going to be the absolute best. Oh! You know what we should do... we should get snacks.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Rogue

My call goes to voicemail as I pace the shitty run down motel I holed up in once we'd put distance between us and the cops. "Is she okay? Just tell me she's okay."

I switched the TV on the minute I walked into the room. Figured it would be a good idea to see if I'd made the news yet. I didn't expect to see Ivy fighting her fears and holding a press conference where she told the entire world what we're up against.

Or to watch her falter and fall.

Jackson broke her descent and an ambulance was called. Rebel and Riot formed a wall between her and Alec until he walked away.

But it's been an hour and I have no idea if she's okay or what happened after the paramedics came. I fight the urge to go to the hospital. I need to see her with my own eyes. I won't be easy until I do.

I toss the burner phone Adira bought me aside. Drag the platinum wig from my head and throw it on the quilted floral comforter that looks like it's twenty years old.

The news switches to a picture of me. They're asking for help to find me. Suggesting I might be dressed in drag.

Definitely going to need a different disguise.

Ivy needs me. I should have stayed. If I hadn't run...

Sitting on the edge of the mattress, I tug at the obscenely long fake lashes that are glued to my lids. Adira just carries all this drag stuff around in his purse like it's a first aid kit.

A cockroach scuttles across the floor right in front of me.

Damn it. If I hadn't run I would be locked up and none the wiser about Ivy's condition. At least like this I can keep looking into what Richard Love was doing in Phoenix. I can—

The click of the door has my mouth drying out as I dive to the floor.

"He was here," Adira says as a second person follows him into the room. "I told him to stay put."

I stand in time to see Jason shut the door. He raises a brow at me. “You couldn’t just do what I told you, could you?”

“Ivy?” She’s all that matters.

His expression grows even more sour. “It’s bad.”

“What do you mean... bad?”

“This just in...” The reporter on the television clears his throat. “The ambulance driving Miss Love to the hospital after that press conference has been found abandoned.”

“What?” I turn to Adira for more information.

“The ambulance she was in never made it to the hospital.” Adira flings the bag he’s carrying on the bed as he rushes toward me. “They found Jackson. Dead. With his throat cut. But there was no sign of Ivy.”

“Alec?”

“Has an alibi,” Jason says. “Thanks to social media we can see where he’s been. After the press conference he went to a bar where he bought everyone a round of drinks.”

“Great way to establish an alibi,” I snap.

“At least we know he doesn’t have her yet. He’s still drinking,” Adira says.

“Dizzy?” She’s my next guess. “She’s been stalking Ivy. For months.”

Adira jerks his chin. “Could be. But no one has eyes on Nicole either so—”

“Nathaniel?” I start stripping out of the dress Adira put me in when we swapped clothes at the memorial.

“For someone who is so shy and sweet she has a lot of enemies,” Jason says.

“Give me your suit,” I snap at him. I’m going to start with that creep and work my way down the list from there.

“You can’t—”

“I brought you a change of clothes.” Adira indicates the bag he put on the bed. “Hat. Shades. All very drab.”

I empty it out and start dressing. “Where are my brothers?”

“Somewhat ahead of you,” Jason says as I shove one leg after the other into a pair of baggy pants. “Rebel’s sweet talking a nurse at Sunny right now to get access to your mother.”

“They must be trying to locate West.” I drag the sweatshirt over my head and hide my hair in the ballcap before tugging the hood back over the top. A pair of non-descript black shades sit on top of something furry looking. I pick up the caterpillar shaped hair. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s a mustache.” Adira grabs his purse. “I have some glue in here.”

“I think not.”

“Everyone is looking for you,” Jason grumbles. “Wear the fucking mustache.”

“Find Nathaniel Croft’s address. You’re driving me to his house.” I stay still for Adira to apply the glue above my upper lip and place the hairy thing on top.

“You’re taking a risk,” Jason warns.

“I can’t sit here and do nothing.” I’m taking more of a risk if I don’t go after Ivy. We might not be able to be together, but I can’t lose her either. As long as she’s safe I’ll find a way to be okay with the rest.

Shoving my hands into the pants that are so baggy my ass crack escapes, I hunker into my shoulders. “How do I look?”

Jason shakes his head. “If we get caught I was driving you to the station to turn yourself in.”

Adira’s phone pings. He snatches up the device and stares at the screen. “Uh, you two go. I need to deal with this.”

“Important?”

“I’ll let you know.” He accepts the call.

“Where’s your car?” I ask Jason as I yank open the door.

Jason speeds through traffic the way he always does. Considering we’re trying to avoid the police, you’d think this would be that one time he would decide to stick to the limit or at least what everyone else is doing.

I tap my fingers on my bouncing knee. Despite his speed it’s taking too long. We have no idea who has Ivy yet so we have no idea where to look. This is one time the police could be really fucking helpful. If only Nicole hadn’t sicced them on me instead.

We drive up into the hills and eventually stop in front of a palatial, modern two story home. It’s surrounded by greenery and palms.

Jason pulls up next to the curb.

“Wait here.” I adjust my cap lower over my eyes before I jump out and head up the driveway. I flex and tighten my hands into balls the whole walk in. He could be watching me approach. Might have already called the cops.

That just means I’ll have to get in and get the information I want quickly and get out again. And if that takes putting my fist through the creep’s face I might enjoy it. I’m pretty fucking desperate at this point. Not entirely committed to my morals.

I decide to go the back way. With any luck the man’s left a window or door unlocked. More chance of getting to him that way than ringing his damn doorbell.

I stop in the shadows when I catch him stalking the length of his pool. His suit is crumpled and his hair isn’t as neatly slicked into place as it usually is. He has his phone pressed to his ear as he yanks on his tie. “I paid you your damn money. You were supposed to deliver her into my possession. Now you’re not taking my calls? Where the fuck is she?”

He could be talking about a puppy or a car... My insides quiver and ice fills my veins. But with Ivy missing, I’m sure he’s not. I charge across the lawn. “You bought Ivy?”

His steps falter, his face going slack as he turns in my direction. The worry in his eyes increases as they widen. “Rogue Maddox?”

Oh, right, the mustache.

“The one and only.” I pick him up by his throat.

He drops his phone as he tries to pry my hand away. It bounces on the concrete and into the pool. “You don’t understand.”

“That wasn’t a denial.” I’m taller and stronger than he is. His feet dangle above the ground. I squeeze a little harder just to prove I can. “You paid someone to kidnap Ivy?”

“It was going to happen anyway.” He gasps for small breaths, his face going red.

I ease up. “Explain. In detail.”

“Put me down and I will.”

I drop him and he stumbles a few steps. Claws at his chest.

“Talk,” I order, advancing on him. I’m so done with these assholes playing with Ivy’s life. Whatever he paid for her... it doesn’t mean anything. Except that I’m going to kick his ass.

“I bought Ivy.” He sucks in a breath as his knees sink into the damp grass. “Because if I hadn’t, Alec would have. It was all set up.”

“What?” Static snakes up my neck.

“I couldn’t let that happen after what she told me he did to her. And that bastard she brought with her knew it.” He manages to get back on his feet and walk away from me. With one hand pressed onto the outdoor dining table, he grinds the heel of the other into his eye.

“Jackson?” It’s a sucker punch to my gut. I had him vetted. I checked everything with a fine-tooth comb. And he’s been biding his time, looking for the right moment to hand her over to her brother? “Her bodyguard? He did this?”

“He saw the potential dollar signs and offered to let me outbid Alec.” Pulling out a square rattan seat, he drops into it and cradles his head in his hands. “I used some of the money in Ivy’s trust to pay his asking price. But now he’s not answering my calls.”

“He’s dead,” I say stiffly.

“You’re going to kill him?” Nathaniel shrinks into himself.

“No.” I grind my teeth. Though I would that I could.
“I mean... he’s dead. Throat slit type of dead.”

Nathaniel blanches. “Ivy—”

“Gone. We don’t know where or who has her.” And every second I waste on this weasel... she could be slipping out of our grasp. I won’t let that happen. “But I’m going to find out.”

“I’ll help.” He touches the breast of his jacket before he frowns at the pool.

“For all I know you and Nicole have Ivy squirreled away somewhere while you bullshit me with this creep level love you have for my... for Ivy.” I cross my arms over my chest. “Why would I ever trust you?”

“Because I’ve only ever told you the truth.” He strides behind the poolside bar and grabs a bottle of cognac. “I am truly trying to protect Ivy.”

“By working with Nicole? Can you see why that might make it hard to believe you?”

He places two balloon glasses on the glossy surface and twists the lid from the bottle. “May I offer you a drink?”

“Ivy is missing and you want to take the time to share a drink?” The urge to throttle him is strong. We need to be chasing leads, not chilling with good brandy.

He holds up one finger to cut me off. “For what I’m about to tell you... I’m going to need it.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Rogue

“I didn’t realize how far in I was in until it was too late.” Nathaniel pours a trickle of honey colored liquid into one of the glasses before moving onto the other. “Richard didn’t tell me much about what was going on with him in those last few months. He only begged me to draw up this deal for Ivy. Made me promise him that no matter what I had to do to accomplish it, I protected his daughter.”

“And of course you said yes, because you’re in love with her.”

He laughs as he puts down the bottle and picks up one of the glasses. He swirls the cognac around in the bottom of the glass and then inhales its aroma before tasting it. “Ivy is in no danger from me. I’m not interested in her in that way. I’m gay.”

“You’re what?” Surely, I’m hearing him wrong.

“Gay.”

I've watched him chase her down and hit on her. Except has he really done anything more than act friendly and concerned? Is it Nicole that made him seem far more menacing? "Then why are you trying to force her to marry you?"

"Because I've run out of options. And time. We're just over a week out from her twenty-first birthday. After that..." He empties his glass. His shoulders slump. "Nicole is after Ivy's trust. A fund Ivy will have access to once she's twenty-one. A fund I've convinced Nicole she can get her hands on quicker and more easily if I can convince Ivy to marry me."

I was right. It was about the money. "I don't—"

"That's because you don't understand how far Nicole will go to get that money. Everything she does is a business transaction. She dedicated her entire life to Richard and their children. As far as she's concerned, that makes her entitled. When Richard decided he would divorce her..." He pours another couple of fingers into his glass. His hand shakes as he lifts the glass to his mouth and empties it. "If Nicole can't get access that way, she will do it by proving Ivy is mentally unfit to control her own life."

“So when she said she’d have her institutionalized...”

My burner phone vibrates with an incoming text.

Rebel: We got a number for West. Organizing to meet in a hotel on the outskirts of town. Can you get there?

“Ivy?”

“Possible lead. There’s a girl...” Rebel sends through a second text message with the address of the hotel.

A third text is Rebel’s reason for believing West might actually help. Apparently he’s the reason our mother is on new medication and seems to be doing the best she has in a long while.

I shove my phone back in my pocket. “I’ve got to go, but we’re not finished here.”

“Let me lock up. I’m going with you.” He puts away the glasses and the bottle and heads toward the house.

“Hell, no.”

“Trust me, we’re on the same side. I’ll fill you in on the way.”

I follow him into the house. “Do you think Nicole can really have Ivy declared mentally unfit?”

“She’s already tried once. But Doctor Keller wouldn’t sign off on it. But that doesn’t mean she can’t find a doctor who will. It happens all the time. And she’ll have Ivy locked up somewhere where she’ll be treated awfully. She’ll do it out of spite. She has had no love for that girl her entire life.”

“And you haven’t gone to the police because... you can’t work out who to trust.” I trail him through his house as he locks doors and shuts off lights.

“That and she has my name on documents that could have me imprisoned for a very long time.” He walks into an office and opens a cabinet. He retrieves a box with a new phone in it and rips through the packaging. “By the time I realized... I’m looking at a long time in prison if I can’t find a way to prove my innocence. That woman is the devil.”

“Christ.” We really are on the same side. Just working different angles and getting nowhere fast. “What about Mark Anders?”

“She paid him to get in your face and when that didn’t work, she escalated.”

“And you went along with it because...?”

“There has to be something more than money,” he says. “Something Richard said to me... I haven’t been able to let it go.”

“And?”

“And now we need to hurry. Ivy could be anywhere.” He shuts off the light and opens the front door. “We can talk more in the car.”

“Yeah.” I choose to believe that we’re reducing the suspect pool with this new information from Nathaniel. And would Alec really have been out drinking if he had Ivy in his possession? So it’s most likely Dizzy or Nicole who has her. West could still be a suspect, but if Rebel thinks he might actually be trying to help us I can give our triplet the benefit of the doubt. Just like I am with Nathaniel. “I’ll send my ride home.”

I jog over to the car where Jason is waiting.

“We’re going to see West.” I pop open the glove box and take out the gun he keeps there.

“Seriously?” Jason’s knuckles are white around his steering wheel.

I pocket the weapon. “Nathaniel seems to be telling the truth, but better safe than sorry. You should go home. I don’t know where this night will lead, but if I get caught it’ll be better if my lawyer isn’t also arrested.”

He lets out a long suffering sigh as I shut the door. The engine purrs quietly as he takes off slowly down the road.

“Nicole killed Richard,” Nathaniel says when I climb in. “But I haven’t found anything to prove it. There’s no money trail. No paperwork. I couldn’t get the driver to talk to me when it happened.”

“You didn’t talk to the wife,” I say as we reverse out of his driveway. “There were medical bills and she was on the organ donor list. The accident happened and suddenly she has a guardian angel pay off their bills and their house.”

“There’s no evidence of that on Nicole’s side.” He shakes his head. “If there was I would have found it by now.”

We fall quiet as we cruise through traffic. Lights flash by outside and something mellow and instrumental plays in the background. I switch it to the news to see if they’re reporting anything new.

“I might be wrong about this only being a business transaction for Nicole. The last time I talked to Richard he was agitated and out of sorts. He didn’t make much sense, but it stuck with me all this time.”

“What did he say?”

“At the time I was worried he was having a breakdown. Nicole was in distress. She kept begging me to help convince him to seek help. I don’t know why I let her fool me.”

“Get to the point.”

“He said Nicole tricked him way back when. That he never would have married her if he’d known the truth.” He shakes his head. “He acted really cagey at the time. Wouldn’t go into detail when I asked how she tricked him. He said he needed to find her, but then wouldn’t explain who ‘she’ was. Only that everything would have been different if he hadn’t let his own fears get the better of him. And then he said he should never have let Nicole be Ivy’s mom.”

“Let her?” That’s an odd thing to say. Unless...

“Almost as though he picked her to be Ivy’s mom after the fact.” His brow creases. “Which leads me to think

that perhaps Ivy isn't—”

“Nicole’s daughter.” It would make sense. I never could understand how her mother could treat her this way. Or why she would turn a blind eye to the pain Alec inflicted.

“But it’s Nicole’s name on the birth certificate,” Nathaniel says. “And I have yet to find anything that suggests Richard and his first wife had a baby. Perhaps she was born by surrogate? I’ve devoted two years to this and all I have is a hunch that Nicole is not her biological mother. Without knowing how Nicole tricked him I’m not sure where else to look.”

“If she’s been planning this for twenty-one years...” I thump my hand into the door. Then Nicole has her claws dug in so deep, she’ll never let go unless we find evidence. Truth she has had two decades to bury. “How could he have not realized?”

“I think... he was grieving the love of his life. By the time he could deal with the pain, Nicole would have been ingrained so deeply in Ivy’s life that he probably thought keeping her around was the lesser of two evils,” Nathaniel says. “He probably convinced himself she needed a mother.”

“That’s one mother she would have been much better off without,” I say as the tires crunch on gravel. Marty had mentioned Richard was married before Nicole, but this scenario didn’t cross my mind once. “Is Alec really Ivy’s brother?”

“I don’t know. There was a one night stand. It’s possible that part is true. Perhaps could be the reason Richard stuck with Nicole.”

“That could be how she tricked him.”

We pull into the small courtyard of the motel and the GPS announces that we’ve arrived at our destination.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Ivy

I must have lost consciousness, because when I wake it's dark. The only light is from the dashboard. The stars overhead. And our high beams on this quiet stretch of road.

Dizzy is singing offkey to the radio. She bounces and wiggles in the driver's seat. Every now and then she throws in an arm movement and her voice gets louder.

"Dizzy?" I'm groggy and my throat is like sandpaper.

"Hey, you're awake." She turns to beam at me and the whole car turns with her enthusiasm. She corrects course with a giggle. "Oops."

"Where are we? Why won't you let me go?"

She flattens her foot on the pedal and the brakes screech as she pulls onto the shoulder. Big blue eyes sparkle at me over the seats. "Just in time. You need to take your meds."

“No, Dizzy, I...” My head hurts so much. My vision swims. “Tell me why you’re doing this. Why are you working with Alec? I know you were there that night.”

“You keep saying that, but you don’t know anything.”

“Are you taking me to him? Are you going to let him kill me? Because that is what will happen if you take me to him.”

“You ask a lot of questions, you know.” She slithers over the seats and pokes around in the bag of supplies she stole from the ambulance. I try to kick at her, but my ankles are bound with neon pink duct tape. “But you still aren’t asking the right ones.”

“Alec?” I insist.

“I sent him an invitation.” Her eyes light up as she climbs onto my lap to pin me in place. “I really hope he comes to our party.”

She runs her fingers along the line in my arm, up to the almost empty bag. “You could use another one of these.”

“Jackson poisoned me with something. I need a doctor. Do you even know what you’re playing at?”

“Uh-huh.” She bobbles her head as she changes the bag. “West taught me.”

“Do you think I could go to the bathroom?” I don’t need to, but perhaps if I can get outside the vehicle I can run from her. Not that there’s much outside that I can see. Nowhere to hide. And with my ankles bound—

“You already have.” She glances at my lap. “That’s why I covered you with a blanket I found in the trunk. I didn’t want you to get cold. But I don’t have spare clothes to dress you in.”

I groan. I peed myself? Just great. Unfortunately, that’s the least of my problems.

“Pill time,” she announces as she snatches them up. They rattle as she forces off the lid.

I turn my face away. “I don’t want it. Please, Dizzy.”

“I hate taking pills too.” She stuffs one between my lips and then pours water in my mouth until I swallow. The liquid gets everywhere, soaking into the blanket on my lap and the front of my dress. I start to shiver. She’s humming the entire time.

There's that tune again. The one I keep hearing over and over in my head. I dreamed about Alec humming that tune as he hunted me. "How do you know that tune?"

"My mom loved it." Her eyes fill with pain as she climbs off me and peels the wet blanket from my lap. "She used to sing it to me and West. She used to sing it all the time. She told us magical stories about a sweet prince and the girl he fell in love with. Beautiful stories that would make her smile."

Her words make me tear up, and I don't know why, other than the longing in her voice. An emotion that I understand too well. I miss my dad so much. There have been so many times I've wanted to turn to him for his advice. Tonight is no exception.

I miss Rogue too. Is he still running from the cops? Does he have any idea that Dizzy has me? Is he going out of his mind with worry?

I miss him so much I conjure him to my side. His cologne and that undertone of oatmeal that makes me want to nibble at his throat invades my senses as I'm transported to the back of the Range Rover.

His thighs are like tree trunks between mine, his palms hot on my hips. I can practically feel the scratchy stubble he

loves to rub against my cheek because it makes me squeal.

I'm carried to a million different moments that make up our love. A love I was afraid of. That I ran from. A love that transformed my world. Changed me. Saved my life. Made me grow. A love that I can no longer have, though my soul and his have become so entwined there is no escaping us.

And I don't know how I will ever move on from that. I only know that I have to. Even if I wasn't currently being held by a psychopath, there is no hope for us.

I shake myself out of it... I have more pressing concerns to deal with. "I'm sorry, you must miss your mom terribly."

"I do." She presses her lips together and nods before she exits the vehicle to grab a fresh blanket from the trunk. "But it's better this way. The pain she went through... she's in a better place now."

"What happened to her?" Did Dizzy do something to her? Or is her death the catalyst that shaped Dizzy into who she is?

Dizzy snuffles as she tucks the scratchy material around me. "You should have known her. Everything would

have been so different.”

“What are you talking about?”

She climbs back into the front seat and turns the radio down. “Now let me see...”

“Where are you taking me?” I lift my feet and kick the back of the seat. “Dizzy, let me go.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You know, sometimes you make it very difficult to love you. But I still do... because that’s what family does, right? We love and we forgive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“West says that,” she says as we get back on the road. “He says no matter how far I run he will always find me. He is my family now that Mom is gone. He is my home. And it doesn’t matter what I do he will always love me. He will forgive me.”

“Dizzy?” West is just as obsessed with her as he thinks she is with me. But perhaps I can use that to my advantage. She clearly cares about him. About what he thinks. “Could we call West?”

She shakes her head. “He won’t be happy. He wanted more time to be certain.”

“Certain of what?”

“I’m going to tell you a story.” She presses her foot down on the accelerator and the car jumps forward. “Now let’s see... there once was a girl with hair as blonde as the sun. She lived in a pretty pink doll house in a country where the sun shone year round. She went to school. And she hung out with her friend. He was a handsome boy. Charming and clever. But he lived in a house filled with evil. Bit by bit the evil started to change the boy and the girl couldn’t save him so she ran as fast and as far as she could.”

My head grows heavy so I rest it on the back of the seat, but I force myself to listen because this story seems important to Dizzy. It soothes her. And that has to mean something. It might even help me work out how to get her to let me go. “Where’d she run to?”

“College,” Dizzy says. “And there she fell in love with a prince. A beautiful and kind prince. One who was good and sweet. One who would go to the ends of the earth for her. The girl was so happy and in love. Everything was perfect.”

Her voice trails off and she wipes at her cheek.

“Dizzy?”

She holds up a hand to quiet me.

“They were happy.” When she speaks she’s quieter, sadder. This girl is the polar opposite of the Dizzy I normally see. “They got married. And they found out they were having a baby. They were so excited. I’m sorry, this is the part where my mom always cried.”

“She’d cry?” Over a children’s story? Or because this story was real. Everything Betty told us about West’s dad comes to mind. He sounded like a monster. If Dizzy’s mom was being abused... “Your dad is from a dangerous family.”

“That man is not my father.” She spits the words with pure hatred. “He was a monster and the best thing that ever happened to me was his death.”

“Dizzy, what happened? With the girl and the prince, I mean.”

“The girl ran into the boy from her past when his father died. He’d grown into a man and had a child of his own to look after. She missed his friendship and tried to comfort him. But the boy from her past had become a monster in the time they’d been apart. And when he saw the princess, he wanted her. So he plotted and he waited.”

The back of my neck is prickled and my heart is trying to crawl into my throat. “This isn’t some fairy tale, is it?”

She glances at me over her shoulder. “No, it’s not.”

“What did Robert Hawthorne do?”

“He waited until my mom had her baby and then he put his plan into action. He stole her out from under her husband’s roof less than two months after her first child was born. A beautiful baby girl. And he took her home to look after his six year old son.”

“West.”

“But what he didn’t know was she was already pregnant with her second daughter by the time he took her.”

“You?”

She nods. “My existence worked in his favor. He told her if she ran that he would kill me. If she fought I would reap the punishment. He gave her no choice but to stay.”

I clamp my hand over my face as my eyes grow wet. Poor Dizzy. My heart aches for what she’s been through. What her mother went through at the hands of that monster. What West possibly went through as well.

“Those stories always ended with the prince rescuing his princess and spiriting her and her daughter away from the evil. The prince would rescue the little boy too. Mother would create happy endings where I would have a sister. A beautiful sister with brown hair like our daddy and hazel eyes like our mother. She would be painfully shy, but we’d recognize each other instantly. Because we’d met once before.”

Her story makes me think of the woman with the white hair. The girl in the pink coat with her big blue eyes.
“Dizzy, what are you saying?”

“She hoped he would come. Always. Every day that Robert Hawthorne held her captive she waited for our daddy to find her. She knew he would.”

“Our daddy? You think we’re...?”

“He was too late, Ivy. She was already gone by the time he worked it out. Nineteen years is a long time living with monsters. You know that as well as I do. By the time he found us she’d been in the cold, hard earth for a couple of years. But he came like she knew he would. He was trying to piece it all together. What happened. And he told me about my sister.

“He told me about you.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rogue

My gaze darts from Rebel to West and back again.

Well, this is fucking weird.

You're telling me. Rebel glances from me to West.

This fucker has our face.

“Not quite. The eyes are different,” I say. They’re darker. Colder. *I’m not sure this guy has a sense of humor.*

I’m not sure any of us do anymore.

“The cheekbones too,” Rebel says.

“He has better ears,” Riot offers.

“If you men are finished.” West taps his fingers on the table. “Or should we whip out our cocks and measure up there too?”

We both know I win this contest. Rebel smirks as he reaches for the button on his jeans.

Only because you're a metal head. I undo the string on my pants. "Okay, I think that would be appropriate."

"Is this normal?" Nathaniel asks Riot, his gaze glued to the three of us.

"I'm not showing you my penis." West rubs his hand over his head. "Are you always this weird?"

I stare at my identical. *We might be a triplet now, but that guy is not the same.*

"Pretty normal," Riot says.

Oh. I raise my brows. *Do you think he gets hives?*

Let's see. Rebel smirks.

"Can you stop it with the weird mind meld bullshit?" West stands. "I'm not interested in bonding or whatever this is. I'm only here because you said Dizzy has Ivy. If you don't know where she is—"

"Hang on." I push a hand into his chest as he attempts to leave. "At first I assumed it was you she was spying on us for, but then why take Ivy? What does Dizzy want with her?"

"Take your hand off me." He stares at my hand like he'll rip it from my body if I don't. "Let's get one thing straight. You are not my family, and I am not interested in

getting involved in your world. I told you, I am only here for Dizzy.”

“Then let’s work together to find them so we can get out of each other’s hair.” I drop my hand to my side and give him space. Mom said he was different than us and he definitely is. I can’t say I like it.

“So Dizzy is obsessed with Ivy because...” Rebel leads him in.

“She believes Ivy is her sister,” he says.

“And you don’t?” I rub my forehead. How would that even work? Dizzy is Nicole’s daughter too? Or is Nathaniel right about Nicole not being Ivy’s biological mother? Are Alec and Dizzy related? Two psychotic peas in a pod? “How can that even be?”

“What did Betty tell you about our father?” West settles his arms on his knees and folds his hands between them. Kinda like Rebel does.

“That he’s a monster,” Rebel says. “That he stole you.”

“Yes, well, he had a habit of doing that. He abducted Dizzy’s mom and held her captive for years. By the time I

found out it was too late to do anything about it.”

“What was her name?” Nathaniel asks.

“Poppy,” West says.

“Poppy Ashton.” Nathaniel nods slowly. “That was the name of Richard’s first wife. It would make sense. She could very well be both girls’ mother.”

“I want proof. Dizzy is... fragile. She’s been through things you can’t even imagine in your worst nightmares. It’s why I agreed to help Ivy get her memories back,” West says. “I was able to get a DNA sample on a champagne glass that I was going to run against Dizzy’s. But then when it came time to help her get her memories back... she remembered Dizzy was there the night Alec attacked her, and the situation went south.”

“What the fuck?” I snarl. “Dizzy was there that night? Helping Alec? Hurting Ivy?”

“No, not helping that inbred bastard,” he snarls. “She was trying to save Ivy’s life. She didn’t want to leave. But I couldn’t let her stay. I couldn’t risk her for some girl that doesn’t matter.”

She matters. To me. To my family. To Dizzy, apparently. But this asshole... Dizzy tried to save Ivy's life and he ripped her away.

I lunge across the room and plant my fist in his jaw. "You almost cost Ivy her life."

"I'll give you that one. And only that one." He cradles his jaw as he rolls off the floor and moves to a seat. "It's not a choice I would make again. The more I've come to know of Ivy, the more I see similarities between her and Dizzy. But my sunshine will always be my first priority. You have each other. I only have her."

"So the DNA?" Nathaniel asks, latching onto the idea of proof.

"Ivy remembered while we were sitting in the limo. Dizzy might have said something to set her off. She was screaming and thrashing. She wouldn't calm down. And then she hit her head and knocked herself out. It was heartbreaking for Dizzy."

"How'd Ivy get home?" Rebel paces a tight square. "We were all there. How did none of us notice? How didn't security?"

“Look at me.” He points to himself and then me and then Rebel. “Look at you. Do you think I couldn’t fool your security team into believing I’m either of you? And it was late. While you were slumbering, I pretended I was you and that she’d needed some air and to talk, but had fallen asleep on my shoulder. Not one of your security team blinked an eye. I carried her to her bed and helped her into pajamas. I used suggestion to block out anything after our meeting.”

“Christ, this guy.” Riot shakes his head.

“While I was doing that Dizzy became unbalanced and destroyed everything in the limo.”

“Fucking hell.” West makes me feel a little unbalanced too.

“The sample was useless. Ivy was tucked up tight in her bed. I had to restrain and sedate Dizzy to get her to leave without making any more of a scene. I decided it was best to lie low for a while.”

“Is that why she has bruises?” Ivy noticed them and they bothered her so much she offered Dizzy to stay with us for as long as she needed.

“Yes,” West says. “Unfortunately.”

Rebel and I exchange glances. West seems to care about Dizzy a hell of a lot and considering the few things we've learned about their lives so far, it makes sense.

"What did you mean when you called Alec inbred?" Nathaniel asks.

"He's our half-brother," West says. "I found out a few years ago, just before our father died. He told me that he picked the wrong son to raise. That he should have raised Alec as his heir."

"I need to sit down." Rebel drops onto the end of the bed and cradles his head in his hands.

"Yeah." I reach for the closest surface to support me. "That's—"

"Fucked up," Riot says. "Do you think Alec knows that y'all are related?"

"I... I have to think that if he did he would have thrown it in our faces." Right? He would have said something.

"Do you? Is that what you think?" Rebel blows out his cheeks. "Because there is no way on this green earth that I would ever admit to being related to that bastard out loud."

“There’s also his questionable parentage.” West nods. “If he is aware of it... it’s probably not something he would want anyone to look into.”

“Ivy really isn’t Nicole’s daughter,” Nathaniel says the words like hearing them out loud will cement them in his mind. The fact that we’re finding out that we share genes with our enemy seems to be missed by him entirely.

“If she and Dizzy are indeed sisters...” West scrunches up his face and then releases. “Then no.”

God, I hope they’re sisters. God, am I really praying that hyper, obsessive Dizzy and my sweet Ivy are sisters? Fucking hell. “We need to prove it.”

“First... we need to find them,” West says.

There’s a knock on the door and we all turn into statues except Rebel who moves to the window.

“Summer?” I raise a questioning brow.

“No.” He presses his lips together as he tugs the curtain aside a crack. “We made the decision that it would be best for her to be out of harm’s way. I put her on a plane home to her brothers as soon as the ambulance didn’t make it to the hospital.”

I scratch my jaw. Wouldn't have thought he could talk her into that. "It's probably for the best."

"It's me." Adira's stage whisper comes in loud and clear through the flimsy door.

Nathaniel opens it and steps aside.

"We're fraternizing with the enemy now?" Adira frowns at the lawyer as he enters the room and shuts the door. He's changed out of my clothes and into a black on black ensemble that includes low booties and a black bob. "What is Satan's little helper doing here?"

His gaze lands on West and his jaw drops. He places a hand to the middle of his chest. "Well, this is... hold me, baby Jesus, I think I'm seeing triple."

West assesses Adira with a critical eye. He takes the queen in from head to toe. "You must be Adira."

Adira arches one perfect eyebrow. "Uh, do I know you?"

"Dizzy talks about you," West says. "I'm West."

"That girl better bring back my bestie," Adira says before he tips his head toward Nathaniel. "You. Explain."

“We read him wrong,” I explain. As the night has progressed I’ve become more certain that he has been trying to do what he says. “This whole time he’s been trying to keep Ivy safe.”

“And looking for evidence to prove Nicole killed Richard, amongst other things,” Nathaniel adds.

“Well, I guess he can stay then.” Adira prances past him and drops his oversized bag on the bed. “I have news.”

We all grow silent in anticipation.

“Marty’s editor has started a hotline to gather any and all information about the Hawthornes. They’re offering a reward for legitimate information. And the rest of the media outlets are scrambling to be the first to find the truth.” Reaching inside the bag, he withdraws a tablet. “Her boyfriend and the team at Hollywood Juice are fact-checking every tidbit that comes in.”

West’s features have darkened with every word. “This is why I tried to keep Dizzy away.”

“Rebel, call them and tell them we’re sending Nathaniel to help fact-check.” I turn to the lawyer. “You know the history better than anyone.”

He nods and walks to the door. “You find her...”

“I’ll let you know.”

The door closes behind him.

“Okay, we might have a lead.” Adira does something on the tablet. “I have the location data from Richard’s last days.”

We crowd around him as he pulls up Google Maps and starts at the top of the list of places Richard visited. A hotel. A bank. Restaurants.

“None of these mean anything to me.” Adira chews on his glossy lip. “These are places he would go anywhere he went.”

“We don’t even know where Dizzy would take Ivy.” I clasp my hands behind my head as I walk away. “We’re losing time.”

“There.” West points at a screen. He grabs his jacket and shrugs it on. “I know where she’s going.”

“Where?” I grab Rebel’s keys from his hand.

“Poppy told us stories when we were growing up... they always started in a pink doll house. That house.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Ivy

“Wake up.” Dizzy shakes me by both shoulders.
“We’re home.”

“Where?” I smack my lips. My mouth is dry and my tongue feels too big.

“Home.” I look around as she drags me across the back seat until my feet touch the pebbled driveway.

In front of us a three story pink doll house towers over an emerald lawn. Pretty lights cast a glow across the yard. A pink stone fountain sits in the middle of the driveway, and a stone wall surrounds the property as far as my eye can see.

Through the gates I catch a glimpse of desert and rock. “This is the house in your story?”

“In our story.” She crouches in front of me. “I’m going to take off the tape. Promise not to try and kick me, or I’ll have to hurt you. And I don’t want to do that.”

I nod. “Why bring me here? Why not just tell me that you’re my sister?”

“Would you have believed me?” She cuts through the tape.

Immediately pins and needles flood my feet. “Yes.”

“Don’t lie.” She stands. “I’m not an idiot. You couldn’t stand me when we first met. If you hadn’t forgotten everything that happened when Alec attacked you, you would never have given me a second chance. You wouldn’t have believed me if I told you I was your flesh and blood. Though I hinted about it enough.”

How many times did she talk about being like sisters? Or as close as sisters? Or just tell me how much she wished she had a sister? All those hints. I should have seen it. “I’m so sorry, Dizzy.”

“You believe me now. You won’t try to run. All is forgiven.”

I flinch when she grabs my arm and leads me toward the front door. I’m feeling stronger, almost like whatever Jackson gave me is wearing off. But I’m still leery of Dizzy. “Why bring me all the way here? To... this place?”

She opens the front door and shoves me inside the dark house before flipping on lights. The interior is silent and lifeless.

“Because it was our mother’s.” She moves into the living space and raises her hands. Twirling slowly in a circle, an almost peaceful look settles on her face. “Can’t you feel her? Feel her love? Can’t you feel how happy she is that her girls are together?”

“Dizzy...” I don’t feel it. Instead, tears prick my eyes. They clog my throat. I only have one memory of our mother and she seemed like an angel. I missed out on knowing the woman who would have raised me with love like she did Dizzy.

And Dizzy missed out on the love of our father, only knowing a monster instead.

I imagine a past where we were all one happy family. I imagine playing with Dizzy when we were little, and sharing make up and clothing as teens. We might have fought over boys, and maybe I wouldn’t have been so terrified to come out of my shell. Perhaps Dizzy wouldn’t be quite so... extra.

But that isn’t what happened. It’s not the life that we’ve lived. And my real mom is a stranger to me. One I will

never get to know.

“Did you know our dad used to call her his sunshine? All my life she called me her sunshine. She said West and I were the only warmth in her world.” Her face falls and she walks to the windows. Throwing open the curtains, she stares out across the dark lawn. “She’s buried right there. Under those pink roses.”

The dust gets up my nose and makes me want to sneeze. I peer through the reflection of two girls so similar and yet different. Little lights are dotted along the pathway, casting enough glow to see the rambling hedge of dusky roses that run along the fence line.

“I moved her once I found out this place was real. Dug the hole myself. Planted the roses.” She nods determinedly. “She’s at peace here. Not like she would have been if she’d remained stuck eternally next to that animal.”

“Did Dad know she was here?”

“No, he didn’t. Richard is the one who brought me here. Before he died.” She wraps her arms around herself and rubs her hands up and down. “He bought the house when our grandparents died. Kept it. But it’s mine now. He gave it to me. He said I could have it.”

“Where’s home?” I ask.

“I told you.”

“Phoenix.” That’s where she always said her mom was. Somewhere in Phoenix. Arizona being the country where the sun always shone in Dizzy’s horrific fairytale. The same place our dad died. Because he came here for them. He was going to put our real family back together. That’s why he planned to divorce Nicole.

I touch the key at my throat. Perhaps that’s why he’s been haunting me. Trying to tell me about Dizzy. Or perhaps... “Do you know why I’ve been getting messages from him when he’s been gone for so long?”

“It wasn’t me.” She screws up her nose in concentration. “If that’s what you were hoping.”

Only because it would answer the question. “Did he leave anything for me here?”

Her gaze narrows on my fingers wrapped around the key. “There’s a safe. I haven’t been able to get into it. West would be able to, but... I wasn’t ready for him to know about this place.”

“Can you show me?” I start to shiver. I’m cold and there is a lingering smell from when I peed myself earlier. “Actually, is there any possibility I can get changed out of these clothes first? And then would you show me?”

“I have clothes.” She walks away from the window and takes the stairs to the next level, turning on lights as she goes. She shows me to a simple bedroom where she lays out an outfit for me.

“I’ll wait outside.” She walks out to the landing and closes the door.

I’m finally alone, and it’s the first time I’m able to breathe since before the memorial. Was that only hours ago? It feels like so much longer. I strip out of my soiled garments and dress in the clothes Dizzy has provided before joining her on the landing. “Show me the safe.”

“This way.” She starts to climb the stairs that lead to the attic.

I trail after her.

I’m puffing by the time we enter the pitched room. Lightheaded. The dust is thicker in here. It settles like a blanket in my lungs and makes me cough. There are boxes

stacked on top of each other. Odd bits of furniture and a child's bed.

Dizzy disappears behind a pile of boxes. "It's over here."

She kneels in front of a safe that is about the same size as one of Nathaniel's filing cabinets. It has a keypad and a slot for a key.

"Do you think this is what that's for?" Dizzy's gaze is glued to the key as I unclasp the chain.

"One way to find out." Heart thumping, mouth dry, I drop to my knees beside her and insert the key into the slot. When I twist it nothing happens. "I need the code."

"You don't have it?"

"I can get it." The number that dad told me in his phone call. It's still on the mirror in the penthouse. "Let me call—"

"No," she snaps as she scrambles to her feet. "It isn't time."

"But I have the code. I just need to get it." What were the numbers? One. One.

Pain lances through my skull and my vision flickers. Did she just hit me? I reach up and touch the back of my head as I sway on my knees. I knew not to trust her. I shouldn't have let myself get distracted. "Dizzy?"

"Alec has to come here. I need you to make him come."

Everything goes dark.

Chapter Forty

Ivy

What happened? I peel my eyelids open and stare at the little glowing stars on the ceiling. My head throbs and I'm nauseous. I try to sit up, but I can't get my bearings. And I don't seem to be able to move.

Adrenaline surges through me and I become more aware of my surroundings. Posters of teenage boys and boy bands hang on the walls. Behind my head, the wrist not in a cast is chained to a white wrought iron headboard.

A vibrant pink ruffled bedspread cocoons my body. And on the bookshelf is a picture of a girl a few years younger than I am now. She has hair the color of snow and her arm is around someone, but the photo has been torn in two and only her half has been put back in the frame.

The last thing I remember is Dizzy getting upset because I wanted to get the code for the safe. She said she

needed me so that Alec would come here. She might be my sister, but she's also Alec's half-sister, right? And she was there the night he tried to kill me. But I think I can talk her around. I have to.

“Dizzy?” I croak. “Dizzy, please...”

The door opens and she strolls into the room, a tray in her hands. “Hey, sleepyhead. Are you thirsty? It's time for your pills.”

“What are the pills for?”

“To help detox the poison of course.” She smiles.

“You're helping me?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then why do you want Alec to find me? You know he'll kill me. He tried before.”

She puts the tray down on the nightstand. Shaking out a capsule into her palm, she picks up the glass of water. “Are you going to fight me this time? These really are for your own good.”

“Why were you with Alec in Narnia? Why do you want him to show up here?”

“Take the pill and I’ll tell you.”

“Fine.” I’ll hold it in my cheek and spit it out when she leaves the room.

She pops it in my mouth and holds my head up so I can sip the water.

I make a show of swallowing the pill for her. “Done.”

“Open your mouth and say ah.” She follows it up with doing the movements.

I hide the pill under my tongue and do as she says. I learned some tricks in Sunny, though I never felt the need to avoid my meds there.

“Okay.” She sits on the edge of the mattress and folds her hands in her lap. “I’ve been watching you since our dad died. I was at the funeral. I was working up to approaching you, but then you ended up at the facility and I couldn’t follow you there. So I waited. And I watched. I watched the family you grew up in. I watched Alec in his true form. Saw the things that he did. And then you got out and you reluctantly became my friend, thanks to Ben.”

Damn, I didn’t realize. “You never cared about Ben, did you?”

“I liked Ben, but he had that big crush on you. I don’t think he ever stopped.”

“Is Ben...”

“Oh, he’s fine. His dad really did get cancer. He is really staying with him.”

“Oh, thank God.” I settle back against the pillows.

“Now where was I?” She smooths out her skirt. “Alec likes to crow about his accomplishments online. He uses an alias and confesses his crimes. That’s where he met Jackson, by the way. On this twisted website. It was easy to catch him and set up a notification. That’s child’s play for anyone who knows how.” She rolls her eyes. “The idiot was in Narnia, posting about wanting to kill you. I got to you as quickly as I could. I held your artery in my fingers to keep the blood from flowing out. But West, he made me leave when Rogue showed up.”

“You helped save me?”

She nods. “We’re sisters. I don’t know how many times I have to say that. And that’s why Alec is on my list.”

“List?”

“My kill list, of course.” She smiles. “And that is why you can’t leave. You’re the cheese to my trap. When Alec gets here I’m going to kill him. After that we can work out what happens next.”

“I’m angry at him too, Dizzy. He’s hurt me too many times for me to still have compassion left. But killing him...” The idea of letting Dizzy kill him in cold blood. I’m not sure I can handle that. Plus, what if she can’t actually do it? What if Alec comes prepared? “He deserves to rot for a very long time.”

“He deserves to die.”

“No, Dizzy. He deserves jail time. For what he’s done to me. To Rochelle Kitt. And who knows how many other people he’s hurt. He should have to suffer a very long time.”

I rub at my wrist. I can get out of the handcuffs, but can I get out of this house and far enough away that Dizzy won’t drag me back to wait for Alec? And there’s the safe upstairs. I need to know what’s in it.

She stands and starts to sway. “I don’t know. I don’t like it. I want to kill him. I want his blood dripping from my fingers. I have to slay the monsters.”

“I want his confession.” Seeing Dizzy like this, she seems so damaged and yet fragile. It breaks my heart. Things could have been so different for her. For us. “I want him to admit to what he did to Rochelle Kitt. I want him to admit to what he did to me.”

She nods. “I can get you that. But I can’t promise I won’t hurt him a little bit. Or, like... a lot.”

“Take the cuff off and we’ll do it together,” I promise.

“Okay.” She produces the key from her pocket and leans over me to unclasp the metal bracelet.

“Thank you.” I sit up and rub my wrists. “And those pills are truly to help with the poison?”

“Yes.” She rolls her eyes at me.

I take a leap of faith and swallow the one still hiding in my cheek. “I want to try that safe again too, if that would be all right. I think I remember the code. One. One. One. Three. Zero. Three.”

“That’s my birthday.” She smiles and for the first time since she brought me here, she almost seems like herself.

“Do you want to go up and try it?” I scoot to the edge of the bed.

“Yes, let’s.”

I follow her back to the attic. We crowd around the safe. I input Dizzy’s birthday into the keypad and take a deep breath as I reach for the handle.

It doesn’t budge when I try to turn it. “What the hell?”

“What about your birthday?” Dizzy asks. “What if it’s both? Yours first because you’re older.”

“It’s worth a try.” I start again. My birthday and then hers. This time the door springs open to reveal a pile of papers bound together. I take them out. They’re weighty and wrapped in a buttery leather cover.

Taking a deep breath, I open it to the first page.

A racket starts and Dizzy’s eyes light up as she pulls out her phone and looks at the screen. “It looks like Alec is almost here.”

I hug the papers to my chest as I stand. “How are we going to handle him when he gets here?”

Chapter Forty-One

Ivy

Footsteps trudge over the gravel and up onto the wraparound porch. It's followed by the heavy rap of knuckles on the solid door. Alec came alone just like Dizzy told him to.

He still thinks she is Jackson. A man he met via a dark internet chat site where he shared how much he hated me. And how he tried to kill me. How he longed to finish the job.

Jackson offered to help Alec. He didn't have a motive other than money for what he did to me. He sent Alec videos for weeks while my body fought to keep from succumbing to whatever he laced my tea with. Videos of me sleeping. Footage of Rogue and I being intimate.

I vomited when Dizzy told me how deeply Alec had infiltrated my life without raising any suspicion. I can't think about it without feeling bile rise in the back of my throat.

I'm not entirely convinced that Dizzy isn't right about taking his life. But I want justice more than I want revenge. I

want his confession... loud and clear and on record. I want him to take responsibility. I want him to fear the dark and I want him to fear falling asleep. And I really want him to go to prison and become some monster's pretty little bitch.

Dizzy smiles at me as she crosses to the door. She presses a finger to her lips and reaches for the handle.

I scream through the tape covering my mouth, but it's muffled and nonsensical. I struggle against the tape that keeps me in my chair. It's all performance at this point. My hands are free, and there is a knife taped to the underside of the table in front of me.

Dizzy opens the door. "Hey there. We've been waiting."

"Perhaps I've come to the wrong place," Alec says but then he catches sight of me and his eyes turn greedy. He enters the house, in his hand he totes a black sports bag. "I didn't realize you would be... you."

"A girl?" Dizzy puts her hand to her lips and giggles. "Or pretty."

Alec gives her a cursory glance then his eyes narrow. "Haven't I seen you before? Aren't you her friend?"

“How else did you think I was going to get close enough to take those videos that you wanted?” Dizzy walks into the room with him.

“That makes sense.” His shoulders ease down from his ears and his mouth twists in a frosty smile that chills me to the bone. “I brought the money we agreed on.”

“Great,” Dizzy says.

He hands her the bag. “It’s all there. You can count it if you want.”

“That’s okay. I trust you,” Dizzy says.

He’s no longer paying her any mind. He’s focused on me as he struts over to where I wait. “You don’t look too good, little sister. These past few weeks must have been hard on you.”

I flail as much as I can. Scream as loud as I can. It’s only partially an act now. He makes my flesh crawl and when he reaches out and grips my chin I flinch. My eyes burn too. But I’m no longer weak. And my eyes don’t burn with tears. It’s anger that courses through me, hot and consuming.

He is no longer the monster I cannot win against. Together Dizzy and I will bring him to his knees. We will

break him. And I will enjoy watching him realize that he has been beaten.

“Don’t worry, I’ll put you out of your misery soon.”

He caresses my cheek.

I cringe away from his touch, bile rising in my throat once more.

“What? I’m not good enough for you? You’ve been sleeping with your cousin all this time.” He tsks.

Dizzy appears behind him, a pink handled blade in her hand. She reaches around him and presses the sharp point to his throat. A drop of crimson wells at the tip and slides down his Adam’s apple. “Don’t move or I’ll bury it in your carotid.”

Alec stills, but his eyes are calculating.

“You’re considering how tiny I am and thinking you can take me, aren’t you?” Dizzy giggles.

Alec moves, but Dizzy moves faster.

He crashes to the floor, his head hitting the tiles and then lolling awkwardly as his eyes roll back.

“Stupid boy. You’re not stronger because you’re bigger. And you’re certainly not quicker.” Dizzy hands me her

blade. “Get that tape off and let’s get him tied up. You stab him if he comes to and tries anything.”

I manage the pink duct tape around my ankles and chest while she strips him down to his singlet and boxers to ensure he doesn’t have any weapons. Then she heaves him onto a chair.

We work together to wrap duct tape around him so thick he’ll be lucky if he ever leaves the chair again.

“What did our dad leave you?” Dizzy asks as she collects two bottles of water from the fridge.

“Everything.” I glance at the file.

Well, almost everything. I’m still related to Alec. But I know why Nicole wanted my compliance so badly. She had a falling out with Robert years ago—I’m not yet sure why—and he cut her off. From her family’s wealth and their backing.

Financially, she bled out in less than six months. She’d been living off of Richard since then. Her charities and businesses spent more than they ever made. She made fraudulent business decisions and bad bets. She embezzled from her own husband. She dug her hole pretty deep from

what I've been able to read through so far. I can only imagine how much worse it has gotten by now.

I twist the lid from the plastic bottle and take a sip. I rub at my chest. There's always going to be a pang. "All of his money and property. All of his belongings. He left Nicole nothing. In a week she would have had nothing anyway. Unless I was unable to care for myself. But now that I have this file, she's done... It's all ours."

"How do you feel about that?"

"About sharing it with you?" I shrug. "You have as much right to it as I do. And honestly... our dad was a good man, but our history is sordid. The money feels tainted by Nicole's greed. Honestly, I don't even need it."

"I don't want it." Dizzy glances around her dollhouse. "All I ever wanted was my real family. And now you know I'm your sister... Plus dad gave me this place. I feel close to mom here."

"I would give it all away to feel that." I would do anything to have known my mother and Dizzy all these years. But all I can do is get to know my sister in the present. And learn about my mother through her.

“What about the rest?” Dizzy lightly prods Alec in the chest with the tip of her knife. A small red patch blooms on his white singlet.

His head tips to the side and he starts to snore.

“I haven’t had time to go through all of it yet.” But it seems to be every bit of evidence our father collected on Nicole’s misdeeds. Including correspondence that proves she and Robert both participated in our mother’s abduction. “Enough to put Nicole away for the rest of her life, I think.”

“I hope so.” Dizzy leans against my shoulder. “Do you ever think we could be real sisters?”

“We are real sisters.” The original forms Poppy filled out for my birth certificate, which Nicole somehow intercepted, are in the file too. “I believe you, you know.”

“I mean...” The hyper energy melts away, leaving Dizzy vulnerable and exposed. “Do you think we could be the type of sisters that hang out sometimes? And share clothes. And talk boys.”

“Maddox boys.” I laugh.

“Yeah.”

I bow my head as the idea washes over me, bittersweet. “I don’t know about talking about boys. But the rest I would like. We’re friends, aren’t we?”

Alec groans.

“He’s waking up.” Dizzy straightens. “Time for his confession.”

I take a deep breath and steel myself as I light up my phone screen. “Let’s make sure he never hurts anyone ever again.”

“I could have made that happen by killing him,” Dizzy says. “If you weren’t so squeamish.”

“Glad I wasn’t recording that,” I say as I bring up the app.

“Ready?” Dizzy asks.

I nod.

She slaps him a few times until he finally rouses. His eyes widen in confusion until he realizes what happened. The next couple of minutes are taken up with him struggling and screaming.

Dizzy smacks tape over his mouth. “Are you going to be a good little bitch boy and stop screaming? Or am I going

to have to stab you?”

“Freaking hell. We talked about this.” I stop the recording. “I’m not going to start it until he’s ready to talk.”

“Thank you.” She presses the tip of her knife into his thigh and his yells grow higher in pitch. His eyes start to water.

There might be a small part of me that is like Dizzy. A tiny, dark part that finds some sweetness in revenge, even if it also makes me squeamish.

“Ready to talk now?” she asks, sweet as pie.

“Mhmm.” He nods vigorously. The rest of his reply is muffled by the tape on his mouth.

She crouches in front of him and takes his jaw in her hand. “Scream or try anything stupid and I will stab you in the balls. Ivy only said I couldn’t kill you. She didn’t tell me not to stab you in those soft, squishy parts you treasure so much. Understand?”

He nods again.

She glances at me over her shoulder. “You can start recording.”

I press the button as she rips the tape from his mouth.

“What’s your name?”

“A-Alec.” He can barely manage his own name as he starts to snivel. “Alec Hawthorne.”

“And what are your crimes?”

“I-I tried to...”

“In detail.” She runs her fingers up and down the flat side of her knife. “Explicit detail.”

“I tried to kill my sister, Ivy Love...” he begins.

Chapter Forty-Two

Rogue

West scowls at the road through the windshield. He's been driving for the last four and a half hours while Rebel and Riot stare moodily out the side windows in the backseat.

Adira took middle, his eyes glued to the screen of his tablet for the entire trip. As long as he has service, he has eyes on the pink house.

That's how we know Alec rocked up there forty minutes ago and hasn't come out yet. But we don't know what's going on inside. We can't tell if Ivy is in trouble, and I can't stand it.

My nerves are shot as I check our ETA for the millionth time since we watched Alec enter the house. "It's taking too long."

"I'm well above the speed limit." West's knuckles turn white as his grip on the steering wheel tightens. "We're only a few minutes away."

“He’s already fucking there. Dizzy dragged her into the middle of fucking nowhere and now Alec is there, and Ivy’s unprotected. And he’s had forty minutes.”

“She’s not unprotected.” West snorts as the GPS instructs us to take the next turn.

The house comes into view ahead.

West slows and parks the truck away from the house. “It’s best if we go in quietly. We don’t know what we’re going to find.”

We fan out around the house. Rebel and Riot take the front. West and I walk around to the back. Adira around the far side.

It’s chillingly quiet. Our movements the only noise. With my hand in my pocket, I cradle the gun in my palm. If I have to I will use it. If it’s on Alec, I can’t imagine I’ll regret it.

West approaches the door first. Fingers wrapped around the handle, he makes eye contact. *Ready?*

Yes. Is this triplet telepathy? I don’t know.

“Rogue!” Adira yells my name so loudly it shatters the silence.

My heart stalls out and then gallops as I take off running in his direction. I don't know if West follows me or if I left him behind as I sprint across the lawn and jump a small pond.

I find Adira standing in front of a thicket of pink roses. Dizzy is on her knees in front of him, Ivy's head cradled on her lap. Tears streak Dizzy's face. "I don't know what happened. One minute we were talking. And then she fell."

More footsteps come running.

"Oh God." I collapse on the ground next to them as Rebel and Riot appear around the side of the house. Ivy is pale. Still. I brush her hair out of her face. "Baby, wake up."

"We should search for a pulse." Adira crouches next to me. "Check that she's breathing."

"Right." I press two fingers to the inside of her wrist until I feel a beat.

Adira puts his ear to her nose. Nods. And some of the fear melts from his eyes. "Come on, Love. Time to wake up."

"Her pulse is weak," I say frantically. "Not as strong as it should be."

“Alec is gone, but I found this.” West tosses a thick leather file at Rebel. “Dizzy, are you okay?”

“Help, West,” Dizzy begs.

“Move out of the way. I have medical training.” West tosses the keys over his shoulder at our younger brother and shoves me aside to start checking Ivy over. “Riot, get the car and bring it as close as you can.”

Riot sprints off.

“West.” Dizzy continues to cry. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know you didn’t.” His voice is calm and soothing. A far cry from the callous man we’ve dealt with all night.

“I did everything just the way you taught me, I promise.”

“She’s alive, my sunshine. She’s still with us.” He reaches over and cradles her cheek for a second before focusing back on Ivy. “I promise she’ll be fine. She just needs a little more care than you and I can give.”

“Jackson poisoned her,” she sobs. “I gave her the pills. I don’t understand.”

“We’re going to take her to the hospital,” he tells her then turns to me. “We need to get her to the car.”

I scoop Ivy up and carry her across the lawn as Riot drives through the gates.

“She’s my sister, West. She really is my sister,” Dizzy says.

We all pile into the vehicle and I hold Ivy cradled to my chest. West directs Riot from shotgun, Dizzy on his lap.

The trip is tense. West and Dizzy continue their quiet exchange, but everything else is quiet. Rebel flips open the book he’s still holding. He sucks in a breath. “Fuck.”

“It’s...” He starts paging through it. “It’s twenty years of criminal acts Nicole Hawthorne has been a part of. Kidnapping. Fraud. Murder. Ivy’s dad documented it all.” He turns back to the first page. Taking out his phone, he starts snapping photos. “I’m going to send these to Jason to send to that detective. And Marty’s editor. If we can take down Nicole, and Nathaniel corroborates...”

I’ll be free and clear.

“Rogue?” Ivy whispers. “What happened? Where’s my phone? Alec confessed.”

“Hush, baby. I’m right here.” My voice thickens with the emotion that overwhelms me. “We’re taking you to the

hospital. Don't try to move. Just rest."

"My phone?" She sinks into my chest.

"I have it." Dizzy hands it to Rebel. "We recorded every word. About what he did to Ivy. And Rochelle Kitt."

"That's going to help," Rebel says. "I'll transfer the file to Jason too."

"Alec won't get far," West says. "Not with that famous mug of his."

"Every muscle in my body hurts." Ivy whimpers.

"You were poisoned." Under our own roof. By someone we trusted. I'm not sure I'll ever forgive myself for that.

"Dizzy figured it out," Ivy croaks. "She gave me these pills to help."

"We're here," West says as the hospital emergency area lights beam in through the windows. We pile out of the car, and I stash the gun in the pocket of the door before I carry Ivy inside. Over the next few hours my family crowds the waiting room.

The doctors treat Ivy while I sit by her side. Whatever happens with Alec. With Nicole. Whether I'm arrested and we

have to go through an entire court battle to clear my name.
None of it bothers me.

Thinking Ivy and I couldn't be together when I love her as much as I do... thinking I was going to lose her... it destroyed me.

I'm never going to stop loving her. And now I don't have to.

I bow my head and pinch the bridge of my nose as tears slip down my face.

Chapter Forty-Three

Ivy

I wake up slowly.

Memories from the past however many hours return to me bit by bit. Dizzy killed Jackson and kidnapped me. She drove me all the way to Phoenix to show me where our mother was buried.

Poppy is our mother.

I have a sister.

It's going to be a long time before that feels normal.

We got a confession out of Alec. And found evidence about Nicole's evil deeds. And I feel a lot better now than I did when Rogue brought me to the hospital some time before dawn. Whatever Jackson poisoned me with must be finally leaving my system.

I fight the nausea that comes when I think about how I trusted the man with my safety. He betrayed us for money.

And that is something I will never understand.

I turn my head to stare at Rogue, sitting in the chair beside my bed. He holds his face in his hands and his shoulders quake.

I reach out to him. “Rogue?”

He lifts his head and his eyes are shiny, bright. He angles toward me, a smile lighting him up as he brushes my hair out of my face. “Hey, you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

“Better.” He’s wearing the most awful, hairy thing on his upper lip. “What’s with the mustache?”

He waggles his eyebrows. “I’m in disguise. The police are still looking for me.”

“What about the file?” I shift, trying to get more comfortable with the lines in my arm.

Standing, he fluffs my pillows and then puts my arms around his neck so he can help me into a better position before he sits on the edge of the bed. “Jason’s friend, the one who has been following up on police corruption... he has a copy. Nicole will be arrested soon, along with a handful of

accomplices she's paid to help cover up her crimes over the years."

I long to caress his face. Even with that ugly thing on his lip. I sink against the pillows. "That's good."

"It's been quite the adventure, huh?" He covers my hand with his huge one. "Dizzy's your sister. Alec isn't your brother."

"No, he's..." I'm still groggy and it takes an effort to put it together. "Yours."

"Unfortunately." Rogue's smile widens.

"I'd never have suspected you'd smile about being related to him."

"Yeah. But all that matters is that you're not." He presses his lips to my forehead. "Which means, as soon as you are better and I'm cleared of Mark Anders's death... I am going to marry you. And there is not a damn thing anyone can do stop us."

"Hey." The doctor walks into the room. "You're awake. And looking a little better, I see."

"Feeling a lot better." I smile at Rogue as he moves back to the chair. When he takes my hand, my heart blossoms.

The doctor checks his tablet and makes adjustments to whatever is in my drip.

“It’s a good thing we caught it when we did,” he says. “You’ll recover. It’ll just take time.”

Rogue clears his throat. “The other test, doc?”

The doctor refers back to his tablet.

The nurses ran a pregnancy test while they were treating me. It most likely wouldn’t be viable after what Jackson did to me, but we need to know.

“There isn’t one, is there?” I ask and my voice cracks.

His friendly face grows a bit more serious. Sympathy fills his eyes. “You’re not pregnant. From what I see here I think all your symptoms were from the overload of heavy metals you ingested.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Rogue says when I can’t form words.

I should be relieved. I should be more than relieved. But all I feel is overwhelming sadness. I wanted it. I was starting to believe it was real. And now that I know Rogue and I are not cousins and we have a future together... My tears overflow.

I can see being a mother so clearly, which is funny with a role model like mine. But I know love from the people I choose to surround myself with, and I know how to give love too.

“I’ll give you some privacy.” The doctor exits and shuts the door.

Rogue lies down beside me and pulls me into his arms. He tucks my head under his chin. I can feel the hitch in his breath. All the emotions he’s trying to keep under control while I let mine become a storm.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” he whispers as he strokes my hair. “I’m so sorry. I wanted it too. With every breath in my body I wanted it too.”

I don’t know how long I cry in his arms. Until my eyes are swollen. Until I have no more tears to shed. It’s better this way, but that doesn’t make me less sad.

“We’ll try.” He kisses the salt from my skin. “We’ll start trying as soon as you want to. We have a future Ivy, you and me, together. One where you get to choose your destiny. A career. Family. A whole football team of kids, if that is what will make you happy. We have a million nights to spend wrapped in each other’s arms. Making love. Talking.

Laughing. And crying. We'll do it all... we'll live this life in all it's good bits and bad bits together. We've already been through so much. Nothing can stop us as long as we have each other."

"You're right." Everything we've been through has only made us stronger. I wipe the tears from my eyes. "I love you."

"My love for you is indestructible, princess. Always remember that." His lips seek mine, and I meet him with an urgency that leaves me breathless as he bites on my lip and parts my teeth with his tongue.

I burrow my hands inside his sweatshirt and over his heart while we kiss and kiss and kiss. He finds my bare thigh under the blanket and the hem of the hospital nightgown, trailing his fingers up the back of my leg to my ass.

A knock and the door swings open, interrupting us. Adira's head pops through the crack. "How's my bestie?"

"Uh." My cheeks turn hot as Rogue grumbles and climbs off the bed. "Better."

"I can see that." Adira smirks as he opens the door and three more Maddoxes and Dizzy follow him into the room.

“Did you tell her we’re not cousins?” Rebel asks Rogue.

“Of course I did.” Rogue grins.

“You’re doing better?” Dizzy throws herself into my arms and hugs me so tight I can barely breathe. “Oh, I am so glad. West, she’s okay.”

“I have eyes,” he says curtly. “Now, can we leave?”

She pouts. “But—”

“We’ll keep in touch,” I promise her. “And see each other again soon.”

“You will be at the wedding,” Rogue tells his triplet as he crosses the room to West. He half-hugs the stilted man and claps him on the back. “The both of you.”

“Do that again and you won’t make it to your wedding,” West threatens.

“You’re our brother,” Rebel says. “You’re not a solo anymore. So you better get used to the fact that we’ll treat you like family.”

“No, thank you.” West scowls.

Riot squeezes the man's shoulder. "Come on, bro. You wouldn't have given me your phone number if you didn't want to be added to the group chat."

"It was for emergencies." West grinds his teeth before he marches out of the room.

The rest of them laugh.

"Dizzy?" West barks from the hallway.

"Call me." She smiles as she holds her hand to her ear like a phone. Then she spins and disappears after West.

"We just wanted to check on you before we drive back." Rebel bends to kiss my cheek.

The three of them stay for a little while longer. Until Rogue eventually hurries them on their way. Then he strips out of his sweatshirt and boots and tugs the blanket back.

I wiggle over to make room for him to lay down and then I settle into the curve of his arm. God, he's so handsome and sweet and warm. And he smells so good he makes my mouth water. "So this is my future, right here and now?"

I've learned to stand on my own two feet. To speak up for myself.

I've fallen in love with the man of my dreams. And he fell in love with me too.

“It is. Is it everything you wanted it to be?”

“I only wish my dad were here to see how happy I am.”

“I'm sure he knows, baby. And it makes him happy to see how far you've come.” He cradles my cheek with his hand as he kisses the top of my head. “Let's get some rest.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Ivy

Opening my eyes, I take in the familiar surroundings of our bedroom and smile before turning onto my side to stare at Rogue's peaceful face. He looks younger in sleep. Less weary.

It's been a long time since he's looked this relaxed and at ease.

It melts my heart and makes me smile.

I stayed in the hospital for several days. By the time I was released, Nathaniel had confessed to his part in helping to frame Rogue and had made a deal, leaving my man free and clear and the police on the hunt for Nicole.

She was arrested shortly thereafter, trying to flee to a country without extradition laws. The cops that she'd bribed to help her were dealt with too.

Hollywood Juice got a tip that led to the arrest of the man Nicole hired to kill Marty. He admitted to taking orders

from Nicole and plead guilty.

With all the evidence stacked up around her, Nicole finally came clean.

She'd only meant to cripple Richard enough that he couldn't leave her, but with the idea of divorce looming she'd taken to spying on him and tracking his movements.

When she found out that he'd bought the Ashton's dollhouse she lost her mind and decided to have him killed. The only reason she'd agreed all those years ago to help her brother abduct my mother was because of her crush on my father. An obsessive crush she'd developed years earlier, but was never reciprocated.

Even after they married, he never got over Poppy. The dollhouse was the last straw.

She also admitted the reason Robert cut her off from her own family was because she tried to kill my mother. Because of Poppy she lost both her lover and her brother and she hated her for it.

After that it became about the money. About me. For two decades her whole world has been wrapped around making me suffer in an attempt to get back at my mother. She

knew how Alec treated me and did nothing to stop it. Instead, encouraged it. And she did this to get back at a woman who probably never even knew that Nicole hated her.

She knew about West's existence, but didn't know who his mother was. She seemed surprised that he was Rogue and Rebel's fraternal triplet. We figured she was cut out by Robert so early that she didn't make the connection between the boy she knew and the man he would become.

I have every faith she will spend many, many years behind bars.

Alec's confessions were given to Jason's detective friend. They were distributed by Hollywood Juice too. He's finally more famous than the Maddox twins combined. Of course, West doesn't count, because he likes to stick to the shadows.

Even though he continued to call me his sister, we think Alec found out Robert was his father before Rebel's fame became an issue and before Rebel and Rochelle dated. It's what probably set him off.

He once said something about how Nicole cared about me more than him. I didn't see it at the time, but I think he was alluding to my inheritance.

His mother chose money over him. And his father chose West as his heir. It must have hurt not to be loved.

But I don't think it would have mattered, had his life turned out differently. My dad did love him as a son for a long time, after all.

Alec is sick. He would have gone down this path anyway.

I just hope they pick him up soon, because so far he's managed to hide from the police. But it's only a matter of time, right? I hope. I hate that he got away. Part of me wishes I hadn't talked Dizzy out of killing him. But then I'm not sure how I would have lived with his death on my conscience. I'm not built like that.

"What are you thinking?" Rogue asks, his eyes still closed.

"You're awake?" I brush a strand of hair out of his face.

"It's my girl's birthday today." He wraps an arm around my waist and drags me against his chest so he can steal a kiss. "And a special one at that. I'm not wasting a minute."

“Twenty-one.” It kind of felt like I would never get here. It’s Christmas Eve too. There’s a huge tree in the living room. Massive. We threw a party the last night all of his family stayed with us and spent hours decorating it while we drank too much spiked eggnog.

“First thing’s first,” he says between brushes of his lips over mine. “Lie on your back and spread those knees. I’m about to write your birthday card on your clit.”

I laugh as he presses me down on the mattress and then pushes my feet to my ass, spreading my thighs and arranging my knees into mountains as he kneels between them.

His eyes grow heavily hooded, the blue darkening as he rolls his lip between his teeth. “Fucking hell, I love this view.”

Leaning down, he laps at me.

The first rush of arousal floods me and I arch off the bed. I moan when he tugs my clit between his teeth and nibbles at it.

He pops it free and starts to draw letters over it with the tip of his tongue until I’m moaning and writhing.

Reaching between my thighs I grab his hair with both hands. I got the cast off yesterday, and using two hands to hold on while he devours me is absolute bliss. Especially when he uses his fingers to pull me apart so he can thrust his tongue inside me.

His thumb rolls over my clit while he makes greedy slurping sounds. It pushes me to a climax that makes my toes curl.

He bites the inside of my thigh and then crawls up my body to kiss me. "Happy birthday, baby."

"Now write your name inside me with your cock," I beg against his lips.

"Here I thought this was your birthday." An amused hum slips from his throat as he pushes inside me. His hips roll so deliciously as he moves in and out of me at a slow and steady pace.

Our bodies grow damp with sweat as we kiss and touch and fuck. It takes much longer to get to the edge this time. The orgasm builds so sweetly, so intensely. When it hits it drags me under, rendering me without senses as I scream for him.

He bites my shoulder and roars as the ripples of my orgasm set him off too.

We linger afterwards. Revel in the afterglow. In slow, loving kisses and the kind of intimate jokes that only two people in love can share. Then he carries me to the shower and we make love again.

Afterward, we meet up with Adira for breakfast. And he hands me an envelope that arrived to his apartment for me this morning.

It's a letter from my dad.

He hopes that my receiving this letter means that I worked out what the key was for and managed to free myself of Nicole. He tells me that he didn't want to commit too much of the story to paper in case Nicole got her hands on them somehow. That he recorded only the most pertinent information, in case he didn't make it, and had it delivered by a source he trusted in the days leading up to my birthday. He also set Dizzy on her path to me, knowing between us we would have all the pieces to bring what was left of our family back together.

I dash the tears from my eyes with a finger. "He never stopped looking after me."

“He was the best kind of man,” Adira says. “But enough tears. It’s a big birthday. What do you want to do to celebrate?”

“I need to buy a dress to wear to the party tonight.” I smile at Rogue. “Want to watch me shop?”

“You know I love spoiling you.” He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles.

We spend the day shopping for all kinds of pretty things. Rogue arranges for entire stores to close just for me and Adira to have private shopping sprees. He tells me to buy whatever my heart desires.

My heart only desires him.

But I shop without worry about the cost or worrying about my worth. I let him buy because it’s a part of his love language. He loves to spoil me.

Later that night everyone gathers at Mojito to celebrate. We watch the queens perform and L.A Riot does a set.

Rogue and I sneak off to relive a memory. I’m just climbing off my knees when we hear Riot and Kelsey snarling at each other outside Adira’s dressing room.

Rogue drags me behind a costume rack as Riot's cute and feisty band manager storms into the room. "I can't deal with you anymore. I quit."

"Yeah, you quit?" Riot thunders and the door slams. "Quit this."

It's followed by a thud and then a moan.

Rogue stands and clears his throat. "We'll just... uh... yeah, we'll be going."

Riot has his ass hanging out as Rogue tugs me past him. Kelsey's cheeks are vibrant red.

Rogue opens the door and ushers me into the hallway.

"Fucking hell," Riot groans.

We both burst out laughing as we make our way back to our table.

Adira does a to die for Marilyn Monroe impression and sings me happy birthday as Ivanna Bey Yaluva and Magnolia Clitterbean wheel out a three-tier cake with blue and white icing.

Tears fill my eyes as I stand and blow out the candles. I take in the smiling, happy faces of everyone that I care about.

I am no longer alone or lonely. I am surrounded by an ocean of love.

And I have never been this happy.

Chapter Forty-Five

Rogue

I check my watch again for the hundredth time while I wait for Ivy to come out of her meeting with Nathaniel. With Alec still out there I get a little nervous when she takes a long time. But my girl needs to be independent. She's confident and it makes her happy. And that's all that really matters to me. Her happiness.

It's been three months since Ivy took charge of her father's finances. She became a billionaire overnight.

But she didn't stay that way for long.

It was always about love for her. Kindness. Freedom. It was never about the money. So she disbanded Nicole's fake charities and created a company that gives money to real charities on a case-by-case basis.

Nathaniel's help with Nicole meant he got a deal. And Ivy forgave him since he was only trying to protect her.

He also helped her push the paperwork to have Richard exhumed and cremated so that she could move him to the dollhouse to be with Poppy. It was partly for Dizzy, but also because my girl is a sucker for fairytales with happy endings. So now the sweet prince and his princess are together under the roses for all eternity.

Nathaniel helps her run her company too, mentoring her. She says Richard would have wanted that, and Nathaniel certainly proved himself trustworthy in the end. They meet every week to discuss new opportunities.

She hurries out of the building with a big smile on her face and climbs into the passenger seat next to me. “Sorry it took a while. We had so many applications this week. It’s really starting to grow.”

I put my hand on her knee as I guide the Jeep into traffic. Even though Alec is still out there somewhere, the moment we didn’t have to worry about the media I broke out my favorite ride again. “I am so proud of you.”

She beams at me. “I find it so amazing that this is my life now.”

“I find you amazing.” I lift her hand and kiss her knuckles. “Are you still meeting up with Danica this

afternoon?”

“Yep. But can we grab some chicken nuggets on the way? I am starving and I doubt I’ll get another chance to eat before we get on the plane.”

I pull into a McDonald’s drive-through and order a box of chicken nuggets for her and a burger for me. I still have to pick up my tux before we catch our flight to Kansas. We’re getting married on the Heart ranch and my brothers and Summer are already there, making sure everything will be perfect. Even Rochelle Kitt is attending.

She’s been doing better these last couple of weeks. Although she’s a little cautious with Alec on the lose still. It’ll take time for her to find her new normal, but at least she’s trying to live her life again.

“Have you decided whether to take Danica up on her offer?” I ask while we drive toward the fashion designer’s office.

She nibbles on a nugget. Her brow creased in thought. “I am. But I think I’m also going to go back to school and do that makeup course I wanted to do. It’ll be hard work. And I’ll probably be quite busy, but I think I can handle it.”

“I know you can.” I park in the employee parking lot.

She turns to me. “Is it greedy that I want it all?”

“Baby, you deserve it all. And after what you’ve been through, what you’ve overcome, I have no doubt you can manage it.”

“Good.” She nods before she bends and rifles through her purse. “Because there is something else.”

“What is it?”

She takes my hand and deposits her pill pack in my palm with a smile. “I can’t stop thinking about it. Especially now that we know Summer and Rebel are having a baby.”

Yeah, I’d picked up those vibes but it had taken Rebel a lot longer to come clean about Summer being pregnant.

And I’ve been feeling the same. My chest catches and my cock twitches like it wants to get started right this second. Family. We both want it.

But I figured it would be years before she brought it up. “You really do want everything, don’t you?”

“Do you think it’s too much?” She bites her lip.

“Only while you’re pregnant. I’m not good with fashion. Or makeup. But once our baby, or babies, are born we can manage it together. I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you have everything you want.”

“God, I love you.” The chicken nugget box falls to the floor of the Jeep as she climbs onto my lap and straddles me. She twines her arms around my neck. “I think we should practice right now.”

“In the parking lot?” I raise a brow at her.

She reaches between us and pulls on my zipper. “Mmhmm.”

“Thank fuck. As soon as you put your birth control in my hand I was hard as rock.”

“I can’t wait to have a family with you.” She tugs her panties to the side and takes me inside her. Rolling her hips, she lifts herself up and down on my cock over and over. She takes what she wants and the pleasure on her face makes my chest swell.

Her walls ripple around my cock, and I push up and spill so deep inside her.

Catching our breaths, we smile at each other so big.
Then laugh.

“Are we really doing this?” she asks.

“Forever. Babies. Everything. With you.” I nod. “We sure are.”

“I better get inside.” She climbs off my knee and takes a moment to straighten up before she opens the door and climbs out. “I’ll see you in a few hours.”

She closes the door and walks across the lot.

Before her I never thought there would be any way I would end up here. Totally whipped. Getting married. Trying for a baby. But this woman... I roll the window down before she gets inside. “I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Epilogue

West

I pull in and cut the motor before pressing the button on the garage door. There's a muffled sound from the trunk as the door slowly shuts.

"So you're awake then." I climb out of the driver's seat and walk around to pop the trunk.

It's been three months since I brought Dizzy home, and she's been pouting ever since. I hate it when she gets like this. Sad. It sucks all the warmth and light out of my life.

She's my sunshine and when she isn't happy... well, nobody is happy.

I pop the trunk and lift the lid.

The man blinks in the light after being locked in the dark for so long. He struggles against the rope I tied him up with. Screams against the tape over his mouth. It's muffled by the rag I jammed in his throat.

It took me a while to find Alec Hawthorne. Like a rat he scurried off to hide, and burrowed in deep. The police couldn't trace him. But I have ways and means. He was never going to evade me for long.

Picking him up, I toss him onto my shoulder and stalk through the house. The ocean roars against the shore not too far away. It's the sound of something wild and natural and untameable. Of all my houses this one is my favorite.

Because it reminds me of my sunshine. But also because no one can hear her misery except me.

I yank open the door that leads into the basement. The stairs shriek under our combined weight while he struggles on my shoulder.

The ornate bars of the cage come into view. My sunshine sits on the wooden swing with her back to me, her bare feet dangling.

She glances over her shoulder at me and her eyes glitter with pain.

Her pain slices at my heart. It opens the scars carved into my chest until I feel raw and bloody. "Dizzy, I brought you something."

“Leave me alone, West,” she says in a voice devoid of anything more than misery as she turns away. “Or let me go.”

“You know I can’t do that.” I collect the key from where I keep it on the far wall. “Not while you’re like this. I won’t let you hurt yourself. I can’t lose you. You’re the only person who can love something like me.”

“I don’t love you,” she whispers.

Her words are like claws, tearing at my flesh. She doesn’t mean them though. We are all the other has. Even now that she has a sister. It doesn’t change that she is of the darkness like I am. One day Ivy Love will realize that and then it will be Dizzy and I alone once more.

I dump Alec on the floor of the cage. “I brought you a surprise.”

“A surprise?” Her ears prick up at Alec’s muffled screams.

“He was on your kill list.”

She takes in the man at my feet. For the first time in months she smiles. “Is that Alec Hawthorne?”

The warmth of her voice creeps over my skin. It warms my blood and soothes the beast inside me. “It is.”

“And you brought him for me?” She presses a hand to her chest. “To...”

“Kill him.”

She leaps off the swing and comes to me. Her hand presses to my chest as she lifts up on her bare toes to press her lips against mine. “Can I keep him for a little while, West? Pretty please.”

“Whatever it takes to make you happy.”

“Oh!” She claps her hands together and bounces on her toes. “We are going to have so much fun.”

What comes next for Rogue and Ivy?

Well, happily ever after of course!

Perhaps we’ll check in with them from time to time. Along with Rebel and Summer. You can sign up to my newsletter for updates from your favorite characters and new release news. After all, we still have one... oops, I mean two Maddox brothers left!

Are you in love with a rockstar? Or feeling West’s morally gray vibes?! I’d love to know. Come join me in my A-List Rebel’s group on Facebook to be the first to get sneak

previews and extras! Bring your dream cast, gray sweatpant memes, and anything else you want to share and join us here:

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